

Mary Richardson Walker

By Gretchen Cohan



Mary Walker

At age 24 Mary Richardson began a diary, *“These lines are penned that in after life should my life be spared, I may have the opportunity of comparing myself with myself, & of calling to mind many events which might be forgotten.”*

Mary was an ardent, pious young woman, a puritan, deacon’s daughter and had, as a teenager received a call to missions. This was in New England in the 1830’s, however and women missionaries, especially unmarried ones, were rare. The commissioners of the American Board of Foreign Missions knew of Mary’s capabilities and aspirations but wrote that they could not use “an unmarried female” in the work.

Around this time, the Board had appointed a young man, Elkanah Walker as missionary to the Zulus in Africa. As he assembled gear for his journey, he rather shyly inquired: “is it advisable for me to go out without a companion?”

Board commissioner William J Armstrong suggested to Elkanah that he go to meet Mary and then, perhaps marry. To encourage this shy young man in this unconventional courtship, a mutual friend wrote a rather glowing letter of introduction. The young couple met in April of 1837 and within two days became engaged.

Mary’s diary sketches the surprise and turmoil of meeting a future husband who could make her missionary dreams become real. The couple exchanged letters over the next months, getting to know one another and exploring their shared faith and vocation. The following April they set off for their post, not to Africa, it turns out, but overland to another foreign country—Oregon.

Mary and Elkanah traveled from Maine to Boston (Mary’s first time in a city where the buildings were “so high I feel a sort of dizziness.”). They sped by Vanderbilt’s cars to New York City and then by steamer to Philadelphia. Their stage coach carried them through the Appalachian Mountains to Pittsburg where they boarded a riverboat for St. Louis. They purchased supplies and switching to horseback, traveled on to Independence Missouri where they met up with a US company of fur traders and their

missionary partners (another newlywed couple Cushing and Mary Eels) and stepped out of the US.

Mary often wrote in her tent after long difficult days. She exclaimed over plains dotted with thousands of buffaloes, encounters with wolves, bears and Indians, and her knowledge “that we ought to realize that every day may be our last.” Rivers were dangerous. They crossed the Kansas, the Platte, and many smaller ones. They dined with the son of William Clark, Mary wrote, “who had accompanied Lewis; in the afternoon I arranged my trunk.” They cooked with the flour, rice, sugar, salt, and pepper they had purchased in Independence and traded with Indians for additional foods. Mary remarked on distances covered, minerals, plants and landscapes and the effort to keep spirits up.

Tensions grew at Rendezvous Point when the American Fur Company men’s trade route ended; the missionary party had to pause. They considered joining with Captain Sutter who was rushing for California gold, but their way north from California would be long and uncertain. They rejoiced when finally, a party from the Hudson Bay Company arrived to guide them through the Rocky Mountains and over the Continental Divide.

From 1838 to 1848 the Walkers and the Eells developed the Tshimakain Mission (near present day Ford, Washington.) The Waiilatpu mission run by Marcus and Narcissus Whitman near present day Walla Walla served as sort of regional headquarters where the American Board’s Missionaries gathered to plan and exchange news.



A meeting on October 15, 1837, laid out major goals. They would study both the Nez Perce and the Flathead languages, erect mills, a blacksmith shop, and a press for printing materials in native languages. One resolution read “that instruction be given in the native language so far as the immediate benefit of the native tribes demand; but their for their permanent benefit we will introduce the English language as fast as expedient.”

Letters among the missionaries and reports sent to Boston reveal their hopes, disappointments, and evolving goals as far as work among the Indians was concerned. Elkanah wrote: "...we must use the plough as well as the Bible, if we would do any thing to benefit the Indians." They agreed upon the importance of creating a self-sustaining farm both as a hedge against the high prices charged by the Hudson Bay traders and as a lifestyle model for the Indians.

They feared for the "bad example" by their white neighbors and the "habit of roving" that prevented Indian children from attending school. The missionaries and administrators back in Boston alike worried about the impact of settlement. Elkanah again: "It is necessary that they should be settled & made cultivators of the soil as speedily as possible in order to save them from utter extinction."

Both the Walkers and Eells raised families. Mary gave birth to five of her six children while at Tshimakain. In addition to tending children her days were filled with endless farm and household tasks. Every day but Sunday would find her repairing clothes, trading with Indians, baking, washing, ironing, churning, dipping candles, butchering, and tending a large garden. The family had frequent visitors including artists, Paul Kane and John Mix Stanley, and assorted scientists, and traders.

In 1847 the Mission came to an uneasy end. In late December, Mary was anticipating the arrival of Dr. Whitman to attend the birth of her fifth child, instead the family received news of an attack at Waiilatpu resulting in the violent death of Marcus and Narcissa Whitman and eleven others. In the confusion and whirl of accounts that followed, the missionaries questioned their future. They feared for their own safety, but also of that of the Indians with whom they had been living and working for nearly ten years. They heard of violent encounters between Americans and Cayuses. Elkanah wrote "I hope the matter may be brought to a speedy close and the land again enjoy peace. It is a long tedious winter."

In March, at the urging of John Lewes, Chief Trader of the Hudson Bay Company the family took refuge at Fort Colville although the men returned to the mission site and even planted crops in hopes of returning later. Mary wrote during this time of eagerly awaiting any news, tending her children, trusting in Providence, and walking along the Columbia River "the stone is stratified.... Very nice for building." But there was no prospect for returning to Tshimakain instead, in July, the missionaries set out with a US troop escort for The Dalles. In nine years not one Spokane converted to Christianity. The experience was heartbreaking for the Walkers.

John Lewes wrote this to Mary "...allow me to offer my Condolence for the stern necessity that causes you to quit your once happy home at Tshimakain. Wherever kind

Providence hereafter may direct your steps, may it be to a Place where you & yours may ever live in Health, Peace and quietness, free from War & all its alarms.”

On Saturday June 3 the families retraced their steps to their former home where they distributed farm implements to the Indians and gathered a few household items. They continued then, to camp at the Spokane River and spent the last Sabbath of their Oregon missionary adventure resting and conducting services in both English and native languages.