

JOSEPH L. MEEK

The wonderful romance which gave enchantment to stories of adventure, hardship, daring deeds and suffering which were encountered by those who figured conspicuously, and with considerable fame, in the early settlement and claiming of Oregon can be told by a long list of courageous men and women. One of this list who can never be lost sight of for his fearlessness, courage and good words and humor is Joseph L. Meek, a mountain man and first Sheriff of the Provisional Government of old Oregon.

Joseph L. Meek was born in Washington County, Virginia, in 1810, one year before the settlement of Astoria, and at the period when Congress was much interested in the question of its far western possessions and their boundaries. "Manifest destiny" seems to have raised him up with many other bold, hardy and fearless men—guards and sentinels on the outposts of civilization—securing to the United States with comparative ease a vast extent of territory for which without them a long struggle with England would have taken place. Loyal and faithful historians can not exclude their names from honorable mention, and very prominent must appear the name of Joseph L. Meek, the Rocky Mountain hunter and trapper. Mr. Meek did not try to disguise the fact that he was a mountain man. He possibly did many things he should not have done, and left undone many things he should have done. Still, seeing "Uncle Joe" good humored, quiet, not undignified, a true citizen of the plains, one could never accuse him of any very bad qualities.

His pronunciation was southern. He said "bar," "whar," and "thar," a thorough Virginian, and a blood relation of one our Presidents from the same State. Like many children of southern planters he received little attention, and was allowed to frequent the negro quarters, while the alphabet was neglected. He had been sent to school in a nearby neighborhood where the alphabet was set on a wooden paddle. Not liking this method of learning he one day hit the teacher over the head with the paddle and ran home where he again was allowed to amuse himself with his black associates. He dressed like them in tow frocks, feet guiltless of shoes or stockings.

When eighteen years of age, becoming weary of neglect and plantation life, he jumped into a departing wagon and started out for himself. There was a stepmother in the family. He knew he would

not be missed, and had no mother's blessing to guide him, "and if father should grieve the mother would comfort him." He drifted to St. Louis where he fell in with Mr. Wm. Sublette, who was purchasing an outfit for the Indian country and picking up recruits for fur hunting service. Joe offered himself and was accepted.

Among the recruits was Robert Newell, a young man about Joe's age. Their companionship was close and continued as long as they were mountain men. They both joined the fur trader's service at the same time, and left their mountain life together, coming to the Willamette Valley. Their Indian wives were sisters. Robert Newell was one who figured very prominently in the affairs of Oregon.

One morning when camped near Booneville, Missouri, the boys were hunting their mules, when they met with an elderly woman coming from her milking yard with a gourd of milk. Newell made remarks on the style of the vessel, when she broke out in a sharp voice, "Young chap, I'll bet you ran off from your mother. Who'll mend them holes in the elbows of your coat? You're a purty looking chap to go to the mountains among them Injuns. They'll kill you. You'd better go back home." The thought of home and some one to mend their coats was strongly presented, and many times thought of after penetrating the unknown wilderness, and there were many a longing look back as all civilization disappeared.

After twelve years away from all law and refinement, and sick of fur-trading, Newell decided to quit the mountains and go to the Willamette Valley and settle down. The glories of the American fur trading had departed. Meek was at Fort Hall hunting and trapping there for the Hudson's Bay Company. He remembered his talk with Mrs. Whitman, that fair, courteous, dignified lady, who had stirred all longing for civilized life. But he had misgivings and fears. Could he settle down? What could he do? Where could he go? He set out on what proved to be his last trapping trip, met a Frenchman who told him he was wanted at Fort Hall by his friend Newell. Meek hastened to Fort Hall where Newell awaited him with news and thoughts of a different life. "Come," he said to Meek, "We are done with this life in the mountains with all its dangers and solitude, freezing and starving, and Indian fighting. The American fur trade is dead. Americans are settling the Willamette Valley and the Hudson's Bay Fur Company is not going to rule this country. Will you go?"

"I'll go where you go," answered Meek.

"I thought you would. In my way of thinking a white man is

a little better than a Canadian Frenchman. I'll be hanged if I'll hang around a Hudson's Bay Post."

Then it was settled and Oregon began to increase in real immigrants, not fur-traders and missionaries, but true frontiersmen, bordermen.

Meek left his little girl Helen Marr at Whitman Mission under the tutorship of Mrs. Whitman, who in Meek's estimation was a saint. Little Helen Marr was a victim of that most horrible of massacres.

The journey to the "Falls" was no easy one, Meek driving a five-in-hand team—four horses and a mule. Newell, who owned the outfit, was mounted as leader. The wagon was the one that Dr. Whitman had left at Fort Hall. December being far advanced the weather was impossible, pouring rain, gray dismal skies, no winter supplies, no place to purchase provisions but at the Hudson's Bay Company sold at fifty per cent profit. Time was short considering what was to be done. As for our hero he was a mountain man and that only. He had no trade, no knowledge of the simplest affairs as to the ordinary way of making a living. He had only his strong hands and a heart naturally stout and light. His friend Newell had the advantage in several particulars. He had more book learning, more business experience and more money, so became a leader among his associates.

The hardships of mountain life were light compared to this first winter. Instead of buffalo steak, antelope, and mountain sheep, our brave hearted pioneers subsisted on boiled wheat. Mountain men were usually poor, prodigal and not over industrious, so Meek found it hard to settle down to labor, especially farming.

During the summer the United States Exploring Squadron under Commodore Wilkes entered the Columbia River to explore the country in several directions. It was then that Joe Meek found something to his liking as he was engaged by Wilkes as pilot and servant while on his many tours through the country.

When at last came just the right time to consider a "divide" from joint occupancy with the Hudson's Bay Company and the establishing of American laws for the little colony Meek took the lead with all the characteristics of a true born American.

In the Legislative Committee were mountain men of which Newell was one. Meek was appointed as Sheriff of the Provisional Government of Oregon, then a country without a governor or a magisterial head and without a treasury to pay the Legislative Com-

mittee except by subscription at the rate of \$1.25 per day in orders on some of the few business firms west of the Rocky Mountains.

The office of sheriff was one great thrill to Mr. Meek as there were all kinds and conditions of bad Indians and worse white men to deal with—thefts, murders, distilleries—but with his coolness and reckless courage combined with his physique he could scare any poor sinner into submission.

Those who thought themselves the “better portion” of the community displayed quite an antagonism for Meek on account of his mountain manners and Indian wife, but found to their great chagrin that he was becoming of some note in the community. He cared nothing for their pious prejudices, and they could call him “old Joe Meek.” He well knew that when it came to a point of courage to get them out of trouble or danger they would come with all courtesy to “Mr. Meek.”

After the Whitman tragedy it was Joe Meek who came to the rescue of the unprotected settlers in the midst of the enemy. In this massacre there were fourteen killed and sixty-two held captive.

A mass meeting of citizens was held in Oregon City, the speakers to adopt methods of ways and means. Among them, Meek, his impatience to avenge the awful deed, was whetted to the breaking point, as his little Helen Marr was among the captives. But he was too good a mountain man to give any rash advice. The colony was small and poor. Where was the where-with-all to carry on the important measures immediately?

The Legislature undertook a settlement, and resolved to send a messenger with the account of the massacre to Governor Mason of California, and through him to the Commander of a United States Squadron then in the Pacific, asking him to send a vessel of war to the Columbia River with arms and ammunition. This duty was assigned to Jesse Applegate, who with a small party set out to cross the mountains into California. But they had to return as the snow was so deep that travel was impossible. Joseph Meek was selected to travel through the Rockies in mid winter to Washington, D.C. in behalf of the rights and firesides of the unprotected settlers, who were surrounded by twenty-thousand savages. Well he realized what it meant traveling over mountains, through floods and snow, on foot or horseback, by night and day for two months, but he never faltered in a cause so righteous.

On the 17th of December he resigned his seat in the House to make the memorable and historic trip, after performing the sad

rites of burying the dead at Waiilatpu, among them Dr. and Mrs. Whitman and his own child. To avoid trouble he might meet with from Indians on the Western side of the Rockies he adopted the red belt and Canadian cap worn by the employees of the Hudson's Bay Fur Co. No one knew better than Meek the character of the Indian and the power that the Hudson's Bay Fur Company had over them. While on this trip to Washington he was appointed United States Marshall of Oregon Territory by President Polk. No office could have suited him better, and he was always prompt in fulfilling the duties of his office.

Some writer of Western history says that Meek's part in history is a fable, and will do to tell "our children." It is bigger than a child's story, but beautiful and good to tell to the children if told correctly. "The man of distinction is simple, honest, and a lover of justice and duty."

ROSETTA W. HEWITT.