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by Anne LeGare



Scene on ranch of Hidden Bros., one mile east of Vancouver, Washington.—Photo by Jas. Waggener, Jr.

The Mossback

By FRANK W. STONE.

It is not the purpose of this article to repeat well known historical facts pertaining to the Pacific Northwest, but rather to set forth extenuating circumstances in defense of that much maligned individual commonly termed "the old mossback."

Vancouver, Washington, and Oregon City, Oregon, were two of the first white settlements established in the "Oregon Country."

Both were outposts of the Hudson Bay Company, whose trading posts were scattered across the North American continent.

The Oregon City post was in charge of that well known figure of early days, Dr. John McGlaughlin, while the factor at the post on the north bank of the Columbia, was the man for whom it was named, Captain Vancouver.

This great organization pushed its posts into the wilderness and brought a touch of civilization where the face of a white man had never before been seen, but they did not encourage immigration nor settlement.

In fact they threw every possible obstacle in the way of home builders, for establishing settlements ruined their business, that of collecting furs.

The Hudson Bay Company preferred the nomadic lazy Indian, whose winter's catch of skins could be bought for a few trinkets or a gaudy blanket, than even the white trapper who understood the value of the furs he worked so hard to collect. Then, too, the fur-bearing animals disappear before the march of progress. The beaver,

the otter, the mink and the martin are creatures of the wilderness and when man began to hew down the forests, they vanished from their old haunts and streams once strewn with debris left by the beaver as they constructed their dams or rippled as the mink or other animal stole silently upon the fish it had marked as its prey, were deserted by these shy creatures.

When the United States government secured possession of the valuable tract known as "the Oregon country" all was changed.

Pioneer missionaries returning to the States to plead with the authorities of their respective denominations for more recruits for this promising mission field, gave such glowing accounts of the fertile soil, beautiful streams and mild climate that thousands of families restless and dissatisfied from various causes, disposed of their eastern homes and with their "all" loaded on ox wagons set out on the long, weary journey across the plains, to that wonderful country "where rolls the Oregon."

The hardships and dangers of the journey were lightened by the enchanting prospect of a home free from the rigors of the eastern winters, and while some became discouraged and turned back or perished either by the hand of the fierce Indian tribes that infested the plains and tablelands east of the Rockies, many pushed forward nor rested until they pitched their tents on the banks of the mighty river of the west, the great Columbia.

To encourage immigration the government at Washington passed the donation land claim act. This act gave to each and every bona fide settler six hundred and forty acres of land if married, and three hundred and twenty acres if single.

Think of it! A square mile of good tillable land, the choice of thousands of such square miles for the trifling cost of securing a patent. True, the land was of less value in those days than fifty acres are at the present time. Nevertheless it was a magnificent gift, and thousands hastened to avail themselves of the offer.

Rude habitations sprang up as if by magic. Cabins built of logs, notched and fitted together at the corner, the interstices being filled with moss and mud or pieces of split wood. The roofs were made of clapboards or shakes as they were more

in sightliness and comfort to the taste and ingenuity of the maker.

Two square pens of logs set about twenty feet apart and covered with one roof was the usual style for a barn, the space between the pens being used as a driveway when hauling hay or grain, which was stored in the pens or mows, as they were called.

This driveway also served as a threshing floor where the scant crop of cereals was threshed, either with a flail or by the trampling of oxen driven around the floor for that purpose; afterwards being winnowed by a crudely devised fanning mill.

In time saw mills were built, the first being the old sash or up and down style, consisting of a heavy straight saw blade, fastened in a frame or sash which worked up and down in a grooved frame, the motive power being an old fashioned over-shot



Scene along the beautiful Washougal river above Camas, Washington.—The Chronicle.

commonly termed; about three feet long and from four to ten inches in width, split from the yellow fir or cedar. These shakes when properly laid made a very good roof.

As saw mills were unknown the floor also was made of split boards of varying lengths and an inch or more in thickness.

The fireplace for warming the cabin was built of stones, held together by a plaster of clay and the chimney was built of sticks, plastered with the same material to render it fireproof.

This fireplace served to cook the meals as but few stoves were brought across the plains by ox team.

Here and there could be found a piece of furniture which had made the long journey but for the most part, the furniture was scanty and crude, made of such material as the pioneer had at hand and corresponded

water wheel, propelled by enough water to generate 20,000 horsepower of electricity. These mills were capable of cutting from 2,000 to 5,000 feet of lumber per day of uncertain length, usually from daylight to dark.

With their arrival in the promised land, the pioneers found that their troubles had only begun. True, there was but little danger from the Indians, as the tribes of the Western coast were for the most part harmless, being too indolent to make war, but supplies came, either around the Horn or across the isthmus and there was little or nothing to work with.

However, they set about diligently clearing a portion of their land, setting out orchards of such trees as could be obtained and planting and harvesting the crops of wheat and oats, which yielded abundantly.

The process both of planting and harvest-

ing was slow and laborious, the ground was only partially cleared, that is the stumps were not removed and it was sometimes difficult to guide the breaking team of three or four yoke of oxen among the stumps. Reapers and harvesters were unknown, the grain had to be cut by hand either with a sickle or cradle, a scythe fitted with four long wooden fingers to hold the grain until it could be deposited in an even swath.

Oxen was the only team known, there were no horses save the cayuse or Indian ponies, too small for draft horses, but useful as saddle animals, but very uncertain as to temperament.

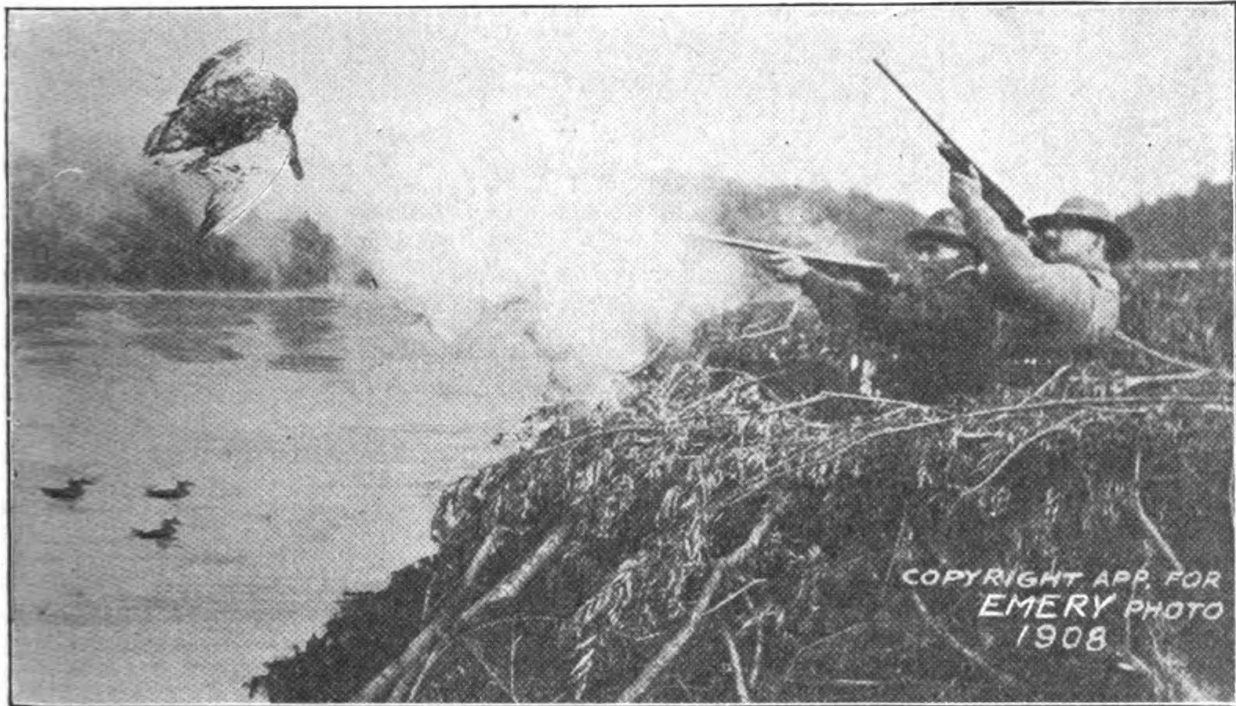
The grain was hauled to the barn by oxen, "tramped out" by oxen and hauled to the mill, where the miller ground it into flour, for a portion of the grain, claimed at

keeping the larder supplied with fresh meat. Deer and bear were plentiful, to say nothing of the native game birds, quail, peasant and wood grouse. So plentiful was these birds that the pioneers tired of a dish that can not be obtained now for love or money.

Crops were planted in the spring and then the farmer did but little in the way of steady work until harvest. After the crops were gathered there was another period of inaction until spring again brought planting time.

Wood was so plentiful that but few laid in a supply for the winter. In fact only now and then could be found a farmer who cut down trees to get wood, the majority depended on broken limbs and bark for their supply of fire wood.

A yearly bill was contracted at the gen-



Frank Wilcox and Geo. B. Thomas bringing down a duck at Lake Vancouver.—The Columbian.

times by the farmers to be the major portion.

The energy and enthusiasm of the first New Year's gradually gave away before the fact that such energy was wasted. Grain and hay and garden truck grew in abundance wherever planted, while apple, plum and pear trees groaned under the loads of luscious fruit which grew to perfection, unharmed by coddling moth, woolly aphs or San Jose scale.

There was no market for farm products save the local one and it required but little to overstock this.

A few pears were canned or preserved for winter use, a few bushels of winter apples were stored in the dug-out cellar and the remainder was left to rot on the trees or to fall and be eaten by hogs or bears, the latter oftentimes varying his diet by eating one of the aforesaid hogs.

There was no difficulty experienced in

it required but little effort to raise all they could dispose of and in time, even this effort became burdensome.

It was the custom to kill hogs in the fall, pickling the side meat and smoking the hams and shoulders.

The supply was supposed to last a year, but few there were who were not compelled to draw on the general store for bacon before hog killing time came around again.

The woods abounded with vine-maple and alder, wood that made an excellent smudge for curing meat, but one genius found that straw would do almost as well and required no effort to cut.

The scheme worked well for a time, but on one occasion filling an old box stove he used in his smokehouse, with the easily secured fuel, he went to visit a sick neighbor. When he returned all that remained of the log

eral store for tea, coffee, sugar, oil and necessary clothing. Butter and eggs were turned in against this account at a very low figure throughout the year and in the fall when the wheat was sold the farmer often finding that he lacked considerable of having enough to "square up," a note was given for the balance, secured later by a mortgage on the farm, which in due time became the property of the enterprising merchant.

Winters in the Northwest are usually mild and open and the farmer seldom raised enough hay and could never spare enough grain to feed his stock, depending on the grass and shrubs to sustain them and they usually did pull through after a fashion, gaunt and half starved, staggering in their weakness and retarding the growth of young stock for the greater part of the summer.

Thus the old settlers became saftless;

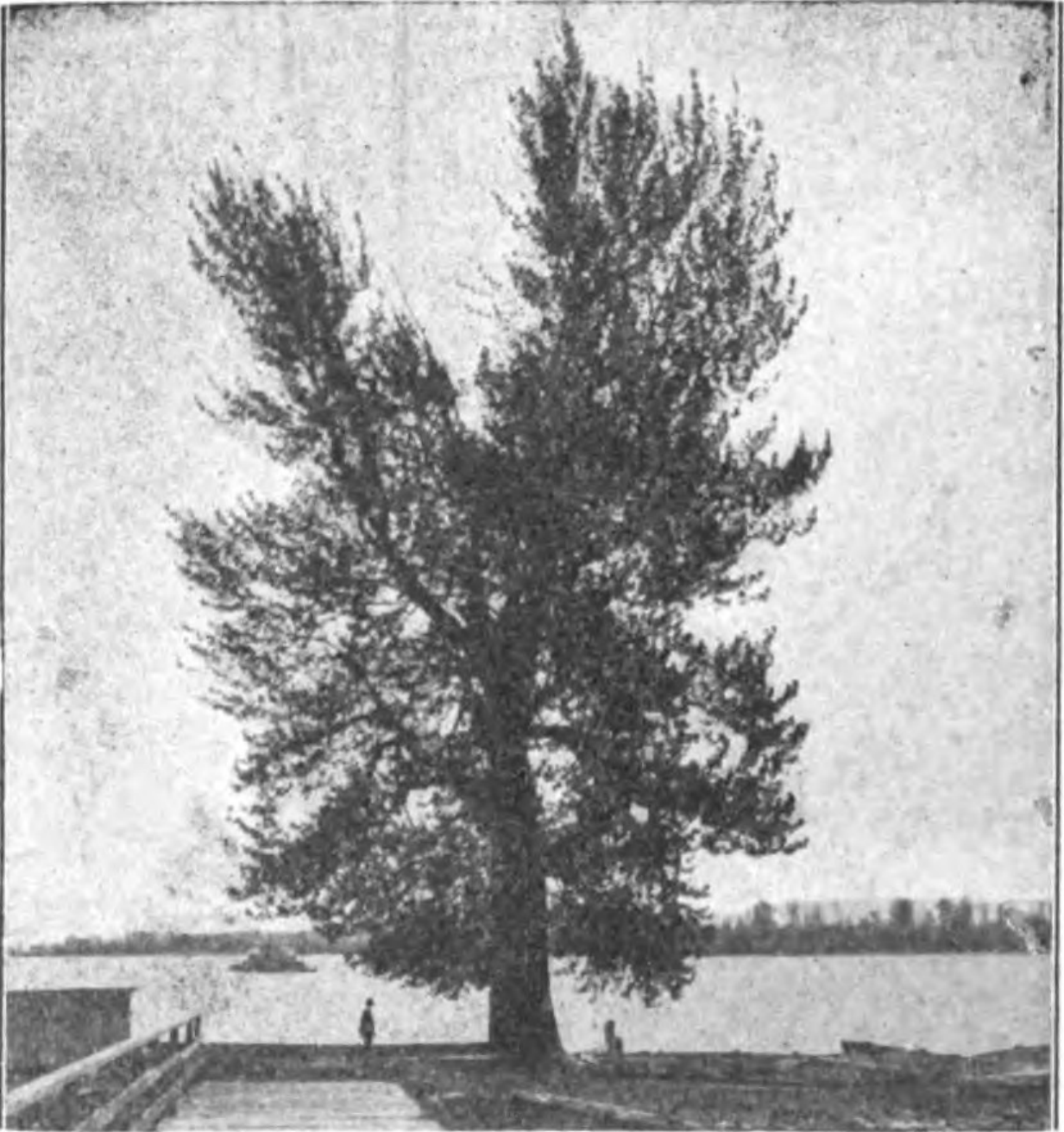
Three pounds of inferior green coffee cost one dollar, while five gallons of coal oil cost \$2.50.

Tallow candles were largely used for light, nearly every family having a tin candle mould. The tallow used being either beef or mutton.

Wheat was the only product that would bring cash in the market, therefore the scanty clearings were cropped and re-cropped with this staple until the ground would only produce an average yield of 10 bushels to the acre.

Money at all times was very scarce and the boy who possessed 25 cents on the Fourth of July to spend for firecrackers was the envy of the neighborhood.

Christmas brought but few "boughten" toys, warm mittens, home-made and stockings also home-made, were the staple Christmas gifts. These, with a little cheap candy



The old witness tree at Vancouver, Washington.—The Columbian.

smokehouse and stock of meat was a mass of coals and over-cooked hams and shoulders.

The average pioneer farmer was always hard up. The limited market made over production a certainty; however small the crop raised by each, the aggregate was more than enough to supply the local demand. Therefore, the consumer bought farm products at his own figure, while the merchants, having in view the long term of credit, charged all their conscience would allow for the goods they sold and the conscience of most of them was very accommodating.

The householder of today complains bitterly of high prices but in those "good old days," one dollar bought only six pounds of brown sugar, while the white granulated sugar used almost exclusively today, was unknown or found only on the table of the well-to-do when they had company.

and a few nuts, made up the bulk of Christmas cheer.

The habit of doing as little as possible was naturally adopted by the children at an early age. Thus the boys rushed through their allotted tasks and hurried away to the trout streams where the hours were idled away, wading in the cool water, fishing in the choicest pools or basking in the sun along the sloping banks.

Jointed rods and fly hooks were unknown, but the fields supplied bait in the shape of grasshoppers; the thickets of little fir trees furnished a long tapering pole. Mother's work basket was drawn on for the line; linen thread doubled and twisted and waxed with shoemaker's wax, was strong enough to hold any trout.

The only outlay was for hooks. These were bought at the general store.

It required but little skill as an angler to catch fish in those days. There were no



Scene showing timber near Amboy, Washington.—Photo by Jas. Waggener, Jr.

long, tiresome waits, the bait no sooner struck the water than there was a flash of silvery brightness and the rod would bend with the weight of a speckled beauty.

Lack of energy never reached the point where it quenched the desire for knowledge. The log schoolhouse was built in every neighborhood almost as soon as the log houses and barns.

School was only held three months in the year, and the teachers were not the most enlightened men of the age. Women seldom taught in pioneer days, as many of the scholars were men in stature, and it required a strong arm at times to maintain discipline.

Corporal punishment had not been discarded at that time, and the pupil who transgressed the rules could depend upon receiving a severe thrashing unless able to handle the teacher.

One disciplinarian used what he called a mourner's bench, over which the culprits were forced to kneel while he "slickened his paddle" on the broadest part of their quivering anatomy.

It is very doubtful whether such punishment made better citizens of the recipients thereof. In fact, looking back at this time it seems strange that this particular tyrant wasn't murdered by the husky youths he so thoroughly cowed. The schoolhouse was also used as a "meeting house" and the pioneer ministers preached to large congregations, which gathered whenever there was preaching, many traveling for miles over execrable roads, to hear the word of God, as taught by such men as John Flinn, John Miller, Harvey and Gustavus Hines and many others, whose names were household words in those days, and whose devotion and piety left a lasting impression on the land they helped civilize.

Ah me, in recalling the old days I have wandered from my text.

Probably no one knows when the term "mossback" was first used. It no doubt originated from the fact that any inanimate object lying undisturbed for any length of time in the damp western climate becomes coated thickly with moss and therefore the term "mossback" fitly expressed the inaction of the old pioneers.

Mossback should be divided into two classes; the active and the passive.

The former are men who through no especial ability or effort of their own acquired property, which through the natural advancement and building up of the surrounding property became valuable, thus giving them wealth, and who instead of using this wealth to help build up the community, only blocked the wheels of progress by fighting every improvement that touched their pocketbooks.

Little can be said in defense of these, but they are to be found everywhere and are the product of no particular section or system.

Much can be said in defense of the latter or passive class; the old pioneers who through lack of judgment and energy drifted with the stream until their holdings had passed to others. There are only a few left. Now and then one can be found tottering under the weight of years, and they too, must soon pass out into the great beyond.

Let us view with charity their shortcomings and remember that the lack of progress which characterized them, was the logical outcome of their environs.

Those old pioneers were upright and generous, ever willing to lend a helping hand to one in need, and if we can all show as clean a record when we stand before our Maker in the judgment, we have little to fear.