Breeds And Half-Breeds

GORDON SPECK

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BAPTISTE DORION

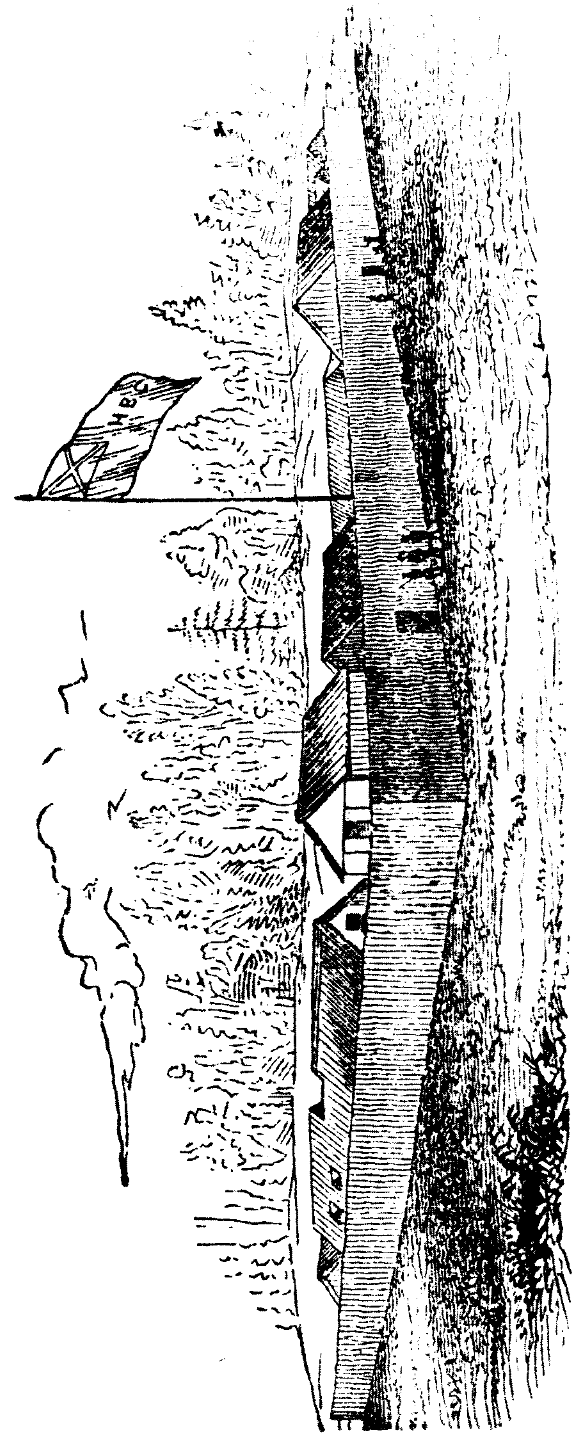
1834–1849

BAPTISTE DORION and an uncertain number of half-brothers and half-sisters rounded out a third generation of the Dorion family. But compared with his father and grandfather, Bapiste was a colorless and indistinct figure flitting across the log pages of the Columbia. He was never associated with a really great cause or even a pathetic failure. He lived during the exciting years when Hudson's Bay Company men, missionaries, settlers, and government agents built the "Oregon question" into an international crisis, but Baptiste played no decisive role; and except for the Whitman massacre, the years themselves were generally safe and prosaic, reflecting political footwork more than frontier heroics.

For years Baptiste Dorion and Thomas McKay, half-breed son of Mrs. McLoughlin, wife of Dr. John McLoughlin, were the two most important half-breeds attached to the Hudson's Bay Company on the Columbia.[1] But the doctor, the Company's chief factor at Vancouver, wrote of events, not interpreters, and his many associates were equally remiss.

From early life until his death, Baptiste was surrounded with rival traders in the Okanogan, on the Columbia, Cowlitz, Spokane, and Willamette rivers; with missionaries of conflicting and intolerant faiths at Waiilatpu, Lapwai, Salem, and The Dalles and in the Cowlitz Valley; and with an ever-increasing flow of settlers—God-fearing, ruthless, sinful, peaceful, and quarrelsome. All his life he was subject to the cross-pulls of divergent faiths, commercial interests, and political entities. Life for him was much more complicated than for his grandfather, old Pierre, squatting among his squaws on the Missouri, or even for his half-breed father, Pierre, Jr., who mastered his craft

Dr. John McLoughlin, Hudson's Bay Company chief factor at Fort Vancouver when Baptiste Dorion served as one of his interpreter-guides. *Oregon Historical Society*



Fort Vancouver when it was a trading post of the Hudson's Bay Company [illegible] U.S. *Signal Corps, Photo 111-sc-*[illegible] *The National Archives*

and tramped across a continent and died without ever knowing the stresses of civilization.

No wonder Baptiste was neither quite civilized nor savage, neither wholly upright nor totally treacherous. He had forever to remember that he was more Indian than white, more civilized than savage—a conflict which he controlled largely with honor and a minimum of lapses.

Early in his maturity, Baptiste was employed as an interpreter-guide along the Columbia, particularly at Vancouver, where he was "an important leader among the half-breeds—next to Thomas McKay."[2]

When J. K. Townsend, the noted naturalist, visited the Columbia in 1834 and wished to make a side excursion into the Blue Mountains south of Walla Walla, he chose Baptiste as his guide and mentor; but he said little about Dorion's work.[3]

Seven years later Baptiste was interpreter for the notorious Dr. Elijah White, the "garrulous busybody"[4] who imagined himself with a mission to put the Indians in their place, remove the Hudson's Bay Company from Old Oregon, abolish demon rum, and show the missionaries how to save Indian souls.

White had first arrived on the Columbia by the sea route in June of 1837 as a physician attached to Jason Lee's Willamette mission. Three years later Lee's patience was exhausted, and he dismissed White.

But it was too late. The doctor had evolved a scheme for reorganizing life on the Columbia. He hurried to Washington to arrange official status, and before his neighbors were aware of their danger, he had been appointed Indian subagent and was hurrying west, making speeches, sneering at missionaries, damning the Hudson's Bay Company, and publicizing himself.

He arrived at Elm Grove, southwest of Independence, Missouri, just in time to be elected captain of the wagon train which left there May 16, 1842. Under his command were eighteen wagons and somewhat more than a hundred men, women, and children—and a goodly number of family dogs.

Now, Elijah White was not only a busybody; he was a prude. Within days he had issued a fiat: no swearing, no lovemaking—and no dogs. It is unlikely the good people under his orders would have taken much umbrage at the first two rules. One could always curse

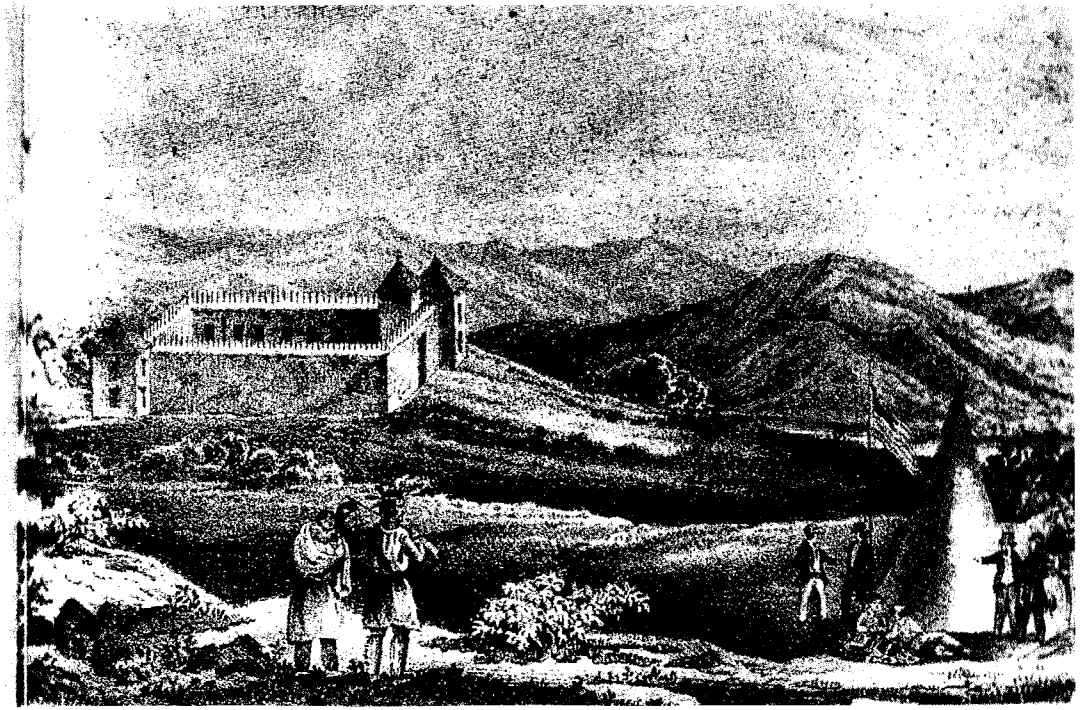
silently and make love in secret. But when White tried to legalize his hate of dogs by jamming a motion through camp meeting providing that all family pets be shot, it was too much.

As the beasts yelped and mothers and children cried at the cruelty, irate fathers informed White that any man shooting another dog would himself be shot.*

At the end of the month Elijah was not reelected, and Lansford Hastings became captain. Thereupon the train split into two parts, and the doctor stalked ahead with a small following of his own.[5] However, Indian alarms and the accidents of trail travel kept the two divisions more or less in touch, and at Fort Laramie, Thomas Fitzpatrick agreed to deliver both detachments to the Columbia for $500.

* Some say every dog was killed; others insist that the parental revolt saved some of the pets.

Fort Laramie, 1842. Artist unknown. *U.S. Signal Corps, Photo 111-sc-89547, The National Archives.*



When the wagons were abandoned at Fort Hall, White again rushed ahead, and on September 11, 1842, gleefully brought Marcus Whitman, medical missionary at Waiilatpu, the staggering news that his mission was to be sold, his colleagues were to be recalled to the states, and Whitman himself was to desert his Cayuse Indians and start over again among the Spokanes.

White was exultant. He went on to the Willamette, set up his authority, and before long announced he was leading an army to punish the Indians who had invaded Whitman's privacy and burned the gristmill.[6]

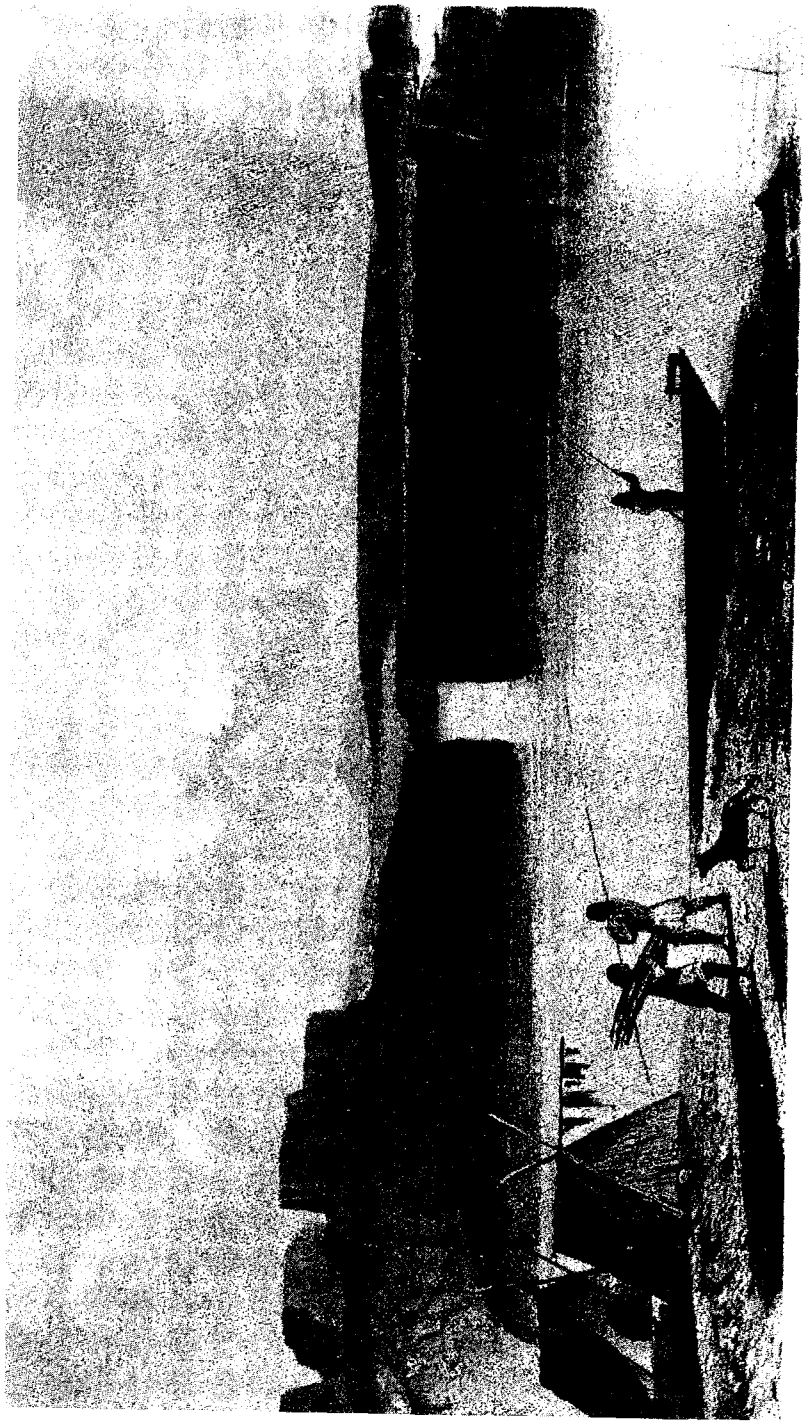
Not only did the Cayuse and Nez Percé need correction, said the doctor; they needed laws. And he obliged, with eleven sections of perhaps the most absurd rules ever written to affect the Indians. There was some native support for his edict that the Indians could own no dogs except those used as draft animals (the doctor hated dogs as some spinsters do men—without qualification). He further decreed that braves were to be whipped, jailed, or hanged for offenses ranging from entering a house uninvited to horse-stealing and murder.

McLoughlin, who knew the Indians, and even the missionaries, who did not, were appalled. They begged White to let the Indians quiet down of their own accord. But Elijah White, armored with Righteousness, his laws, and an "army" of six men—Thomas McKay, Cornelius Rogers (a recent recruit of Whitman's), Baptiste Dorion, and three others—moved against the Cayuses and Nez Percé on November 16, 1842, fighting −15 degrees of frost, the coldest in Indian memory.

White passed The Dalles on the twenty-fourth and was at the modern Walla Walla December 1, where he met Mr. McKinlay, the Hudson's Bay Company representative in the area. McKinlay, however, had been ordered by McLoughlin not to accept White as United States Government Indian agent since the Oregon boundary had not been settled and there were honest reasons to doubt White's authority. Furthermore, McKinlay was not to attend any meeting with White or to permit Company buildings to be used for the same.[7]

None of this deterred White. He called the Indians to council; he scolded, he promised, he exhorted, he read his laws. To his delight and surely to Baptiste Dorion's secret amusement, the natives appeared to accept the eleven rules with equanimity—for whatever his failings, the doctor had a suavity which appealed to the primitive mind.[8] What he did not know, but Dorion did, was that the Indian would bitterly

Marcus Whitman mission at Waiilatpu as it looked when Elijah White, Indian subagent, tried to reorganize religious work on the Columbia. *Washington State Historical Society.*



The Dalles, favored salmon fishing and drying site of Columbia River Indians. Mt. Hood in the upper center. John M. Stanley, *Report of Explorations and Surveys . . . 1853, U.S. Senate, 36th Congress, Executive Documents, Phillips Collection, University of Oklahoma Library.*

resent a flogging, first as an insult to his manhood and second because he could not understand why he should be punished for acts he had done all his life without censure. Such punishments put him in the category of squaws, than which there was no lower status except a dog's.

And the brave would expect payments for these indignities, just as Whitman and Reverend H. H. Spaulding of Lapwai, the Idaho mission, and the Catholic fathers "paid" him with food, presents, and special privileges for singing hymns and mumbling prayers.[9]

The Cayuse and Nez Percé also found it inconceivable that White would set out to punish a whole tribe with an "army" of six or seven men. The Cayuse in particular were restless. Both the Whitmans were gone—the doctor back east to plead his cause and recruit immigrants, and Mrs. Whitman to The Dalles for safety. The Cayuse felt deserted.

Open hostility was imminent.

But radiant with pride at his success, White returned down the Columbia, reporting to Mrs. Whitman and Dr. McLoughlin that he had fixed everything.

He had.

He had fixed it firmly in the minds of the Indians that the white man could not be trusted and was probably a fool besides.

Early in March of 1843, the doctor returned to the Cayuses accompanied by some 500 Nez Percé he had collected from Lapwai. Whitman was still absent, and the Cayusè were apprehensive and the Nez Percé angry.

White held another council and mouthed more absurdities, including the hint that he was a direct representative of God.[10]

When news of this latest folly reached the lower Columbia, his outraged neighbors hurried a request to Washington that White, who was also going to the Capitol, be stripped of his power to cause trouble and be kept away from Old Oregon entirely. His commission as subagent was eventually canceled, but he returned to the Willamette in 1850 as a private citizen.

Following Whitman's return with the immigrant train of 1843, the pot boiled steadily among the mission Indians and the settlers on the Willamette and the Columbia. All manner of proposals were offered for the solution of Indian unrest and the problems evolving from the influx of immigrants into Hudson's Bay Company preserves.

The international, national, and even local political infighting which took place over the Oregon question has no place in this

volume. Suffice it to say that in 1847 the Indian facet of the problem exploded in the Whitman massacre and the Cayuse War.

The causes were manifold, and no two historians agree either on their number or on their importance. Without prejudice as to their validity or rank, the following may be suggested.

The white man never understood the Indian's values of right or wrong.

The Indians resented the increasing immigration.

They were confused by the conflicting teachings of the missionaries, Protestant and Catholic.

Whitman, knowing that his system of Indian salvation had failed, was plagued by an increasing lack of confidence. This was sensed by the Indians, who demanded more and more concessions.

The Hudson's Bay Company ruled their Indians by the code of an eye for an eye, which the natives understood, while the Americans wrote noble treaties and broke them with a callous disregard for honor worthy of Nietzsche.

The delay in settling the Oregon boundary also delayed the right to maintain troops in the area, and the Indians committed acts they would not have done had force been present.

And perhaps not least among the causes of the war and massacre were the disgruntled half-breeds, who were barred by their birth from living entirely in the world of either of their parents. They were often unemployed and yet lacked the Indian's skill to survive. Robert Newell said there was no "doubt in my mind but one of these kind of men was the cause of the massacre at Waiilatpu."[11] He was referring to Joe Lewis, an educated half-breed who had drifted all the way from Maine to the Columbia[12] and had been a great troublemaker at the mission.[13]

And there were more reasons for the conflict. Marianne Toupin, half-sister of Baptiste Dorion, lived among the Cayuse, and had been a constant harassment to the Whitmans. And Baptiste himself seems to have been a sort of agent provocateur, perhaps in revolt against White's actions, perhaps through some warped sense of eye-for-an-eye justice, perhaps for pure mischief. Anyway, when White returned to the Willamette after his first visit to the Cayuse, Dorion remained upriver.

There is little agreement on how long he stayed or exactly what he did except that, along with Joe Lewis and others, he was accused

of inciting the Indians to trouble. He reportedly told them that when spring came, White would return with a fighting army; that Whitman had gone east for the express purpose of bringing yet another army to punish them;[14] and that when this was done, the white men would drive them from their homes and seize their lands.[15]

If Dorion did allege this last, he can be indicted only for telling the truth, for that was exactly what the white man, under one pretext or another, intended to do.

These reports had one seriocomic repercussion. The Indians asked McLoughlin whether the rumors of white intentions were correct. He denied them,[16] and gave the Indians presents to assuage their fears. Thereupon they promptly repeated the cycle, rumor followed by denials and gifts, with every band they met, and these in turn hastened to the nearest Company post to claim *their* gifts.

Open hostilities between the Cayuse and their allies and the whites began in 1847, and a hastily recruited militia, under several commands, rushed up the Columbia to quell the unrest.[17]

Baptiste Dorion, second lieutenant,* First Oregon Rifles,[18] receives a note of dubious honor in the journals. The First Oregon Rifles, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel James Waters and Major J. Magone, went to the Palouse River not far from where it empties into the Snake. Dorion was a member of their force. Waters and Magone hoped to capture one or more of the Indians involved in the Whitman massacre.

In mid-May Waters marched toward the Reverend Spaulding's mission at Lapwai, not far from the present Lewiston, Idaho, where guilty Indians were supposed to be camped. He sent one segment of his men across the Snake and led another to the Palouse River in an attempt to prevent any escape to the Columbia.

Waters, Magone, and Dorion with their men reached a rendezvous on the Palouse where they had been promised ferry service by friendly Indians. However, no Indians were present, and Magone and four others made a raft, crossed to the far side, and scouted to the mouth of the river, where they found their transport.

The Indians ferried the troops across the Palouse to a suitable campsite. While they were there, a local Indian offered to lead Waters to the

* However, the official roster of Dorion's company as published in the *Oregon Spectator* (April 6, 1848, p. 4) has him listed only as "duty sergeant."

enemy, and about May 22 the militia started up a dry stream bed toward Spaulding's mission. Around noon they received word that a band of Spokanes were holding a small herd of cattle belonging to the Indians whom Waters was seeking. The Spokanes offered to deliver the cattle to Waters and join him against his enemies.

The militia seemed about to consummate a successful campaign when the following morning Waters learned that his quarry had escaped to the mountains, leaving their stock behind. He immediately sent Magone, Dorion, and about 100 men to seize the animals.

In his official report, Magone said that as they approached the Snake, "an Indian was discovered on the hills, and warmly pursued by Battise Dorio and others who were in front and this was deemed a sufficient signal for a charge. . . . Before I got down the hill that leads to the river I heard the shrill report of the rifles. . . ."[19]

Historians have sometimes absolved Magone of responsibility by saying that "Baptiste Dorion . . . set off at full speed without orders, followed by several others, and the fleeing Indian was killed before the major, owing to his having a poor horse, could call a halt."[20]

Magone, however, said that when he came up, he was told that Dorion and his fellows were shooting at Indians hiding in a canoe and that an Indian camp was nearby.

The spokesman for this camp denied there were any guilty Indians there. Magone accepted this statement but posted a guard and then left on a short errand. By the time he returned, four of his men had killed two of the Indians, and had he acquiesced they would have shot the entire camp—not because they were guilty of any wrong but because they were Indians.

Later, Waters' official report also admitted that "an [armed] Indian" had been killed in cold blood for no offense other than insisting that certain animals which the army had seized were his and in no way connected with the Whitman massacre.[21]

And so the Cayuse War, which "was hardly a war at all,"[22] dragged along in similar episodes, offering little glory to anyone unless it were the negative commendation that with such exceptions as the above killings, the white men behaved with more humanity than was their wont in Indian wars.

The Cayuse affair may be said to have been important more for its causes than for any profound results, leaving aside the question of the subjugation of a minor people.

And Baptiste Dorion, too, remains an unsatisfactory historical figure. He served Townsend in the Blue Mountains; he and his half-breed friend McKay acted as guides and interpreters for McLoughlin and his guests; in 1844 "Baptiste Doria" paid a tax of 85¢ on horses valued at $280; and once he emerges as interpreter-guide in the "Reminiscences of Hugh Cosgrove,"[23] a well-to-do businessman trying to locate somewhere in Oregon about 1847, two years before Dorion died at the age of thirty-one.

Baptiste had his grandfather's sense of rude fun, and one day after Cosgrove had enjoyed a hearty meal, Baptiste inquired whether he preferred cow beef or horse beef. Cosgrove replied that he did not know since he had never eaten horse beef. "Yes you have, that was horse beef you have just eaten," replied Baptiste.[24]

Dorion apparently continued with Cosgrove until the traveler bought a section of land next to the Catholic mission for $800, many times the price several ex-fur-traders, tired of farming and the "civilization" of the Willamette, had been willing to sell their holdings for.

But such fragments do little to build a personal narrative of Baptiste Dorion, grandson of old Pierre, French expatriate, and son of Pierre the younger and Marie of the Iowas. Nevertheless, together they made the clan Dorion, which, if we count only the years spanned and the domains served, was perhaps without peer among the fraternity of interpreter-guides.

Dr. John McLoughlin's house, built at Oregon City in 1846 after McLoughlin resigned as factor at Fort Vancouver and became champion of American rights in Old Oregon. *Oregon State Highway Department.*

10. Bradbury, *loc. cit.*

Chapter 23. Lisa and Hunt Reach an Agreement

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2. *Ibid.,* p. 137.

3. *Ibid.,* p. 145.

4. *Ibid.,* p. 125.

5. *Ibid.,* p. 131.

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2. *Ibid.,* pp. 336–338.

3. *Ibid.,* p. 218.

4. Hiram Martin Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West,* 3 vols., New York, Francis P. Harper, 1902, I, 206 ff.

5. Robert Stuart, *The Discovery of the Oregon Trail. Robert Stuart's Narratives,* ed. Philip Ashton Rollins, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935, p. 152.

6. *Ibid.,* p. 157.

7. See Barry J. Neilson, "Madame Dorion of the Astorians," *Oregon Historical Society Quarterly,* September, 1929, pp. 272–278.

Chapter 25. Baptiste Dorion

1. Robert Newell, *Memoranda: Travles in the territory of Missourie; travle to the Kayuse War; together with a report on the Indians south*

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3. John K. Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey Across the Rocky Mountains to the Columbia River,* Vol. XXI of Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels,* Cleveland, Arthur H. Clark Co., 1905, p. 347.

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5. For a pro-White version of this quarrel, see W. J. Ghent, *The Early Far West,* New York, Tudor Publishing Co., 1936, pp. 319 ff.; and his *Road to Oregon,* New York, Tudor Publishing Co., 1934, pp. 58 ff.

6. Francis Fuller Victor, *Early Indian Wars of Oregon,* Salem, F. C. Baker, State Printer, 1894, pp. 44 ff.

7. "Dr. John McLoughlin to Sir George Simpson, March 20, 1844," Introduction by Katherine B. Judson, *Oregon Historical Society Quarterly,* September, 1916, p. 232.

8. Victor, *op. cit.,* p. 45.

9. Gray, *op. cit.,* pp. 312–313.

10. Jones, *op. cit.,* p. 271.

11. Newell, *op. cit.,* p. 153.

12. Ray H. Glassley, *Pacific Northwest Indian Wars,* Portland, Ore., Binfords & Mort, 1953, p. 10.

13. Newell, *op. cit.,* p. 124.

14. Jones, *op. cit.,* pp. 269 ff.

15. Gray, *op. cit.,* pp. 312–313.

16. "Dr. John McLoughlin to Sir George Simpson," *loc. cit.*

17. Victor, *op. cit.,* pp. 200 ff.

18. Barry J. Neilson, "Madame Dorion of the Astorians," *Oregon Historical Society Quarterly,* September, 1929, p. 275; see also *Dictionary of American Biography,* ed. Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930, V, 379–380.

19. S. D. Durban and Francis Dupre, "Cayuse War," *Oregon Spectator,* July 27, 1848, p. 4.

20. Victor, *op. cit.,* p. 210.

21. Durban and Dupre, *op. cit.,* p. 2, and "Cayuse War," *Oregon Spectator,* April 6, 1848, p. 4; July 27, 1848, p. 2.

22. Newell, *op. cit.,* p. 99.

23. H. S. Lyman, "Reminiscences of Hugh Cosgrove," *Oregon Historical Society Quarterly,* September, 1900, pp. 266–267.

24. *Ibid.,* pp. 266–267.

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2. Marquis James, *Andrew Jackson, the Border Captain,* New York, Garden City Publishing Co., 1940, p. 337.

3. Otto A. Rothert, *The Outlaws of Cave-in-Rock,* Cleveland, Arthur H. Clark Co., 1924, pp. 172–199, 265n.

4. *Ibid.,* p. 199.

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2. Burton Harris, *John Colter,* New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952, p. 63.

3. Washington Irving, *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville,* New York, Society of English and French Literature, n.d., p. 133.

4. LeRoy R. Hafen and W. J. Ghent, *Broken Hand,* Denver, Old West Publishing Co., 1931, p. 31.

5. *Ibid.,* p. 31. See also W. J. Ghent, *The Early Far West,* New York, Tudor Publishing Co., 1936, p. 118; Charles L. Camp, *James Clyman, American Frontiersman,* San Francisco, California Historical Society, 1928, p. 40; Dale, *op. cit.,* p. 26; Chittenden, *op cit.,* II, 714 ff.; and Harris, *op. cit.,* pp. 72 ff.; 118 ff.

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3. Dale E. Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West,* Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1953, p. 51.