

ABOUT THAT "VALUABLE MANUSCRIPT"

In Volume XIX of this *Quarterly*, pages 112-116, Mr. J. Neilson Barry mentions the existence in 1852 of a manuscript journal describing a journey alleged to have been made in 1809 by four shipwrecked sailors from the Oregon coast to the Red River of Louisiana. The article "a valuable manuscript which may be found," consists largely of correspondence of George Gibbs, about 1852-1853, principally with that well known authority upon Indian matters, Henry R. Schoolcraft. It is alleged therein that such a journal was kept by a Mr. Lasalle or V. Lavelle, who is said to have been one of the survivors of the crew of the ship *Sea Otter*. It is further claimed that this ship was wrecked in 1809 at False Cape, about one hundred miles south of the mouth of the Columbia River. Unfortunately the correspondence seems to have been chiefly concerned with the existence of certain mounds mentioned in the journal. The historian would have welcomed an effort to ascertain the existence of any Indian tradition of such an early crossing of the continent. When in 1853 Gibbs mentioned the alleged journey to "Governor Ogden" the latter was inclined to discredit the story, as he had never heard of it amongst the Indians of the Willamette Valley.

At any rate this manuscript has now disappeared. The purpose of these few notes is not to attempt the elucidation of its disappearance or of its mystery. They may even tend to deepen the difficulties. In fact they may be a case of *lucus a non lucendo*.

Though there is an air of improbability over the whole matter one may start with the proposition that there was on the Northwest Coast in or about 1809 a vessel called the *Otter*—and this may be regarded as a sufficient identification with the alleged wrecked ship, the *Sea Otter*. Archibald Campbell in his *Voyage Round the World* (Edinburgh, 1816) states, p. 153, that during the thirteen months—January, 1809, to March, 1810,—in which he resided at the Hawaiian Islands, there called at Oahu, two English ships, one of which was the *Otter*, Jobelin, master.

The only trouble is that this ship, *Otter*, was not wrecked, though it was so reported. The newspaper item quoted below shows that a party of men calling themselves shipwrecked sailors from the *Otter* arrived from the Northwest Coast; but that the *Otter* was not wrecked appears from Campbell who on page 220 of his *Voyage Round the World* says that whilst he was at Rio de Janeiro (that is, between May and July, 1810) he "went on board the ship *Otter*, returning from the South Seas [Pacific Ocean] under the

command of Mr. Jobelin, whom I had seen in the same vessel at the Sandwich [Hawaiian] Islands. He informed me that he had visited Wahoo [Oahu] a few months after my departure, and found all my friends in good health, except Isaac Davis who had departed this life after a short illness."

The item to which reference has already been made is to be found in the *Columbian Centinel* (Boston, Mass.) for July 25, 1810, and is as follows:

"In a Norfolk paper under date of 20th June, we find an account of four men's arrival from the N.W. Coast of America, stating that they belonged to the ship *Otter* from London, which was lost 22d August, 1808, 200 miles south of the Columbia River (which lies in lat. 46° 15' N.). They gave no particulars of the ship's wreck. We have seen letters from Canton which state the arrival of the ship *Otter*, 15th November, 1809, at Rahina [Laheina, a port on the island of Maui], one of the Sandwich Islands. This information may relieve the distress of some who have friends on that ship."

It will be noted that the date given by the so-called survivors of the alleged wreck is August 22, 1808, whereas that mentioned in the correspondence of Schoolcraft and Gibbs in the article referred to is merely the year, 1809; outside of that discrepancy there is a reasonable close correspondence in the location of the alleged wreck, the name of the ship, the date of her arrival at the Hawaiian Islands, and the number of men who are said to have crossed the continent and carried the story to the eastern newspapers. If we assume that the *Otter* and the *Sea Otter* are identical and that, therefore there was no shipwreck is it a fair surmise to say that these four men deserted from the *Otter*, and invented the shipwreck story to account for their arrival at a place so far removed from the Pacific Coast as the Red River of the South. And yet it is difficult to understand why such a desperate course as the crossing of the continent should have been taken when there were so many trading vessels flitting up and down the coast. As a matter of fact there were eight of such ships there in 1808 and six in 1809. Over and above these there were Russian vessels which in those years were extending their voyages from Alaska as far south as Bodega Bay and beyond. Possibly at that time, Lewis and Clark's journey having been but recently completed, a desire to emulate it may have taken possession of some adventurous spirits. Along this line and to increase the mystery I add the following news item from the *Columbian Centinel* of August 8, 1810.:

"Captain Whittemore (of the *Vancouver*), learned from the natives that the ship *Mercury*, Capt. Ayres, went on shore near lat. 46, in March, 1809, in a violent gale; that 50 of the crew were lost: the natives had let them have what they could get from the wreck, and part of the crew had undertaken to cross the continent. They were provided with axes, guns, powder, etc., for that purpose."

There is a slight resemblance between this story and that in Mr. Barry's article; but it is believed that there is not one atom of truth in it. How the canard originated, it is impossible now to ascertain. Was it pure Indian imagination? At any rate the *Mercury*, a most notorious poacher, was at that very time (March, 1809) carrying on her illegal trade on the coast of California as she had done since 1806 and as she continued to do until 1813. On June 1, 1813, she met her well-deserved, but long-deferred fate, being captured by the Spaniards as a poacher. And, so far as is known, every other vessel on the coast at that time from New England has been accounted for.

And there I leave the puzzle in the hope that some one else may be able to offer a solution.

F. W. HOWAY