

JAMES W. NESMITH

Among the notable men of Oregon, James W. Nesmith, since the earliest settlement of the state, held a leading place. He was a man of quick intelligence, unusual force of character, large individualism and originality, an excellent friend and citizen, and, withal, a true type of those representative Americans who laid the foundations of empire in the West. He died at his home on Rickreall River June 17, 1885. In the annals of early Oregon, his name will have a prominent and honored place forevermore.

James Willis Nesmith was a lineal descendant of James Nesmith, who emigrated to America, in the year 1718, from the valley of the river Bann in the north of Ireland, and who was one of the first sixteen settlers in the historic town of Londonderry. The records of Londonderry, Windham, Antrim and Ackworth display the name of Nesmith in many honorable connections. The Nesmiths were Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, and, as such, were identified fully with the historical movements of that period. James W. Nesmith was born in Washington County, Maine, July 23, 1820. His mother's name was Willis. She was a relative of N. P. Willis, the poet. Colonel Nesmith had no early educational advantages. His mother died while he was in his infancy, and his father, in his youth. He left his native state when a mere boy, and lived for several years among relatives in New Hampshire and Ohio. By the opening of the year 1843, he had moved west as far as Missouri. Here he joined a party organizing for Oregon.

Eager for adventure, and with no ties to bind him to the East, he set his face hopefully for the shores of the Pacific. Years ago he delivered an address, before the Oregon Pioneer Association, on the emigration of 1843, which will stand as an authoritative account of the first considerable movement of emigrants across the plains to Oregon. (Note: Address delivered June 15, 1875, at Salem. See Transactions of Oregon Pioneer Association for 1875, p. 42). Arrived here, the natural vigor of his mind, young as he was, could not but attract notice. He took an active part in the formation of the provisional government, and was judge in 1845. In 1847 and 1848, he was a representative in the legislature of the provisional government, having been chosen for that duty by the electors of Polk County. He served with distinction in the Cayuse War, as captain of a company, and was one of the most efficient actors in that important drama in the early history of Oregon.

The time had come for abandonment of the provisional government, which had been carried on by the early settlers, under whom Oregon had virtually been an independent country. Always foremost in every movement, Colonel Nesmith took an active part in urging the establishment of a territorial government, under the Government of the United States. He studied law and was admitted to the bar in 1848, was elected treasurer of Polk County in 1852, and, in 1853, commanded an expedition against the hostile Indians of Southern Oregon. His service, on this occasion,

was rendered with customary intelligence and efficiency, and prepared the way to his leadership of Oregon volunteers in the campaign against the Yakima Indians, in 1855. After his return from the Rogue River War, in 1853, he was appointed United States Marshal for Oregon, which he held until 1855, when he resigned to accept the position of colonel of the volunteers in the Yakima expedition. From 1853 to 1859, he was superintendent of Indian affairs for the territories of Oregon and Washington.

In politics, Colonel Nesmith had always been known as a Democrat, but, as he was opposed to the extension of slavery, he came into collision with the dominant power in his party in Oregon. The question was one that drew a broad line of division between men everywhere, and perhaps nowhere broader than here. Oregon contained large numbers of people from the slave states, and, to their natural fealty to the institution that characterized the South, they added a party spirit which was not disposed to brook dissent. This divided the Democratic party of Oregon, as of other states, into two factions. Here, the weaker faction was composed of the free-state men. Personal feeling between members of the two factions ran high here, as elsewhere. It was a most bitter struggle, growing out of a difference on a great moral question, upon which all the resources of compromise had been exhausted. Of the free-state men of his party, Colonel Nesmith became the principal leader. As such, he was a candidate for elector on the Douglas ticket, in 1860, and in the same year, by a coalition of the Republicans and free-state Democrats, he was elected to the Senate of the United States for the full term, beginning March 4, 1861. To one who had broken with the larger section of his party on such a question, this was a great triumph; particularly so, since he took the seat vacated by Joseph Lane, his able antagonist, the leader of the pro-slavery party of Oregon and the candidate for Vice President on the Breckenridge ticket. Young persons of the present day cannot possibly imagine the severity of the political contention of those times. But it is agreeable to record the fact that Lane and Nesmith became fully reconciled in after years, and renewed the friendship that the stress of events, which neither could control, had so rudely broken off.

As senator of the United States, Colonel Nesmith supported every measure necessary for suppression of the Confederacy and for preservation of the Union. He served on the military committee of the Senate, where his patriotism and judgment were invaluable to the country. He served, also, on the committees on commerce and Indian affairs, and on various special committees of great importance. When the reconstruction measures were proposed, he acted no further with the Republican party, and made several speeches in the Senate in support of the policy of President Johnson. At the termination of his service in the Senate, he was nominated for minister to Austria; but, owing to the bitter feeling against the President and his friends, the Senate refused to con-

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firm him. While in the Senate, Colonel Nesmith was untiring in urging measures beneficial to Oregon and the Pacific states and territories, generally. Having decided military taste and inclination, he took a deep interest in the army, and gained the lasting regard of many of our most famous soldiers. He was frequently with the armies in the field and saw several important battles.

In 1867 he returned to his farm on the Rickreall, where he lived in comparative quiet for several years. In 1873 he was elected representative in Congress, to fill a vacancy created by the death of the incumbent, Joseph G. Wilson. While in Congress, at the request of the entire delegation from Massachusetts, he delivered a eulogy on Charles Sumner, which attracted universal attention. There had been between Sumner and himself, while he was in the Senate, a warm friendship, though two men were never more unlike. Upon the expiration of his term as representative, he returned to Oregon and has since lived upon his farm, though always taking an interest in public affairs. He was active in promotion of the Oregon Pioneer Association, of which he was president for several years. Though a lawyer by profession, he was, during the greater part of his life, a farmer by occupation. Both in public and in private life, he exemplified the rugged and manly honesty of his race.

In 1846 he married Pauline Goff (Note: Lucinda Pauline Goff Nesmith was born in Howard County, Missouri, April 7, 1831; crossed the plains to Oregon in 1844; died December 30, 1890).

Colonel Nesmith was an able and successful speaker. He possessed an unlimited fund of wit and humor, was quick at repartee, and was never at a loss for pithy anecdotes and quaint illustrations. He had qualities that gave him, during his career at Washington, a national reputation. Though he ranked in politics as a Democrat, he never could be what may be called a "good party man." In ordinary times, indeed, he would have acted steadily with his party; but, upon the great issues that came up in connection with slavery, secession and civil war, he became independent of party and acted with the Republicans in demanding the suppression of the Confederacy and the abolition of slavery. He was the only democratic senator who voted to submit the abolition amendment to the states for their action. Further on, when the issues of reconstruction came up, he refused to go with the Republicans and resumed his relations with the Democratic party. But he was too independent to retain the favor of those who direct the policy of the party. On great questions he was inclined, by the constitution of his mind, to take a middle course; and yet, no man was firmer or more combative in support of his ideas and principles. He was always earnest, intelligent, indefatigable and patriotic, and no man who came among the early settlers fills so large a place in the history of Oregon. His career and his fame are the heritage of the state.