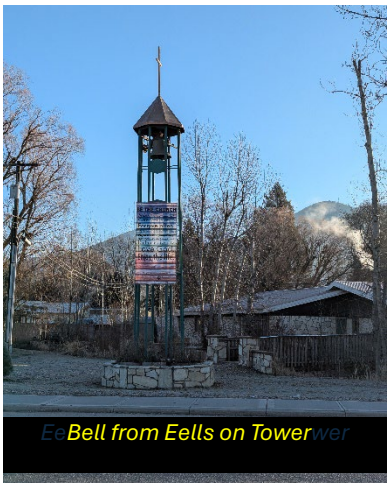
The Fire, the Fort and Bigfoot, Part 2

Last month we recounted a story of the fire at Cushing Eells' home at Tshimakain Mission. In 1848, the year after the Whitman Massacre in Waiilatpu near Walla Walla the Cushings and Eells were escorted to safety in the Willamette Valley by the Oregon Volunteers, a paramilitary group of settlers. The Walkers and Eells were only at their mission near Ford, Washington for 10 years, during which time no natives were baptized.

Elkanah Walker purchased a donation land claim near Forest Grove, Oregon the next year. A precursor to the Homestead Act, the Donation Land Claim Act allowed white men or partial Native Americans (mixed with white) who had arrived in Oregon before 1850 to work on a piece of land for four years and legally claim the land for themselves. Walker took up hauling freight as an occupation but kept on as a preacher in Congregational Churches.



Bell from Eells on Tower

Cushing Eells and his wife Myra also settled near Forest Grove where they spent the next 14 years. Eells taught at different schools. One of them was the Oregon Institute which became the Willamette University. Another was the Tualatin Academy which is now Pacific University. He moved back to Waiilatpu in 1862 and founded another school in honor of the Whitmans. It eventually became Whitman University. Ten years later his house burned down, (Sadly a recurring theme in this story.) He resigned as school superintendent in Walla Walla and moved in with his son Edwin near Skokomish. In 1874 he came back to Chewelah, consulted with John A Simms, Indian agent for the area and preached sermons to both white settlers and Indians.

The previous year, Chief Spokane Garry had invited Reverend Henry Spaulding to visit the area. Over the course of the Spring and Summer Spaulding baptized 253 adults and 81 children. Cushing came back to Chewelah in 1879 and established the first Congregational Church at Chewelah in the home of Thomas Brown, who had established the first post office named Chewelah. It was not until 1892 that a church building was erected. Eells came to pray in Chewelah, 54 years to the day after he first camped on the site. He bought a bell for the church in New York. It arrived in Chewelah on February 11, 1893. Cushing Eells died 5 days later in Tacoma on his birthday, February 16th,at the age of 83.



Sketch of Painted Rock Bigfoot family

Elkanah Walker kept in touch with the Eells. He was on the first Board of Trustees at Whitman College in Walla Walla. Before he and Cushing left the Tshimakain mission, they had learned of the trepidation the natives held for Sasquatch, described as a race of giants who live in the snowy mountains to the west and who hunt at night. In his diary, Walker wrote:



Painted Rock

"They come to the people's lodges at night when the people are asleep and take them and put them under their skins and to their place of abode without even waking. Their

track is a foot and a half long. They steal salmon from Indian nets and eat them raw as the bears do. If the people are awake, they always know when they are coming very near by their strong smell that is most intolerable. It is not uncommon for them to come in the night and give three whistles and then the stones will begin to hit their houses." (Drury 1976, pp. 122-123)



Lava Tube Mt St Helens

Although Walker never visited Mt. St. Helens, he admired its beauty and wrote that neither white men nor natives visited the place because "*It is inhabited by a race of beings of a different species, who are cannibals and whom they hold in great dread*." Almost a hundred years later, Mt. St. Helens gained a reputation for bigfoot activity after a group of miners were attacked by Sasquatch.

So that is the connection between Elkanah Walker and Bigfoot. Obviously, this race of creatures has garnered a lot of attention for hundreds, if not thousands of years. The Wikipedia entry on Bigfoot has over 300 references although it claims from the start that there is nothing to these tales. In another context I would drop the discussion right there. But I have a close friend who actually encountered one in the Colville National Forest. Many of us have heard stories or met people who have had similar experiences. My friend gave me a book, Tribal Bigfoot by David Paulides. It is almost 500 pages long and details interviews with people who have encountered these creatures.

It is significant that this particular book brings in the tribal connection as does the account in Walker's diary. I have another friend in the Okanogan Tribe of the Colville Confederated Tribes. He wrote a book of Okanogan lore called The Way I Heard It A Three Nation Reading Vacation. This book has more than one story about Sasquatches. If you look for other tribal references, petroglyphs come to the fore. Famous among them are the drawings at Painted Rock located on the Tule River Indian Reservation above Porterville, California. The pictographs at this site are 500 to 1000 years old. They show a bigfoot family: male, female and child. They also show many animals and insects: coyote, beaver, frog, caterpillar, eagle, condor, humans and others, showing that Bigfeet were just another creature in their world.

What I find interesting about the combination of religion and bigfeet that comes together in this story is that they both involve belief and they both show the power that those beliefs bring to everyday life. They also show the ever-present conflict between belief and actual evidence. Coming down on the side of repeatable, peer-reviewed science or age-old traditional facts to the exclusion of the other approach cuts off experience of a broader view of the world. To the extent that either approach misjudges the world their power becomes detrimental. I applaud science for constantly asserting doubt and demanding proof. There are mysteries in the world that we don't understand and there is danger too in asserting too blindly that we do understand them.