
The Oregon Country

THE Oregon Country comprised the area west of the Rocky Mountains, north of California, Nevada and Utah. The word Oregon has been traced to the Orjan River in Chinese Tartary, at the mouth of which people called Kal-muchs lived. [122]

How the United States came to possess the valuable north-western country is an interesting story.

It is the only land in continental United States, west of the Mississippi River, which the United States obtained without paying some foreign nation or potentate.

Eight recorded Spanish expeditions, during the 247 years between 1542 and 1789, made discoveries along the Pacific coast, some as far north as the delightful Kodiak Island in Alaska. Most of these discoveries were unknown to other nations until after the voyages of the British explorer, Captain James Cook. [122]

The Spanish navigator, De Fuca, is credited with having, in 1592, discovered and entered the present Columbia River, which he named St. Roc. Another Spanish navigator, Haceta, is recorded 183 years later, in 1775, as having sailed about seventy-five miles up that river.

The Spanish admiral, De Fonta, in 1640, discovered the present Vancouver Island, then voyaged to the expansive harbor of Seward, in Alaska, and proclaimed Spanish sovereignty of all the North Pacific Region.

The only recorded British explorations during those years were the buccaneering expedition of Drake, in 1578, to 44° N. and of

Captain Cook, who, just two hundred years afterwards, was the first British subject to sail to the Pacific Northwest. He made a landing at Nootka Sound, on the west side of Vancouver Island, but did not touch on the Oregon coast.

Spanish vessels often, until 1782, entered the St. Roc River but the increasing size of ocean-going vessels, with frequent disasters on the extensive bar at the entrance, caused the Spaniards to discontinue entering the river.

The report by Captain Cook of the possibilities of the fur trade along the northwestern coast awakened great interest among adventurers. The Northwest Company of Merchants, of Montreal, a rival of the Hudson's Bay Company, as early as 1784-5 projected an overland exploring expedition to the Oregon region, to develop a fur trade. [135]

Charles Bulfinch of Boston, and associates sent the ship "Columbia," of 250 tons, and the "Washington," of 100 tons, with Captains Gray and Kendrick, around Cape Horn to the Pacific Northwest, where they arrived in 1789. Thence they went with a cargo of furs to China; returning via the Cape of Good Hope.

Captain Kendrick, at Clayoquot, near Nootka, on his second voyage to that region, two years later, obtained an Indian grant of a large area of land to the southward, paying for it with muskets, iron, copper and clothing. This was the beginning of American exploration in the Northwest.

Captain Vancouver, the British navigator, was at Nootka and learned from Captain Gray about Puget Sound, which Vancouver intended exploring.

During the previous half century or more, the Russians had been establishing settlements along the Alaska coast between Bering Strait and Sitka, and even erected a fort in California, thirty miles north of San Francisco. Not until the appearance of the British and American navigators did the Spaniards awaken to the activities of the Russians.

Shortly thereafter a Spanish expedition was sent north with men, cattle and agricultural equipment to extend Spanish settlement, and to protest against the Russians occupying land which the Spaniards claimed to have occupied for many years. Three years later, under pressure of the British, the Spaniards abandoned

the settlement at Nootka and withdrew to the California coast.

Captain Gray, in the ship "Columbia," in May, 1792, discovered anew, and sailed into, the Columbia River, the second largest river in the United States, which Cook had passed unnoticed. Gray gave to the river the name of his ship, replacing the Spanish name of St. Roc.

Gray's entrance into the Columbia gave the United States the first logical right to become a claimant to any part of the Oregon Country. Gray's venture was a daring one. The bar at the entrance outside Cape Disappointment was then seven miles long and three miles wide, with a narrow, winding and changeable channel.

Over this bar the breakers, extending for miles, dashed and pounded and thundered with a roar which could be heard for miles. The first ship sent to the Columbia River by Astor lay outside the bar three days awaiting an opportunity to enter. In two different attempts to enter she lost seven men. Crossing this bar, more than fifty years ago, continuously casting with two leadlines, was an experience I have vividly remembered all these years. Since that time the bar has been jettied, and a thirty-five foot channel dredged all the way to Portland.

The region west of the Missouri River was virtually unknown to the people of America when President Jefferson declared that the safety of the nation depended upon having it populated. In January, 1803, before the United States had bought Louisiana from France, he recommended to Congress, and it authorized, an exploring expedition to the Pacific.

This expedition, led by Meriwether Lewis, of Virginia, and William Clark, a younger brother of General George Rogers Clark, was composed of thirty-two persons, including four army sergeants, twenty-two privates (of whom nine were Kentucky hunters), one Negro, two French interpreters and the young Indian wife of one of the last named.

Lewis and Clark left St. Louis in May, 1804, followed the Missouri River for 2,575 miles, crossed the Rockies, and then followed the Snake and Columbia Rivers to the Pacific Ocean, which they reached at the end of eighteen months of arduous travel.

Lewis and Clark for the United States, and Thompson, a Britisher, each posted notices claiming the Oregon Country for their respective nations. [135]

After wintering in Oregon, preparing maps of their route, the explorers, excepting one man who died, arrived at St. Louis in September, 1806.

Every one in the expedition received double pay. In addition, Lewis and Clark were each granted sixteen hundred acres of land, and each of their men received three hundred acres.

John Jacob Astor organized the Pacific Fur Company, and sent a ship around Cape Horn to the Columbia River in 1811. Aboard was one of Astor's Canadian partners. Arriving there, he located a fur trading station on a site within the mouth of the river, to which he gave the name Astoria.

The war between the United States and Great Britain began the following year. A British armed ship appeared at the mouth of the river and threatened capture of the Astor post, whereupon the Canadian partner, without sanction of Astor, sold the post to the Northwest Company, a British corporation. This, in effect, placed the entire country in possession of the British.

United States and Great Britain disputed ownership of the country and in 1818 a treaty provided for occupancy of the territory between 42° N. and $54^{\circ}40'$ N. by subjects of both, for a stated period.

Russia's claim to Oregon, and to the North Pacific Ocean as a closed sea, was compromised through treaties between Great Britain and Russia, in 1824, and between the United States and Russia, the following year. Russia accepted $54^{\circ}40'$ N. as its southern boundary; now the southern boundary of Alaska.

Discussion of this treaty in Congress first voiced the thought of the United States occupying Oregon, and brought notice by the British government to the Hudson's Bay Company that Great Britain would make no claim to land south of the Columbia River.

The Northwest and Hudson's Bay Companies consolidated, and the trading post at Astoria was, in 1824, moved up the river to the present Fort Vancouver. Dr. John McLoughlin, the superintendent, was an amiable and accommodating Scotsman, who extended many civilities to the American settlers, although the policy of the company was consistently opposed to settlement of the country, as being a menace to the fur trade.

This post became, and continued for many years, the focal point of all trade in Oregon. McLoughlin, anticipating an influx of settlers, sent five Canadians, in 1829, to locate on choice farming land and mill-sites near the falls of the Willamette River. This was the first real settlement of white people in Oregon. The next settlers, three years afterwards, were two Americans from Wyeth's party of trappers. [122]

Two Americans, Hall J. Kelley, of Massachusetts, and Dr. Marcus Whitman, a Presbyterian missionary from New York State, unassociated in their endeavors, printed and distributed articles and pamphlets, and through interviews with editors and others in the East, including public officials at Washington, urged American sovereignty of the Oregon Country and its settlement by Americans. Enduring tremendous physical hardships and expense in their respective pursuits for the cause, they both reached Oregon in 1834.

A Methodist mission for the Indians was that year established on the Willamette River, sixty miles south of Vancouver. Some farmers were already located there, and half-breed children formed a nucleus for a school. Four years later a Roman Catholic mission was located thereabouts.

American trappers drifted into the Willamette Valley and, by 1840, there began a stream of genuine settlers, lured by the fact that they could there get for the taking a mile square of fertile farming land for husband, wife and each child. [90]

In 1842, although the boundary between the United States and Canada had not been agreed upon, active agitation was begun in Congress for claiming and forming a territorial government for the Oregon region, and for granting land to settlers. This stimulated migration there from the Middle West.

As a great immigration of one thousand persons, assuring a predominately American population in Oregon south of the Columbia River, the settlers inaugurated a provincial government of the territory, and adopted a land law.

The different religious missions were each allowed to pre-empt an entire township of 23,040 acres, in addition to the land held by their individual members.

Endeavoring to prevent absentee landholding and speculation,

a local legislative committee wisely provided that only actual settlers could become landholders, and shortly thereafter a provisional constitution was adopted.

Farms, ranches, flour-mills and sawmills were established, and their products sold to the Russians in Alaska, and to the people in the Sandwich (Hawaiian) Islands.

Great Britain was intent upon having the Canadian-United States boundary fixed south of the Columbia River, at the forty-fifth parallel, extending from the Falls of St. Anthony (Minneapolis) to the Pacific Ocean.

In the discussion on the subject with Ashburton, the British minister at Washington in 1842, Daniel Webster, believing that Great Britain could influence Mexico, suggested that the proposed boundary might be allowed if the United States could obtain northern California and San Francisco harbor, then possessed by Mexico.

It is possible that it was this which prompted Great Britain, four years later, to send a large squadron to the Pacific, centered at Monterey, with the apparent object of obtaining California from Mexico in liquidation of indebtedness of Mexico to British citizens. Great Britain could then deliver California to the United States, in exchange for the more southerly boundary for Canada.

[135]

The purchase of Louisiana from France by the United States in 1803, and of Florida from Spain in 1819, extinguished any claim France or Spain might have had to land west of the Mississippi River north of 42°, and left the Pacific Northwest open to appropriation by the United States, barring any counter claim by Great Britain.

The United States took no official action for absorbing the region until after the boundary between the United States and Canada had been officially agreed upon in 1846.

The claim by the United States to the Oregon Country was based upon: discovery by Americans (although previously known by the Spaniards) of the Columbia River by Captain Gray in 1792; exploration by Lewis and Clark across the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean in 1805; locating of the Astor fur trading post at Astoria in 1811; settlement of the country by

Americans and contiguity of the land purchased from France and Spain.

From the agreement between the United States and Russia in 1825, fixing $54^{\circ} 40'$ (at the southern tip of Alaska on the Pacific) as the southern boundary of the Russian possessions along the Pacific coast, there arose in the Presidential campaign of 1844, the slogan, "Fifty-four-forty or fight," as indicating the proposed boundary between the United States and Canada. This was advocated by the supporters of James K. Polk, candidate for President. The cry went through the country with enthusiasm, and Polk was elected. The year after being inaugurated, he signed the treaty fixing the boundary at 49° N., as it now exists.

This ended the joint occupancy treaty of 1818, whereby citizens of both countries had been privileged during the preceding twenty-eight years to occupy the region between 42° N. and $54^{\circ} 40'$ N.

Judson [90] states, having seen letters from British vice-consuls in southern California and in the Sandwich Islands, repeating what Americans and Britishers both said of Oregon, "that it was over-rated and not worth a war."

There were, at the close of 1845, about six thousand people in Oregon, including a few hundred in the Puget Sound region, and Americans soon exceeded the British in numbers. Five years later the population of the present state of Washington was 1,111.

Meanwhile the Hudson's Bay Company sank to a subordinate position. Schaifer [135] said: "The Oregon question, so far as control of the country itself was concerned, had been settled by the pioneers . . ." He adds: ". . . the British fort, Vancouver, was indispensable to the American settlers, was in fact the condition of Oregon's early colonization; without it, the country must have remained a wilderness until others had been founded."

Upon the fixing of the boundary, Congress provided for a territorial government for Oregon, which included the present state of Washington and the country east thereof, to the crest of the Rocky Mountains.

With the expansion of lumbering in the territory occasioned by the discovery of gold in California, the population increased rapidly, the settlers taking up land.

Overcoming great difficulties, a caravan of pioneer families, on their westward trek, opened a wagon road over the mountains to Puget Sound in 1853, which facilitated migration to that section.

Immigration into the region became so great by 1851 that the Indians realized that their lands would soon be taken by the whites. This brought on a war which continued in some sections for seven years, at the termination of which, as usual in all wars that have ever occurred between the Indians and the white race, the Indians lost their lands and were forced into the back country—in this instance, onto reservations.

Schaifer [135] in *A History of the Pacific Northwest*, writing in 1917, said: "Much of the territory now held by the cattle companies was originally filched from the national government by the well-known device of the 'dummy' entrymen . . . some of it was land, falsely, or at least doubtfully, described as swamp land and as such sold at one dollar per acre . . .

"The relatively high price of farm lands delays the progress of subdividing the large farms of pioneer times, into holdings suited to a more intensive system of farming. . . . According to the census report, farm lands alone, as distinct from buildings, increased in value during the decade 217.7 per cent in Oregon, 278.3 in Washington and 276.1 in Idaho.

"The primary cause of the rise in the social value of lands here, as elsewhere in the United States, is the disappearance of the free lands. Hitherto these regulated the value of the farm lands, permitting only such advance as was justified. . . .

"A secondary cause of social values in the Northwest has been an excess of speculation in farm lands . . . A general inflation of land values influences the rate of immigration of desirable citizens from other states into this region, and defers still further the full development of the Northwestern resources. . . .

"This is disquieting to all thoughtful men and it contributes to the unrest of the industrial class who see in it the prospect of their permanent exclusion from the ranks of landholders."