Thomas R. Prather

Pioneer of 1852

compiled by Stephenie Flora
oregonpioneers.com

Thomas R. Prather
b. 02 Jul 1832 Boone County, Missouri
d. 08 May 1918 Olympia, Thurston County, Washington

m. 26 Aug 1879 Washington
Agnes Winsor
b. 24 Aug 1855 Plymouth County, Massachusetts
d. 24 Jan 1919 Portland, Multnomah County, Oregon

THOMAS PRATHER IS SUDDENLY STRICKEN

WELL-KNOWN PIONEER FALLS TO STREET WHILE TALKING WITH FRIENDS.

While standing by an automobile talking to some friends, Thomas Prather, 86 years old, one of the best known and oldest pioneers of the county, was suddenly stricken Wednesday afternoon, pitching over on to the pavement in Washington street by the courthouse and dying within a few minutes.

Dr. H. W. Partlow was called and the aged man was removed by friends to his apartments in the Knox hotel, where he had lived of late years, but he failed to regain consciousness. The body was later removed to the Jesse T. Mills undertaking establishment, and the funeral arrangements will be made upon the arrival of his son, Samuel, an enlisted man in the aviation corps who is on his way here from Kelley Field, Texas.

Active Until Death

Though Mr. Prather had failed considerably during the past year, he had appeared to be feeling as good as usual at noon, Mrs. Knox, proprietor of the hotel, says, and only a few minutes before his death had built a fire in the fireplace in the hotel lobby. Besides his son, he is survived by a daughter, Mrs. Edith Thompson of Auburn.

Mr. Prather had many acquaintances and friends throughout the county and the Northwest, for he led an active life from the pioneer days of his first coming to Olympia, in 1853. For 12 years he served the county as commissioner.

He was born in Boone county, Missouri, in 1832 and as a boy made the overland trip to California. He returned to Missouri and in 1852 came west again, as one of 92 people in a company of 14 wagons. In that party were quite a number who came on to Thurston county, including the four Hays brothers, the four Yantis brothers, and Dr. N. Ostrander.

Fought in Indian Wars.

There were only about 50 white people in Olympia when Mr. Prather reached here in 1853, after walking all the way from Cowlitz Landing with his blanket roll on his shoulder. A couple of years later he joined the company of 80 volunteers who fought the Indian wars, returning to this city after his discharge and engaging in steamboating.

Then he took up surveying and in 1858 helped to locate the military road from Fort Steilacoom to Bellingham, later driving the first stake in the preliminary survey for the Northern Pacific, near Snoqualmie Falls. In the seventies he was appointed a guard at the Steilacoom hospital and then returned to this county, serving as commissioner and engaging in various activities until he retired from business some years ago.

[The Washington Standard, Olympia, Washington, Friday, May 10, 1918, p. 1]

PIONEER OF 1852 DIES AT OLYMPIA

Thomas Prather Falls in Street While Joking With Woman.

(SPECIAL TO THE LEDGER.)

OLYMPIA, May 8.—Thomas Prather, one of the oldest pioneers in the state of Washington, dropped dead in the street in Olympia this afternoon. He was 86 years old, and was born in Boone county, Missouri, in 1832. He came west in 1852 with the four Hays brothers, the Yantis family and a number of others, who settled in and near Olympia.

In the party were Dr. N. Ostrander and Kate and Sarah Yantis, the two Ostrander girls and Jerusha Jane Logan Hays, daughter of the leader of the party. They crossed the plains in 14 covered wagons.

Veteran of Indian War.

Prather packed his blankets from Cowlitz Landing, Oregon, to Olympia in 1853, and two years later joined a company of 80 volunteers to fight the Indians. After the Indian wars he worked on a steamboat on the Sound for a number of years and then turned surveyor in 1858. He helped to locate the military road from Fort Steilacoom to Bellingham and drove the first stake in the preliminary survey for the Northern Pacific near Snoqualmie Falls.

For 12 years Prather was a county commissioner of Thurston county and in the early 70's he became a guard at the asylum at Steilacoom. His last trip east was in 1876, when he attended the Philadelphia exposition.

Prather's death came suddenly as he was talking to a woman in an automobile. He remarked, "When you are as old as I am you won't be able to look under your car." With that he commenced to topple over and fell to the pavement dead.

Prather is survived by a daughter, Mrs. Edith Thompson of Auburn and a son, Samuel Prather, a member of an aero squadron training at Kelly Field, Texas. Funeral arrangements have not been announced.

[The Tacoma Daily Ledger, Tacoma, Washington, Thursday, May 9, 1918, p. 3]

Children of Thomas Prather and Agnes Winsor:

1. Edith Helen Prather
b. 11 Dec 1880 Olympia, Thurston County, Washington
d. 25 Apr 1954 Napa County, California
m. Walter Clair Thompson

2. Thomas Hays Prather
b. 11 Dec 1880 Olympia, Thurston County, Washington
d. 20 Sep 1881 Thurston County, Washington

3. Samuel Winsor Prather
b. 29 Jul 1894 Olympia, Thurston County, Washington
d. 22 Jul 1980 King County, Washington
m. Ruth Janet Palmer

THOMAS PRATHER

A dark, rainy afternoon was devoted to gathering such fragments of the reminiscences of that Nestor of Pioneers, Thomas Prather, as stood out most prominently in his recollection.

Had the compiler of this sketch kept to original intentions and recorded word for word the story of Mr. Prather's experiences as told by himself, the reader, as was the writer, would be led a merry chase from Boone County, Missouri, to California, back to the boyhood home again, then to Oregon, down to Panama, out to sea, struggling with sea sickness, to the Colville gold fields, fighting Indians, making love to the Pioneer maidens, canoeing, surveying, logging, always in the front ranks of action, and ever and always every whit a man, and now, in his declining years drifting into a quiet eddy, spending his days at peace with his God and his fellow man.

As the tale progressed and Mr. Prather's memory travelled back to the scenes and incidents of those stirring times a reminiscent glow came into his eyes, his form straightened and many times he would stride around the room in the excitement of calling once again from the shades of the past those friends who, shoulder to shoulder with him, laid the foundation of our city and made possible the prosperity and advantages the descendants of these men and women enjoy today.

Although Mr. Prather's reminiscences were often rambling and embroidered with many irrevelant particulars, his memory was surprisingly good and his unswerving loyalty to his old time friends and associates was a beautiful tribute to the warm feelings these Pioneers entertained for each other. The essential incidents of Mr. Prather's life as told by himself are as follows:

"I was born in Boone County, Missouri, in 1832, which

makes me in the neighborhood of 82 years of age. I was the fifth son of my parents, and a hard struggle we had for existence on my father's plantation in the then territory of Missouri. My father died when I was only eight years old, and I can remember spending many a day in the hot sun dropping corn for 25 cents for the ten hours' work.

"In 1849, came the story of the gold strike in California, and my brother James took the gold fever and left for the West. The following Spring of 1850, I said: 'Now, Tom, no more working for 25 cents a day, when you might as well be getting from $6 to $8 a day in the gold fields.' So in spite of mother's remonstrances, I left the school room, joined an ox train, and came to California, spending seven and a half months on the journey.

"When I got there, sure enough, I went to work at once for $6 a day, and soon had saved up $250, which was more money than I'd ever had at one time before in my life. I was sick, however, and thought I had better pull out of there and go home. I went by water this time, by the way of Panama.

"I had no sooner got back to Missouri than the lure of the West called me again, so in the Spring of 1852, when Judge Gilmore Hays and Andrew Cowen, as partners, organized a wagon expedition to come to the almost unknown country called Oregon, I tendered my services, which were accepted.

"This train consisted of fourteen wagons, with a total of 99 human beings, men, women and children. Among the emigrants were the four Hays brothers, all of whom remained in the West and became identified with Thurston county's early history, four Yantis brothers, Dr. N. Ostrander and twenty-five young men, the latter paying the partners, Hays and Cowen, $125 each for grub and for having their blankets hauled across the continent. They all rode their horses, as did I, myself. Most important of all the train's people to Tom were five (in my eyes), beautiful young ladies, who rode with us every day on their own horses. As I was generally a handy man about the train, I said to myself, 'Well, Tom, here's where you have a picnic,' so I made the charge of these girls my special duty, helping them mount their horses in the morning and to dismount when camp was reached. These girls were Kate Yantis, her cousin, Sarah Yantis, afterwards

Mrs. G. C. Blankenship, two Ostrander girls, and Jerusha Jane Logan Hays, the beautiful daughter of the captain of the train.

"One other special duty was assigned me by Captain Hays and it was to see that, every morning as camp was broken, that a pair of saddle bags were securely strapped onto a stripped mule, which was always ridden by the oldest Hays boy, and well I should be careful of these saddle bags for in them were $12,000 in $20 gold pieces, which Captain Hays was bringing with him to buy cattle and stock the homestead which he proposed preempting when the Golden West was reached.

"Well, before the train reached The Dalles, which was our destination, I became infatuated with the appearance of the Grande Rounde valley and persuaded the captain to sell me a wagon-load of flour, bacon, sugar and coffee. I set a small 'A' tent up beside the road and soon disposed of the entire stock at quite advanced prices to the emigrants who came along the train and were running short of provisions.

"I again joined Captain Hays at The Dalles and helped him drive a drove of cattle, which he had purchased down the Columbia river, to the site of the City of Portland, although then but a settlement of a few log houses.

"In the Spring of 1853, I came to Olympia, which was only a few years old. Did I come in a steam car? Did I come in an automobile, or even did I come in a dead ex wagon? No, sir, Tom walked every step of the way from the Cowlitz landing, carried his blankets and worldly possessions and thought it but a pleasure jaunt.

"When I got here there was just one white woman in Olympia." (Mr. Prather's memory probably failed him here for there were several women living here at that time, Mrs. George Barnes, Mrs. Alexander, Mrs. Rider, Lucy and Charlotte Barnes, Mary Wood, Mrs. Pullen, afterward Mrs. R. H. Wood and several others who contemporaneous pioneers were enabled to remember).

"There were about forty-five white men, and three children. I am sorry, but I have forgotten the woman's name. There was a big band of Indians camped on the west side, coming to this side in canoes for the purpose of bartering fish, oysters and berries for sugar, flour, bacon and calico.

"I especially remember John Miller Murphy among the white people I found upon my arrival in Olympia. He was then a fat, red-cheeked lad of probably ten years of age, living with his sister, Mrs. Barnes, and a favorite with everybody.

"The donation claims of Edmund Sylvester, Edwin Marsh and James Swan covered all that portion of the territory which is now known as Olympia, East Bay avenue and the East side. Old timers still refer to Swantown and Marshville in speaking of these sections.

"Charles Weed was the baker for the settlement and the bread he turned out of shorts was considered a great luxury by me. Of course, when a sailing vessel would come in from San Francisco there would be some white flour, which was eagerly bought up by the storekeeper, George Barnes and Weed, but there was never enough to last till the next ship arrived. However, the store of clams was inexhaustible and the settlers were beginning to raise potatoes and garden truck, and once in a while a steer was killed, so we had fresh beef occasionally, and there was plenty of the best fish in the world, but clams and hard tack were the staples of life.

"In those days the newspapers came from San Francisco about every six months, so we were always a half year behind the happenings of the outside world. It was considered quite an event when finally a mail route was established and we got our papers only three months behind date of publication. My first work upon arrival in Olympia was logging for Captain Percival, up the creek, which even then, and still, bears the name of this noted pioneer sea captain. After spending a few weeks at this work winter set in and the camp closed down. George Barnes then offered me $100 for clearing the block of land he had recently acquired, bounded by Fourth, Fifth, Adams and Jefferson Streets, which was for so many years the Barnes home, and which is now, so it is said, to be the site of the new railroad depot. As this piece of ground was then covered with high cedar trees and part of it submerged by the high tides, I refused the offer and spent the winter with a small crew of men slashing thirty-five acres of forest land for Nathan Eaton, nine miles from town, out on Chambers' Prairie.

"As soon as Spring arrived I took a job as axman and

helped make the first survey of an airline from Portland to Puget Sound. I stayed with this surveying party two years, when the Indian war broke out—in 1855. Then I quit surveying to volunteer under Judge Gilmore Hays, who was raising the first volunteer company in the territory.

"The call for volunteers was made by Acting Governor Charles H. Mason, as Governor I. I. Stevens was at that time in the Blackfoot country, trying to make treaties with the Indians there.

"This was in 1855, and our company comprised 80 volunteers. We were mustered in at Fort Steilacoom, Judge Hays being commissioned captain. Our company was then sent east of the mountains, as it was there that all the trouble with the Indians was reported, the Puget Sound, or "Fish" Indians, as they were called, being apparently friendly to the whites.

"But we had no more than crossed the mountains than along comes Bill Tidd, the pony express rider, with a message from Acting Governor Mason to the effect that Col. Steptoe, in command of the United States troops, was surrounded at Walla Walla by 1,000 Indians and that the Puget Sound Indians were also on the warpath. We were to hasten back to protect the settlers in the White River country. Returning to this side of the mountains, through the Natchez Pass, we camped for the night at Connell's Prairie, just about where the interurban line traverses the White River valley. In the morning Captain Hays detailed me and four other men to guard the supplies and with the rest of the company, which had now been increased in numbers by the addition of Lieutenant Slaughter and twenty soldiers from the United States troops, started to ford the White River to battle with the Indians. As the men plunged into the river, the Indians, concealed along the banks on the far side, opened fire and about a dozen of our men were killed, after which the Indians retreated through the jungle. As they carried their dead and wounded with them, we had no means of knowing how many of the enemy our men picked off, but from blood prints along the train they certainly met with a considerable loss.

"Captain Hays and his men came back to the camp for the night, and in the morning, each man taking one day's rations with him, we started after the Indians along a trail

"I was made mate of the crew, and, of course, Parker was captain. Soon after leaving Port Townsend, which then the only port of entry, the engine gave a fearful screech and went dead. There we were, out of sight of land, no canoe or other means of leaving the boat, the waves of the Straits of Juan de Fuca all but rolling over us, helpless, and at the mercy of wind and tide. Then and there I made a vow that if ever I reached land again no more sea life for Tom. But in the morning we were sighted by a sailing vessel, the Potter, and towed into Victoria harbor. There we found that the boiler had split in two places which had allowed all the steam to escape.

"We got the boiler repaired, loaded and was about to start on our return trip when there passed by our boat an Indian brave with a big canoe in which were his squaw and pappooses. I hailed the buck and in Chinook asked him, 'Where go?' 'Townsend,' he replied. So I told him I would tow his canoe and give him and his family passage on our big canoe to Port Townsend. He was tickled at the chance and I was tickled, too. I didn't want to go drifting around those waters again without some kind of a boat on board.

"This ended my steamboating, although Captain Parker made several other trips on the Traveler, which finally sank near Port Townsend, where for years the top of her smokestack could be seen at low tide, although she finally slipped off into deeper waters and the exact spot of her grave is not known at this day.

"I then went back to surveying, and in 1858, helped locate the military road from Fort Steilacoom to Fort Bellingham. I am the man who drove the first stake in a preliminary survey of the Northern Pacific Railroad, under supervision of Jared S. Hurd. This was near Snoqualmie Falls, in King County. About this time I acquired the lot of land on Washington Street, which for so many years was known as the Prather home.

"For twelve years I was county commissioner, which is the only public office I have ever held. I think I may state, without undue boasting, that it was largely through my efforts that Thurston County received the $150,000 from the sale of public lands to build the county court house, the same building which is now the state capitol building, having been purchased by the state about fifteen years ago.

so wild and narrow that we had to go single file most all the way. We could hear the Indians not far ahead of us—their ponies crashing through the brush and dogs yelping. In this way we came to a branch of Stuck river, I think it must have been. The Indians were not in sight, but it was expected they were ambushed on the other side of the river. Captain Hays called for volunteers to wade across the river and draw the Indians' fire, if indeed they were hiding in the brush. After a moment's hard thinking I said: 'Yes, Captain Hays, I'll go.' Then Lieutenant Slaughter, William Billings, Joe Gibson and Joe Brannon joined me.

"When I stepped into the water I went in over my waist into a chuck hole made by the Indian horses. My blunderbuss got wet, but I held it over my head the rest of the way across the river. Every step I expected the next instant would be my last, but we reached the far shore in safety and were joined by the rest of the company. The boys began firing wildly into the brush, but as I didn't see anything to shoot at. I saved my bullets and waited before firing. So it came about that I was never really in an Indian fight, for after crossing the river the trail grew so bad that Captain Hays decided we had better return to Montgomery's, a Hudson Bay man's place, and wait further orders. Soon after this the entire company was ordered to Mound Prairie, near Tilley's ranch, for winter quarters.

"At this time Captain Hays was made Major General of the united companies of the volunteers of the territory, but as the time for which I had enlisted had expired and the war was practically in the hands of the regular troops, I was honorably discharged and did not re-enlist.

"My next venture upon returning to Olympia after my discharge was to join Captain J. G. Parker for a trip to Victoria, B. C. Captain Parker had sent to San Francisco for a tiny steamboat, which was loaded on a sailing vessel and landed at the Etheridge & Miller sawmill, a mile below Priest's Point, and there fitted up for the sea. This small craft was the very first steamboat on Puget Sound. Captain Parker named her 'The Traveler,' and as soon as she was fitted up put her under charter of the United States government to bring military supplies from Victoria, for which the government was to pay $50 a day.

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"In the early seventies I became a guard at the asylum for insane at Steilacoom and took my third trip East in 1876, to attend the Philadelphia exposition. Soon after my return to Washington I was married at Steilacoom to Miss Agnes Winsor, who was also an attendant at the asylum, although for the twelve previous years had been teaching school. To us were born three children, Edith and her twin brother, who died in infancy, and my son Samuel. Edith is now Mrs. Walter C. Thompson, and lives in the Puyallup valley, and my son is in Alaska."

[Early History of Thurston County, Washington, 1914 Mrs. George E. Blankenship p. 134-41]