

The Commonwealth of Oregon

A Brief History of the Organization and Development of One of the Forty-eight United States of America, Submitted in a Series of Comprehensive and Interesting Letters, Written Particularly for Those Who Have Commenced Studying and Preparing Themselves to Pass the Examination for American Citizenship.

By A. C. Strange, Oregon State Director of Americanization Schools

I.

BRIEF HISTORY OF EARLY GOVERNMENT IN OREGON

BEFORE 1843, the Hudson's Bay Company, of which Dr. John McLoughlin was the chief factor, constituted the government of Oregon. It was really a one-person government, similar to a dictatorship, in that the head of the agency could make such rules as he pleased and could punish the breakers of those rules as he wished. Yet, although Dr. McLoughlin had great power, he never used it improperly; on the contrary, he was always a fair and firm ruler who was highly respected by all with whom he had dealings.

During this time, several hundred settlers located and established themselves in the Willamette Valley. Some were former employees of the trading company who had grown too old for the hard life of trapping or trading with the Indians and had chosen the easier life of stock growing and farming; others were American immigrants who had crossed the plains in search of homes. Between these two groups, there arose considerable difference of opinion about the need for a government. The Hudson's Bay employees, who were mostly French, believed that the Company's government was all that was needed. The Americans criticised this rule and argued that a government with elected officers should be formed.

Early in the forties (1840-50), two outstanding needs for government arose. One grew out of the death of an American settler who died without heirs. Other American settlers held that it was not right that his property should go to the Hudson's Bay Company but that it should be used for the common good of all. This naturally could not be brought about without a regularly organized government. A second need for government was the trouble the settlers were having with wolves which were destroying their stock. Hence, in March, 1843, a number of the settlers gathered to plan some method of solving these difficulties. It so happened that most of these men were Americans who believed that the settlers should form their own government. It was their argument that their property and their lives were not adequately protected under the Hudson's Bay rule; so it was decided to meet again in two months when the effort should be made to get out all the settlers to discuss their proposal for a separate government.

This meeting was held at Champoe (a place on the Willamette River near where Woodburn is now located) in May 1843. One hundred and two of the settlers were present at this meeting. After considerable discussion, a vote on the question of forming a new government was called for. Fifty two voted that the settlers should form a separate government; fifty voted to stay with the Company. Hence, a Committee was appointed to prepare a plan for the new government, the same to report the following July. This report, which was then adopted,

became the first organic law and the foundation of government in Oregon.

According to this Report, no settler was allowed to hold more than a section of land and the laws of the territory of Iowa were adopted as the laws of the territory of Oregon, which reached from the northern boundary of California to Canada, and from the Pacific Ocean to the Rockies. It was divided into four counties. These counties were Tuality (afterwards called Tualatin), Yamhill, Clackamas and Champoe. To enforce the laws thus adopted, a volunteer company of twenty-five riflemen or rangers was formed. Certain civil officers were also provided for.

The first governing official in this large area was George Abernethy, who held the office during the entire four years of this provisional or temporary government, which the settlers established. The officials at once began petitioning Congress for a permanent territorial form of government. This request, however, was not granted until August, 1848, when an act making Oregon a territory was passed by Congress. The act provided for a governor, the necessary courts, and a territorial legislature. President Polk at once signed the bill and appointed General Joseph Lane as the first governor and Joseph Meek as the first U. S. Marshal.

A year later, General Taylor, a Whig partisan, became president of the United States and he, according to the custom of the time, thought it best to appoint a member of his party as governor of the new territory. Hence, he offered the position to Abraham Lincoln, an offer which was declined, fortunately for the nation. Taylor then appointed a man by the name of Gaines, who accepted, and thus became the second governor of the Oregon territory. In the meantime, General Lane, the first governor under presidential appointment, had been elected to Congress, a position in which he remained until the territory became a state in 1859.

Following Gaines, there were four other territorial governors. During this time, the capital was changed from Oregon City to Salem and parts of the Oregon territory were cut off to form the territories of Washington and Idaho. It was a period of great interest in education, several of the state's colleges having been founded during these years. It was a time, too, of rapid growth in population and accumulation of wealth. This was due partly to the several waves of immigration from the east and to the drifting northward of many miners from California. Hence, when Oregon in 1859 became a State, it did not come into the Union as a sparsely settled, impoverished commonwealth but rather as one worthy in every respect of a place among the states of a great nation.

My next letter will deal with the government of the new state.

Our bodies are but the anvils of pains and diseases, and our minds the hives of unnumbered cares. —Sir W. Raleigh.