The Fire, the Fort and Bigfoot

As this article is being written, we are coming up on the 184th anniversary of a fire at Tshimakain Mission. Fires are not uncommon now and certainly were not then. The event gives us an opportunity to look at the mission itself and what all was going on that tied the event to the Hudson's Bay Company, Fort Colvile and to sasquatch stories.



As you may recall from a previous article, Mary Richardson Walker and her husband Elkanah, together with their fellow evangelists, Cushing and Myra Fairbanks Eells established the mission at a location that is now near Ford, Washington in 1838. The story of the fire is recounted in Elkanah Walker's diary. His wife, Mary, neighbors, Cushing and Myra all wrote diaries. Unlike the more business-oriented reports and letters of the Hudson's Bay Company, the diaries of these Congregationalist missionaries give us insight into the everyday excitement and tedium of their hardships and successes. Mary in particular was also an avid explorer of the minerals, plants and landscapes they encountered on their way. Each of these individuals wrote diaries, started missions and schools, wrote books and travelled extensively around the Northwest.

If we step back a few years to their early years in Maine, we find both the Walkers and the Eells enrolled with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) which gathered the resources and connections to send missionaries all over the world. Ahead of them on this quest Marcus and Narcissa Whitman had already established a Mission in what is now Walla Walla, Washington in 1838. On their journey here the Walkers and Eells travelled by rail to New York and then by steamship to Philadelphia. Transportation using steam power was new to everyone and big cities were new to them. But transportation got more primitive as they travelled west using a stage to cross the Appalachian Mountains and a riverboat to Missouri.

Leaving Independence by wagon train, they left the United States and entered fur trade territory, surviving constant harassment by Indians they arrived at the Popo Agie river junction with the Wind River in

Wyoming where the Fur Trade Rendezvous of 1838 was being held. They had to wait 3 weeks there for the arrival of Hudson Bay employee, Francis Ermatinger, who had been Chief Trader at HBC Fort Colvile several years earlier. American fur traders had moved the site of the rendezvous deliberately to eliminate the HBC from the action. Ermatinger finally arrived and led the party to the Whitman Mission.

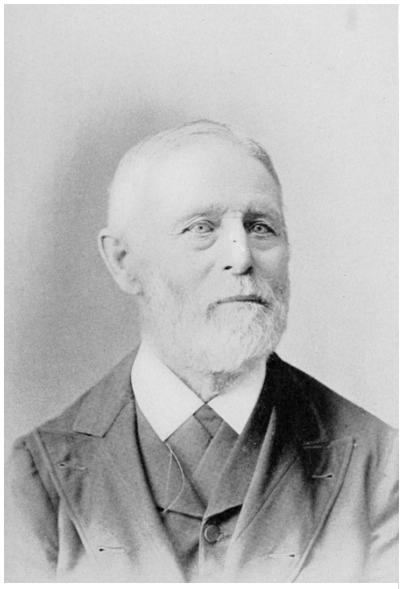


Elkanah Walker

The primary reason the Walkers and Eells went to Tshimakain was that Silimxnotylmilakabok, the Old Chief or Chief Cornelius wanted them there. Fellow missionary with Whitman, Reverend Samuel Parker suggested the location. Archibald McDonald, chief Trader at Fort Colvile, confirmed that it was a good choice and the Old Chief was the most respected Indian in the region. In a discussion of an earlier eruption of Mt. St. Helens in the late 1700s, geologist Charles Wilkes wrote in 1841about a prophecy related by Chief Cornelius: "*Cornelius, when about ten years of age, was sleeping in a lodge with a great many people, and was suddenly awakened by his mother, who called out to him that the world was falling to pieces. He then heard a great noise of thunder overhead, and all the people crying out in great terror. Something was falling very thick, which they at first took for snow, but on going out they found it to be dirt: it proved to be ashes, which fell to a depth of six inches, and increased their fears, by causing them to suppose that the end of the world was actually at hand. The medicine-man arose, told them to stop their fear and crying, for the world was not about to fall to pieces. "Soon," said he, "there will come from the rising sun a different kind of men from any you have yet seen, who will bring with them a book, and will teach you every thing (sic), and after that the world will fall to pieces."* Wilkes knew that natives were well-aware of the arrival of white men on all fronts by 1800. So, he has some questions about the prophecy. Nevertheless, it points to the readiness of Spokan people to hear the teachings of the missionaries.

Missionaries from the ABCFM sought to learn native languages and tried to stop efforts such as the Indian Removal Act of 1830, a law that authorized the president to exchange Native American lands in existing states for unsettled land west of the Mississippi River.

The missionaries dedication to their work is evident in their writings about the fire that hollowed out the interior of Cushing Eells' house on January 11th, 1841. Unlike our present winter, it was very cold, -8º by Eell's thermometer. The house was lined with tule mats, an insulation method used by the tribes. When a spark from the fireplace ignited them, the mats burned at once, barely leaving time to escape. After the flash fire slowed, they were able to rescue whatever was in boxes, but clothing, beds and bedding, books and writing were mostly destroyed. Word was sent immediately to Archibald McDonald but 250 natives were camped around the mission and they rushed to help.



Cushing Eells

Two days later the temperature was around 30 degrees below zero, the Walker's horses had run off, the fires went out and yet services and school continued though with fewer people. In his diary on the 15th,

four days after the fire when the Eells had moved temporarily into the Walker's house, Elkanah Walker wrote "I am almost ashamed of myself because I make no more advance in the language. Thought tonight that I should be willing to give all my goods, house and all if I could by it understand the language." (In 1842, a year later, Walker and Eells published the Spokane Primer, a Salish Language primer, the first book written in Washington.)

The next day, January 16th, there was a chimney fire in Walker's house which Elkanah repaired immediately. The following evening, after Sunday services, Mr. McLean and Mr. Flett arrived with four other men and tools from Fort Colvile to help restore the Eells' house. They were very cold and I'm sure glad to have the fireplace in the Walker House working again. Over the next three days despite the cold, school continued to be held and the Eells' house continued to be repaired. Over the night of Tuesday the 19th, the principle medicine man of the tribe had spirits appear to him. He claimed that many people would die during the winter if the spirits were not caught. Walker assured people that they should not worry. He also sent a letter thanking McDonald for his help as the HBC men left on the 20th.

When looking up articles about Elkanah Walker, I came across a link to an entry in his diary about the native belief in sasquatches. The Walkers and Eells left Tshimakain in 1847 after the Whitmans were murdered at their mission in Waiilatpu (Walla Walla). HBC men escorted them to Oregon where they created more missions and schools. The bigfoot tales by Walker were mentioned before they left the mission. They are thought be linked to Mt. St. Helens, which in 1924 again became a hot spot for sasquatch activity. (There is a lot more to say about all of this, but space has run out for this month's issue.)