

THE MYSTERIOUS OREGON

The subject of these remarks is the name OREGON, the ultimate source and meaning of which seem destined to remain more or less a mystery. The facts are taken largely from three more extended studies published about ten years ago. (See *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, Dec. 1920, June 1921, March 1922.)

Up to that time the general belief had been that the name (Oregon) first saw the written page in Jonathan Carver's book, "Travels Through the Interior Parts of North America, 1766-1767," which was published in London in 1778. Carver had been rated as the first traveler through what now are the states of Wisconsin and Minnesota, and his book an interesting annal of that period; and such it is. From it William Cullen Bryant seems to have taken the name into his beautiful "Thanatopsis." Carver died in abject poverty in London a few years after his book's publication.

But literary dissection during recent years has proved that Carver was not an original traveler into those regions and that his book was drawn largely from the writings and records of other authors and travelers of contemporaneous or earlier dates. It has been shown that he journeyed from Massachusetts to Michillimackinac (Mackinac) in 1766 at the instance of Major Robert Rogers, the newly appointed commandant at that frontier outpost, and then proceeded to the upper Mississippi under the orders of that officer. Carver was an engineer and draughtsman and, as such, was one of four men selected by Rogers to undertake a journey of exploration in search of a north-west passage to the Pacific Ocean. In his book Carver says the name OREGON was communicated to him by the Indians during his travels, but it has been found that in slightly different form it was contained in the instructions given to these men by Rogers.¹

The plan for this organized adventure into the west originated with Rogers himself. At London, in 1765, he had petitioned the King's Privy Council for permission and support for such an expedition under his own leadership. The petition was refused, but, as a political alternative, he was appointed to the command at Mackinac, subject to the supervision of General Thomas Gage and Sir William Johnson, his superior officers in America. Unable to engage personally in the enterprise, he employed others in his stead. Rogers was a bold and resourceful officer, and his career as organizer and leader of Rogers' Rangers in the French-Indian wars (1755-60) was highly commendable. He possessed courage, endur-

¹ *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, XXIII, 1, pp. 65-6.

ance and almost uncanny knowledge of woodcraft and Indian warfare. His many escapes from capture and death gave him the reputation among the Indians of a man with a charmed life. His entire career reveals a man of genius.

The period immediately following the acquisition of Canada by the English was one of great interest in their new territory. The fur-trade carried on from Albany, Montreal, Detroit and Mackinac was lucrative and naturally attracted the attention of the resident British officers. The petition already mentioned read in part as follows:

"Major Rogers thinks it his duty to represent that he has been very attentive to, and prosecuted with the utmost assiduity every inquiry in his power in reference to the real existence of the north-west passage; in consequence of which he has attained a moral certainty that such a passage there really is. For this purpose he employed at his own expense certain Indians to explore the distant rivers and their outlets either into the Pacific or the northern ocean; and in regard to the latter he has received such lights as he thinks cannot possibly deceive him. The rout Major Rogers proposes to take is from the Great Lakes towards the heads of the Mississippi, and thence to the river called by the Indians Ouragon, which flows into a bay that projects North-Eastwardly into the (?) from the Pacific ocean, and there to explore said bay and its outlets, and also the western margin of the continent to such a northern latitude as shall be thought necessary."²

The career of Rogers offers interesting details, but these remarks are concerned only with his opportunities to obtain information about a river flowing into the Pacific and called, he said, by the Indians the Ouragon. This was the mysterious "River of the West" of that period, usually associated with the Columbia but possibly with the Fraser. The statements in his petition are highly colored in favor of the enterprise and the petitioner. Conditions then rendered impossible his employment of any Indians to travel to the mouth or the source of either of the above rivers, even had his private affairs permitted such employment. Rogers, before 1765, had been as far west only as Detroit (in 1760 and 1763), when on strenuous military service and under strict orders which forbade personal trading with the Indians. Under English control, the fur-trade west of Mackinac had only begun to be organized. The French were the explorers and traders in the west and had already pushed their rather limited business as far as a certain

² *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, XXII, 2, pp. 101-2.

Fort d'la Prairie, located somewhere on the waters of the Saskatchewan above the forks of that river. The French traders employed Indians, full-blood and half-blood, as voyageurs and hunters, of the Iroquois and Algonquin families. French was the language of the fur-trade, then and for long years afterward. Adventure and news of the frontier were common topics of conversation at the mess-tables of the British officers, and individual contacts with traders and returning servants were possible.

The name Ouragon as a geographic designation is distinctly obscure. It does not appear on any map, as far as yet known. Opinions as to how Major Robert Rogers obtained or came to use it lie entirely in the field of interesting conjecture. Four theories are advanced from which the student can choose, or to which he can add.

The first is that Rogers invented it. This theory may be dismissed as unlikely because unnecessary.

A second is that it is an Indian word used by a tribe residing north of lake Superior to designate a bark plate or platter. It is said that a French priest who labored in the tribe mentioned the name in a letter or journal. The tribe was of the Algonquin family in whose language the letter R is usual. The word does not appear in the vocabularies of the Christeneaux (Crees) or of the Sioux or of the other tribes of the plains. How or why this restricted name should have been applied to a river of the western plains and mountains is yet to be explained.³

A third theory is that the term was the French word *ouragon*, meaning wind-storm, applied to a river in a country where such storms prevailed in a peculiar manner. Indians could have told Rogers about the climate of the region, and the description would have been accurate. The prairies of Dakota, Montana and adjoining provinces in Canada are subject to severe blizzards in the winter, which is the trading season, and at times these are suddenly tempered by a curious wind from the southwest, a freak wind to the mind of the uneducated. This wind⁴ is officially recognized by meteorologists and often discussed in their literature. Instances of its influence are common in the records of the United States Weather Bureau. By way of illustration one is cited, as recorded at Fort Assiniboine, Montana, on January 10, 1892, when "the temperature rose about 43°F between 2 a.m. and 2:15 a.m., changing

³ *Mississippi Valley Historical Quarterly*; XII, p. 631 (March, 1926). Dr. Quaife gives no direct reference but probably refers to the journals of La Verendrye.

⁴ Known in Europe as the *foehn* wind, and in the United States and Canada as the Chinook wind. Curiously enough the latter is distinctly a Pacific Coast term, but the wind does not originate there.

from -5.5°F to 37.5°F within those 15 minutes."⁵ Established rules of nomenclature by French and Indians alike are to apply a place-name descriptive of some peculiar feature of the locality. The State of Wisconsin in particular abounds in such names. Either Indian or trader would have spoken in French and could have said the word *OURAGON* to Rogers, when pressed for a name, or Rogers could have supplied it. Though ephemeral, its conception would have been strictly according to rule and practice.

The fourth theory is that the name is Rogers's corruption of the Indian *Ouinipigon*, the earliest form of the name *Winnipeg*. This is based on the famous *Ochagach* map of about 1728, drawn for *Vérendrye* by an Indian of that region.⁶ This chief told *Vérendrye* many tales, one of which was that he had descended a river flowing from a lake and had come to where the tides rose and fell. The map is very crude and shows, far to the west of lake Superior, a lake of the above name and from it a river flowing further west. This map was published at Paris in 1754,⁷ only ten years before Rogers arrived in London. It is entirely possible that a copy would have been available to Rogers at London; perhaps before then in America.

The name *Ouragon* appears only in the Rogers' documents—nowhere else. At London, in 1772, he again presented a petition containing it in connection with other more accurate information regarding the west. He was endeavoring again to obtain the support of the government for his enterprise, and others in London seem to have been assisting him. His own private affairs were involved with debts and his methods then not free from suspicion. These conditions must be considered in theorizing on his use of the name. The word *ouragon* is undeniably French.⁸

The name "Oregon" has such a background of romance, history and literature as is not known to any other on the roll of States. It was synonymous and contemporaneous with the mysterious "River of the West." It symbolized the road to the Pacific. It was first uttered by a soldier whose daring and achievements in battle were magnificent, first printed in the most popular book of the period, and immortalized by one of America's most cultured poets. It savors of the frontier and the pioneer. It is the mother-name in the entire Pacific Northwest. T. C. ELLIOTT

⁵ *Waldo's Elementary Meteorology*, p. 266.

⁶ *Oregon Historical Quarterly*: XXI, 4, p. 355.

⁷ Philippe Buache. Also reproduced in the *Collections of Wisconsin Historical Society*: XVII, 103. Both Carver and Rogers seem to have used the *La Verendrye* journals.

⁸ The hope still remains that some French document may be found from which Rogers took the name.