

STORY OF JAMES H. WILBUR, as the YAKIMA INDIAN AGENT
AT FORT SIMCOE

1148

Told by a member of the Yakima Tribe of Indians,
MR. GEORGE W. OLNEY

Mr. Wilbur was known to Indians, and Whites, as Father Wilbur at that time. Mr. Wilbur was Indian Agent here at Fort Simcoe from 1866 to 1882. Wilbur first came to Ft. Simcoe as the first Indian School teacher, under the first agent that was appointed by the U. S. Government. He was Mr. Bancroft. Fort Simcoe was turned over to the Indian Department by the War Department, as I understand. An officer stationed at the Fort was in charge of the Indians, up to the time Bancroft took the Agency. Bancroft was dismissed. Another, Father Wilbur, was appointed as the second Agent in 1866 and served for 16 years. Father Wilbur and Nathan Olney got acquainted in The Dalles, Oregon.

James H. Wilbur was said to be the first City Police of The Dalles, Oregon. Nathan Olney was the first Sheriff of the Dalles, Oregon, and when Wilbur became school teacher at the Fort, he induced Nathan to come to the Yakima country and take up a homestead. Nathan Olney came over about the year 1865 and settled on the Ahtanum Creek. When Nathan Olney died about the year 1867, Mr. Wilbur, then Agent, had a coffin made for the body, brought Nathan Olney to the Fort, and had him buried at the east of Fort Simcoe, about one quarter of a mile from the buildings.

An emigrant family, shortly after that, in crossing the Toppenish Creek ford, a woman and two of her children were drowned. Father Wilbur had them buried along side of Nathan Olney. The names are unknown to me, graves unmarked. The only name I remember is of the driver of the ox team of the emigrant family, Mr. Ashley. The names of this woman and her two children may be in Father Wilbur's files at the Yakima Indian Agency at Toppenish.

When I was about 8 years old, I stayed at Father Wilbur's home, the house that was built for the agents to live in--a modern building, made of lumber that was milled and framed, ready to put together, in the State of Maine, and shipped around the Horn, and hauled by wagon, I believe, from Astoria, Oregon. (I do not know how, but was told that it was.) When Father Wilbur made trips to The Dalles, Oregon, he used to take me along as his interpreter, as he would meet Indians on these trips.

Father Wilbur was also an arresting officer. Before there was a U. S. Marshal appointed here, he used to arrest bootleggers, and place them in his jail. One of the blockhouses was used as a jail at that time. He went as far as an Indian camp, near Mount St. Hellens. They picked huckleberries, horse raced, and gambled. Father Wilbur did not allow gambling and horse racing, also drinking intoxicants, on the Reservation, so the Yakima Indians would go to this camping ground on a "psirire", away from Father Wilbur's presence. The bootleggers would take whiskey to this camp, and trade for money and horses. Some Indians reported this to Father Wilbur, so he took his saddle horse, named Calico (a big horse with spots, thus the name Calico). The two Indians that came to Wilbur with the news of the bootleggers went with Father Wilbur and led four horses, as there were four of the men bootlegging. The Indians told that these men would be back to the Indian camp on a certain day again with more whiskey to sell. The name of the huckleberry camp is Chequesh. He arrested these bootleggers and took them to Fort Simcoe and put them in jail, had ball and chain put on them, then made them work out their fines by grubbing out oak trees. Clearing the land for farming, they

raised grain on this land after it was cleared. These men sawed the oak wood for fuel. After Father Wilbur converted them to the faith of the Methodist Church, he took the ball and chains off them, and took them to church on Sundays. After that he trusted them, and they were free to work without guard or ball and chain. Later he released them, hauled them to The Dalles, Oregon, and they went their way.

He built the first sawmill run by water power, also a grist mill to grind the Indians' wheat into flour, on the Simcoe Creek in Simcoe Valley. The sawmill was not sufficient to get out lumber fast enough to build houses for the Indians, so he bought a steam engine, and put up a sawmill on Mill Creek, the creek named after the mill was built. He got a white man to train Indians to run the sawmill. When they learned to run the mill the Indians took over. Charley Barnaby, a half-blood, became the engineer. Hampton Lumley, Lancaster Spencer and Wilbur Spencer were the main operators. Loveless was the name of the white man that taught the Indians to operate the sawmill.

The first sawmill that was built on Simcoe Creek, run by water power, was the old type--cross cut saws were up and down, and slow. When water got low it would have to stop operations. The later one, with steam, ran circular saws; the other one used what was known as whip saws. The Indian name for the Creek where sawmill was last set up is, or was, NaNuNaNu. Father Wilbur would go to see how his Indian boys were getting along with the work, often taking a hand in the sawing and handling of the lumber. The first lumber from the Simcoe whip sawmill, Father Wilbur built a church in Simcoe Valley, near Yesmowit's home, and another church at Tupuch, now White Swan. Later he gave these old churches, one to Yesmowit, the other one to Joseph Stivere (then our head chief). His Indian name was White Swan. Tupuch was changed to Stivereville, then when A.C. Coburn bought the Joseph Stivere allotment and laid it out into a townsite, he named it White Swan, after our late chief. White Swan was a nickname, this name he got because he wore a cap made out of white swan feathers.

The next church he built with the lumber from the mill on the Mill Creek was by a carpenter teacher. Father Wilbur had to learn Indians the carpenter trade. Miller and his pupils built the big church, 1879, in Stivereville. He, Father Wilbur, trained young Indians to be ministers. One was a full brother to Joe Stivere, but had difference in name. He was George Waters. Also Thomas Pearne and Coke Helm. They are all dead now. They also brought many Indians into the faith. Father Wilbur preached every Sunday, and he built houses for the church members first, so to get a house built the Indians joined church. I do not remember the time, but he built a church on the Satus for the Shusters. It was too far for them to come to Stivereville church. Only the members of Wilbur Methodist church got houses.

Many white people came to Fort Simcoe to a big camp meeting every year, about the first of July, and would stay until after the fourth of July. They would celebrate the Fourth before returning to Klickatlat, as most of them came from there. Father Wilbur would butcher cattle, sheep and hogs, and furnish vegetables from the Agency garden. Beef and other meats were issued to all visitors to the camp meeting, Indians and whites alike. Many were converted to the faith. At these camp meetings tents and fuel were furnished free to visitors. Klickatlat people had a long journey over the mountains on the old military road, which was rough and very steep in places. They had to tie young trees, with the branches on, to hold the wagons on these steep places, especially on the Dug Hill, as they called it. Harness in those days had no breeching, brakes could not hold wagons

on this Dug Hill. This road was used till about 1900, or even later.

Father Wilbur had a herd of weathers (sheep) at the Fort Agency, to butcher for the school. When he butchered the last sheep, he did not get any more. He had a large bunch of Chester white hogs running around everywhere at the Fort. They would sleep under the blockhouses. The big crickets were plentiful then and hogs would live on them in season, besides the roots and acorns from the big oak trees there. The hogs were fed grain raised on the Agency farm to fatten them in late fall. They were butchered for bacon and hams. He had smoke house. John Hadley was the Agency farmer and he did the curing of hams and bacon. He had a blacksmith shop, carpenter shop, harness shop. Many Indians learned their trades at these shops. They made wagons, and bobsleds for winter hauling, as wagons were out of the question for snow, bob sleighs were used to haul agency logs to the mill and cordwood.

My brother, Frank Olney, learned the wheelright trade under a white teacher. He shaped the woodwork for wagons and sleds. Abe Lincoln, a half blood and brother-in-law, was learning the blacksmith trade and put the iron on the wagon gears. Daniel Boon learned the harness making trade and built harness. All these things were issued to Indians. Food was issued to all Indians. Annuities like cloth, blankets, clothing, was issued to all Indians free. The blacksmiths made plows out of sheet steel and braces and supports on the woodwork was made by these Indians. Many other steel tools were made at the blacksmith shop, and handles and woodwork by the carpenter shop boys. All planing of lumber was done by hand, like door casings for doors and windows. Most of the young men were full-blooded Indians. Daniel Boon was a full blood, and an excellent harness maker. He also repaired shoes for Indians.

The Indians learned to till the soil and raise food under Wilbur. Father Wilbur went to see his wards, and if they were idle he put them to work. He would hold the plow, drive the team, to show them how it was done. When leaving his man, he would tell him, Now you have so much of the work done, or else. They all minded the Father. He was a strong man with a strong character. He was kind to all, and rough when he encountered a rough man, sometimes he had to deal with tough white men. He established the government hay ranches. One is northwest of White Swan. The big cattle ranch was on the north side of lower Toppenish Creek, was fenced in with boards from the mill. It was one mile wide and six miles long. Hay was cut and stacked for feeding. It was wild hay, which grew abundantly then. These hay ranches were abandoned and were allotted to Indians later, Indians that wanted a start in the cattle business. Wilbur gave them work, on the many agency farms, and he paid them in cattle, branded "I Dis" for Indian Department.

Father Wilbur was a good friend of mine. He was the one that married us, Betsy Yesmowit and me, in July 1881. On his last trip here he visited my wife and I and had dinner with us. About the year 1883 he bade us goodbye for the last time. Father Wilbur was the finest man and friend I ever had. He done much for us Indians morally and financially. He was a fast friend of my father, Nathan Olney.

I write this from my memories of him. I am 88 years old now. Dedicated to a good man, James H. Wilbur.

(Signed) George W. Olney
Written this 1st day of June 1951.