

PIONEER PHYSICIAN

■ A century and a quarter ago a young physician named Marcus Whitman led a small band of missionaries through the South Pass of the Rocky Mountains; behind them lay 2000 miles of wilderness, ahead lay more arduous adventures that were to make Dr. Whitman's name a legend in the Oregon Territory.

The son of Beza Whitman, a tanner and tavernkeeper, Marcus was born in a log cabin at Rushville, N. Y., on September 4, 1802. His father died when he was eight; poverty forced the large family to separate, the boy going to live with a half-uncle at Cummington, Mass. A Massachusetts church school gave him a good grounding in Greek and Latin, thoroughly imbued him with the New England virtues of industry and piety. He joined the Congregational Church, hoped to become a minister; when poverty ruled out a theologic education he chose medicine.

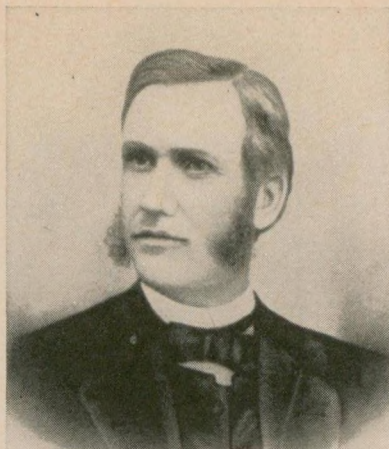
In the custom of the time, he "rode with" a licensed Rushville physician, giving his preceptor two years of free service in exchange for experience; in his spare hours he worked as teacher and sawmill hand to pay for additional training. At 24 he enrolled in a medical school at Fairfield, N. Y., but his studies were soon interrupted by ill health and lack of money; in six years he doggedly completed the 32-week medical course, meanwhile serving as a wandering physician in New York, Pennsylvania, Canada.

By 1834 Dr. Whitman had established a successful practice in Wheeler, N. Y., but he was restless and vaguely dissatisfied. When an itinerant evangelist named Samuel Parker came to Wheeler to seek men and women who would go west to Christianize the Indians, Dr. Whitman promptly offered his medical services to the mission. At about the same time, in Angelica, N. Y., a young woman named Narcissa Prentiss was writing the mission board: "Is there a place for an unmarried female in my Lord's vine-





Narcissa Prentiss whom Dr. Whitman married when she was 26.



Dr. Marcus Whitman as he looked before beginning his first trek west.



Rev. Henry Harmon Spalding who went with the Whitmans to Oregon.

yard?" There was no place for unmarried females, but the Rev. Parker saw the opportunity for a tidy arrangement, suggested that Dr. Whitman should pay a call on Narcissa.

They made an odd-matched pair: Dr. Whitman (now 32) was a raw-boned, muscular, slightly untidy man whose mild manner concealed a stubborn determination; friends described him as unassuming and sensible. Narcissa, 26, was graceful, vivacious, quick-witted, somewhat haughty. Their common zeal was to venture into heathen lands; Dr. Whitman proposed and was at once accepted; the next day he left with Dr. Parker to reconnoiter a mission site.

Trek West. Starting point for the expedition was St. Louis; from there to the Oregon Territory the uncharted route wandered for some 2000 miles across bleak prairies and forbidding mountains. The Rev. Parker was singularly unsuited for such a journey; his genteel disdain for western ways was shown in the stiff-collared garb and tall hat that he wore on the trail; wrapped in the serene contemplation of his great mission, he never bothered to learn such rudimentary details as the proper way to cinch a pack. Dr. Whitman had to perform camp duty for both although he was racked by frequent attacks of pain which he ascribed to "inflammation of the spleen."

They fell in with a fur brigade headed west to supply Rocky Mountain trappers. A serious difficulty at once arose. Dr. Whitman and the Rev. Parker were both convinced that travel on Sunday was a grave moral offense; the fur brigade members suffered no such inhibition; left behind every Sun-

day, the missionaries had to ride 18 to 20 hours a day to regain lost ground.

When cholera swept through the caravan Dr. Whitman labored heroically, erecting shelters for the stricken men, enforcing sanitary regulations; so terrified were the brigadeers that they meekly acquiesced when he snatched away the whisky with which they tried to dose themselves. The physician drove himself so hard that he collapsed one evening while going to the aid of a patient; next morning he awoke to find that he had lain all night in a driving rain; a few feet away was his erstwhile patient, dead from exposure. But thanks to his efforts the death toll was only three out of some 50 persons.

After three weeks the epidemic abated and the brigade staggered on. In Pawnee country the physician was stricken with acute dysentery and for days could barely cling to his horse at a slow painful gait; the brigade commander then assigned a man to remain with Dr. Whitman and help him with the necessary frequent dismountings.

At the Green River rendezvous in Wyoming the mountain trappers met the brigade for the annual exchange of furs and supplies. Among those present was the legendary trapper and scout Jim Bridger who had suffered for years from an iron arrow point imbedded in his back; Dr. Whitman removed it, was then swamped with requests to treat scores of old wounds.

At the Green River the physician and preacher negotiated with Indians to secure agreement that several tribes would welcome missions; the Rev. Parker proceeded with Indian guides while Dr. Whitman hurried home to prepare an expedi-

tion. By the spring of 1836 he was headed west again, this time with a bride. Said Narcissa: "We had to make love somewhat abruptly, and must do our courtship now we are married."

Companions on the journey were the Rev. Henry Spalding, his wife, Eliza, and a missionary jack-of-all-trades named William Gray. The party brought along goods and implements enough to establish two settlements, also drove a herd of livestock.

Before the journey was half completed, in the wake of another fur brigade, Narcissa was pregnant and Dr. Whitman was stricken with rheumatism. One departure from the procedure of the previous trip, Dr. Whitman persuaded his companions that Sunday travel was permissible.

On July 4, 1836, they crossed the Continental Divide. Dr. Whitman was already the first American-trained physician to cross the divide, now Narcissa and Eliza became the first white women to accomplish the feat; shortly after, the Whitmans added another footnote to history as the parents of the first white child born in the Oregon Territory.

The Mission. The Whitmans settled among the Cayuse Indians, called the mission Waiilatpu from an Indian term meaning "The Place of the Rye Grass." It was on the banks of the Walla Walla River, in a scenic, fertile valley. Dr. Whitman labored 18 hours a day to set up the first crude shelters; when daughter Alice was born three months later he had constructed a four-room roofed lean-to but had not yet found time to build a cradle. Aided by unskilled and often reluctant Indians, Dr. Whitman also

managed to fence in stock and plant crops; soon he was planning ambitious projects to irrigate the valley.

His missionary efforts were just as arduous but not so successful. The Indians had hoped that the white man's religion would allow them to share the apparent magic of a conquering people; what they received from Dr. Whitman was a stern creed that promised tribulations on earth with a likely prospect of damnation thereafter. Confided Narcissa in a letter home: "They feel so disappointed, and some of them angry, because husband tells them they are all on the broad road to destruction. One said it was good when they knew nothing but to hunt, eat, drink and sleep; now it was bad. They try to persuade him not to talk such bad talk, as they say, but to talk good talk. . . . Some threaten to whip him and to destroy our crops, and for a long time their cattle were turned into our potato field every night to see if they could compel him to change his course of instruction."

But Dr. Whitman could not be persuaded, much less compelled; in a determinedly peaceful way he could be wholly intractable as evidenced when one Cayuse attacked him in course of dispute. Recalled Dr. Whitman: "He (the Cayuse) then took hold of my ear and pulled it and struck me on the breast, ordering me to hear. . . . When he let go I turned the other to him and he pulled that, and in this way I let him pull first one and then the other until he gave over and took my hat and threw it into the mud. I called on one of the Indians to give it to me and I put it on my head, when



Rev. Spalding leading Dr. Whitman's party in prayer at South Pass, 1836. He wrote that Bible and hoe were salvation of Indian souls and bodies.

he took it off again and threw it in the mud and water, of which it dipped plentifully. Once more the Indians gave it back to me and I put it on all mud as it was, and said to him, 'Perhaps you are playing'."

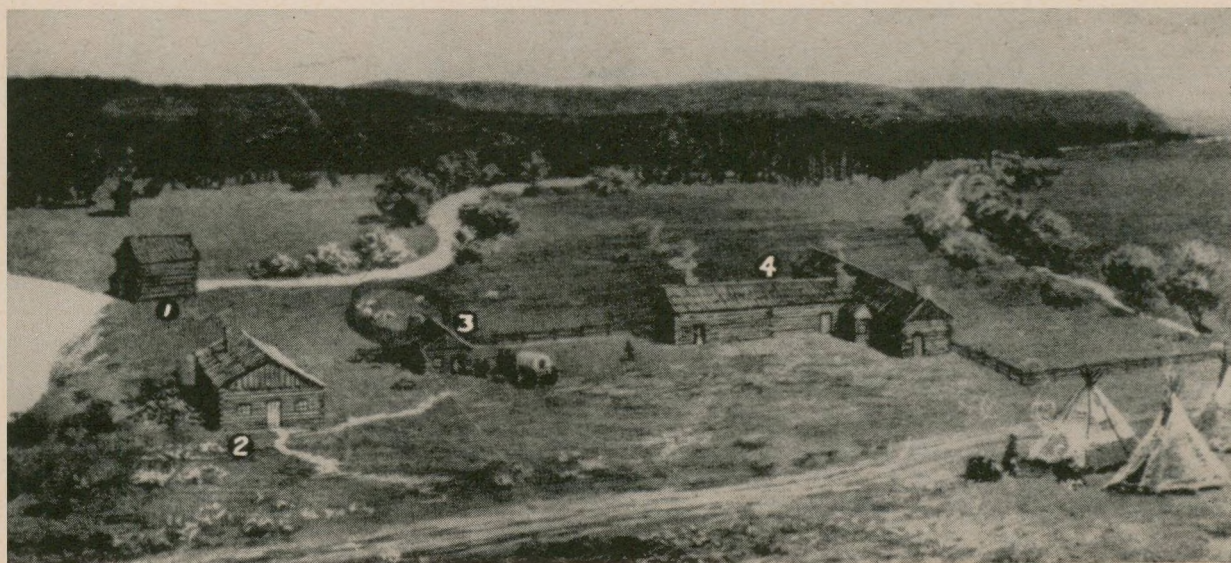
A still greater misunderstanding derived from the Indian belief that Dr. Whitman could cure any ill if he really wished. During one virulent outbreak of "lung inflammation" a Cayuse chief brought his stricken wife to the mission, solemnly warned that if she died he would kill the physician; fortunately she recovered and the chief himself was successfully treated a few weeks later.

To such problems was added personal tragedy when the Whitmans' small daughter died by drowning; they sought consolation by adopting wilderness waifs of every description, eventually acquiring 13 children. They gave shelter also to the aged, ill or crippled who drifted

in from tribal encampments or dropped off wagon trains. The household usually numbered about 40 persons; at the main table Narcissa always served 19 or 20, a sparse fare that often consisted of potatoes and corn meal, cakes made from burnt wheat, occasionally a little milk.

In 1842 came the crushing news that the mission board had decided to close Waiilatpu, transferring Dr. Whitman to a Spokane Indian area. He was ordered to proceed to the new post but instead he saddled a horse, rode east to protest; winter snows and warring Indian tribes that blocked his route only deterred him for the time it took to make a thousand-mile detour by way of Taos. He completed the 4000 miles in less than five months, often scrounging for food or going without. When he reached the east he wore a four months' growth of beard, smelled rankly of the buffalo

Drawing of Whitman's mission Waiilatpu: (1) mill, (2) mission house; (3) blacksmith shop; (4) mission hall.



garments he had worn and slept in, struck Horace Greeley as "the roughest man that we have seen this many a day."

The Boston mission board authorities rebuked him stiffly for leaving his post, suggested that his attire was even more unseemly than his conduct. Dr. Whitman accepted all abuse and implacably stood his ground; the mission board surrendered, mainly because "Whitman's Ride" had attracted so much attention that it was impossible to close Waiilatpu.

On the return trip Whitman joined the great migrant train of 1843, numbering a thousand men, women and children in 120 ox carts, accompanied by some 5000 head of cattle. The experienced physician became guide and counselor, riding up and down the column to help, encourage, offer sound travel advice.

Most trail experts were then convinced that only pack horses could negotiate the mountain part of the route but Dr. Whitman persuaded the emigrants that they could haul their creaking wagons through the passes if they did so before the snows. They gambled on his counsel and won, vastly easing their trip and that of other great migrations that followed. But Dr. Whitman missed the last lap of the triumphant march; he received word of an Indian uprising at Waiilatpu and hurried on alone to save his beloved mission.

Narcissa was in a safe refuge, but she was exhausted and despondent, near physical and emotional collapse. The mission had been partly burned by marauding Indians. Before Dr. Whitman could restore order he was summoned to treat his old companion, Rev. Spalding, who lay ill of scarlet fever 125 miles away; when he got back to Waiilatpu he encountered a fresh and bitter disaster. The leading party of the great emigrant train had reached his mission, found it unattended, and had broken in to ransack most of his remaining stores.

The physician gathered his scattered Indian charges and rebuilt his settlement. But Narcissa now was more a burden than a help; she suffered from what he diagnosed as "aneurism of the main aorta below the heart"; his own health never quite recovered from the enormous exertions of the transcontinental ride.

The final blow came in 1847 when emigrants arrived stricken with measles which they spread

among the Indians with devastating effect. The Indians began to talk openly of killing Dr. Whitman; he soon heard of the threats but continued to ride from lodge to lodge, treating all he could; some friends who saw him on his last desperate rounds felt that he expected death at any moment and was ready to welcome it.

The Massacre. Monday, November 29, 1847, began for the mission with the kind of bad news that was all too common: this time it was a new measles death in the lodge of Chief Tilaukait. At two o'clock in the afternoon Tilaukait and a brave named Tamahas came to the mission house, asked to see Dr. Whitman about some medicine; when they were ushered into his study they suddenly whipped out tomahawks concealed in their garments and attacked with wild cries.

Accounts vary, but Dr. Whitman apparently tried to escape; he was found mortally wounded and badly mutilated just outside the house; the only man witness was killed and the two Indians fled. Narcissa rushed out to aid her stricken husband, dragged him inside; almost at once she was shot under the left arm as Indians launched a fresh assault from all sides. Narcissa fell screaming but staggered back to her feet; collecting the terrified mission inhabitants, she herded them into an upstairs bedroom, there bluffed a defense by poking the broken end of an empty gun through the top of the narrow stairwell. A seemingly friendly Indian lured them down with promise of safe conduct, then betrayed them; in the final savage attack the berserk braves poured a fusillade into Narcissa, ground her body into the mud, rained vengeful quirt blows on her face.

Altogether 14 people perished; 47 others were taken captive, were ultimately ransomed. All through the night the terrified captives who huddled in the mission house heard Dr. Whitman still groaning on the floor below; his stubborn stamina would not allow him a quick and easy death.

Aftermath. News of the massacre aroused 500 vigilantes who sprang to arms; only 50 persisted long enough to reach the mission, but they were enough to scatter the sated and disorganized Cayuse. They fled to the mountains in scattered bands; two years later five braves, including Tilaukait and Tamahas surrendered and were promptly hanged. In Washington the federal government had already



Portraits of Tamahas, above, and Chief Tilaukait, murderers of Dr. Whitman, by itinerant painter Paul Kane who said Tamahas' face "was the most savage I ever beheld."



taken larger action; proclaiming shock and outrage at such unsettled conditions, President Polk had advanced Manifest Destiny by annexing the Territory.

For fifty years a flourishing legend grew around the Whitmans; in song and story they were idealized as the epitome of all Christian and pioneer virtues. Myth makers convinced themselves that Whitman's famous ride was undertaken not to save a mission but to spur a rush of Americans to the Oregon Territory before the British arrived there first. Modern historians view the Whitmans as bold pioneers who met a tragic end through forces largely beyond their control. In American medical history the Whitman saga is immortal.

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