

## DR. IRA L. BABCOCK

Although Ira L. Babcock, M. D., was in the Oregon Territory but four short years, his name remains immortalized by his outstanding leadership during that formative period.

Dr. Babcock was sent out by the Methodist Board as a physician for the Mission, and he arrived with his wife and one child on the Lausanne on June 1, 1840. At the meeting of the Mission colony two weeks later he was assigned duty with Daniel Lee at Wascopam, now The Dalles. This was a post isolated from all contact with white people, in a bleak, bare country, and was a severe introduction to his new field. However, Dr. Babcock was called back and forth between the stations with demands for medical skill that would require the services of a dozen physicians. The change of climate and diet, with the exposure and privations, brought sickness upon many of the missionaries and their families. As a consequence, they were frequently ailing and needing attention. The Indians were a prey to all kinds of infectious and contagious diseases and were dying off by the hundreds. Their medicine men had their own method of cure; beating drums to scare away the evil spirits, and putting the sick into hot steam baths and then plunging them into the icy river waters. If an Indian died after taking the white doctor's medicine, he was believed to have been poisoned. The story also circulated that the white man uncorked a bottle and let out evil spirits, causing the epidemics that swept their ranks. It is obvious, then, that a doctor in Oregon faced many serious problems and a life of unremitting toil.

Dr. Babcock took up his headquarters at the missionary base in Willamette Valley, and became an integral part in the growth of the colony. It became evident that a school was needed not only for the Indians but for the white children, who were getting more numerous. So Jason Lee called a meeting on January 17, 1842, and appointed Dr. Babcock as chairman of a committee of three to report a plan for an institution of higher learning. Less than a month later the committee returned its report, and the Oregon Institute was founded, to which Dr. Babcock contributed \$160. He was on the board of trustees and helped select the location which was at Wallace Prairie, a few miles up the Willamette from French Prairie.

Petitions had been sent the United States Congress setting forth the need of civil laws in the infant colony, and praying for protection under the national government.

With the influx of settlers and missionaries it became evident that some form of government would soon become necessary; although peace and good order prevailed generally. Action, however, could be no longer postponed when at the death of Ewing Young it was obvious that somebody must have authority to dispose of his estate which was considerable. Whereupon, the settlers gathered on February 17, 1841, and resolved to

draw up a constitution and code of laws and to elect a governor, supreme judge, three justices of the peace, three constables, three road commissioners, an attorney general, a clerk of courts, a treasurer, and two overseers of the poor. This new government would give its protection to all settlers south of the Columbia and all north not connected with the Hudson's Bay Company.

The next day there was a large attendance of French and Americans, and in an effort to propitiate both factions, a majority of French Catholics were placed on the committee of seven, appointed to draft a form of government. Supporters of Dr. Babcock, intending to make him governor, hesitated to press the issue, and compromised by nominating him for supreme judge with probate powers. He was elected and instructed, until the new government was put in operation, to govern the colony according to the laws of the state of New York. The committee were to report at a meeting called at St. Paul for June 7, 1841; but, defeated by the very men put on the committee and other sympathizers with the British interests, the whole affair fell through. Vainly hoping month by month that the United States would extend its jurisdiction over them, the Americans let the matter drop for a period of two years. Meanwhile, Dr. Babcock was the governing power and executive, and to him came all matters of dispute, the French Canadians uniting in recognizing the authority of the officers elected. He first had the estate of Ewing Young probated and settled. It might be interesting to state that no heirs being found, \*\$1500) out of an estate of \$3735 was spent in building the first jail in the West at Oregon City, and that the money so spent was refunded years later to a man from Mexico who claimed to be a son.

Dr. Babcock directed the administration also of the estate of Cornelius Rogers whose tragic fate is mentioned in the life of David Leslie. The sum of \$1500 was paid over to the heirs in Utica, New York.

In the midst of his judicial and medical duties, Dr. Babcock helped in the organization and erection of a Mission hospital which must have been in steady service.

As a gesture in response to the clamorous demands of the Oregonians, the United States Government sent out Dr. Elijah White as Indian sub-agent in 1842. In his history published in 1848 he records that he called together a meeting of the settlers at Champoege, on September 23, 1842, when Dr. Babcock was unanimously elected chairman. There resolutions were passed expressing approval of the appointment of an Indian agent, gratitude to the United States for the "intended liberality toward the settlers, and for its intention to support education and literature among us," and expressing a final hope of being brought soon under the jurisdiction of the mother country.

By February 2, 1843, the settlers determined to make one more attempt to establish a proper system of government, and gathered in the Oregon Institute for what was later known as the First Wolf Meeting. Dr. Babcock was elected chairman and presided. There is scant record of any

business transacted except the appointment of Dr. Babcock of a committee of six to call a meeting at the home of Joseph Gervais, half way between Salem and Champoeg, on March 6. After plans had been formed for protection against the wild beasts, the hidden purpose of the meetings was revealed, and Dr. Babcock was elected chairman of a committee to see what could be done to give the settlers adequate civil and military protection.

From past experience, the American settlers realized they were skating on thin ice in forming a government in competition with the long-time supremacy of the Hudson's Bay Company, and that a false move might plunge them into another failure; but the committee held regular meetings and drew up a resolution advocating that a government be formed, and indicating what officers would be needed. Considering the time ripe for action and willing to risk all, they called the meeting at Champoeg.

When representatives from all factions were assembled, Dr. Babcock was elected president and proceeded to the business in hand. Here in the open air on the shore of the Willamette was enacted the great historic drama. The fears of coagitators were realized as soon as the resolution to organize a government was read. The Canadians had already been instructed by the priests, and drilled to vote "no" on every motion. It was a precarious situation, but the Americans with grim determination decided to put the matter to the test and a motion was made to accept the recommendation of the committee. Dr. Babcock called for a vote, and confusion reigned. The chairman could not be positive if the motion was lost or won, and only the method of separating into opposite sides made clear that a majority favored the resolution. Dr. Babcock presided through the rest of the meeting, guiding the deliberations that worked out the destiny of Oregon.

Immediately after this, Dr. Babcock obtained a leave of absence from the Mission and took his family to the Sandwich Islands, hoping that the change would be beneficial to their health.

There he learned that the Reverend George Gary had been appointed by the Methodist Missionary Board in New York to supersede Jason Lee in the Oregon Mission. He met Hines and Lee when they arrived at the Islands, and imparted to them the momentous news which caused an entire shift of plans.

Dr. Babcock with Hines returned to Oregon aboard the Chenamus, arriving there April 23, 1844. The next month he was again elected to the office of supreme judge. The new superintendent took up a short time later his duties of reorganization of the Mission, and the report of all his dealings was sent to the Board and later published. He speaks at some length of his visit of inspection to the mission of Wascopam, and his horror at the state of the Indians. He relates the same incident as does Dr. White which is as follows:

Mr. and Mrs. Perkins, in charge of the mission, learned that the son of the chief had fallen a prey to disease that was sweeping the

tribe. The young boy had as his constant attendant and companion a little slave boy who had been captured from another tribe. These Indians had a custom of burying their dead in a huge box, or sarcophagus, built on a rocky island surrounded by the swift waters of the Columbia. Here the dead would be placed one after another, and the bones pushed aside to make room for other corpses. The dead were well clothed and supplied with whatever they might need in the future life. The loving father could not send his son forth without his slave to wait upon him; so he had the little slave strapped and bound on top of his dead master and imprisoned in this charnel house to die. Grewsome and horrible are the details of this interment, as recounted by the Reverend and Mrs. Perkins. They had to leave the child in all night; but before sunrise bribed the custodian to accompany them to the island and liberated the prisoner. Dr. White said several months later the child bore the cuts and scars from the thongs that had bound him.

A more cheerful entry in Gary's diary is of the date of October 2, 1844, at the Falls: "Attended court as a spectator. Doctor Babcock, Judge. Indeed it looks like a land of law and order. One criminal fined for sending a challenge to fight a duel, \$500, and deprived of his eligibilities to any office of trust or profit; also of the privilege of voting at any election."

When the dissolution of the Mission was worked out, Reverend George Gary was loath to part with Dr. Babcock. Ordinarily very chary of praise, he none the less wrote: "Dr. Babcock has sustained a very fair and respectable standing in this community in all respects, and at the present time exercises the office and discharges the duties of Judge of Probate and Circuit Courts with credit to himself and to the benefit of the community. It is a loss to the community to have him leave; but I cannot require his remaining here unless in my opinion the interest of the mission demands it. In view of this I consent he may leave, and he leaves with my high esteem and Christian regards."

Dr. Babcock sailed away with his family for Fort Vancouver and the States on November 11, 1844.

Law maker, judge, executive -- Oregon could ill afford to lose a man of such caliber.

An item in the Oregon Weekly Statesman of April 15, 1870, states that Dr. Babcock was revisiting Oregon with his family, remaining for only a few days; that he was at that time a resident of Ohio and examining surgeon in the United States army; and that he retained pleasant memories of his former life on the Pacific coast.