

## CHAPTER V

### EARLY DISCOVERIES, EXPLORATIONS, AND ESTABLISHMENTS

It was long known that a great river existed that had its origin in the Rocky Mountains, flowing westward and emptying into the Pacific Ocean at what was called the Straits of Anian. It was designated as "The River of the West," but was re-named "Oregon" by Captain Jonathan Carver, who, in 1766, attempted to reach it by a trip across the continent from the east, but failed in his undertaking. From this source was derived the name for all that territory west of the Rocky Mountains and north of California, the Territory of Oregon.

The Columbia River became first known to civilization by the discovery of its mouth by Captain Robert Gray. A coterie of Boston merchants, appreciating the value of trading with the Indians of the Northwest Pacific Coast, outfitted two sailing vessels for the purpose, the *Columbia Rediviva* commanded by John Kendrick, and the *Washington* of which Robert Gray was master. Later the commanders exchanged vessels, and soon thereafter parted company. Kendrick went on an exploration expedition to the north, while Gray continued cruising along the Oregon coast where he was convinced he would find the fabled River of the West. He found what he sought and sailing across the dangerous bar, and through the heavy breakers that

guarded the entrance, he safely entered the River and on May 11, 1792, anchored in fresh water ten miles above its mouth. Gray named the river after his vessel, "Columbia," and that name has since been retained.

Gray sailed up the Columbia 35 miles in all, remained ten days, and then departed never to return. But before leaving he took possession of the country in the name of the United States, and as a token of the claim buried some pine tree shillings at the foot of a tree; and thus laid the foundation for the principal, valid right of the United States to the Oregon region, to which it finally obtained definite title by the establishment of the boundary between the United States and Canada, in 1842, at latitude  $49^{\circ} 00''$  north of the Equator.

In 1806 the United States expedition, under the command of Lewis and Clark, crossed the Rocky Mountains at the head of the Missouri River, and descending one of the headwater branches of the Pend d'Oreille River, on the west slope, reached the main stream which they called "Clark River." Finding that this river was taking them too far north they turned away from it to the west and, crossing the Bitter Root Mountains, came to what is now named Clearwater River. They followed the Clearwater to its junction with Snake River where the town of Lewiston, Idaho, now stands. The Snake they called "Lewis River," and descended it to where it enters the Columbia River near the present city of Pasco, Washington. The expedition continued down the Columbia to Lewis and Clark River, which flows into Young's Bay just west of

Astoria, Washington. The expedition reached the end of its westward journey late in the fall, and after wintering at Lewis and Clark River returned east in 1807.

Up to this time the lower part of the Columbia River was all that was known to civilized people, and no white settlements had been founded anywhere along its course. But now appears a man who finds its source, traces it to the sea, and surveys its full length. This was David Thompson, an astronomer and surveyor in the employ of the Northwest Company, a trading company of the colony of Quebec.

Early in 1807, accompanied by four helpers, Thompson left Rocky Mountain House, his company's post on the Saskatchewan River east of the Rocky Mountains, and crossing the continental divide at Howse's Pass came to Blaeberry River, a stream flowing westward. Following the Blaeberry to its mouth on June 30th, he reached a large river whose descent was to the north—it was the Columbia, but Thompson not realizing it called it the "Kootanae." At this point, which is 130 miles below Canal Flat, he built canoes and with them ascended southward, until on July 18th, he reached the lower end of Windermere Lake. Here, on the point that juts southward into the lake at what is called Taynton's Bay, he erected a fort. The location of the fort proved inconvenient and unsatisfactory and, remaining there but a few days, on July 29 he moved to near the mouth of what he called Nelson's Rivulet, now known as Toby Creek, which enters the Columbia from the Selkirks, about a mile

below Athalmer, and here built a permanent fort to which he gave the name of "Kootanae House," the remains of which can still be seen just east of the wagon road between Athalmer and Wilmer. Here he remained until the spring of 1808 when he journeyed southward across Lakes Windermere and Columbia to the flat at the head of the latter, which we now know as Canal Flat, reaching it April 21, 1808, the earliest date a white man is known to have viewed the head of the Columbia River. He portaged the mile and a half across the flat to the Kootenay River, which he called "McGillivray's River," naming the portaging place "McGillivray's Portage"; and then canoed down the Kootenay about 240 miles to near where Bonners Ferry, Idaho, now stands. Here he terminated his southward journey and returned northward to Kootanae House.

Ceasing his explorations of the Columbia for the time being, in the interim, Thompson made several trips across the Rocky Mountains by way of Howse's Pass, and also went down the Kootenay to the point he had reached before, and from thence overland to the Pend d'Oreille and Spokane rivers, where he established three trading posts. It was not until 1811 that he resumed his exploration of the Columbia River.

Having had trouble with the Indians at Howse's Pass, this time, in the depth of winter, he crossed the Rocky Mountains, from the east, at Athabasca Pass, which is, in a direct line, about 80 miles northwest of Howse's Pass. On December 29, 1810, he had started out with twelve men and several horses but before reaching the Pass sent five men and the

horses back; and with the remaining seven men traveled up Whirlpool River and across the divide reaching a stream flowing westward. This is now known as Wood River but was called by Thompson "Flatheart" on account of the disheartened condition his men were in due to the hardships they had encountered. Following down the Flatheart the party turned to the south when it came within about a mile of the Columbia, which they ascended about twelve miles, when the men mutinied and the outfit turned back down to Canoe River, which coming from the north empties into the Columbia just below the mouth of Wood River. He reached Canoe River, January 18, 1811, and putting up a cabin he and three of his party wintered there, the other four having deserted and returned eastward by the way they had come. This winter camp became afterwards celebrated as Boat Encampment and was the regular stopping place of the later voyagers traveling by way of the Columbia River, Wood River, and Athabasca Pass.

As spring approached, Thompson and his men constructed a clinker-built canoe of split cedar boards, which was 25 feet long and 42 inches wide. Having no nails the boards were sewed together with the split roots of the pine. On April 17th, the party started up the Columbia and on the way picked up an Indian who was an experienced canoe man. By this time Thompson realized that the river he was on was the Columbia and flowed toward the ocean from Canoe River, but considering navigation too dangerous that way, or else wishing to visit first his different trading posts, decided on the up-

stream and Kootenay River route, knowing that he could reach the Columbia at Kettle Falls. He had 197 miles to go to reach Kootanae House, and 232 miles to reach McGillivray's Portage, and with many bad rapids to ascend; but the low stage of water in the winter, the snow on which to make portages, and in places the frozen surface of the River helped him out, and on May 14th he arrived at the Portage. Carrying across here he ran down the Kootenay River to his usual point of departure, and after visiting his posts on the Pend d'Oreille and Spokane Rivers, proceeded to Kettle Falls, on the Columbia, where he built a canoe in which to descend the River. He left Kettle Falls, July 3rd, with five white men and four Indians, successfully negotiating the various rapids to the mouth of Snake River, where he took possession of the country in the name of Great Britain with the following notice written on a piece of paper which was tied to the top of a tall pole set in the ground:

Know hereby, that this country is claimed by Great Britain as part of its Territories, and that the N. W. Company of Merchants of Canada, finding the Factory for this people insufficient for them, do hereby intend to erect a Factory at this Place for the Commerce of the Country around—D. Thompson.

Leaving Snake River Thompson continued down the Columbia, passing safely through the several rapids, and portaging the Grand Dalles and Cascades he reached the site of Astoria, July 15, 1811, but found he had been anticipated, and a post already was established there by John Jacob Astor, of New York City, who had sent an expedition

around Cape Horn on the sailing vessel *Tonquin*, under command of Captain Jonathan Thorn, which had reached the Columbia, April 12th, and taken possession in the name of the Pacific Fur Company. Their arrival antedated Thompson's by ninety-five days. Thompson described his advent at Astoria as follows:

"On July 15th, near noon, we arrived at Tongue Point, which at right angles stretches its steep, rocky shores across the river for a full half mile, and brought us in full view of the Pacific Ocean. The waves were too high for us to double the point; we went close to the River bank, where there is a narrow isthmus, one of a hundred yards, and carried across it; from thence near two miles to the fur trading post of Mr. J. J. Astor, of the City of New York, which was four low huts, the far famed Fort Astoria of the United States. They had been here for a few months, and arriving after a long voyage around Cape Horn, in the rainy season, without sufficient shelter from tents had suffered from ague and low fever, from which most of them had recovered."

Compared with the foregoing it will be interesting to note the impression Thompson's arrival made upon the members of Astor's party. Alexander Ross, who was present at the time, has this to say:

"On the 15th of July we were rather surprised at the unexpected arrival of a northwest proprietor at Astoria. Mr. Thompson, northwest like, came dashing down the Columbia in a light canoe manned by eight Iroquois and an interpreter, chiefly from the vicinity of Montreal."

Gabriel Franchere, who was also present, gives this version of the occasion:

"Toward midday we saw a large canoe with a flag displayed from her stern, rounding the point which is

called Tongue Point. The flag she bore was the British and her crew was composed of eight Canadian boatmen, or voyagers; a well dressed man, who appeared to be the commander, was the first to leap ashore."

It is claimed by some Canadians that the purpose Thompson had in posting his notice at the mouth of Snake River was to claim the territory north of the Snake, only, as the Lewis and Clark exploration, and Gray's discovery of the Columbia's mouth, debarred Great Britain from any right below Snake River; and Thompson's continuation of his journey to Astoria was solely one of exploration and to complete his survey of the River to the Pacific Ocean. Be this as it may, but the Canadians secured, in course of time, absolute control of the whole Columbia River territory and ousted Astor from his possessions at the mouth of the River. In 1812 war was declared between Great Britain and the United States, and Duncan McDougall, a British subject, who was in charge of the Pacific Fur Company's interests at Astoria, on October 20, 1813, disposed of all that company's property to the Northwest Company. Ten days later the British man-of-war *Raccoon*, commanded by Captain Black, appeared before the fort, took possession, and changed the name of the place to Fort George. On October 6, 1818, Astoria was restored to Astor, re-assumed its name, and nominal control was given to the United States, but the Canadians continued in actual control about twenty-four years longer, establishing their local headquarters at Fort Vancouver, now Vancouver, Washington. In 1821, the Northwest Company consolidated with the Hudson Bay Company under



the latter name, and it was not until the final adjustment of the International Boundary between the United States and Canada, in 1842, at 49° 00' north latitude that the Hudson Bay Company withdrew north of the boundary line.

Thompson remained at Astoria eight days, and on July 23, 1811, accompanied by nine men in three canoes, ascended the Columbia River to the mouth of Snake River, from there going overland, and after visiting his various trading posts, arrived at Kettle Falls. From Kettle Falls he ascended the Columbia River with eight canoe loads of Indians and without mishap lined up the numerous dangerous rapids and reached his old encampment at the mouth of Canoe River, September 12, 1811. He had navigated the entire length of the Columbia River, part of the way by going down stream and the remaining part by going up stream. He had ascended from Canoe River to McGillivray's Portage; descended from Kettle Falls to Astoria; ascended from Astoria to the mouth of Snake River; and ascended from Kettle Falls to Canoe River; thus completing the circuit. He did not make a continuous journey, but is the only man, up to the present time, who has traveled on the bosom of the Columbia River from its birthplace in the mountains to its dissolution in the sea.

Thompson made another round trip between Canoe River and Kettle Falls and then departed to the east by way of Athabaska Pass and never returned to the Columbia River.

Thompson made a complete survey of the Columbia River, as he was accustomed to do of all the

ivers that he explored. For this purpose he carried with him a sextant, chronometer, and magnetic compass. His method of making surveys was to establish an astronomical station and definitely determine its location by meridian altitudes of the sun for latitude, and by lunar distances for longitude. With this station as a starting point, as he navigated or followed a stream, each course of it was taken with the compass, and its length, from bend to bend, was estimated either by eye or by the length of time taken to travel the course. He would then establish additional astronomical stations at controlling points, such as sharp bends, prominent tributary streams, or favorable camping grounds, and then mathematically calculating the traverse of what he had run, he would correct, up to the new station, principally the estimated distances of the courses.

Thompson's activities on the Columbia were but a small part of what he did for the Hudson Bay and Northwest companies. For twenty years he had surveyed a great part of the northwest, from the headwaters of the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean, and in 1813-1814, on a scale of fifteen miles to the inch, he made a great map covering all the territory he had surveyed. His map was entitled, "Map of the North West Territory of the Province of Canada, 1792-1812." His work proved to be wonderfully accurate considering his unfavorable way of traveling, and the crude instruments (compared with those of today) that he had to work with. More recent and elaborate surveys have proved him to be nowhere in error more than a few minutes of arc; and a comparison of the meander-

ings of the Columbia River as delineated on his great map with recent maps shows almost every course and bend exactly as he represented them. His map is now in the possession of the Conservation Commission of the Dominion of Canada at Ottawa, Ontario.

After leaving the Columbia River, Thompson continued making surveys in the East almost up to the time of his death, which occurred when he was almost 87 years old. He was the greatest practical surveyor-astronomer the world has produced, and is now about to receive belated recognition. The Canadian Pacific Railway Company and Hudson Bay Company have combined together in the raising of funds to build a complete trading post on Windermere Lake, at Taynton's Bay, where the first Kootanae House was erected. It will be a reconstruction of an early trading post with stockade, a museum of fur trading days, and a memorial to Thompson. It will be the first of its kind to be established in Canada. The work has already been started, and it is expected that it will be completed in time to open with appropriate ceremonies on August 30, 1922.