

# FORT HALL ON THE SAPTIN RIVER

AN HISTORIC STORY OF OTHER DAYS.

By MILES CANNON, in Capital News

**E**MBRACED in the component parts three potent factors:—civil government, commerce and religion. These elements are frequently symbolized by the flag, the dollar mark and the Cross respectively. Their advent into the territory that now constitutes the state of Idaho occurred when the limits of Old Oregon extended from the Pacific ocean, along the 42nd parallel to a point 18 miles northeast of Rawlins, Wyo., thence along the continental divide to the arctic ocean. Their coming was hand in hand, the first and last under the protection of the second, a relative position, some contend, that they occupy even to this day. They made their first stand on the east bank of the Saptin, afterwards known as the Lewis, and now by the beautiful and poetic name of Snake river, at a point six miles above the mouth of the Portneuf, 20 miles above American Falls, and 1288 miles out of Independence, Mo., on the Oregon Trail.

Strictly speaking, both the flag and sign of commerce had been seen before in Idaho, but here was the first manifestation of the Christian faith in all the vast territory of Old Oregon. The first American flag to enter the state of Idaho was a small one borne by George Dreyer (Drouillard), the interpreter of the Lewis and Clark expedition, who together with Captain Meriwether Lewis, and John Shields, entered what is now the state of Idaho, about 4 o'clock in the afternoon of Monday, Aug. 12, 1805. Not only was this the first flag, but it was the first foot print to be made by a white man in the state, and the place of this interesting event appears to have been at a point about 12 miles east of Sunfield, Lemhi county. This expedition raised a flag at Fort Clatsop during that winter, but the following spring it was made over into five gowns with which food was purchased from the Indians to sustain the company during a period of famine. The second flag was raised at Fort Astor in 1811, only to be lowered again on Oct. 16, 1813, upon the failure of Mr. Astor's enterprise. According to the terms of peace following the war of 1812, the British government permitted Mr. J. B. Prevost, Oct. 6, 1818, to again unfurl the American flag over Fort Astoria, but he had been gone hardly an hour before the British flag was again run up to remain the symbol of authority until 1846. The next episode in the career of the flag of the Union in the northwest brings us back to Fort Hall, the subject of this narrative.

**In Command of Eastern Trader**  
It was a motley company that composed the cavalcade which emerged from the pass at the head of Ross Fork, on the afternoon of Sunday, July 12, 1834, and, following down that stream nine miles, encamped near where Fort Hall station is now located on the Oregon Short Line north of Pocatello. The company was in command of Nathaniel J. Wyeth, a trader from Cambridge, Mass., and under whose protection they traveled, in addition to his company of 50 men and 130 horses, Captain William Stewart, a veteran under Lord Wellington at Waterloo, who was traveling for pleasure; Thomas Nuttall, a botanist, J. K. Townsend, an ornithologist, and a Methodist missionary party consisting of Revs. Jason Lee and Daniel Lee, Cyrus Shepard and P. L. Edwards.

The following day, Monday, they traveled only six miles to a bend in the Snake river to the northwest, where the company again encamped and from a small slough near the river, spent the day taking trout of the finest quality and weighing about two pounds each. The following morning Mr. Wyeth rode down the river three miles to a point where a small water way led off from the main stream, and which was fringed with willow brush that concealed his presence. When he emerged from the growth he noticed a large buffalo bull near by, which he shot, and as he stood by the carcass and observed the wide river which makes a sharp bend to the south, and the slough forming a protection to the east, with a suitable point of land sufficient for the purpose, he then and there located the historic Fort Hall, destined to become one of the most important stations on the famous Oregon Trail, and, until the building of Fort Bridger, nine years later, the second building west of the Missouri river. It was here that the first flag raising in Idaho was celebrated, which was the fourth event of the kind west of the Rocky mountains, and it was here that the first sermon was preached in that vast territory, the distinction belonging to the Methodist society. It was at Fort Hall

where Mrs. Whitman and Mrs. Spaulding, the first American women to cross the continent, were entertained two years later, and it was here that more than 300,000 American pioneers replenished their scanty stores to enable them to reach the Pacific coast. Before its fall in 1855, the fame of this post had reached the civilized countries of the world, but today the historic spot is deserted and forgotten and the only sound that disturbs the death-like quietude is the mournful dirge of the desert winds that play in the tree tops of the grove hard by, the same grove in which Jason Lee, 81 years ago, introduced the Christian faith to the wilds of the Pacific northwest.

## Favorite Feeding Ground

The story of Fort Hall, replete with intrigue, pathos, courage, hope and failure of those who were present when it was founded, is one of unmeasured interest to students of history and a brief narrative of its most salient features may be not amiss. The fort was located at the northern extremity of a natural meadow consisting of more than one hundred thousand acres of rich bottom land, formed by the confluence of the Snake and Portneuf rivers. A large number of bright sparkling streams, fed by a countless number of pure cold springs, traverses the valley at intervals of about three miles, all of which teemed with trout and beaver. It had been a favorite feeding ground during the winter seasons for deer, elk and buffalo. The country properly belonged to the Shoshones or Snake Indians, but the dreaded Blackfeet were wont to swoop down upon these bountiful game fields and the ubiquitous wanderings of this powerful tribe is evidenced by their name being given to one of the principal streams of the locality.

A great Indian trail from the south which crossed the divide near Malad city and followed down Bannock creek and up the Snake river on its way to the headwaters of the Missouri, intersected another of even greater importance near where the fort was located. It was the last mentioned trail that Mr. Wyeth and his party had followed for some 1200 miles and which afterwards became known as the Oregon trail. From a commercial standpoint the country was claimed by the Hudson's Bay company, first under the command of Alexander Ross, then Peter Skene Ogden, Donald McKenzie and others. At first their trading expeditions were fitted out at Spokane House, located nine miles northwest of the present city of Spokane, Wash., thence by way of Flathead Post and the Bitter Root valley, but McKenzie established headquarters at old Fort Walla Walla and reached the territory by way of the trail that afterwards constituted the Columbia river section of the Overland route, and still later followed by the O. S. L. and O. R. & N. railroads.

Wyeth had been west as far as Fort Vancouver two years before and had attempted to establish himself "in such branches of business as may be expedient," but the loss of his vessel, the Sultana, at the Society islands, which he had engaged to bring out his goods by way of Cape Horn, caused the expedition to end in disaster. Accepting the hospitality of the Hudson's Bay company, he set out for the east by way of the Spokane House, Flathead, Bitter Root and the Portneuf, thence by way of the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers. While engaged in making a bull boat on the Bighorn river, near where the "Burlington" now crosses that stream north of Sheridan Wyo., he contracted with Milton Sublette, on the part of the Rocky Mountain Fur company to bring out for that company the following year \$3000 worth of merchandise. After passing Fort Union at the mouth of the Yellowstone he made the remaining part of the journey to Independence in the company of only two Indian lads, one a Nez Perce and the other, Baptiste, a boy of 13, son of Francis Payette and his Flathead wife. At that time, 1833, this may be considered to have been a journey hazardous in the extreme, the entire route being through a country infested with hostile tribes.

## Trading Company Organized

Undaunted by a complete failure we find Mr. Wyeth, after his arrival at Cambridge, actively engaged in the formation of what he termed "The Columbia River Fishing & Trading company," organized for the purpose of establishing a salmon fishery at the mouth of the Willamette, which was to be operated in connection with a general fur business through the interior. His voluminous correspondence while at Cambridge, published by "Sources of the History of Oregon," volume 1, parts 3 to 6, (1899) affords

an interesting study of the man who brought the American flag and the Protestant religion to the state of Idaho. His pack train on this occasion carried about 13,000 pounds of merchandise, some of which was purchased in the eastern markets and shipped down the Ohio, the balance being purchased at St. Louis and sent by boat to Independence, Mo., from which place the expedition started. His pack animals were purchased across the river at Liberty, and the expedition set out on its long journey on the morning of April 28th, 1834.

In addition to the land caravan, Mr. Wyeth chartered another ship, the May Daere, to go round by sea and meet him at the mouth of the Willamette with a cargo of goods and material for the salmon fishery. The adventurous spirit of this enterprising Yankee seems to have been thoroughly sustained by the alluring prospects of a great success beyond the mountains. He made great haste in order to reach the Green river rendezvous ahead of William L. Sublette, a veteran of the fur trade, but in this he failed, a fact which caused some disquietude in the mind of Mr. Wyeth, for fear that worthy competitor might disturb his profitable contract with the Rocky Mountain Fur company.

## Safe Conduct for Missionaries

The following letter appertains to the engagement to furnish safe conduct to the Methodist missionaries:  
New York, Feb. 15, 1834.  
Rev. Jason Lee, (Baltimore).

Dear Sir: I have received your favor of the 11th inst., in answer to which say that I leave this city tomorrow morning and proceed directly west and remain but five or six days at St. Louis. You will hear from me in St. Louis by calling on Messrs. VanPhull & McGill.

I think I received and answered a line from some one in western Mass., but I am not certain.

&c. &c. N. J. WYETH.

Relative to his pack train cargo the following letter will throw some light:  
Louisville, March 4.  
Capt. Thing (Louisville).

Dear Sir: You will find at Mess. Allison & Andersons 3 bbls Alcohol and 11 packages Tobacco, provided they do not ship the same before you arrive at this place in which case you will proceed direct to St. Louis.

I am &c. N. J. WYETH.

At St. Louis, on March 31st he notes the arrival of Nuttall, Townsend, and the missionaries. At Independence, on April 17th, he notes among other things that "There are none of the Dignitaries with me as yet and if they 'preach' much longer in the States they will lose their passage for I will not wait a minute for them."

The following notation in the journal of Mr. Wyeth, under date of June 1st, gives us the first building of the famous Fort Laramie, the first supply station on the Oregon Trail.

"At the crossing (Laramie river) we found 15 of Sublette's men camped for the purpose of building a fort, he having gone on ahead with his best animals and the residue of his goods he left about 14 loads."

The caravan arrived at the Green river rendezvous, 12 miles above the mouth of Big Sandy on the 19th of June, where the first bitter disappointment awaited him. In his journal he noted the following:

"... found rendezvous 12 miles up and much to my astonishment the goods which I had contracted to bring up to the Rocky Mountain Fur Co. was refused by those honorable gentlemen."

Mr. Wyeth appears to have been in a bad humor as a result of the treatment accorded him by the Rocky Mountain Fur Co., which was then competing with the Hudson's Bay company in the trade between the Rocky mountains and the Snake river valley. It is reported by some writers that he made this significant remark at the time: "I will roll a stone in your garden that you will have trouble in getting out." He broke camp the next morning and moved over to Ham's Fork, at a point where the town of Granger now stands, a distance of 23 miles, where he encamped for seven days. Here he wrote twelve letters, all of great interest, but we will forbear noting them except a few references pertaining to Fort Hall.

To Mr. Ermatinger, of the Hudson's Bay company, he wrote:

"... I am now on my way to meet a vessel that I sent from Boston to the mouth of the Columbia and hope to be there by the first of September. You have also enclosed a letter from Mr. Payette, whose son is now with me. I came up with goods and about 50 men, 130 horses. The goods I will

have to leave for sale somewhere hereabouts with part of the men. I have got no Beaver and have sold but little and that for drafts which I hope are good.

"I have again to repeat to you the advice which I before gave you not to come with a small party to the American Rendezvous. There are here a great collection of scoundrels.

"I have a great desire to see you and repay in part for all the kindness which I received from you last year. . . ."

"ya. obt. Sev. and Friend  
"NATH. J. WYETH."

## Route Followed by Emigrants

It may be stated that it was through the courtesy of the Hudson's Bay company, whose Snake river expedition Mr. Wyeth accompanied from Vancouver to Green river the year before, was in command of Mr. Ermatinger. This being the same trader who, in company with Joe Meek, Robert Newell and Caleb Wilkins, drove the first wagons from Fort Hall to the Columbia river. This occurred in the fall of 1840, and the wagons, three in number, had been abandoned or left at Fort Hall that year, and the little company was outfitted by Mr. Ermatinger, from 1838 to 1841, in command of Fort Hall for the Hudson's Bay company. This journey was made to establish the feasibility of taking wagons through to the Columbia, a task considered by many as being impossible at the time, and the route these men traveled was followed by the American emigrants until the Oregon Trail fell into disuse more than 30 years afterwards.

In one of his letters from Ham's Fork, Mr. Wyeth expressed his bitter disappointment at being unable to deliver his goods at Green river, and that he needed the money to pay his company and other expenses of the journey. He advised his friends to keep away from the American rendezvous as it was composed of murderers and thieves and that crime of every nature was rampant. His men were willing to take goods, however, at a profit of 500 per cent over original cost and he settled with them with no difficulty. As to his future he said:

"I shall proceed about 150 miles west of this and establish a fort in order to make sale of the goods which remain on my hands. I have sent out messengers to the rawnacks, Shoshones, Snakes, Nez Perces and Flatheads to make robes and come and trade them at this post. . . ."

He wrote cordial letters to Francis Payette, Captain Bonneville, who was then in the Bear River country and whose acquaintance he had made the previous year, and sent his kindly regards to Dr. McLoughlin, at Fort Vancouver. Though in competition with that great corporation, he appears to have been on terms of friendly intimacy with all its officers. On June 27 he broke camp again and moved up the trail in the direction of Bear river. July 4, found the caravan encamped at the forks of the Muddy, at a point where the town of Nugget now stands, and the following entry in his journal indicates that they celebrated the day, but doubtless, in a manner much to the disgust of the missionaries.

"I gave the men too much alcohol and took a pretty hearty spree myself. At the camp we found Mr. Cery and Mr. Walker, who were returning to St. Louis with the furs collected by Mr. Bonneville's company, about 10 packs and men going down, to whom there is due \$10,000."

The mountain value of a pack of beaver, about 90 pounds to the pack, was \$500. July 6 the caravan camped on the ground now occupied by the City of Montpelier, on July 8 at Soda Springs, and on the 10th they overtook the Bonneville party on the upper waters of the Blackfoot. Actuated by a feeling of selfishness, a spirit that amounts almost to a trait with the American people, the doughty captain was putting forth his utmost energy to escape his Yankee compeer, and, doubtless would have succeeded had it not been for a social call that the nestor of the fur trade, Mr. Thomas McKay, saw fit to make his encampment on the Blackfoot.

## Trading Expedition Appears

The captain, with about 23 men, was encamped for the purpose of taking a supply of buffalo, when a scout announced that Wyeth was approaching from the Bear river. Their load of meat being too heavy to admit of rapid travel, the captain determined to cache his baggage so he might be able to elude the unwelcome countrymen until he could have an opportunity to either kill or drive all the

buffalo out of their favorite feeding grounds on the upper Blackfoot, such being his solicitude for a fellow traveler in the wilderness. While thus engaged a pack train was seen flitting over the divide from the direction of the headwaters of the Portneuf. It proved to be a trading expedition of the Hudson's Bay company under the command of Thomas McKay, who encamped at no great distance. Now the captain was on his way to the Columbia, a country under the domination of that company, so he immediately forgot the object of his wish and conjured in his mind a scheme to cultivate the friendship of the swarthy brigade commander, one of the most famous men of his day. Here followed the celebrated debauch, on a beverage brewed from honey and alcohol as delineated by Washington Irving in his "Bonneville's Adventures."

Before the feast was fairly opened, Mr. Wyeth, far in advance of his company, rode up and the captain met him in a friendly and courteous manner. He acquainted his unwelcome guest with the news of the mountains and obtained from Mr. Wyeth an account of events in the east, after which they parted. The following day the captain, in his search for the buffalo, was unable to reach his own camp and was compelled, therefore, to accept the hospitality of Mr. Wyeth. The following day a fearful havoc was wrought in the buffalo herds of the Blackfoot, in which all hands of both expeditions took part. Captain Bonneville then hastened on his journey, leaving Wyeth to gather up what meat he could care for and pursue his journey in a more leisurely manner and in company with the sorrowful trader, McKay, now suffering from the effects of the captain's compound of honey and alcohol.

McKay was in no mood for rapid travel, however, and fell behind, so it was the caravan of Mr. Wyeth that halted on the bank of the Snake on Monday, July the 13th, and fished in the crystal waters of Portneuf bottoms, as noted in the beginning of this narrative. On the evening of the 14th, the calvaude moved down to the site of the fort and again encamped where they remained for 23 days, during which time the fort was constructed. It was made of drift logs taken from the river, and cottonwood timber from the grove near by, and when completed, it presented a very formidable appearance, 120x150 feet on the ground, with a stockade about 16 feet high which formed the outer walls of the quarters, and two bastions on top so arranged that the guns would sweep either side in case of an attack.

While the work was in progress the scientists and missionaries availed themselves of the opportunity to rest and enjoy the novelty of the situation. McKay had, in the meantime, fully recovered from the effects of "a swarm of bees in his head" and encamped with the party of Mr. Wyeth, in order, doubtless, to observe operations and be in position to report to his superior officers at Fort Vancouver. With his party there were now at Fort Hall nearly one hundred persons and more than two hundred and fifty jaded horses regaling themselves on the succulent grass of the bottom lands. On Sunday afternoon, July 26th, 1834, Mr. Wyeth invited Rev. Jason Lee to conduct religious services.

## First Religious Services

Without the least premonition of the fact that this was to be the first sermon in a future state, or of three states for that matter, and apparently without any thought of the historic significance of the event, preparations were made to hold the services in the grove of cottonwood trees, which grew within a few feet of the west wall of the fort. By 8 o'clock in the afternoon all was in readiness. The French and half-breeds of the Hudson's Bay company party spoke English, as did all the Wyeth party, so the services were conducted for the whites only. The entire company had assembled before the appearance of the missionaries.

Mr. Lee was a tall man but rather spare and inclined to stoop. He wore a full beard of light brown color and over a high forehead he roached high a heavy growth of rather darker shade of hair. He possessed large, blue eyes, and his kindly expression denoted deep and earnest thought. His lungs were tubercular to a degree which, to some extent at least, affected his voice, giving it a strong yet rather a grating sound. He wore the regulation ministerial garb and was assisted in the services by the three other members of his party. Standing under the shade of the trees, his congregation reclining in

every conceivable attitude before him, the breaking waves of a great river at his back, and in the midst of a trackless desert, he delivered a message from Calvary—nineteen centuries in its coming. The bacchanalian orgies over buffalo hump and "honeydrips" which he had recently witnessed doubtless inspired the text from 1 Cor.: x, 31:

"Whether, therefore, we eat or drink or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God."

Let us indulge the hope that some day a marble shaft will mark the spot where the message arrived, and the words themselves, chisled deep into its granite base, be a fitting tribute to the man of God who bore it.

After services the assemblage repaired to the race track to witness a horse race by two of McKay's men. One of the riders, a Frenchman by the name of Kenseau, was thrown from his horse and killed. Of this Mr. Lee wrote:

"The next day, Monday, Mr. McKay asked me to conduct a funeral service. I attended at 12 o'clock, read the 90 Psalm, prayed, and then went to the grave, where I read a part of the fifteenth chapter of First Corinthians, and also read the burial service as found in our Discipline."

Mr. Wyeth noted the event as follows:

"On the 26th a Frenchman named Kenseau was killed horse racing and on the 27th was buried near the fort. He belonged to Mr. McKay's party and his comrades erected a decent tomb for him. Services for him was performed by the Canadians in the Catholic form, by Mr. Lee in the Protestant form and by the Indians in their form as he had an Indian family. He at least was well buried."

## Journey Was Resumed

On Thursday following Mr. McKay resumed his journey towards Fort Walla Walla, then the base of operations in the Snake country, the missionaries joining his expedition. Mr. McKay presented Mr. Lee with two fine saddle horses, much to the delight of the latter and satisfaction to the former. Thomas McKay, when our people shall have awakened to the unmeasured interest in pioneer history, will occupy a unique position. As the agent for the Hudson's Bay company, he had the distinction of escorting the first Methodist, the first Presbyterians, and the first American women, and assisting the first Catholics to establish in old Oregon. As a French half-breed and a Catholic, he supported the Americans in the occupation of the country, fought with them in the Indian wars, and was a friend and supporter of all religious sects.

August 6, Mr. Wyeth made the following entry in his journal:

"Having done so much as was requisite for safety to the fort and drank a bale of liquor and named it Fort Hall in honor of the oldest member of our concern (Henry Hall of Boston) we left it and with it Mr. Evans in charge of 11 men and 14 horses and mules and three cows."

Writing to his uncle on Oct. 6 from the Columbia river he gives us a better account in the following:

"Since mine of June 21 from Ham's Fork I have, as I then proposed, built a fort on Snake or Lewis river, which I named Fort Hall, from the oldest gentleman in the concern. We manufactured a magnificent flag from some unbleached sheeting, a little red flannel and a few blue patches, saluted it with damaged powder and wet it in villainous alcohol, and after all, I do assure you, it makes a very respectable appearance amid the dry and desolate regions of central America. Its bastions stand a terror to the skulking Indians and a beacon of safety to the fugitive hunter. It is manned by 12 men and has constantly loaded in the bastions 100 guns and rifles. These bastions command both inside and outside of the fort. . . ."

The second disappointment awaited Mr. Wyeth at Fort Vancouver which place he reached on Sept. 14. Here he met Dr. John McLoughlin, chief factor, of whom he speaks in these words: "He has here power and uses it as a man should to make those about him and those who come in contact with him comfortable and happy."

The following morning he proceeded down the river in a canoe and met his brig, the May Daere. She had been struck by lightning and delayed so long making repairs that salmon operations for that year had to be suspended. In fact the entire project was one disappointment after another and, finally all had to be abandoned. Writing to his brother Charles, under date of Sept. 22, 1835, he said:

"I am too busy and too unwell to write much even to you. It sometimes

(Concluded next week.)