

EZRA MEEKER, THE PIONEER

Ezra Meeker, the best known pioneer of the Pacific Northwest, died in Seattle on December 3, 1928. This fact was recorded in the January issue of this *Quarterly* and promise was there given that a sketch of his life and a bibliography of his writings would appear in the next issue of the publication. His was a colorful career, made so by his enterprise, his writings and especially by his long sustained devotion to the Oregon Trail.

He came very naturally to his qualities as a pioneer. He was born in Huntsville, Ohio, on December 29, 1830, and when nine years of age started the trek that was to lead him to the western edge of the continent. His parents were Joseph R. and Phoebe S. (Baker) Meeker who started westward from the Ohio home in 1839 and in 1841 settled in Indianapolis. There Ezra attended the public school for four months, which was about the only formal education he had. Like many other pioneers, however, he continued the independent quest for knowledge throughout his life.

In his twenty-first year he was married (May 13, 1851,) to Miss Eliza J. Sumner and moved on to Iowa in quest of ampler land. This proved only a step on the way. On May 28, 1852, they crossed the Missouri River, six miles below Council Bluffs, Iowa, and began the covered-wagon journey across the plains by the North Platte, Bear River, Fort Hall and Snake River route to the Columbia, arriving in Portland, Oregon, October 26, 1852. After a week in Portland and three months in Saint Helens, they settled on a claim where the town of Kalama, Washington, now stands. The verb "settled" is hardly correct. Within a year they sold their claim and moved again. Mrs. Meeker traveled in a canoe up the Cowlitz River to Cowlitz Landing (now Toledo) and from there by ox-team to Olympia and on to Steilacoom. Mr. Meeker went by land, driving their live stock to the newest home. Mr. Meeker engaged in merchandising at Steilacoom and stuck to it for nine years, including the troubled period of the Indian war. In 1862 the family moved to Puyallup and began to clear a homestead. The long trek was ended.

Mr. Meeker was never still long enough to really merit the title, but the years rolled on, his abundant hair and beard grew snowy white, and he was actually referred to as the "Sage of Puyallup."

He became one of the most successful and most extensive pro-

ducers of hops. He participated in other agricultural work and wrote frequent articles for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* and other newspapers. These activities caused him to be selected as Washington Territory Commissioner to the American Exposition at New Orleans, 1885-1886. A picture of the exhibit there shows an extensive collection of products with hop-culture predominating. He built a lovely home in the new town of Puyallup. The interior of the house was finished in a way to exhibit the values of polished native woods.

When the Klondike gold rush in Alaska startled the world in 1897, Mr. Meeker was not content to remain the "Sage of Puyallup" or the "Sage" of any other place. His five children were grown and had homes of their own, and he just pulled out to join the rush to Alaska. He did not "make his pile" and soon after returning home he turned his attention to historical writing. This led to the greatest and most enduring of his many ambitions—the searching and marking of the Oregon Trail.

First of all he would retrace his old route of 1852 with an ox-team and covered wagon from Puget Sound to Iowa. This he did in 1906-1907. Not content with tracing that actual route he moved on with his quaint equipment to New York and other cities. The illustrations in his subsequent books show how traffic was jammed in those cities by crowds who gathered around the wagon and oxen to see and hear the snow-crowned survivor of a picturesque era in American history. One of those illustrations shows Mr. Meeker shaking hands with President Theodore Roosevelt near the covered wagon.

The next phase of this development was Mr. Meeker's successful efforts in having permanent markers placed along the Oregon Trail. Years were devoted to this work. The necessary expense money was in part raised by the sale of pamphlets and picture cards. These, with the attractive excursions gave Mr. Meeker national fame.

These exertions necessitated frequent trips by vehicles swifter than the ox-cart. He thus traversed the Oregon Trail several times in Pullman cars of the railroad, in automobiles, and as a capping climax he traveled over the same route in 1924 by airplane, from Seattle to Dayton, Ohio, in company with the famous pilot, Oakley Kelly. This unique combination of records was made the subject of a special illustrated article in *The Country Gentleman* for November 29, 1924.

To complete his work for the Oregon Trail, Mr. Meeker

sought to raise the necessary money by persuading Congress to authorize the issue of a special souvenir half-dollar which could be sold to collectors and others for a dollar each. Disposing of those coins occupied his last days, although he was at the same time planning a new book. He wanted to publish that book on the centennial of his birth.

Mrs. Meeker, who was living at the home of her daughter, Mrs. Eben S. Osborne, of Seattle, passed away on October 15, 1909. This severe bereavement did not wholly dishearten the old pioneer as shown by the above record of his activities. In that very year (1909) he had started a concession at the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition in Seattle. It was a pioneer log-cabin eating house. This he gave up and started again on his travels. The funeral of his wife was delayed until he could return. Soon after the funeral he was again at his big and loved task. He said: "I would a lot rather die somewhere on the Oregon Trail than in a city bed where other folks die."

While visiting his friend, Henry Ford, in Detroit he was taken ill. He recovered enough strength to make his way back to Seattle, among his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Here he found the end of his long trail on December 3, 1928.

There are many portraits of Ezra Meeker, and Alonzo Victor Lewis has modeled a statue of him for Puyallup. These will help to preserve his fame and so also will his books and the multitude of newspaper and magazine articles by him and about him.

Meeker Bibliography

No effort has here been made to include newspaper and magazine articles by Mr. Meeker, but the record has been made as complete as possible from evidence at hand of all the books and pamphlets published by him. This was prepared by the Reference Department of the University of Washington Library:

PUBLISHED WRITINGS OF EZRA MEEKER

1870

Washington Territory west of the Cascade Mountains, containing a description of Puget Sound, and rivers emptying into it, the lower Columbia, Shoalwater Bay, Gray's Harbor, timber, lands, climate, fisheries, ship building, coal mines, market reports, trade, labor, population, wealth and resources . . . Olympia, W. T., Printed at the Transcript office, 1870. 52 p. tables.

1883

Hop culture in the United States; being a practical treatise on hop growing in Washington territory, from the cutting to the bale . . . with fifteen years' experience of the author . . . to which is added an exhaustive article from the pen of W. A. Lawrence . . . on hop raising in New York state. Puyallup, Meeker [c1883] 170 p. front. illus. 3 plates.

1904

Who named Tacoma? [and Prosch, T. W. General McCarver named Tacoma] Seattle, 1904. 8 p.

Annual address of Ezra Meeker, president of the Washington state historical society, Tacoma. Delivered January 22nd, 1904. [n.p. Meeker? 1904?]

1905

Pioneer reminiscences of Puget Sound; the tragedy of Leschi; an account of the coming of the first Americans and the establishment of their institutions; their encounters with the native race; the first treaties with the Indians and the war that followed; seven years of the life of Isaac I. Stevens in Washington Territory; cruise of the author on Puget Sound fifty years ago; Nisqually house and the Hudson Bay company . . . Seattle, Wash., Lowman and Hanford stationery and printing co., 1905. xx, 554 p., 1 l. plates, ports., fold. facsims.

1907

The ox team; or, The old Oregon trail, 1852-1906; an account of the author's trip across the plains, from the Missouri River to Puget Sound, at the age of Twenty-two, with an ox and cow team in 1852, and of his return with an ox team in the year 1906, at the age of seventy-six . . . a narrative of present and past conditions. [4th ed.] New York, Author, [c1907] 248 p. front. (port.) illus.

1909

Ventures and adventures of Ezra Meeker or, Sixty years of frontier life; fifty-six years of pioneer life in the old Oregon country; an account of the author's trip across the plains with an ox team in 1852, and his return trip in 1906; his cruise on Puget Sound in 1853, and his trip through the Natchess Pass

in 1854; over the Chilcoot Pass and flat boating on the Yukon in 1898. The Oregon trail . . . Seattle, Wash., Rainier Printing co., [1909] 384 p. incl. front. plates, ports., fold. map. Plates printed on both sides. A later edition, Seattle, 1916, published under title: The busy life of eighty-five years of Ezra Meeker . . .

1912

Personal experiences on the Oregon trail sixty years ago . . . 5th reprint . . . [St. Louis, Mo., McAdoo Printing co., 1912.] cover-title, 150 p. illus., map. First pub. under title: The ox team; or, The Oregon trail, 1852-1906.

1915

Story of the lost trail to Oregon . . . [Seattle, 1915] 30 p. illus.

1916

The busy life of eighty-five years of Ezra Meeker; ventures and adventures . . . Seattle, Meeker [c1916] 399 p. front. (port) illus. Contains the material of his "The ox team." [1906]

1921

Seventy years of progress in Washington . . . Seattle, Wash., 1921. 381, 52 p. incl. front., illus., plates (1 mounted fold.) ports. Autograph copy. Appended: A facsimile reprint of the author's Washington Territory west of the Cascade Mountains . . . Olympia, W. T., 1870 (52p)

1922

Ox-team days on the Oregon trail. Rev. and ed. by Howard R. Driggs . . . illustrated with drawings by F. N. Wilson and with photographs. Yonkers-on-Hudson, N. Y., World book company, 1922. 225 p. incl. front (port.) illus. (Pioneer life series)

1926

Kate Mulhall, a romance of the Oregon Trail . . . drawings by Margaret Landers Sanford, Rudolf A. Kausch and Oscar W. Lyons . . . New York, Author [c1926] 287 p. front., illus., plate., map. "Works by Ezra Meeker": p. 287.

Undated

Uncle Ezra's short stories for children . . . Tacoma [n.d.] 100 p. illus. Port. on back cover.