NARRATIVE OF A TOUR FROM THE STATE OF INDIANA TO THE OREGON TERRITORY IN THE YEARS 1841-2

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JOSEPH WILLIAMS & JAMES C. BELL

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NARRATIVE

OF A TOUR

FROM THE STATE OF INDIANA

TO THE

OREGON TERRITORY

IN THE YEARS 1841-2

By JOSEPH WILLIAMS

With an Introduction by
JAMES C. BELL, Jr.

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INTRODUCTION.

The book here published for the first time is the narrative of a traveler who accompanied the first emigrants from the United States to the Pacific Coast in 1841. It was printed for the author in 1843 and is practically unknown to scholars or the collectors of books relating to the history of western America. Its importance to any who are interested in this phase of the development of the United States will be evident, if for a moment we consider certain aspects of the times in which the writer lived.

It is a truism to say that most Americans enjoy travel, and indulge themselves in this form of amusement to an extreme degree. The glamor of a journey, the thought of seeing new places, rather than the discomfort and not infrequent hardships, fill the minds of all would-be travelers; nor will the experience of others often deter those who have set their hearts upon visiting far places about which rumor has been weaving bright illusions. The desire for travel, mere travel for its own sake, without other aim than that of satisfying our curiosity, is general among all classes of the American people, as one may prove by glancing at the faces upon the sightseeing buses of any city street. What is, perhaps, not so generally realized is the fact that this longing to visit new and distant places, is a very old one in America; one frequently gratified

by all sorts of people in an earlier day when travel was neither luxurious nor safe.

The book before us is the account of a traveler to the Pacific Coast long before railway and automobile made travel convenient for the tourist. It was the day when goods were moved by canal boat or raft, and passengers journeyed, either by "elegant" river steamers, or in stage coaches, which had difficulty in moving through muddy roads, that were described by Charles Dickens as "having no variety but in depth." A few railways had been constructed between nearby cities, and the building of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, the first conceived for the purpose of connecting two important districts of the United States, had been undertaken. It was the day when people thought of transportation in terms of canals, rather than railways, while the idea of paved highways was a matter for future concern.

It was also the day before the country became thickly populated; settlement in the Mississippi Valley in 1840 was confined almost exclusively to the neighborhood of navigable streams; the frontier was the Missouri River. New Englanders were settling on the rich Illinois prairies, farmers from the north European countries were just beginning to cultivate the rolling hills of Iowa and Wisconsin, which had been recently surveyed by the government and thrown open to settlement. Beyond the frontier lay the open prairie and the Rocky Mountains, west of which was the little known region called "the great American desert." Many warlike tribes inhabited this vast stretch of

country, whose only contact with civilization came through the occasional missionary and the fearless trapper.

The trappers searched every mountain stream for the beaver skins which were used in the manufacture of gentlemen's hats; but they rarely ventured into the great desert beyond the Rocky Mountains as the game upon which man lived did not exist in the sage brush country. No other fur-bearing animal was so much sought as the beaver, for the possession of a fur coat was not thought a mark of wealth and distinction among occidental peoples of that day.

The tourist attractions of the United States about 1840 were rather limited for a resident of Napoleon, Ripley County, Indiana; a summer traveler might take the monotonous and sultry boat trip down the Ohio to St. Louis, or go by stage to Niagara Falls. At this latter spot of scenic grandeur, the tourist's soul would be stirred by the roaring of the waters, but there were no intermediate points of interest to relieve the tedium of the journey. Aside from this, there was little to do except stay home and raise more grain than a farmer could profitably sell.

There was, however, another alternative for a man of sixty-four years who desired to preach to others and see the country as well. He might go to the Pacific Coast by a route which was literally teeming with the varied and fantastic wonders of nature. Oregon was occasionally visited by fur traders and missionaries, while the peaceful ranch life of the Mexicans in California was sometimes

disturbed by trappers and horse thieves from Missouri. It mattered little that almost two thousand miles of prairie, mountain and desert separated the border towns of Independence and Westport, Missouri, from the settlements of Oregon and California.

In the Willamette Valley of Oregon, near its junction with the lower Columbia River, were a few farms cultivated by New England missionaries and French Canadians, old servants of the Hudson's Bay Company. From San Diego to the Bay of San Francisco were the scattered missions of Spanish Franciscans, who were the first to carry European civilization to California. Near the Pacific Coast were vast stretches of rich agricultural lands inviting cultivation. In Oregon the coast natives were rapidly disappearing; while in California the Indians supplied labor under the economic system controlled by the Mexicans. Such was the population and prospects of the habitable region along the western edge of this continent which has since become part of the United States.

Undoubtedly it would be a pleasure to make the overland trip on horseback, if all the travelers of a season would stick together so as to afford each other mutual protection from the plains' Indians. Money, after the purchase of horses and equipment, was of little use, though of relatively high value. Food could be secured by the use of the rifle, water was free and plentiful, even on the desert, while the stars made an excellent covering beneath which to sleep soundly. Thus were the physical wants of man easily satisfied;—the really

necessary qualities for such a journey were a mind strongly set upon going and perfect "trust in the God of heaven." Both of these spiritual qualities were the possession of old Joseph Williams in very large measure, as the reader will presently learn.

An eager interest in the western-facing shore beyond the Stoney Mountains, as the great chain of the Rockies was at first called, had long been characteristic of the residents of the Mississippi Valley. Before, and during the Revolution, French and Spanish merchants of old St. Louis conducted a trade with the Missouri River Indians and heard from them about the mountain region. Thomas Jefferson dreamt of the exploration and the possible future acquisition of territory in that direction, years before the population of his country had reached the Mississippi River, which was the new Republic's western boundary.

In 1803 President Jefferson found the opportunity to fulfill his dreams. By the purchase of Louisiana he accomplished the large expansion of the United States; just how large was a matter of conjecture, but at the time of little importance. General William Clark, leader of the most important of the several expeditions sent by the President to explore the new territory, was directed to proceed up the Missouri, cross the mountains to Oregon, and seek a water communication with the Pacific. The Lewis and Clark expedition could not find any route practicable for such communication, nor did the Indians know of any. It was Ramsay Crooks, director of the private enterprise supported by John Jacob Astor, who discovered in