



Offbeat Oregon: Astorian Party and the river collide

By Finn JD John
For The Sentinel

When Marie and Pierre Dorion set out from St. Louis with the Astor Party in the spring of 1811, Marie was probably the only member in a position to really know how awful things could get.

For one thing, she was three months pregnant, with two little boys, two-year-old Paul and four-year-old Baptiste, in tow. For another, she probably had been talking to Sacagawea, who was a fellow Native American wife of a French-Canadian interpreter living in St. Louis. And Sacagawea probably would have known about the irresponsible and petty act with which Meriwether Lewis goaded the Blackfeet Tribe into declaring war — killing a young Blackfeet man who tried to steal a horse, and hanging a Jefferson Peace Medal around his neck.

Lewis and Clark had gone through Blackfeet Country on their expedition. As Marie possibly knew, and as expedition leader Wilson Price Hunt would soon learn, the Astorian party would have to make other arrangements. Throughout what is now central Montana, the turf was thoroughly burned.

The Astorian Party was one of two that New York magnate John Jacob Astor had financed and sent forth in the wake of the successful Lewis and Clark expedition. Astor had made his fortune with an inland fur-trading empire in the Great Lakes region — what was, at that time, known as “the Northwest.” Now there was a new Northwest to explore, on the edge of

the Pacific Ocean, and Astor dreamed of making his fur-trading empire worldwide.

His plan was to send an overland party to blaze a suitable trail from St. Louis up to the Pacific Ocean, noting good sites for trading posts along the way, which subsequent parties would later establish and operate. The trail would terminate at the mouth of the Columbia River where Lewis and Clark had camped. By the time the trailblazers arrived there, Astor planned to have a base already established; to do this, he was sending a second party by sea, “around the horn” at Tierra Del Fuego. These two parties would meet up at what is now Astoria, whereupon they would establish overseas trading routes across the Pacific to the Far East, and get busy making enormous profits selling New World beaver and otter furs worldwide. It was a neat scheme ... on paper.

Things went somewhat badly amiss, though, with both the land and the sea parties. The sea party arrived on schedule in the 94-foot, 290-ton windjammer Tonquin, but in a state of near-mutiny; Jonathan Thorn, the captain of the ship, was a Navy officer on leave, and expected passengers and crew alike to behave like sailors on a Navy ship. Some of these passengers were investors in Astor’s company, and considered themselves Thorn’s bosses.

After dropping the Astorians off to build their trading post, Thorn sailed north, making for the Russian colony of New Arkangel (today’s Sitka) to trade

for supplies. He stopped on the way on Vancouver Island, where in trade negotiations he insulted a First Nations V.I.P. The natives, in retaliation, snuck aboard the Tonquin and attacked, killing most of the crew; one of the survivors blew up the powder magazine, killing himself and dozens of the boarding natives and sinking the Tonquin in the bay; and just like that, Fort Astoria was completely on its own.

Still, for the surviving members of the sea party, it could have been worse. They were at their destination, there was a sufficiency of food, and the natives, while not super-friendly, were at least not out for scalps.

The same would not be true for the overland party.

Sixty strong, the overland party left the outskirts of St. Louis in the spring of 1811. With them were two botanists to catalog scientific discoveries, and, eventually, the Dorion family.

Because Astor’s Great Lakes fur empire was largely handled by French-Canadian voyageurs, this new expedition was staffed with quite a few of them. And for the first half of the journey, their water skills stood the party in excellent stead. They made fine time working their way up the Missouri, until it was time to strike out overland to avoid the enraged Blackfeet; then, on horseback, they did as well as anyone might.

But then came a time when the party arrived on the banks of a broad and beautiful river, a river flowing northwest ... toward their destination. Correctly they divined that this was a tributary to the mighty Columbia. The voyageurs in

the party became very excited.

There was some debate. Some members of the party who were not voyageurs felt that the overland journey, while not as easy and pleasant, was more of a bird in the hand; while who knew where this river might lead? For all they knew it could pour into a colossal sinkhole and run underground for hundreds of miles.

The argument was becoming heated, so party leader Hunt put it to a vote. The result was an overwhelming mandate to take to the water.

The party camped there by the river for a few days while the voyageurs felled cottonwood trees and shaped them into canoes. Then, leaving their horses in the care of some nearby Native Americans, they took to the water.

They should have asked the locals first. Or, perhaps they did; but the voyageurs, born to the open water and the flashing paddle, had high confidence in their ability to handle any kind of river. Even if the Native Americans had warned them about what was in store, they likely would have assumed they could handle it.

The first several days the party made thrilling progress: 60 miles one day, 40 miles the next (some rapids had to be portaged around), another 50 ... but the river was getting rougher and rougher.

By the time the river revealed its true colors, they were in what we know today as Hells Canyon, hundreds of miles downstream from where they had left the horses, and the river had a new name: La Rivière Enragée — Mad River. Today

we know it as the Snake. It was not navigable. Not even for voyageurs.

The party split into two groups before striking out cross-country, hoping thereby to be better able to feed themselves as late autumn ripened into early winter. Even so, all of them soon were on the brink of starvation. They depended greatly on the Shoshone tribes in the area, but the high plateau terrain there is not fruitful, and the population was scant and had little to share. Nonetheless, all would have died of starvation and exposure if not for Shoshone charity.

Throughout this time, Marie Dorion was preternaturally stoic, never complaining, always keeping up, while becoming more and more visibly pregnant. Finally, she went into labor; Hunt and the party forged ahead, leaving her and Pierre and the two boys behind. A day or two later they rejoined the party, and Marie had her new baby in her arms.

The baby died eight days later. It seems likely that there simply wasn’t sufficient nourishment for Marie to nurse him.

Finally, on Jan. 7, the Shoshone guides whom Hunt had bribed and shamed into braving the winter weather to help them brought the first group into the Grand Ronde Valley, the little banana-belt pocket of lush grasslands and plentiful game tucked into the otherwise inhospitable Blue Mountains of Eastern Oregon.

There they stayed with the charitable Native Americans, gorging on deer and elk meat and starchy roots, as the other members of the overland party straggled in.

Then they set out for the short journey to the banks of the Columbia, down which they would find their destination.

It was January 18, 1812, when the traders at Fort Astoria looked up and saw two canoes coming down the river toward them. The overland party had made it at last — or, rather, most of them had; of the original complement of 60 (61 if one includes Marie’s baby), just 45 survived.

And a case could be made — based on circumstantial evidence, but lots of it — that that number would have been much smaller had Marie and her two boys not been with the party. The decision to abandon the horses and follow an unknown river should have been a fatal one. The main reason it was not was the charity of Shoshone and other Native American tribes. Would those tribes have been as responsive, as willing to share their own limited resources, without the faces of the children and Marie among the group of bedraggled, dirty, scraggly-bearded scary men? Or would they have left them all alone to starve?

As for Marie, she may have thought her troubles were over when her husband and the boys arrived at the fort. She may also have thought that nothing could ever induce her to go back into that barren Snake River wilderness that had slain her baby and come so close to taking the rest of her family as well. But if she did think that, she was wrong.

We’ll talk about Marie’s return to Shoshone and Bannock Indian country, and her second winter in the Snake River wilderness, in next week’s column.

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