

# Breeds And Half-Breeds

GORDON SPECK



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PIERRE DORION, JR., AND  
WILSON PRICE HUNT

1804-1811

WASHINGTON IRVING says Pierre Dorion, Jr., the best known of the Dorion family, was a "loose adventurer," a somewhat unsavory character; Coues says he "appears to have been a sulky brute"; Brackenridge called him a "worthless fellow"; and other contemporaries said he was dark-browed, sullen, and quarrelsome, drank excessively, and beat his wives. Doubtless. Of course Pierre the younger was not exactly responsible for his complexion, and Indian stoicism could have been taken for sullenness. But it cannot be denied that he drank, quarreled, fought, and beat his wives. Every half-breed and many a white man did the same. On the other hand, Dorion is credited with a devotion to his families not always found among Indian men.

Regardless of his personal traits, the younger Pierre was acknowledged as the best Sioux interpreter on the Missouri and was in constant demand.

No one knows where or when he was born, but he was a Sioux trader when Lewis and Clark went up the river. Unlike his father, his life-span was short, violent, and tragic. Excepting his role in the Lewis and Clark and Big White excursions, he was attached to only one historical venture in any notable sense, that of the disastrous Overland Astorians. The record of that expedition and the story of young Pierre Dorion's adult life are inseparable.

When John Jacob Astor entered the trans-Mississippi fur trade with his dream of an empire at the mouth of the Columbia, he thought to guarantee its success by sending one expedition by sea and one

by land to build his first post, Astoria. The maritime detachment under Captain Thorn on the *Tonquin* does not concern us here.

For the overland venture, Astor chose Wilson Price Hunt of Trenton, New Jersey, a cultured and successful gentleman of the Atlantic seaboard but one completely ignorant of the Indian trade. There were other partners whom we shall encounter from time to time, men who owned small amounts of shares and held equally small authority. Some were experienced Indian traders; others were primarily gentlemen for whom Astor had a predilection, perhaps in contrast with his own very humble beginnings.

From first to last, Hunt committed one blunder after another. He

Wilson Price Hunt, leader of the tragic Overland Astorians. *Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.*



and Donald McKenzie, a former North West Company servant and one of several traders with the same name, went to Montreal in July of 1810 to recruit men and buy equipment. The North West Company was already fighting a bitter battle with the Hudson's Bay Company and did not welcome another competitor. It did everything it could to hinder Hunt and McKenzie, and it effectively prevented all first-class voyageurs from joining the Astor flag. The crew Hunt finally collected was distinctly second-best.

However, he got his thirty- to forty-foot canoes loaded; assigned a foreman to the bow, the oarsmen to the center, and the steersman to the rear; and paddled to the Chapel of St. Anne, named for the patron saint of the voyageurs. Here simple rituals prepared them for the wilderness. The conclusion of the rites signaled a gigantic thirst, and Hunt barely managed to get beyond Montreal.

At Mackinac he hoped to expand his crew to sixty men. It was the last stop before entering the wilds, and the voyageurs made the most of it. They always received a large portion of their wages in advance, and these were immediately spent on gaudy clothes, women, and rum. After the advance wages were gone, the boatmen ran charge accounts at the local shops, knowing that custom compelled their current employers to pay these bills before they would be allowed to leave town. Thus, the voyageurs and the shops colluded to perpetrate a profitable swindle, and Hunt "bought" his employees a second time at Mackinac.

Donald McKenzie and Ramsy Crooks, who joined Hunt at Mackinac, were familiar with the routine. Why they did not prepare Hunt for the experience is unknown. Perhaps they tried. Hunt had a habit of not listening.

In mid-August the Astorians left Mackinac and paddled for St. Louis via Green Bay, the Fox and Wisconsin rivers, Prairie du Chien, and the Mississippi.

At St. Louis Wilson Price Hunt ran head on into Manuel Lisa.\* Henry Marie Brackenridge, in his rare *Views of Louisiana* published in 1817, three years before Lisa's death, says the Spaniard had gone as far as the Big Horns, and Washington Irving credits him with traveling to the very source of the Missouri. The point is unimportant

\* About this time Joseph Miller, a well-educated Baltimore citizen, joined the Astorians.

here except to stress that Hunt was entering into competition with a master completely familiar with the battleground.'

It was much too late to start for the Pacific during the present season. Hunt, hoping to curb expenses, decided to winter his men at Nodaway, a few miles above the modern St. Joseph, Missouri, where prices were lower and temptations fewer. Two days after they arrived there, the river froze over, and the men squatted down to while away the winter. Hunt went back to St. Louis and enlisted Robert McClellan, a former partner of Ramsy Crooks, and John Day from the backwoods of Virginia.

Sometime during the winter it dawned on Hunt that he might need guides and interpreters. The delay was a serious blunder, because Manuel Lisa knew the value of the interpreter-guides, and when Hunt at last made overtures to Pierre Dorion, Jr., Lisa began a series of maneuvers designed to prevent any such association.

Young Dorion loved three things in life: a good fight, women, and liquor. He had recently gone to Lisa's upriver store and purchased several items on credit, including whiskey at \$10 a quart—a fantastic markup even on the river. When Pierre sobered up, he refused to pay the bill on the ground of an overcharge. Lisa did not press the matter at the time, but when Hunt tried to hire the interpreter, Lisa let it be known that he intended to have Dorion jailed for nonpayment of debts. An interpreter in jail was of no value to Hunt.

But Pierre Dorion, Jr., was also versed in the tricks of the river. For two weeks he played Lisa against Hunt, until the latter agreed to give him wages of \$300 per year, \$200 to be paid in advance, and allow him to be accompanied by his pregnant wife, Marie, and two small sons\*—all expenses to be paid by Hunt, of course.

To add to Hunt's troubles, five men from his Nodaway camp drifted into St. Louis and spread a tale of mistreatment intended to induce others to desert. The men were in fact on a diet of "lied corn hominy for breakfast, a slice of fat pork and biscuit for dinner, and a pot of mush with a pound of tallow in it, for supper."<sup>2</sup> This diet and the boredom were the real causes of discontent.

\* Pierre had earlier married a Yankton girl, Holy Rainbow, but had left her and was now attached to Marie, an Iowa girl. Marie had a long, wild life of her own, encompassing three "husbands" and half a continent. The facts of her life rival the fictions of Sacajawea's, but Marie never acquired a good press agent.

About the only bright spot for Hunt was the attachment to his command, as paying guests, of John Bradbury of the Linnaean Society of Liverpool, and Thomas Nuttall, the English-American botanist. These gentlemen, out to see the West, were in no way under Hunt's orders except that they would not be permitted to break the rules of safe travel.

When Hunt left St. Louis on March 12, 1811, Bradbury and Nuttall stayed in town an extra night to await the mails and have a last bit of fun. During the evening they heard that Lisa had a warrant for young Dorion's arrest which he planned to serve upriver at St. Charles after it was too late for Hunt to obtain another Sioux interpreter. Bradbury and Nuttall naturally threw their sympathies to Hunt, and at two o'clock in the morning rushed overland to warn him of Lisa's plans.

When Pierre learned of the trick, he quickly outlined a ruse to circumvent the arrest. He and his family would leave the boats at once, circle inland, bypass St. Charles, and rejoin Hunt farther upriver. Hunt did not trust Dorion, and said he never expected to see him again if once he left the boats. But since there was little real choice, he agreed, and shortly got an agreeable surprise when Pierre did exactly as he had promised.

Except that when he rejoined the Astorians he was alone. Marie had absconded in a huff with the children because Pierre had lost his temper and given her a sound spanking.

Normally this discipline was accepted by Indian women with total equanimity; in fact, its omission was sometimes considered proof that their husbands placed no value upon them. But Marie was different. Any one of the three men with whom she is known to have lived could attest to that—but this is the story of Pierre Dorion, Jr., not Marie.

Pierre was disturbed at Marie's defection—not because she was gone, for wives were easy to come by, but because she had his personal goods with her and he was bankrupt. Hunt understood and sent one of his men after Marie, but it did no good. Pierre slept alone that night. Just before daybreak a repentant Marie and two big-eyed little boys showed up of their own accord, and Hunt took them aboard. Pierre forgave, if he did not forget, and the Overland Astorians went on to Charette, sixty-eight miles above St. Louis.

From there they moved to Fort Osage for three days, April 8–11,

1811. Here Hunt learned that the Sioux were again in an angry mood.

The Osages entertained Hunt, Bradbury, and Nuttall with a scalp dance. This ceremony, and presumably a new male face, so impressed Marie she decided to leave Pierre and move in with the Osages. Dorion knocked that nonsense out of her in short order, and from then on she was a dutiful if not a particularly loving wife. She sulked a few days, but Pierre knew his rights!

In mid-April Hunt picked up his Nodaway section. The united party of sixty voyageurs, hunters, interpreters, paying guests, five partners, and the clerk, John Reed, headed upriver, keeping a sharp lookout for rattlesnakes, which were just emerging from their winter quarters and were in no humor to be trifled with.

One night eleven naked Sioux whooped into camp and set up a great hullabaloo. After their capture Dorion explained that the "warriors" had recently been defeated, and as redemption they must discard all their clothes to the "medicine"\* and perform some reckless deed to regain their self-respect. The present night foray had not been notably successful. Hunt's men wished to shoot the braves and get back to sleep, but he vetoed that form of frontier justice.

This little episode pointed up the angry temper of the Sioux and Crooks, and McClellan blamed the trouble on Lisa, contending that he had set the Sioux against all other traders in order to ease his own passage through their lands. McClellan was so sure of this that he had repeatedly said he would shoot Lisa on sight. The rumors of Sioux hostility and McClellan's attitude made the voyageurs nervous and unhappy. As these simple men saw it, the Indians might attack at any moment; McClellan might start a trade war; and Nuttall and Bradbury were silly young men who asked Dorion foolish questions, and spent long hours pulling up weeds along the river and oh-ing and ah-ing over them. In fact, the men suspected they were attached to an unlucky expedition.

These feelings were not lessened when Bradbury cut across land one day and was captured by a small band of Sioux, who seemed uncertain what to do with him after they had him. He seized upon their hesitancy and saved his life by entertaining them with the "medicine" of his pocket compass and microscope until the boats

\* "Medicine" has no exact synonym in our present-day vocabulary. It was an Indian-frontier term covering ritualistic mores, superstitions, native medicine, and anything the Indians could not understand.

came up. But it had been a tight situation. The Sioux had soon lost interest, and he had had nothing else to divert their attention.

While most of these events were occurring, Manuel Lisa was still in St. Louis. Several details had delayed him. For almost two years Sacajawea and another Indian wife and two children belonging to Toussaint Charbonneau had been living in St. Louis more or less as guests of William Clark. But Sacajawea was unwell and wished to return to the upper river, and Charbonneau had long ago tired of the inhibitions of civilization and wished to go north with Lisa.\*<sup>3</sup>

Also, Henry Marie Brackenridge, whose writings were one day to be valuable sources of early Missouri River lore, wanted to see the West as a paying guest aboard Lisa's boat. Such details took time to arrange, and it was the first week in April before Lisa could leave St. Charles.

In view of this delay and Indian unrest, Lisa sent Charbonneau to Hunt asking him to wait so that the two parties could travel the dangerous territory together. But Hunt, influenced by Crooks and McClellan, thought Lisa could not be trusted, and the New Jerseyite played a very questionable hand. He replied to Lisa in terms so ambiguous that both Charbonneau and Lisa believed the Astorians had agreed to wait.

When Lisa found the contrary to be true, he initiated the longest race ever run in North America. And it was no gentlemen's sporting event. It was in deadly earnest, and the loser might well forfeit his fortune and his life, to either the Indians or his opponent. Lisa was furious at his rival's perfidy, and Hunt was so frightened that he was not entirely responsible for his actions.

The race lasted two months over a course of 1,200 miles. Day after day Hunt pushed his voyageurs in a frenzy to escape the indignant Spaniard. Lisa, in a single keelboat manned by twenty-five superb oarsmen, begged, threatened, and taunted his crew to catch the double-talking Astorians.

During the course of the race, the regular routines were maintained of necessity. Hunters brought in the daily meat; clothes wore out and were mended or replaced; and around evening fires made of green

\* We have already called attention to the uncertainty regarding which of Charbonneau's wives was involved in this journey. See Chapter 16.

wood whose excess of smoke helped control the mosquitoes, the men laughed at ribald tales or complained of the food or the work.

At one point three white men came paddling downstream: Ed Robinson, John Hoback, and Jacob Reznor, former employees of the Missouri Fur Company who were returning almost reluctantly to civilization. It took little persuasion for Hunt to induce them to join him.

They advised him to leave the Lewis and Clark trail, probably the least practical of all the transmountain routes,\* at the Arikara villages, strike overland, and cross the Continental Divide farther south. Hunt accepted their advice.

While these arguments were being considered, minor duties were keeping Dorion busy. Two Sioux spies called from shore and warned Hunt not to attempt to cross their land, and a war party rode brazenly along the high river bank. Hunt's rifles were about to open fire when Dorion's sharper eye saw the buffalo robe signals which indicated a desire to talk rather than fight. At the parley which followed, Pierre is said to have interpreted the speeches simultaneously with their utterance. If this is true, he was a notch above most interpreters, who gave the substance of a speech either at the end or in long segments.

A few days after this council, Lisa hove in sight.

There were to be stirring hours ahead. The quarrel between Crooks, McClellan, and Hunt on the one hand and Lisa on the other, with Pierre Dorion, Jr., the pawn between, had smoldered for several months. Lisa intended to collect for the whiskey Pierre had bought from him—but Dorion had won the first round by evading arrest at St. Charles.

Hunt now believed himself in double jeopardy. He honestly thought Lisa was dangerous in his own right; and if McClellan really shot Lisa as he had threatened, the act would constitute murder, even on the Missouri. Hunt wanted none of it. He was having trouble enough.

\* This was contemporary opinion, but it is not commonly expressed today. "The route taken by Lewis and Clark across the mountains was perhaps, the worst that could have been selected," said Brackenridge; and Major Andrew Henry of the Missouri Fur Company, referring to the better passes over the mountains, said he thought "loaded horses, or even waggons, might in the present state, go in the course of five or six days, from a navigable point on the Columbia, more easy than between those on the heads of the Ohio." (See Henry Marie Brackenridge, *Views of Louisiana*, Baltimore, Schaeffer & Maund, 1817, pp. 163-164.)

He was to have much more.

At the moment, however, everyone pretended amity. Lisa covertly looked for Dorion, and Hunt covertly watched McClellan. Lisa did not intend for his difference with Dorion (largely wounded pride, since the accusation of overcharge was true and Lisa knew it) to eclipse the insult of Hunt's leaving without him at the beginning of their respective journeys. But for now, he would keep up pretenses and wait.

Meanwhile, Lisa and Hunt were moving upriver with a buffer zone of safe distance between them. But a torrential rain following the Fourth of July upset the arrangement and compelled the two parties to camp not over a hundred yards apart.

Lisa was much too wily to start open war. Instead he invited Dorion for a drink. Whiskey was one of the pleasures the half-breed could not refuse, and Lisa kept the tin cup full.\*

Bradbury said:

Mr. Lisa invited Dorion . . . to his boat, where he had given him some whiskey, and took the opportunity of avowing his intention to take him away from Mr. Hunt.

Dorion had often spoken . . . of his debt [for whiskey in] great indignation at the manner it had been incurred, alleging that he had been charged the most exorbitant prices for articles at Fort Mandan, and in particular ten dollars per quart for whiskey.<sup>4</sup>

To take Dorion from Hunt would even two scores: it would put Dorion in Lisa's power again and deprive Hunt of the best Sioux interpreter on the river. But for once, Lisa underestimated his man's capacity. Pierre drank a goodly round of river fire but refused to betray Hunt. Lisa threatened to prosecute, and the half-breed countered by reporting the whole thing to Hunt. Naturally, this convinced Hunt of Lisa's treacherous nature.

Just as Pierre finished his story, Lisa walked into Hunt's camp and asked to borrow a towline. A grand free-for-all flared up. Dorion, fired with whiskey and an innate love for a fight, charged from his

\* Liquor was measured on the river and throughout the mountains by the tin cup. Unscrupulous traders often handled it in such fashion that a finger or thumb took up a profitable portion of the cup.

tent and struck Lisa "several times, and seized a pair of pistols belonging to Hunt," said Brackenridge.<sup>6</sup>

Lisa shouted, "*O mon Dieu! où est mon couteau?*"<sup>6</sup> (he preferred a sharp knife to a pistol) and rushed to his boat to get his weapons.

Brackenridge stepped in and tried to calm Lisa, but seeing it was futile, accompanied him back to Hunt's camp. Dorion "took his ground the party ranging themselves in order to witness the event," said Bradbury.<sup>7</sup>

This was the chance McClellan and Crooks had waited for. It gave them a chance to kill Lisa in an open fight and avoid the charge of murder. Hunt perhaps sensed this, for "he did not seem to interest himself much in the affair," said Brackenridge.<sup>8</sup>

At this stage of affairs, the three paying guests decided to intervene. Brackenridge wrote later, "I had several times to stand between him [Lisa] and the interpreter, who had a pistol in each hand. I am sorry to say, that there was but little disposition on the part of Mr. Hunt to prevent the mischief. . . ."<sup>9</sup>

However, while Brackenridge was thus occupied, Hunt did dissuade McClellan from shooting Lisa, only to have his good work backfire: at that very moment Lisa made a derogatory reference to Hunt, who immediately reversed his ground and challenged Lisa to a duel.

"He told Lisa the matter should be settled by themselves and desired him [Lisa] to fetch his pistols."

Lisa started for them, and "I followed to his boat, accompanied by Mr. Brackenridge, and we with difficulty prevented a meeting, which in the present temper of the parties, would certainly have been a bloody one," said Bradbury.<sup>10</sup>

Time played to the advantage of the peacemakers. Brackenridge talked Lisa into a calmer attitude, Hunt did not press the matter, Dorion partially sobered up, and McClellan stalked off to sulk and wait for another day. Bloodshed had been avoided but Lisa and Hunt refused to speak to each other.

The intermediaries believed they now held certain advantages which they hoped to maintain: interwhite war had been prevented and the Indians were less likely to attack; Dorion would probably not start a fight unless he got drunk again; and Hunt, they were confident, would not force the issue.

At the same time, they had to consider negative items. The Mc-

Clellan-Crooks combination was potentially most dangerous. McClellan was activated by a blind, sustained hate, and Crooks was all too likely to back any move McClellan made. Brackenridge considered Dorion a "worthless fellow," and was inclined to sympathize with Lisa on the whiskey bill. And not only were Bradbury and Nuttall unfamiliar with the ways of the river, but Nuttall remained aloof from the whole thing as much as possible, thus placing most of the burden for peace on Brackenridge and Bradbury.

## LISA AND HUNT REACH AN AGREEMENT

1811

UNDER an uneasy truce, the two commands worked slowly up the current along opposite sides of the Missouri, always in sight lest one should reach the Arikaras first and open trade to the disadvantage of the other. Hunt was slightly ahead and Lisa granted this salve to his rival's pride, for the Spaniard's superior crew could have passed Hunt any time they were ordered to do so.

During the second week in July, both parties camped six miles below the Arikara towns. The question of who first should enter the villages could no longer be postponed.

Who was to have the advantage? Who was to decide?

Each possessed certain strengths. Lisa had the experience and the better crew. Hunt had Pierre Dorion, Jr. And we may be sure Lisa appreciated that fact even if Hunt did not. Perhaps that is why the Spaniard accepted with such alacrity when Brackenridge offered to approach Hunt seeking some compromise.

Before any conclusion was reached, however, two Arikara chiefs arrived with their own interpreter\* and told Dorion bluntly that the Rees would permit no further progress unless Hunt established a

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\* The identity of this interpreter is clouded. He is referred to as a Frenchman who had lived among the Indians twenty years. Several had done that—René Jusseume, Toussaint Charbonneau, the Dorions, Joseph Garreau, and Antoine Tabeau, to name a few. Since Charbonneau and one or more of his wives were with Lisa, and Dorion, Jr., was with Hunt, it is doubtful if the interpreter mentioned could have been either of them.

permanent post among them. Dorion countered that such a ruling should not apply to Hunt because he was going to the big water to the west and would leave the river at this point anyway. The Indians were satisfied, and Brackenridge then persuaded Lisa and Hunt to enter the towns separately but simultaneously—a solution which prevented the Indians from suspecting ill will among the whites.

A council followed in which Lisa dropped a most magnanimous remark, often studiously forgotten by Hunt's partisans. Lisa agreed to trade if Ree prices were not too high, and then pointedly referred to Hunt as his friend, saying that in case of any trouble he would be arrayed with Hunt.<sup>1</sup>

While Pierre Dorion, Jr., was interpreting, his eyes wandered searchingly around the council fire. He was uneasy, and whispered to Bradbury, who sat next to him, that many of the head men of the Rees were not present, so that their followers would therefore not be bound by the agreements of the council. Hunt, of course, knew nothing of this, but Lisa did, and it may have been these potentials for trouble that induced him to ally himself with Hunt. However, before the absences came up for discussion, the missing chiefs drifted in one by one and the tensions relaxed.

The Arikaras consented to sell horses at \$10 a head in goods at "first cost," a price somewhere between our cost of manufacture and wholesale. This settled, Lisa then offered to trade his horses for Hunt's riverboats, and Crooks, Dorion, and Bradbury went after the horses.

Bradbury was riding a very poor horse which constantly fell behind, and "Dorion . . . and others . . . occasionally rode after me, to beat him forward"<sup>2</sup>—a sentence that adds another brushstroke to the portrait of Pierre Dorion, Jr. To let Bradbury, whom he liked, ride a worn-out horse which must be beaten to keep it moving amused him. His fun was as simple—and as cruel—as his loves and hates.

René Jusseume (who was again upriver) met the horse-collecting party, and at first took pains to be courteous to Bradbury, inviting him to a squaw dance. But on the way he reverted to his often unpleasant self, deliberately riding through an Indian corn patch over the protests of both Bradbury and the squaws working there. "I suspected that he committed this aggression to show his authority or importance," said Bradbury.<sup>3</sup>

Following the council, Hunt and Lisa had resumed speaking to each

other, and Lisa went to help Crooks and Dorion; Hunt began buying additional horses from the Rees.

But he was unhappy. As each horse was acquired and its tail cropped to mark the sale, Hunt would cast an anxious eye on the heights along the riverbank, where a band of Sioux was riding back and forth, back and forth.

Was it to be war after all?

The several interpreters explained that if the Sioux rode side by side as they were doing, it only meant that buffalo were near. If they began riding crisscross to each other, then it was time to post guards and get the powder out.

But a Sioux was a Sioux to Wilson Price Hunt, and he began buying dogs for food rather than risk hunting buffalo—a move which must have amused Charbonneau and his squaws, to say nothing of Dorion when he returned and heard about it.

The adjustments in package size and distribution of personnel, necessitated by Hunt's decision to go overland, would have taken much longer than they did had not Hunt and Lisa been served by the greatest collection of interpreters available on the Missouri. Charbonneau and Pierre Dorion, Jr., had come all the way from St. Louis; Hunt had recently hired the mulatto Ed Rose (of whom much more later) and René Jusseume; and one or two others were within call.

It is to be regretted that these men were either illiterate or too busy to set down their versions of the Hunt-Lisa quarrel. But their days were filled with labor and their nights with sin, and history is the loser.

Prostitution was a thriving business. Bradbury said that about eighty squaws were on hand and that it was very common for wives and husbands to put their heads together and discuss the price to be charged. "The Canadians were very good customers, and Mr. Hunt was kept in full employ during the evening, in delivering out to them blue beads and vermillion, the articles in use for this kind of traffic."<sup>4</sup>

The river Indians honored chastity and modesty mostly in the breach.

The Arikaras gave a special prize to any young lady who could prove virginity at a specified age; but she must claim the prize in public, and if she lied the man—or men—responsible for her loss must step forward. Brackenridge witnessed one of these rituals, in which "the daughter of the interpreter (a Frenchman who had resided with



the Arikaras upwards of twenty years), a beautiful girl of sixteen came forward, but . . ." a young man stepped out and the "young lady . . . shrunk back confused and abashed, while the . . . crowd was convulsed with laughter."<sup>5</sup>

On another occasion Bradbury and Brackenridge hired an old squaw to ferry them across the river to visit a Mandan village. They had just shoved away from shore when three young ladies, about fifteen years of age, arrived and demanded to go along. They had not been included in the agreed-upon price for ferry service but they were determined to have their own way. They stripped nude, tossed their clothes in the boat, and dived into the river and swam and splashed around the amused Brackenridge and the blushing Bradbury. They teased and coaxed until the two men got into the game and decided to teach the girls a lesson. When they reached the opposite shore, the men refused to give the girls their clothes.

The outcome of the game is not recorded.

But it was not all fun and frolic. One day all business was halted; a sense of suspense hung over the lodges, and the whites ran half-fearfully to Dorion to ask what it meant. He said a war party, led by Grey Eyes, was returning, and the solemn music and the slow tread of the advancing noncombatants were part of the ceremonies to welcome the heroes and honor the dead. Villagers and their horses marched ten or twelve abreast, each clan to itself. Warriors in full dress pranced into view with captured scalps fluttering from their war poles; an old mother greeted her dying son sitting stiffly astride his horse and staring ahead into eternity; the aged and infirm rubbed their shriveled hands across a hero's legs to share the glory; and those whose sons had not come home slunk off to a nearby hill to grieve and moan, away from the feasting and dancing which would be held in the great lodge for the next two days.

These were stirring scenes for Hunt, his guests, and even the interpreters and voyageurs, who, though they had witnessed them many times, never really tired of the spectacle.

But the summer was well advanced, and if Astoria were ever to be founded, Hunt must be about it.

## DISASTER

1811-1814

JULY 18, 1811: Hunt was ready. Nuttall was staying upriver; Brackenridge and Bradbury were to return to St. Louis aboard Lisa's keelboat.

The Astorian forces of sixty-four men and eighty-two horses were divided into messes, each with its own equipment. Only the partners, and later the hunters, rode. And Pierre Dorion, Jr. He laid down the flat condition that he have a horse to use as he saw fit. This did not imply that the pregnant Marie was to ride. She trudged along on foot as good squaws were supposed to do.

Washington Irving has left a classic description of the wilderness over which the Astorians were about to pass. And if some of his predictions eventually proved wrong, the travelers were nevertheless to find conditions very close to Irving's dismal picture.

Some portions of it along the rivers may partially be subdued by agriculture, others may form vast pastoral tracts, like those of the East; but it is to be feared that a great part of it will form a lawless interval between the abodes of civilized man, like the wastes of the oceans or the deserts of Arabia; and, like them, be subject to the depredations of the marauder. Here may spring up new and mongrel races, like new formations of geology, the amalgamation of the "debris" and "abrasions" of former races, civilized and savage; the remains of broken and almost extinguished tribes; the descendants of wandering hunters and trappers; of fugitives from the Spanish and American frontiers; of adventurers and desperadoes of every class and country, yearly ejected from the bosom of society into the wilderness. . . .

Irving was willing to admit that "Some may gradually become pastoral hordes, . . . half shepherd, half warrior, . . . but others, it is to be apprehended, will become predatory bands, mounted on the fleet steeds of the prairies, with the open plains for their marauding grounds, and the mountains for their retreats. . . ."1

In the beginning of the transmountain journey, Ed Rose was the more important of the two interpreter-guides. His duty was to get the Astorians safely through Crow country. But he had a bad reputation, and it was rumored that he intended to betray Hunt to the Crows.

Hunt was in a dither. He was afraid of the Indians; he distrusted both his interpreters; he did not know how to go ahead, and he dared not turn back. Stubbornly trusting his own infallibility, he blundered along until on the outskirts of the Black Hills Dorion and two companions went hunting and failed to return for three days. Hunt set signal fires. Nothing happened. Justifiable fear for Dorion was intensified by the belief that it was here that Rose intended to ambush the Astorians. It was arrant nonsense, of course, but fear knows no logic.

Thus pressed, Hunt clutched at the absent Dorion as a savior, and shifted his course westward in the hope of making contact with the hunters. Shortly thereafter they came into camp. They had got lost, seen none of the signal fires, and recognized no landmarks.

Even Marie seemed pleased to see Pierre.

This experience pointed up the value of Ed Rose, who was at home here. But after he led Hunt around the Black Hills, traced out the Big Horn Mountains, and located his own Crow camp late in August, Hunt overpaid him and summarily canceled his contract. This was a costly mistake, for it put all the responsibility for interpretation and guide service on Dorion, who never pretended to know anything about the lands beyond the Crows.

The Overland Astorians were not a confident or happy expedition. Their leader was conscientious and brave but unfitted for his task; the partners squabbled; the crew was generally second best; and the greatest Crow interpreter (with one possible exception) had just been dismissed.

But sometimes an amusing incident lightened the general gloom. Once when John Day and a younger boy were hunting, they were surprised by a grizzly bear. Day cautioned the boy to stand still and not shoot. The bear might go away. Instead it reared, roared, and threatened. Day whispered, "Be quiet, boy! be quiet!" Again the

grizzly threatened and again Day said no. A third time the bear offered battle, and Day himself shot and killed it. The boy, somewhat confused by the conflict between orders and actions, asked for an explanation, and Day laconically replied, "I will not be bullied."<sup>2</sup>

After Ed Rose was discharged, Hunt and Dorion wandered on into the mountains. It was the last of August, and snow soon blocked the route. Hunt then ordered one of the backtrackings which eventually brought disaster to all and death to some.

Rose heard of their present plight, and despite his recent shabby treatment came to their rescue and set them on a proper trail. It apparently did not occur to Hunt to rehire the mulatto.

Perhaps only the tragic Vitus Bering or Henry Hudson among New World expedition leaders deserves more blame and more sympathy than Wilson Price Hunt. He made one mistake after another. But he was a brave man, and his suffering in the weeks after Rose had left a second time beggar description. He found a roving band of Flatheads, but left them to challenge the Wind River; a local guide thought a single range of hills separated Hunt from the headwaters of the Columbia when in fact a Continental Divide with a thousand spurs stood in his path; he floundered into sight of the Tetons and on to the Green and Hoback rivers; he got to Jackson Hole but left its relative safety for Teton Pass and the Snake. He sent Dorion and Day to explore the Snake because the voyageurs were weary of horses, dry land, and sagebrush and longed for their boats and the toils and perils they were used to, and Dorion and Day came back saying the Snake was unnavigable. The partners voted to go to Andrew Henry's old post near the modern St. Anthony, Idaho, and arriving there found it deserted—and it was October.

But the quiet little river flowing past the empty site, with the Tetons shining across the valley on frosty mornings, was too much for the good sense of the voyageurs and Hunt. They gave their precious horses to a band of Indians, made canoes, and, leaving Hoback, Reznor, and Robinson to trap the Henry preserve, embarked in high spirits on October 18.

Within a matter of hours, catastrophe struck: submerged rocks punched holes in the canoes, and unexpected currents capsized them and scattered everything helter-skelter. Valuable sunshine hours were lost collecting the goods, drying and repacking them, and repairing the canoes. The wilds, supposedly alive with game and Indians, were

devoid of both. For 300 miles the expedition encountered not another white man. Now and again they spotted a few Indians far to the right or left, but they were only outlines against the sky. Seldom could Dorion get close enough to be heard. When he could, he did not know their tongue, and sign language was inadequate for the information he needed.

Crooks and Antoine Clappine, probably Hunt's most valuable voyageur, split a canoe end to end, and Clappine drowned. Food was nearly gone, and Hunt divided his command, sending them in all directions with the admonition to find help or get to the Pacific as best they could. This command, in effect, relinquished Hunt's leadership.

Dorion and his family remained with Hunt.

Extra goods were cached and Hunt fought bravely on, hungry, wet, essentially lost, and near total despair. In these days of trial, Wilson Price Hunt rose above his own attributes and displayed a personal fortitude worthy of a greater leader.

Some of those he had but recently sent away returned and said the farther reaches of the Snake were still more wild and unnavigable. Turbulent water was forcing one portage after another, and Hunt abandoned his canoes and decided to walk to the mouth of the Columbia—a thousand miles away! Hunt and the Dorions and the dispirited boatmen. Snow on the hills, frost and cold and hunger. Only forty pounds of corn, twenty of lard, a handful of dry soup, and five pounds of dried meat per man—a pitiful supply for thirty-six humans for a thousand miles. But long ago they had reached the point of no return. Go on or die.

With the Dorions and eighteen men, Hunt started down the north side of the Snake while Crooks and the others took the opposite bank. They hoped that by keeping to the river they would at least always have water. It was a delusion. It was impossible to follow the river that closely. Long before the end, the voyageurs resorted to their own urine in their agonies of thirst.

In mid-November Dorion heard from a band of half-starved Snakes that John Reed, leading one of the splinter parties, had passed by. Hunt bought one emaciated horse and a few days later Dorion bought another for his family. Snow-covered mountains faced them. Famine was very real, and Hunt killed his horse, and the men declared it wonderful food. "So should I," said Hunt, "were it not for the attachment I have to the animal."<sup>3</sup>

December, and three feet of snow. Crooks on the opposite bank was suffering from the last stages of starvation, and Hunt was powerless to help. Marie trudged along, uncomplaining, and the two little boys stoically accepted it all. With old moccasins and an occasional dog, the party cheated death. Crooks retraced his steps but found no relief. Hunt panicked and ordered a retreat into the heart of the Continental Divide in midwinter. Crooks became too weak to travel, and Hunt and five others heroically slowed their pace to wait on him while the Dorions, their skeleton horse, and the remainder went on. For he who could not keep up was left behind: this was the universal code, from the Gulf to the Arctic—cruel, pathetic, and deadly practical. The majority must not die for the sake of the minority.

Hunt begged Dorion to kill his horse, but Pierre refused and was unanimously supported by his companions, who argued that death was not yet upon them and the animal could always be killed later.

Then, from a helpless Indian camp, Hunt seized five horses and immediately sent meat to Crooks and his men on the opposite bank. Starvation had made them frighteningly wild and ravenous; and Jean Baptiste Prévost, insane with hunger, lost all control, upset a makeshift boat, and drowned at the very moment of rescue.

Ice flowed in the Snake. Hunt seasawed first ahead and then behind his separate fragments of command. Christmas came and went, and the Hunt party left the river and headed straight into the mountains. Marie's time matured, and Pierre did the unusual, waiting with her while the others tramped on, and a new Indian baby joined a tragic journey.

Then: a snow-free valley with friendly Indians and food. New Year's Eve, 1811, and Pierre and Marie walked quietly into camp, their two-year-old son proudly riding the family steed. New Year's Day, and in their buoyancy the voyageurs broke into song and dance, garnished with spitted dog and horse. Another day, and the third little Dorion left his new world with as little fanfare as he had entered it. Warmer winds and milder skies told of Pacific slopes as one fragment of the command after the other found the Columbia and straggled to its mouth, defeated and bankrupt but alive.

And the Dorions walked, too, for Pierre became careless and lost his horse to thieves.

The failure of the seaborne Astor enterprise under Captain Thorn, the murder of his crew and the loss of the *Tonquin*, the rivalries among

the partners, the advent of the North West Company, the War of 1812, and the sale of Astoria for a fraction of its worth to the North Westers are matters which affected Pierre Dorion, Jr., only in that he heard them talked about.

From mid-February of 1812 until July of 1813, the Dorions received little recorded attention at Astoria. Presumably Hunt took Pierre on his many excursions along the river and into the immediate hinterland, but there is no satisfactory evidence that the guide went with Hunt to Alaska.

Small parties were dispatched from Astoria on various missions; reports were dispatched to St. Louis only to be lost to Indian knavery; trapping and trading units were sent as far east as the Rockies and as far north as the Okanogans; the *Beaver*, the second annual ship from home, arrived; Robert Stuart, Ramsay Crooks, John Day, and a small crew started east with dispatches, and Day went insane and was left with friendly natives to be returned to the Fort, where he died a year later.

Robert Stuart picked up Hunt's westward trail, got lost, and traveled a hundred miles down the Snake in the wrong direction before he came to his senses and realized he was heading toward Astoria and not St. Louis.<sup>4</sup> He found Hunt's caches rifled. Then Crooks became too ill to travel, and Stuart too had to decide for or against leaving a helpless companion. He wrote: "The sensations excited on this occasion . . . are not such as arise in the artificial solitude of parks and gardens . . . [for] the phantoms which haunt a desert, are want, misery, and danger . . . [and] man is made unwillingly acquainted with his own weakness, and meditation shews him how little he can sustain, and how little he can perform."<sup>5</sup> As Hunt had done on the outward route, Stuart refused to leave Crooks. But starvation then became so real that his crew proposed they cast lots that one should die to save the rest.

My thoughts began to ruminate on our hopeless and forlorn situation with the prospects before us untill I at length became so agitated and weak it was with difficulty I crawled to bed. . . .

This . . . led my reverie to a retrospective view of former . . . days, when difficulties and distresses were only things imaginary, which convinces me how little a man who knows . . . neither cares nor sorrows, can feel for those of others. . . . Let him visit these regions of want and misery . . . and he will be taught the . . . advantage of prayer.<sup>6</sup>

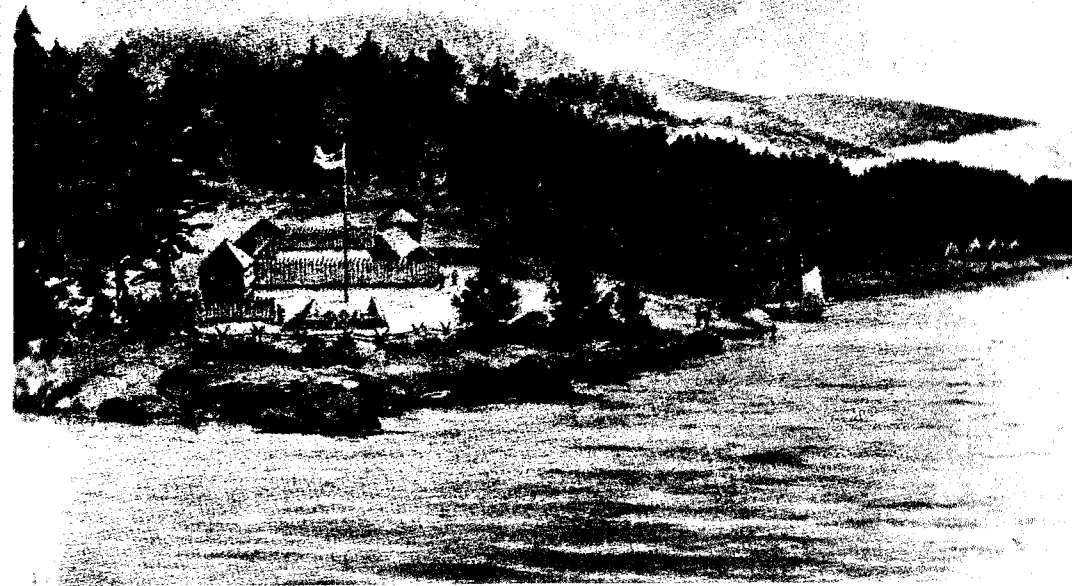
Stuart floundered on; discovered South Pass and did not know it; reached the North Platte and failed to recognize it; went into winter quarters and lost them to the Arapaho; found another shelter and spent a lonely winter in it; and finally delivered the dispatches to St. Louis on April 30, 1813.

In the meantime, the sale of Astoria to the North West Company had been decided, and on July 5, 1813, John Reed, Giles LeClerc, Pierre Delaunay, the Dorions, and others were sent to the Snake country. Their orders were to find Hoback, Reznor, and Robinson, collect as many pelts as possible, and join the remaining Astor forces as they were returning to St. Louis after the transfer of Astoria to the North West Company.

Reed intended to center his work on the left bank of the Snake but changed his mind and built a small cabin near the mouth of the Boise River. Dorion and one or two others built another shelter four or five days' travel farther on.

By late September Hoback and his partners were with Reed, but even this last effort to save some little of the Astor investment failed. Delaunay, a moody man, left camp one morning and was never seen

Astoria, 1811. U.S. Signal Corps, photo 111-sc-90797, The National Archives.





Astoria, renamed Fort George by Captain W. Black of the British sloop of war, *Raccoon*, in 1813. Rendering by Henry James Warre. *The Beinke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University*.

again; François Landry fell from his horse and was killed; Jean Baptiste Turcot died of syphilis, politely called (as were several other diseases) “king’s evil” in those still-Puritan days; then, during the second week in January, LeClerc crawled into Dorion’s hut and gasped out that Pierre and Reznor had been ambushed and killed.

Marie caught two horses, helped LeClerc onto one, put herself and her sons on the other, and dashed for Reed’s cabin, five days away. Sometime during the third day of fear, LeClerc died of his wounds,\* but there was no time to mourn him or perform even the simple Indian rites. The enemy was in sight. Marie and the boys hid and spent the January mountain night without food or fire, an ordeal which would have proved fatal to a lesser breed. At daybreak she hurried to Reed’s cabin.

The gruesome remains of a sadistic massacre were strewn about.

Only she and her sons were alive.

The whole Astor enterprise had been a failure. Disaster had piled

on disaster, death on death. Twenty-two men had died on the *Tonquin*, Clappine had drowned, the new Dorion baby had quitted life before it had a meaning, John Day had died insane, starvation had driven Prévost mad and he had drowned himself in a frenzy for food—and now only Marie Dorion and her boys were left of the Reed party.

Even her Pierre was gone. He would spank her no more, nor wait while she presented him with a son. Not again would his wild laughter carry across the nights, or his prowess as an interpreter buy her blue beads.

Helpless to aid the dead and fearing for herself and her sons, Marie turned mutely away from the blood and mutilation and started for the Columbia. In midwinter she forded the Snake, but she found the Blue Mountains impassable. With a fortitude rarely matched by any New World heroine, she killed her horses, made a tent of their hides, gathered fuel, dried their meat, and proceeded to survive the winter. When spring came she worked laboriously through the mountains, and arrived at Walla Walla just as the homeward-bound Astorians were moving up the Columbia. She hailed them from shore on April 17, and told them the story we have repeated.\*

Marie Dorion was as much an adventurer as any man who ever took a scalp from a writhing enemy. After telling the Astorians of the fate of Pierre and his companions, she said good-bye and started for the Okanogans, 2,000 miles away from her ancestral home. Six years later she married a trapper, one Vénier, of whom nothing is known. Whether Venier died or deserted her or she left him is unrecorded, but in 1823 she was living with Jean Baptiste Toupin, an interpreter at Walla Walla. Almost twenty years later Toupin and Marie moved to the Willamette Valley near Salem, Oregon. Advancing age and the proximity of an organized society induced them to have their twenty-year union, and their two children, legalized. Baptiste Dorion, grandson of old Pierre Dorion and one of the two little boys who suffered all the way from the Missouri to the Pacific, and Marguerite Venier were also “acknowledged” by Toupin in the ceremonies of the Catholic faith, July 19, 1841.<sup>7</sup>

With all their flouting of the mores of their society, there was a genuine understanding of human frailties and a willingness to for-

\* Hubert Howe Bancroft says LeClerc died at the Dorion cabin (*History of the Northwest Coast*; Vols. XXVII-XXVIII of *Works*, San Francisco, A. L. Bancroft Co., 1884, XXVIII, 246-247, 247n).

\* The only record we have of most of these events is Marie’s memory. Therefore, the time and place of LeClerc’s death and the details of her flight are subject to human error.

give them among the frontiersmen. They understood the basic drives of men and women, their own mates included—and did not quibble.

Pierre Dorion, Jr., was not so stable as George Drouillard; he was not so picturesque as Toussaint Charbonneau; he was neither so reckless nor so invaluable as Ed Rose. But he was a worthy member of the select fraternity of interpreter-guides. He easily ranks among the dozen most important on the Missouri. He was born a riverman and died a mountain man, and by that transition symbolized the shift of emphasis from the Missouri to the Continental Divide.

## Chapter 20. Toussaint Charbonneau Grows Old

1. Bernard DeVoto, *Across the Wide Missouri*, New York, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1947, p. 272.
2. Carl Russell Fish, *The Rise of the Common Man*, New York, Macmillan Co., 1927, p. 294.
3. DeVoto, *op. cit.*, p. 283.
4. Charles Larpenteur, *Forty Years a Fur Trader*, Chicago, R. R. Donnelley & Sons, 1933, pp. 117-119.
5. DeVoto, *op. cit.*, p. 134.
6. John C. Luttig, *Journal of a Fur Trading Expedition on the Upper Missouri, 1812-1813*, ed. Stella M. Drumm, St. Louis, Missouri Historical Society, 1920, p. 139.
7. DeVoto, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

## Chapter 21. Pierre Dorion, Sr.

1. See Tesson to Delassus, August 4 through October 10, 1799; Pierre Chouteau Collection, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.
2. *Ibid.*, August 18, September 4, and September 18, 1799.
3. Washington Irving, *Astoria*, New York, Century Co., 1909, p. 202.
4. Meriwether Lewis and John Ordway, *The Journals of Captain Meriwether Lewis and Sergeant John Ordway*, ed. Milo M. Quaife, Madison, Wisconsin Historical Society, 1916, p. 85.
5. Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804-1806*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites, 8 vols., New York, Dodd, Mead & Co., 1904-1905, I, 129 ff.
6. Olin D. Wheeler, *The Trail of Lewis and Clark*, 2 vols., New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1926, I, 93; W. J. Ghent, *The Early Far West*, New York, Tudor Publishing Co., 1936, p. 116.

7. William Clark, Indian agent at St. Louis, to General Henry Dearborn, Secretary of War, May 18, 1807; War Department Records, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Copy with the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Wheeler, *op. cit.*, I, 93-94.

10. Hiram Martin Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Fur West*, 2 vols., Stanford, Academic Reprints, 1954, I, 123.

11. *Ibid.*, I, 123.

12. Maximilian, Prince of Wied, *Travels in the Interior of North America*, Vols. XXII-XXIV of Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels*, Cleveland, Arthur H. Clark Co., 1906, XXII, 318n.

## Chapter 22. Pierre Dorion, Jr., and Wilson Price Hunt

1. For a concise review of the beginnings of the Astorians, see W. J. Ghent, *The Early Far West*, New York, Tudor Publishing Co., 1936, Chap. 4.
2. Henry Marie Brackenridge, *Brackenridge's Journal of a Voyage up the Missouri River in 1811*, in Vol. VI of Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels*, Cleveland, Arthur H. Clark Co., 1904, pp. 33-34.
3. Ghent, *op. cit.*, pp. 137-138.
4. John Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior of America*, London, Smith & Galway, 1817, pp. 102-103.
5. Brackenridge, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-107.
6. Bradbury, *op. cit.*, p. 103.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
8. Brackenridge, *op. cit.*, p. 107.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 107-108.

10. BRADBURY, *loc. cit.*

10. Bradbury, *loc. cit.*

Chapter 23. *Lisa and Hunt Reach an Agreement*

1. John Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior of America*, London, Smith & Galway, 1817, p. 113.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 137.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

Chapter 24. *Disaster*

1. Washington Irving, *Astoria*, New York, Century Co., 1909, p. 163.
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*. <sup>3</sup>*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.