

INTRODUCTION

Here is the story of the Whitmans—Marcus and Narcissa—who played prominent roles in the history of Old Oregon during those critical years, 1836–47. The Whitmans and the Rev. and Mrs. Henry H. Spalding, all residents of New York State, were sent in 1836 to the Pacific Northwest as appointees of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions to evangelize the natives. The Whitmans settled among the Cayuse Indians near present-day Walla Walla, Washington, and the Spaldings among the Nez Perces near what is now Lewiston, Idaho.

Both Whitman, who was a Presbyterian elder and a physician, and Spalding, a Presbyterian minister, were convinced that the natives had to be civilized before they could be evangelized. Although neither of the two tribes—the Cayuses and the Nez Perces—were nomadic, they were highly mobile as they found it necessary to spend months of each year traveling in search of wild game, fish, or roots. Both Whitman and Spalding saw the necessity of inducing the Indians to take up farming and be settled so that a consistent program of education and evangelization could be conducted.

The missionaries also realized that, with the inevitable coming of the white man into the Old Oregon country, the natives would have to adjust to the new culture which would be thrust upon them or perish. The eleven years spent by the Whitmans at Waiilatpu were years of transition and upheaval for the Cayuses. Marcus and Narcissa faced more problems and more dangers than did the Spaldings or any of the other missionaries who served in Old Oregon because their station, Waiilatpu, became an outpost on the Oregon Trail.

Although Whitman's primary responsibility was to do all that he could to evangelize and civilize the natives, he also became involved in the political future of the Old Oregon country. In 1818 the United States and Great Britain signed a Treaty of Joint Occupation which temporarily postponed settlement of their respective claims to the vast territory lying north of the 42nd parallel (which was then the Mexican border), west of the Continental Divide, and extending northward to Alaska.

After being on the field for about two years, Whitman was alerted by the pioneer Methodist missionary to the Willamette Valley in Oregon, the Rev. Jason Lee, as to the importance of having the Oregon boundary fixed at a line far enough north to give the United States the lower Columbia River country and the Puget Sound area. Both Lee and Whitman became convinced that the most effective way for the United States to establish its sovereignty over this part of Old Oregon was through American emigration.

Dr. Whitman made three notable contributions to the opening of the Oregon country for American settlement:

1. He saw the feasibility of taking white American women over the Continental Divide while on an exploring tour to the Rockies in the summer of 1835. The successful crossing of the Rockies through South Pass by Mrs. Whitman and Mrs. Spalding on July 4, 1836, unlocked the mountain gateway for men who wanted to take their families with them to Oregon. Where women could go riding horseback on side-saddles, other women and children could follow in covered wagons.
2. Whitman's stubborn persistence made it possible in 1836 to take the first wheeled vehicle across a long section of the Oregon Trail extending from the Green River Rendezvous in the Rockies to Fort Boise. Where one wagon had gone, others could follow.
3. He was responsible in leading the first great Oregon emigration of about one thousand people in 1843 from Fort Hail into the Columbia River Valley.

These three history-making achievements combined to encourage thousands of Americans to make the overland trek to Oregon after 1843. The decisive factor in the establishment of the boundary with Great Britain in 1846 at the 49th was the numerical superiority of American settlers in Old Oregon over those of British citizenship.

Whitman served his country even in his tragic death on November 29, 1847. When the news of the Whitman massacre, which took the lives of fourteen people, reached Washington, D.C., Congress, hitherto dilatory, was moved to pass legislation making Oregon a territory of the United States.

A NEW BIOGRAPHY NEEDED

Three reasons called for this completely new biography of Dr. Whitman and not just a reprint of my *Marcus Whitman, M.D., Pioneer of Old Oregon* which appeared in 1937. In the first place, the earlier edition has long been out of print and second-hand copies are now in great demand.

Secondly much new information bearing on the lives of the Whitmans and the history of the Oregon Mission has been discovered or has been made available to me since 1937. This included materials located in the archives of the Hudson's Bay Company which I had the opportunity to examine in London, England, in the summer of 1966. In my first Whitman book, I used 222 letters written by either Marcus or Narcissa Whitman. Since then I have located eighty additional letters. Journals of two Roman Catholic missionaries who opened stations in the vicinity of Waiilatpu shortly before the massacre have been found. New illustrative materials in the form of sketches, paintings, or photographs have been discovered. Such unused sources, plus many more, called for a more detailed study of the Whitmans than has hitherto been made.

Finally, since I have continued my researches and writings in the history of the Oregon Mission of the American Board for nearly forty years, I now feel better qualified to evaluate the services rendered by the Whitmans to the natives, to the immigrants, and to the nation than ever before. With but one exception, I have found no reason to change any of the basic conclusions regarding Whitman's activities at Waiilatpu as set forth in the 1937 edition. That one exception deals with Whitman's interest in opening Oregon for American settlement. On the basis of new documentary evidence, I have in this work given more attention to the significant role that Whitman played in the opening of Old Oregon to American settlement.

This new work is not only a biography of Marcus and Narcissa Whitman, it is also a history of the Oregon Mission of the American Board. It will also be a source book for the history of the Old Oregon country during the mission period, 1835-47.

In making quotations from original sources as letters and diaries, I have for the sake of clarity introduced punctuation and have modernized some of the archaic spellings.

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Pasadena, California
February, 1973