

The Last Steps in the Formation of First Oregon Government

A Narrative of the Pre-Territorial Days by Robert Carlton Clark; Published in the Oregon Historical Quarterly.

By Robert Carlton Clark.
In a letter dated August 30, 1846, written by Dr. John McLoughlin, chief factor of Hudson's Bay Company at Vancouver, he says: "We have yielded to the wishes and requests of the respectable part of the people in this country of British and American origin by uniting with them in the formation of a provisional and temporary government having for its object the protection of life and property."
The act here described constitutes the last step in the formation of a pro-

visional government for Oregon. It will be the purpose of this paper to give an account of the motives leading to this step.
In a former paper by this writer appearing in the Quarterly the movement leading to the formation of a government for Oregon was described so far as it had taken place down to the election of officers in May, 1844. It was there shown that the first of the steps in this movement had been taken in 1835 when the American element elected magistrates for themselves; the second in 1841 by the election of a larger body of offi-

cers; the third in 1843 with the placing of the government on a more definite constitutional basis. It was not, however, until 1844 that the British and Canadian citizens, resident in the Willamette Valley were brought into the union. By this fourth step a government embracing all the territory south of the Columbia River was established. It was not, however, until the next year and by means of a special agreement with the Hudson's Bay Company officials and by forming a new constitution that the region

north of the Columbia and its residents were brought into the bounds of the infant state. The story of this last movement will be related here.
At the time of the organization in 1843 of the Provisional Government for Oregon Territory by the settlers of the Willamette Valley, most of whom were of American extraction, no attempt was made to give a definite northern boundary to the territory over which its jurisdiction was to extend. Oregon territory was to include all the region south of the northern boundary of the United States. The obvious intention was to avoid giving offense to the Hudson's Bay Company which had extensive land-holdings around Vancouver and elsewhere along the north bank of the Columbia River. The following year, 1844, after an understanding had been reached with the French-Canadian and other British subjects by means of which they were brought into the Provisional Government, a new legislative committee meeting in June passed a law definitely fixing the Columbia River as the northernmost limit of the territory. Though a second session of the same body meeting in December of the same year, after new men had arrived from across the Rockies with a report of the political campaign in the United States and the democratic party's championship of the claim to Oregon with its slogan "Fifty-four, forty or fight," passed another act making the northern boundary line the parallel of fifty-four degrees and forty minutes north latitude, no attempt was then made to organize the region north of the Columbia or in any way to extend a definite jurisdiction. The bolder spirits among the Americans might be inclined to lay claim to control over the whole of the Oregon region, yet until the Hudson's Bay Company through its officials recognized the authority of the Provisional Government over themselves and the territory under their control such assertions were without practical effect. Indeed, until the British citizens within the Willamette Valley had given allegiance to the new government it was without authority over them. There were men among the Americans, cooler headed and more moderate, who realized the desirability of securing the consent of those whom they would govern. The government of 1843 had proven ineffective so long as the French-Canadians, constituting as they did, a compact body of settlement on the lower Willamette prairie, and other Britishers held aloof. In 1844 these had, by peaceful means, persuaded that their own best interests would be served, been brought into the union. Now to complete this union territorially the region north of the Columbia needed

to be included, and to secure what was more important a political union of the people settled north and south of that river. The settlers north of the Columbia constituted, for the most part, those directly connected with the Hudson's Bay Company and in its employ—about two hundred in number—and those who had been brought into the country under the direction of the Company and who recognized a certain measure of authority and control by its officials. The Provisional Government could scarcely hope to compel from these people obedience to its laws. It was the better part of valor and wisdom to secure from them also by peaceful persuasion a recognition of its authority, to form with them a definite union. This last act in the making of the Provisional Government of Oregon was accomplished in August, 1845, by a formal agreement entered into between the legislative body acting on behalf of the people of the Willamette Valley and the officials of the Hudson's Bay Company speaking for the people to the north of the Columbia.

On the side of the inhabitants of the Willamette Valley, beyond which the authority of the existing government could not be thought really to extend, there was a strong desire for an understanding with the Hudson's Bay Company that would secure its support. Those that thought of themselves as subjects of Great Britain were for the most part retired servants of the company and accustomed to look to it for direction. This is shown by the fact that they had joined the new organization at the behest of Dr. John McLoughlin, its chief official at Vancouver. This element could not immediately divorce itself from a long habit of obedience and subservience. To secure itself from possible attack or submergence and from encroachment on its land by the ever-swelling tide of restless Americans it had been persuaded to join with them in supporting a government, but by this act they were not won away from allegiance to the company and would consider a union that included that powerful organization a better guarantee of their own security.

The second factor that made for union from the side of the Provisional government itself was the economic union that really existed between the Hudson's Bay Company and the Willamette Valley. The settlers of this region were very largely dependent upon the company for the merchandise they needed and as purchasers of such surplus agricultural products as they had for sale. During this year 1845 the Willamette Valley was expected to have 50,000 bushels of wheat to market. Many of the Americans had received assistance from the company,

which had furnished means of transportation from the Columbia to their new homes, of had been given credit for food to tide them over the winter months and for seed to plant the first crops. Many of these perhaps owed their very lives to the generosity of Dr. McLoughlin. Not all of them were grateful for such help, and there were complaint against the company that it was a monopoly and was not always fair in its dealings. Yet facing a real situation they were compelled to recognize themselves economically dependent upon it and were not inclined to refuse the facilities it offered. Indeed the presence of the Hudson's Bay Company with its thorough organization for keeping in communication with the outside world was a great blessing to the early colonist, however grudgingly they may have recognized its value. By means of it they sent and received letters from their friends in the east. It served as a clearing house for commercial paper, its stores of manufactured goods were always complete, and it was ready to accept their surplus grain. Its mills ground the flour needed by the various settlements.

There was a manifest advantage to these settlers to have the company incorporated with them in a common government. It would not seem such an alien and hostile body attempting to crush out their very existence. A third object of union would be found in the influence and control maintained by the Hudson's Bay Company over the hostile Indians that were to some extent a menace to the Willamette settlement. The company traded widely with the Indians and had secured a certain measure of influence over them. It had shown no disposition to turn these Indians against the Americans, but it was manifestly to their interest to have a positive influence exerted upon these Indians to keep the peace. This desirable object was more certain to be secured if the company became a definite part of the organization responsible for maintaining order in the Oregon territory.
A fourth and perhaps the strongest of all the motives leading the Provisional Government to seek a union with the Hudson's Bay Company was that

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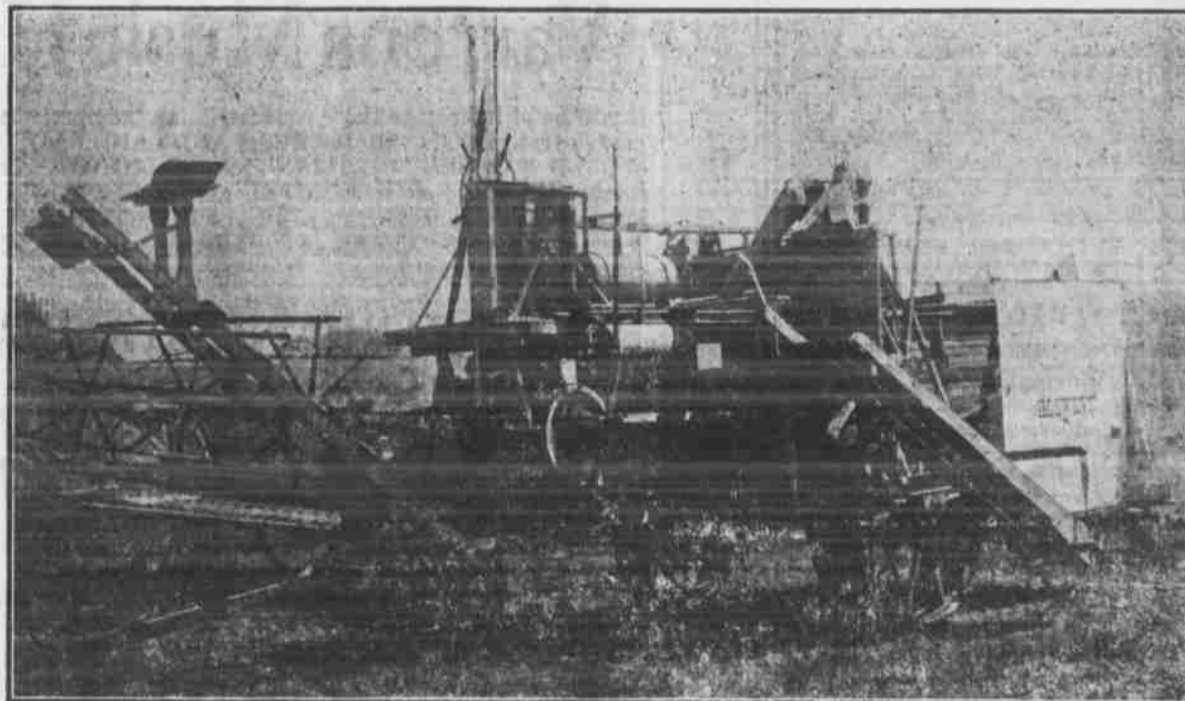
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