

THE OREGON MISSION—ITS TRANSITION

The centenary of the founding of the first Christian mission in the Northwest section of North America deserves more thorough study than is usually given its historicity and the achievements of Jason Lee and his associates. This brave band arrived at the Hudson's Bay Trading Headquarters on the 15th of September, 1834. Reinforcements came about every year until the great *Lausanne* ship-load arrived June 1, 1840. No story of missionary activity ever awoke the church with a more romantic challenge. Then came sorrows and difficulties, with criticisms, personal and general that merit a place in the celebration. Questions have arisen that deserve as complete answering as possible. Why was Jason Lee removed from the superintendency of the Oregon Mission? What service did the mission render the Indians? Was the American settlement of the country aided or retarded by the activities of the missionaries? These are vital questions that still persist and some careful review has been asked for. The vital criticisms may be focused in one major thesis; The Causes that resulted in the Recall of Lee and the practical closing of the Mission.

This subject has never been treated any too impartially, but it would seem that some unbiased statement should be undertaken as a part of an adequate memorial. Numerous articles have appeared that merit some criticism of their authors, for their limited views and manifest bias. But personal equations shall here be avoided as nearly as may be from a study of the records of the Missionary Society and the more dependable writings of those whose first-hand information must be regarded. The first formal review was written by two of the missionaries, Daniel Lee and J. H. Frost, under the heading *Ten Years in Oregon*. Little appears to our purpose. At the close we read, "The kind and most affectionate manner in which we were received by the Board of Managers of the Missionary Society, and by our Christian brethren and friends generally, has more than healed all the wounds that time and time's sorrows have made. . . . And, again, taking all the very embarrassing circumstances into the account, under which the missionaries have been obliged to labor, I ask the Church and a candid public, whether as much has not been accomplished toward the evangelization of the inhabitants of that territory, as could reasonably have been expected?"

Perhaps the most read of the missionary accounts was the *History of Oregon*, by Gustavus Hines, with other pages from his ready pen. Reference will be made to his report to the Board that proved very troublesome to his friend Lee before the meeting of the Missionary Managers, upon his return East in 1844. Doctor Elijah White, physician at the mission and Missionary W. H. Kone became dissatisfied with their treatment from Jason Lee and retaliated by complaining to the Board. As early as April 8, 1842, Jason Lee wrote the Board, as follows, "I am aware that unfavorable reports have gone home in reference to our prospects in this field, and certainly they are not so flattering as might be desired. . . . I am fully persuaded that my best energies may profitably be used up here in Oregon. Nor am I able to persuade myself that there are or ever have been talents of such superior order in this country that work commensurate to the ability could not be found."

The Bishop's address at the Baltimore Conference of 1840, contained a paragraph based on the enthusiasm then prevailing, with the great Reinforcement about to reach the Oregon shores. To quote: "The character which the Oregon mission has recently assumed, is well calculated to invite your particular attention to that extensive and important field of missionary enterprise. We can have little doubt that, with the blessing of God attending our efforts, the time will arrive when the interests of the missionary colony, and the success of the work among the aboriginal tribes, will call for the organization of an annual conference in that vast territory." Then a prophetic caution followed: "And our grand object should be to preserve one harmonious compact, in the unity of the Spirit and the bonds of peace, that Methodism may be one on either side of the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, and on all the islands of the sea."

Among those who saw service in both the Doctor Whitman mission and the Methodist station at Salem was W. H. Gray. Not to follow all his assertions too trustingly, but to seek any light his account may hold, we quote from his *History of Oregon*, page 365, in the chapter, "Efforts to Destroy the Missions": "The Protestant missions in the country were greatly annoyed by the unreasonable and threatening conduct of the Indians about their stations. . . . The American missionaries were becoming disheartened and discouraged, and were beginning to abandon their stations." This unrest Gray attributes to the Hudson's Bay Company and the priests who

were aggressive though working under cover to discredit American missions and settlements. Gray follows: "The Rev. Mr. Hines, with all his wisdom, sound judgment, and experience, became, unwittingly, an instrument and apologist in this deep-laid scheme to rid the country of Protestant missionaries and American settlers. He was led to join his influence against his truest and best friend, who is called home and superseded, and the mission stations abandoned and broken up."

This was at a time of influx of greedy settlers throughout the territory. They demanded their liberty and seemed displeased that any mission should be strong enough to greatly affect society or government. When the first American Civil Government west of the Rocky Mountains was achieved at Champoeg, May 2, 1843, there were thirteen Methodists among the signers. The mission was in position to aid materially as well as numerically, and owed it to the community to stand for the best laws and industries obtainable.

Elijah White became Indian Agent and his *Travels and Adventures in Oregon* were cast into book form by Miss A. J. Allen. Regarding the difficulties that arose between Jason Lee and Dr. White, she says: "It is not worth while to give the particulars; suffice it, that the difference was an honest one, in relation to the best way and means of carrying forward the objects of the mission." . . . Dr. White resigned, and presented his complaint to the Board, p. 131.

In his *Missionary History of the Pacific Northwest*, Dr. H. K. Hines includes a review of this general theme, under the heading, "Clouds and Darkness," chapter 14. "The Missionary Board and the church at home felt that they were waiting long for the conversion of the Indian tribes. A number of the missionaries in the field felt that their work here was not producing the effects among the Indians that they anticipated, and were unwilling to work longer without more decisive and tangible evidences of success. Of course the dissatisfaction of those in the field soon communicated itself to members of the Missionary Board, and increased the unrest there. These causes had been operating to a greater or less extent from the arrival of the 'great reinforcement' in 1840, and they reached a point that culminated in a great change in 1844." He well knew the vital changes that came about among the red men from 1838 to 1843, in their strange decimation. Another occasion of dissatisfaction—in the opinion of some the mission was encumbered by too much secular business.

Later, 1918, there appeared another review of *The Oregon Mission*. A master student had devoted years to the searching out of any hidden truths. This was Bishop J. W. Bashford, christian statesman. But were he writing today he would most likely shift his emphasis. Chapter XIII is entitled: "Lee's Sun Sets." The Bishop leads off, saying, "Lee's personal tragedy was precipitated by a colossal blunder on his part; and . . . we are amazed in his mistake as to the time of his second marriage." But the facts were the women of the mission were much nearer the sorrowful death of Lee's wife, Anna Maria. She died June 26, 1838, while Jason Lee was enroute overland to present the high claims of Oregon upon the church and the nation. This zeal aroused the Missionary Society to send out the great reinforcement in the fall of 1839, which landed in Oregon, June 1, 1840. The Board requested their superintendent to go as a married man and a proper bride appeared in Miss Lucy Thompson. Perhaps the Board of Managers should share in this "colossal blunder," also the women of the mission might have realized it was nearly two years from the date of Anna Maria's death to the day Lucy arrived at the mission.

The Bishop met the Bancroft criticisms of Lee in several pages of careful argument, beginning at page 214; that Lee mistreated David Leslie, that he played the hypocrite while cheating Dr. McLoughlin out of his land at Willamette Falls, and that Lee was worldly and ambitious, and deceived the Missionary Society and misappropriated a large amount of their funds. The facts show Lee was a real friend of Leslie, that there were two sides to the property contest and that the Doctor as Chief Factor of the Hudson's Bay Company sought to keep Americans south of the Columbia River, and that fraud does not appear on the books of the mission. Those desiring to pursue this line farther may ruin the leads given above.

The responsibility for setting Lee aside must rest with the Board and the Annual Reports should be scanned. The record for 1840 began: "The Oregon Mission is daily increasing in interest and importance. . . . They carried with them the entire confidence of the Board, and no doubt have the prayers of the Church for their preservation and success in their arduous enterprise." Let us note: "But what is most cheering and encouraging to the friends of this holy cause, just before this company sailed, a letter was received from Dr. White . . . giving an account of a powerful work of grace . . . All was love, peace and harmony and prospects were brighten-

ing before them." Also note: "Though it makes no part of the object of the society to found a colony in that region of the country, but simply to send the blessings of the Gospel to those who are or may be there, yet we doubt not that this mission will contribute greatly to building up a Christian colony in the Oregon territory, which will tell favorably on the future destinies of its inhabitants."

The above is submitted as a favorable attitude. Then in the report of 1841, we find: "Including the reinforcements furnished by the last expedition, there are 68 persons connected with the mission, men, women and children, all supported by this society." When the *Lausanne* returned East, Dr. White was aboard, returning with his family, having resigned his post as mission physician. The record contains: "a misapprehension of his obligations to the Board and a disaffection toward the superintendent." Also by the same ship went letters that tended to throw confusion into the thinking of the Board. The report for '42 was short re Oregon, for the unfortunate reason that too little was at hand from Lee or others of the Oregon Mission.

In the Annual Report for 1843 appears Jason Lee's letter of April 8, 1842, quoted above; also a long letter from the most evangelistic minister of the mission group, Rev. H. W. K. Perkins, dated Wascopam, March 15, 1842, and breathing zeal and promise for the mission. The report says: "The spirit breathed in these communications commands our highest approval, and merits our highest commendation. For though our brethren in Oregon are aware that unfavorable rumors have reached the Board concerning the Mission, yet with an unyielding firmness they reassert that confidence in the success of their undertaking. . . . They evince a spirit . . . almost to preclude the possibility of defeat. . . . Relying less upon human instrumentality and more upon divine efficiency, we must not cease to labor and pray for the salvation of Oregon, until the conquests already won shall be repeated, and even eclipsed by future triumphs."

Nevertheless, in the business session plans were adopted that resulted in sending Rev. George Gary to appraise the mission and dispose of it as seemed in his judgment the wisest. The report for 1844, on the Oregon Mission, opens: "The superintendency of the mission has been transferred to the Rev. George Gary. The conflicting and unsatisfactory reports concerning it which, from time to time, have reached us, seem in the judgment of your Board, and of the Bishop having charge of Foreign Missions, to call for a thorough and impartial investigation of its conditions and prospects. . . . We wish it distinctly understood that it is on *these accounts* Brother Lee has

been superseded, and not because there is any lack of confidence in his religious and moral character, or of his entire devotion to the interests of the Oregon Missions." Attention is given the long review of the mission and closes: "The Board embraces this method to record their grateful acknowledgement of the kind attentions our missionaries and their families so often received from the gentlemen of the Hudson's Bay Company, stationed at Vancouver and other points."

Evidently strong criticism followed the action of the Board that recalled Jason Lee and shrunk the mould in which the service of Methodism in Oregon should be cast. After another year, 1845, the Board saw fit to approve, somewhat in official justification of itself, Jason Lee and all persons involved. It was not difficult to lay the blame upon the fateful shrinking of the native tribes, the vast distances and meagre reports. To quote: "Without impugning the motives of a single individual, it may and perhaps ought to be admitted, that the Board was somewhat misled in relation to the necessity of the great reinforcement sent out in 1839. But this admission, under the circumstances should not, and in justice *cannot* subject either the Board or the Bishop having charge of the Foreign Missions, to the charge of recklessness in their expenditures. . . . It seems to us that it should be viewed as one of those mistakes which furnish no just ground for *censure, suspicion, or distrust*. . . . All, then, that can in *justice* be said of this *now* regretted measure, is that through the influence of glowing representations and plausible, though unwise counsels, the Board were induced to sanction an enlargement of the Oregon Mission which, with additional light and experience, they are free to admit was not *really* necessary."

Those who desire to pursue this study farther, and do not have access to the original records of the Board in New York, may find a painstaking reprint with an introduction by Judge Carey in No. 4, Vol. 23, Dec., 1922, *Oregon Historical Quarterly*. The reports of Superintendent Gary swell the Board pages for the next two years and provide a concise official history of the missionary enterprise. It is as fair a review as could be expected, especially now that all the past efforts to plant the Church of Christ and open His Word among the Indians of old Oregon may be merged in one great commemorative centennial of honest zeal seeking the Christian good of others and the founding of the church in the wilds of the Pacific Northwest.

Let us recall the general unrest everywhere in America at the

time we are here studying. In chapter 21, *Pilgrim and Pioneer*, this writer said: "Uneasiness prevailed throughout the country. It was the time of great debates on States' rights and slavery, and only a year before the impact split the churches, North and South. Oregon was more a battlefield in Congress than in the management of the Missions."

It was a time of extreme individualism everywhere, under the guise of patriotism and there should be small wonder that good men were seen in questionable attitudes by so ambitious an era. Strong contradictions arose, in matters before the mission as well as in affairs of the states. Fifty years after Lee began his mission along the Willamette, Dr. William Roberts said: "Oregon belongs to the United States largely, if not wholly, in consequence of missionary enterprise." He was a truly great Christian leader who said that. But the son of another pioneer minister, Hon. Clarence B. Bagley, declared that Oregon would have turned American if the missionaries had not come. However, he believed that "if anybody deserved to be canonized for service to Oregon it was Jason Lee."

When the remains of Jason Lee were removed from his old home, Stanstead, L. C., and the slab monument placed at his grave in the Lee Mission Cemetery at Salem, many memorial addresses were given by leading statesmen of Oregon. Such men as Harvey W. Scott, Hon. Allen Weir, Judge Moreland, seeing the sun rise over Oregon and not analysing any spots on its surface, ascribed to the Father of Christian institutions in Oregon the encomiums of pioneering in sacrificial labors so great and worthy that criticisms, though possible, could not belong to an honest and generous memorial.

Those who share in the centenary appreciations in 1934 will appreciate the tribute adopted by the Board of Managers at their meeting June 19, 1845, following the death of Lee. From this we extract: "Our beloved brother was the great Missionary Pioneer in the valley of the Columbia River; where, for ten years, he labored, suffered and sacrificed, to an extent beyond what the Church *generally* has ever realized or appreciated."

This spirit of Jason Lee is striving to awaken the heirs of a magnificent obsession for the salvation of all and the larger Christian achievements of which the new Pacific Northwest is so manifestly capable and worthy.