

# Pages From Our Past

By Kenneth L. Holmes, writer historian

## TRAVELING "PROFESSORS" IN FRONTIER TOWNS

There were many character types on the frontier. One whose fascination draws our interest like a magnet was the traveling "professor." These men were migrant actors and lecturers combined. A noted member of this clan was "Professor" Vanderhoof, who advertised in Oregon City in 1857, "A Panoramic Entertainment including a Scientific Lecture dealing with the Planetary System." He combined this with "Spiritual Manifestations" and Exhibitions of Mesmerism and Ventriloquism.

The story of these brave troopers is told in the book we wrote of recently, Alice Ernst's "Trouping the Oregon Country," (Oregon Historical Society) and in an older publication (University of Washington Press, 1944), "A History of Variety-Vaudeville in Seattle," by Eugene C. Elliott. In both of these studies the "professor" takes stage center during the 1850's and 1860's.

"The professor," writes Elliott, "was the first entertainer in the Northwest wilderness: He traveled alone, of necessity, for transportation was uncertain and expensive and the population too small and scattered to support a company." He differed from previous entertainers in two important respects. First, he did not merely pass through the territory but revisited it again and again, year after year, making friends, noting

changes, marking progress. This was his life, amiable and, in a sense, leisurely. He wandered up and down the waterways, stopping at each landing for a day or two. He would arrive in town, give one of his 'inimitable performances' in the local hall, arrange for another two weeks later, and until then go down the Sound. 'We would advise our readers in the different localities he may visit, not to allow the opportunity pass of listening to his lectures.' The last part of the quote is from the Seattle Weekly Intelligencer, Feb. 8, 1869.

A second distinguished characteristic of the professor, says Elliott, was that for all his "professing" and "lecturing" he catered to the taste and inclinations of his frontier audiences, "nor was he less the artist for it." He made use of the homely language of the untutored westerner, indulged in topical comment and rough political satire.

One of the most popular of these travelers was "Professor" Plummer, or "Yankee Plummer," as he was called by the Washington Standard of Olympia. He was described as the "elocutionist and mirth-provoking delineator of 'hewman natur ginnerally.'" On January 25, 1869, the Standard reported his visit as follows:

"He is a thorough Dutchman; a genuine Yankee; and unmistakable brother of an Irishman; a shrewd Attorney; a zealous Preacher, saturated with the air of sanctimony; an accomplished Reader; an exquisite Actor. One man insisted that there must be a troupe of 'Plummer Brothers, who popped up and down through a trap-door as occasion required. 'Why,' he said, 'they don't look a bit alike.'"

The "professor" was an "open, honest charlatan." He could lecture on science, religion, phrenology, mesmerism, the classics, and recite from great poetry and drama. He built up his image by exaggerated advertising, as is shown in the following quote from the Standard:

"Prof. Herrmann, the World-renowned Prestidigitator... has by special command, had the honor of appearing at the palaces of the following heads of Europe: Queen Victoria of England, Emperor of Russia, Emperor of Prussia, Emperor of Austria. He has also given special entertainments for the gratification of three Presidents of the United States—Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Johnson and U. S. Grant, who all pronounced him to be the Greatest Living Magician! Eclipsing in his marvelous feats of Legerdemain the great Hindoo Jugglers."

The "professor" was known and loved by pioneer folk all over the Pacific Northwest. We who have never heard a "World-renowned Prestidigitator," who could also discourse on phrenology, or in rolling tones mesmerize his audiences, would like to have shared the experience.

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8 THURSDAY, NOV. 15, 1962



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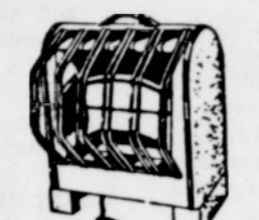
Battery Booster Cable Set for 12-Volt Cars 8-Foot. Compare at \$2.50. Only **\$1.33**



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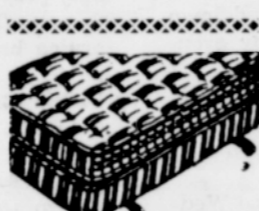
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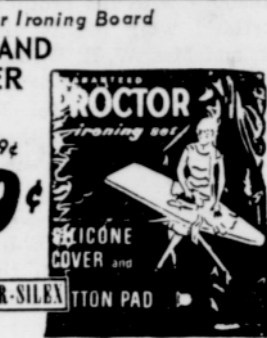
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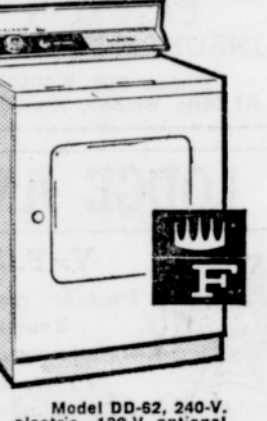
Kresky automatic auto. forced air wood burning heater. Floor level heat in every room. 6-8 rm. size **\$159.95**



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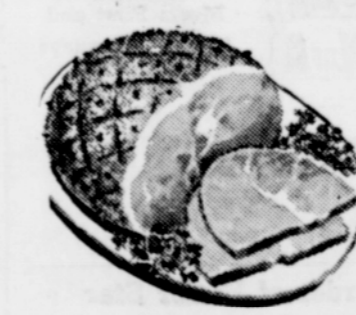
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