

OSBORNE RUSSELL

Osborne Russell was one of that hardy race of Mountain Men, and he vividly portrays through the pages of a journal the daily life, adventures, and hazards of himself and his comrades. The journal was kept from April 1834, until June 6, 1843, and was published in 1914 by L. T. York of Boise, Idaho.

Russell was born in Hallowell, Maine, on the Kennebec river, June 12, 1814. Obsessed with the desire to become a sailor, at the age of sixteen he ran away and shipped on a sailing vessel. The skipper was so hated that when they reached New York the crew deserted. At this point he joined and during the next two years, worked with a fur trapping company operating in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

At Independence, Missouri, his diary states that he engaged on April 14, 1834, with the Columbia River Fishing and Trading Company from Boston, headed by Nathaniel Wyeth. Among the fifty-eight members of the company were Nutall and Townsend, botanists and naturalists, also Jason and Daniel Lee and Captain Thing, an eminent navigator, who was to plot the route across the mountains by astronomical observations.

They followed, in the main, what is now known as the Old Oregon Trail, with Wyeth in the lead. They rode in double file, each man leading two loaded horses, while the rest, with twenty head of extra horses and as many cattle, brought up the rear. Over prairies, mountains and streams the cavalcade advanced until they came to the now historic rendezvous at Green river, just over the Continental divide. Here were gathered about 600 men, half-breeds, Indians and whites, including two companies of trappers and traders. One was the American Company under Dripps and Fontenelle, and the other the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, whose partners were Thomas Fitzpatrick, Milton Sublette and James Bridger.

On Wyeth's first trip, two years previous, he had contracted to supply the Rocky Mountain Company with merchandise for trade with the Indians. Upon his arrival with the goods, to his indignation he found the contract had been broken, whereupon he was able to dispose of only a small part of his stock. He vowed they would repent their treachery, and the story of his retaliation in selling out to the rival British company will follow. After a two weeks' stay at Green river, the march was resumed on July 2, 1834. When they arrived in what is now the southeastern corner of Idaho, they met Captain Bonneville with about twelve men killing buffalo and drying the meat for their journey to the Columbia.

Wyeth did not tarry long to visit, but pressed on, and in a couple of days crossed the great valley of the Snake river. Here Wyeth determined to build a fort, store the remainder of his merchandise, leave a number of men to guard it and to trade with the Snake and Bannock

Bannock Indians, while he with the rest of the company continued the trek to the west coast. The diary states: "On the 18th (July) 1834, we commenced the fort, which was a stockade 80 feet square built of cottonwood trees set on end, sunk two and one-half feet in the ground and standing about 15 feet above with two bastions 8 feet square at the opposite angles. On the 4th of August (after 18 days' work) the fort was completed, and on the 5th the stars and stripes were unfurled to the breeze at sunrise in the center of a savage and uncivilized country over an American trading post."

The uncertainty of the location of the American trading post, the first Fort Hall, seems quite definitely settled when Russell states that the stream called the Portneuf ran into the Snake River about 12 miles below the fort.

Twelve men, Russell included, were left in charge and Wyeth took his departure on July 19. The journal says that it was the most lonely place in the world, with not a human in sight except the men at the fort.

With this spot as headquarters, Osborne Russell spent eight years hunting and trapping in the Rocky Mountains. It did not always remain so lonesome, as whole encampments of Snake and Bannock Indians moved near the fort; hunters and trappers from other companies gravitated toward it; and, being in the line of travel, emigrants stopped on their way west. Little houses had been erected for shelter and men from the Hudson's Bay Company, the first white women with their missionary husbands and others well known in western history made this a stopping place.

On December 20, 1835, after his venture had proved such a dismal business failure, Wyeth returned and signed up discharges for all his men. Allying himself with Bridger's company at one time, and independent groups at other times, Russell served two expeditions, as camp tender under the intrepid leader Joseph Gale. A "camp tender" took care of the horses and the camp, procured firewood, cured the skins, and waited on the trappers. What these men passed through on their protracted winter hunting trips, and how they survived the dangers and suffering can only be sensed from the meager entries in the diary. It is one hair-raising adventure after another, with grizzlies, buffalo and elk, and brushes with the Indians.

Besides his association with Joseph Gale, he speaks of encountering several times "Major Meek", both afterwards founders of the provisional government. Thomas J. Hubbard and James O'Neil were also of Wyeth's company of 1834.

After Wyeth withdrew from his enterprise, he sold Fort Hall with all its stock to the Hudson's Bay Company in the year 1837. This gave the British company a foothold in the territory of the Rocky Mountain Company, and proved the latter's undoing. Still it was a

hospitable sanctuary in the wilderness and afforded to Russell a retreat in hours of extremity. He cites a case when he arrived starved and naked, wounded in the leg by an Indian arrow, and robbed of every possession. He was taken in by Courtney Walker of the Hudson's Bay Company, who brought him clothing, blankets and a fine supper. Having been without food for three days, he ate sparingly. His wound soon healed because of the attentive care that it received.

After years of hunting in the Yellowstone, Salt Lake, and other sections, he made up his mind to "go to the mouth of the Columbia and settle in the Willamette or Multnomah Valley." Hence, he joined Dr. White's company just coming from the East, and traveled with them to the falls of the Willamette (Oregon City), arriving there September 26, 1842. Here he found a number of Methodist missionaries and American farmers who had formed a company to erect mills. A sawmill, then under construction, was in operation two months later. When in the employ of the American company during the erection of a flour mill, on the 6th of June, 1842, a rock said to weigh 60 pounds struck him on the right side of the face, throwing him six feet backwards. When he was assisted to his lodging, it was found that nine pieces of rock "the size of wild goose shot" had penetrated his right eye and destroyed it. At this sad incident his journal closes with a poem that he wrote in June, 1842, when leaving the mountains for the Willamette Valley. It is called the "Hunter's Farewell". Notwithstanding the close of his journal with this accident and his reluctance at again assuming the restrictions of civilization, Osborne Russell adapted himself readily to the life and customs of more populous centers.

He was never married. He is referred to as a man who never lost his virtuous habits, but always remained true to his principles; also as a man of education, refined feelings and exceptional ability.

He was on hand when the provisional government was formed at Champoege in 1843. At the first annual election the next year, in May, 1844, he was elected one of three on the executive committee with powers of governor. The legislature made startling changes in the laws as drawn up the previous year. They recommended the first uniform tax. This was adopted by the legislative committee, incorporated into an amended organic law, and ratified by a large majority at a special election. The amended organic law also abolished the executive committee and vested the executive power in a single individual to be known as Governor to be elected at the next annual meeting, June, 1845. The oath of office was modified then to allow all citizens, whatever their nationality, to participate in the government without sacrificing their allegiance to their native country. This letting down the bars to the English and French Canadians was branded by some as "impolitic and unpatriotic". The legislative committee was superseded by a House of Representatives, the seat of government was established at Oregon City, and sweeping changes made in the land law. Drastic restrictions were drawn against the missions appropriating such large and valuable tracts.

As one of the executive committee, Russell signed and sent to the United States Congress, on June 28, 1845, a memorial setting forth conditions and needs of the Oregon Country, begging for protection under the civil laws, military escort for emigrants, a public mail service, commercial and land claim regulations, but, above all, the establishment of a territorial government in Oregon.

At the first election of a Governor, June 3, 1845, Russell's name was put in the field against George Abernathy, and two others. Although being next to Abernathy in the number of votes received, the former had the majority and became the first Governor.

He left for the California gold mines in September, 1849. Letters give the name of his town as "Gallows town, 55 miles east of Sacramento within four miles of the American river." He was in partnership with a neighbor from Oregon, Gilliam, who was there with his family and operated a store and a boarding house. He said that 3,000 had gone into that section within a year and cities and towns were rising in the hills as if by magic over an extent of 400 miles in the gold region.

Letters sent east indicate that Russell was residing later in Polk county, Oregon, and minutes of Pacific University at Forest Grove name him as one of the original trustees of that institution in 1854.

Russell returned to California and spent many years near Newton, Placerville, where he was afflicted with miners' rheumatism in later days and was obliged to enter Eldorado county hospital at Placerville, May 1, 1884. There he remained until his death on August 2, 1892. Buried in the hospital cemetery, his grave, like others of the period is unmarked and as yet unidentified.

- Men of Champog.