

Thursday, June 2, 1949

# Early Curry History Told By Essay Of Gold Beach H. S. Student

Through Georgia Fromm, Curry County school superintendent, the Pilot was given this story, written by Burton Dignan of the Gold Beach high school, telling of early-day history of this county. This article was the prize-winner of the Judge Allen Boice trust fund.

## THOMAS VAN PELT

Thomas VanPelt was born in about 1830 in Lexington, Kentucky. He moved to Minnesota and then to Illinois where he lived from the time he was 15 to about 20 at which time he traveled to the Oregon country. Ever since he had been 15 he had been associated with Indians, the Chipewas, the Menomonees, and the Sioux. Consequently, he had a pretty good knowledge and understanding of the Indians and their ways. He spoke the Chetco Indian language and jargon language which was a broken lingo used by the Indians and whites, introduced by the Hudson Bay Company.

He was a blacksmith by trade but while living in Oregon, in 1890, he was a justice of the peace for several years. He also served in the justice court as a lawyer but was never admitted to the bar. He was very influential with the Indians and rated far above the regular Indian superintendent.

After his more active days were over he started a ranch. He also did a great deal of salting salmon and sent the fish to San Francisco. He opened the first lumber mill in Curry county.

He died a natural death Feb. 17, 1898.

This story tells of the exploits of courage and good fellowship of Thomas VanPelt who during his lifetime was a material influence in developing this county and saving the lives of the settlers and pioneers by his timely warnings and influence.

In July 1853 twelve men came to the vicinity of Curry county at the Chetco river and began to settle down. They divided the land into sections and put the claims into a hat from which the men drew; thereby getting their land fairly and without disputes. Christian Tuttle, A. F. Miller, James W. Taggart, and Thomas Van Pelt were the most prominent and the ones with which this story deals.

At the mouth of the Chetco River on the south side was the Chetco Indian village. One night when most of the Indians were up the river gathering acorns and fishing for salmon, Miller, one

of the settlers and owner of the public house and a river ferry, decided to kick the Indians out of their side of the river, and without consulting the other settlers attacked and killed three Indians.

This started a short and bloody war. About two weeks later Van Pelt, Jim Jones and Evan Fielding, who were living at the mouth of the Winchuck river, about five miles from the Chetco River, were attacked by about 75 Indians. The attack occurred when Jones was washing dishes and Van Pelt and Fielding were down at the beach.

Jones fled from the kitchen for his life and met the other two men. Together they ran up to the cabin and cleared the Indians from the house. Van Pelt thought they should hold the house as long as they could so they repulsed three attacks by the Indians. Finally the Indians left, having lost three or four of their number already. The three left the house and began hiking south. About four miles north of Smith River they came across four settlers who had evidently gone to Crescent City for supplies. Bloody, ragged, and darty plies. Bloody, ragged and dirty tening spectacle for the leader of the group leveled his rifle at them as they ran toward him. With the four settlers the trio went back to the Winchuck river and inspected the house, which was battered and burned where the Indians had tried to burn them out. They threw the Indians into the river to be carried to their watery ocean grave.

Then with their larger party they proceeded up the valley and viewed the other burned dwellings of the settlers.

The superintendent of the Indians began investigating the outbreak and arrested Miller. The Indians then returned the guns, blankets, and other articles taken by the Indians during the war and peace was restored.

After peace was restored everything was quite for a while. Then in 1855 the Southern Oregon Indians began to go on the warpath. A representative of the United States government had been buying the Indians birthright of land with blankets and trinkets. When the Indians finally realized they had been selling the land they had held since time immemorial they sent deputations to the other tribes of Crescent City, Smith River and Klamath tribes to request their assistance. These tribes refused to help because of the foolishness of the Southern Oregon tribes.

It was by reason of these frequent interviews that Thomas Van Pelt heard of the unrest of the Indians. Before he re-built a house which had been partially burned and destroyed, he went to the chief of the Hasonta tribe of Indians on the Winchuck river and made a bargain with him. The chief Ne-et-cas requested VanPelt to pay for the land where VanPelt's house would be built and also if he would see to it that lawless whites did not destroy and burn his tribes' houses. In return the chief agreed to inform Thomas in case of an Indian outbreak, in plenty of time to warn the rest of the settlers, and would see to it that his house was not molested.

About Feb. 15, 1856, Ben Wright and two other men came to Van Pelt's house and asked him to join a party at the mouth of the

Rogue. Thomas VanPelt informed Wright, who was the sub-Indian agent, that the Indians were planning war. Wright laughed at him and ignored the warning.

About two after his visit, Van Pelt visited his good friend Christian Tuttle. He left then, returning to his own cabin, meaning to pick up some supplies. There he found twigs tied to his door which were Indian locks. No self respecting Indian will invade a house adorned in that manner. Van Pelt concluded that the outbreak had come and Chief Ne-et-cas had taken that precaution to protect his house.

"Short Thumb" as VanPelt was called by the Indians, because of his left thumb being off at the first joint, was much respected by the Indians. During April, a Capt. Jones, while traveling down the coast to Crescent City for supplies, stopped at the VanPelt house while he was gone, and stayed over night. When he and his men left they did not replace the Indian locks, and Indians following behind the troops burned the VanPelt house. As the troops crossed the Chetco River, a sergeant was suddenly struck by an arrow, and an Indian rushed out and drove it clear through his body. The soldiers shot the Indian and found him to be Chief Ne-et-cas, who in a violent rage at the white men for having broken his bargain with "Short Thumb" had laid down his life to get revenge.

At about this same time, Thomas VanPelt who had been living on the Winchuck, received news that Ben Wright and Poland, the two leaders of the volunteers had been murdered unsuspectingly while they were playing cards at a ranch near Grave Creek. Also, 25 other settlers had been wounded or killed, and the war was on. Luckily VanPelt had previously warned the settlers of the outbreak and most of them were at the fort and at a dance.

When he heard of the uprising, VanPelt undertook the dangerous mission of getting supplies from Tuttle's house. However, when he came to the river he saw smoke coming up from the valley and knew the Indians had beaten him to them. He then got some supplies from a nearby cabin of one of the men, who was one of the five at the cabin and took them to the cabin, and just in time.

The Indians burned all the houses around them but, aside from three or four Indians, who they dispatched, there was no attack made upon them. There were some packers up the river who did not know about the outbreak, so that night, at the risk of his own life, VanPelt made his way up the river and warned them to get out as fast as they could. He then made his way back to the cabin. While in the act of doing this, he saw a group of riders approaching. Thinking it was just the packers, he paid no heed.

Soon a lone horseman rode up, named Alexander Coil, a man familiar with that party of the country. Asked where the other men that he was seen with, he said, when they saw Van Pelt, with his hair streaming in the wind like an Indian, dragging the body of what might have been a white man, they decided that there was one place not to be, and rode off like Paul Revere.

Coil promised them the next time he would bring men who

were not afraid of a little blood and danger.

The packers soon came and the group of now about 21 men began traveling toward Pistol River, planning to go on to the Rogue River. When they came to Pistol River they were made by a large body of Indians, and had more than they could handle.

They sent a man past the Indians to get aid. They fought at close quarters until a fog came in. One young man was killed and VanPelt and Tuttle protected the man where he was wounded, in the middle of the Indian lines, finally carrying him back to the camp where he died. Help finally arrived from a detachment of soldiers which the messengers had been able to intercept and the Indians were driven off.

VanPelt then, with some other men, went up to Grave Creek and buried Wright and Poland.

All through his life Thomas VanPelt had been one of the leading leaders in the development of the coastal country, and by his courage, alertness, and character of trustworthiness, did much to prevent bloodshed between the Indians and the settlers. Even when war did come, due to his knowledge of the Indian tongue, he often kept the individual chiefs from going on the warpath by counseling them.

## Conservation In Co. To Total \$62,000

Curry County Agricultural conservation association committee met last week approving practices totaling \$27,000. Approved plans will be mailed to each farmer showing the extent to which government co-operation will be applied. The payment to any one farm or farmer cannot exceed \$700.00.

C. J. Doyle, chairman of the county committee, points out that all practice payments have been made in full in previous years. All payments made were within the maximum farm allowance, which last year was \$500. He warns that heavy participation this year will reduce payments as much as 60%. Farmers are urged to complete the most important practices first.

Charles Fox, Langlois, and Cecil Watts, Brookings, each represented their communities. The committee was assisted by Ted Dunwoodie, field man from the state office, Portland.

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