

THE COLUMBIA RIVER HISTORICAL EXPEDITION

THE EXPEDITION

During the latter part of July, the Columbia River Historical Expedition made its way to the Oregon country over a route that closely followed the course taken by the fur-traders and pioneers of a previous generation, traversing in a few days the vast extent of territory which those hardy adventurers took months to cover. It was the second expedition of its kind, and like the Upper Missouri Historical Expedition of 1925, it was conducted under the auspices of the Great Northern Railway. Its sponsors were the governors of Minnesota, North Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington, and the state historical societies of those commonwealths. Many of the members of last year's expedition were also on this trip, and there were many others, the party averaging about one hundred and sixty persons. In addition to those who made the whole trip many joined the expedition for longer or shorter periods — the governors of the different states traversed, railroad officials, a group of Portland people, and others. An interesting addition to the party this year was the group of high school students from various parts of the United States chosen through a series of oratorical contests on the French pioneers under the direction of the Franco-American branch of the American Good Will Association. A group of five French students, winners of similar contests in France, also accompanied the expedition and were occasionally represented on the programs.

The purpose of the expedition, as explained on the gay invitation, was "to visit historic places, hold memorial celebrations, and dedicate appropriate monuments in honor of distinguished pathfinders and pioneers of the Northwest." Not

only was the Northwest of the past — its history, romance, and hardships — visualized for the visitor, but also the Northwest of today and even that of tomorrow, its people, its spirit, and its aspirations.

Following the precedents of long ago, this expedition for the Oregon country had various rendezvous. Travelers from the East, from Canada, and from France met in Chicago, the starting point, and spent July 15 enjoying the sights and the hospitality of that city. Many more joined the party the next morning in St. Paul and Minneapolis and during the day on the westward journey through Minnesota along the old Red River trails. A brief stop was made in the Twin Cities and still shorter stops were made at St. Cloud and Fargo, affording hardly enough time for glimpses of the towns and for greetings from the hospitable citizens.

The first formal program was at the University of North Dakota at Grand Forks. Here the mammoth transcontinental train of July, 1926, was greeted by a train of tiny cars of early railroad days and the "William Crooks," the engine that in July, 1862, made the first trip between St. Paul and St. Anthony along the first section of a road which now extends to the Pacific. Here stood the two trains puffing away side by side, a vision realized. The next glimpse of early days was a caravan of Red River oxcarts — squeak and all — and Indian travois, slowly crossing the green lawns of the campus. The sound heralding the approach was noted by old settlers in the gathering long before the vehicles appeared. Next a bit of present-day North Dakota was brought to the attention of the guests — an exhibition of pottery made from Dakota clays. Not only was the pottery-making shown, but also the process of making the souvenir replicas of the old Astor medal, which were presented to the guests attending the salmon dinner given by the people of Grand Forks in the University Commons. Old and new mingled at this banquet, too, for a radio broadcasted Dr. Charles N. Bell's reminiscences of his early days

in this region before Grand Forks was platted. Other speakers were Dr. Orin G. Libby, who emphasized in his address the three native culture centers in North Dakota, the Lake Traverse, the plains, and the Missouri River regions, and the influence of beaver and buffalo on the early history of the region. Dr. Solon J. Buck told of the importance of river forks in prehistoric and later days, and Dr. Lawrence Abbott gave the first of his series of addresses. Music by Great Northern musicians and some numbers coming in over the radio filled out the program.

A night on the train, now traveling in two sections, brought the expedition to the Montana state line near the site of old Fort Union, once an important station for explorer, fur-trader, and Indian, but abandoned long ago. For a day or so, it was again the meeting place of Indian, soldier, and traveler, visitors from near and far. On July 17 Indians in gala attire welcomed Major General Hugh L. Scott and the other guests as they stepped off the train and accompanied them to the site of the old fort, marked by a flag staff last year, where again a brief but impressive flag-raising ceremony took place. The rest of the morning was spent inspecting the colorful Indian tepee village whose inhabitants were not in the least fazed by the visitors, but calmly went on preparing their noonday meal, the squaws bustling about doing a dozen and one things and the men folk enjoying their preluncheon smoke or siesta, a state of affairs that caused favorable and unfavorable comment among the visitors according to their sex.

The afternoon was devoted to addresses to and by the Indians and intertribal contests. It was indeed a great day for the Indians and they were making the most of this opportunity of being the center of attraction of the admiring and occasionally awe-struck audiences. The moving-picture men and other photographers were in evidence, too, recording for less fortunate audiences the spectacle of the day. If only they could have recorded the colors of that kaleidoscopic throng!

Twelve tribes from far and near — Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, Chippewa, Sioux, Assiniboin, Gros Ventres, Crows, Blackfoot, Bloods, Piegan, and Cheyenne — had sent their chiefs, and picked representatives and camp followers, too, to take part in the celebration and to partake of the liberal rations of the Great Northern commissary.

The first event on the afternoon program was an address by General Scott to the assembled Indian tribes in sign language, the *lingua franca* of the Indians, many of whom could speak only their own language. This was followed by responses by the various chiefs, who harangued the gathering in their own languages and spoke for their own and for allied tribes. Each received one of the replica Astor medal souvenirs and proudly added it to his accoutrement.

Next came a series of intertribal contests into which the Indians entered with gusto. Aroused by the tom-tom of the big drum, the Indians in the audience frequently could not be restrained from joining the dancing and even the squaws singly or in groups stepped forth and joined the ever-changing, ever-shifting mass of gyrating Indians, some of whom added modern jazz to the steps and movements of their native dances. Teams of three squaws each entered the tepee race, one of the most interesting contests, and the rewards were well earned. Setting up a tepee in ten minutes or less demanded skill of an unusual kind, and when it came to fastening the covers over the tall tepee poles, then truly did the corpulent squaws exhibit their agility. The Indian camp-fire ceremonies in the evening were most impressive and the expeditionists reluctantly tore themselves away at the insistent bidding of the locomotive whistles, turning again and again to look back at the Indians milling around the blaze, the tepees silhouetted against the glow of the fire and against the moonlit sky, and the glorified muddy Missouri shimmering in the distance.

The next morning, July 18, the party joined the Society of Montana Pioneers at a session at Fort Benton. The afternoon

was spent at Great Falls attending an out-of-door reception, hearing addresses in the shady park facing the station, and visiting points of historic interest in the vicinity, such as the falls and giant springs noted by Lewis and Clark. Early the next day the expedition reached Bonners Ferry, where a monument commemorating the first route of trade and travel across what is now the state of Idaho was dedicated with appropriate addresses.

That afternoon and evening the members of the expedition were the guests of the hospitable citizens of Spokane on a motor trip to Mount Spokane, where proceedings in honor of the missionaries and traders were held, followed by a bounteous picnic supper and a drive down the long winding road to the city of Spokane and the train.

At Wishram the following morning a monument to the pathfinders and pioneers of this region was dedicated with fitting ceremonies. A train ride along the Dalles of the Columbia brought the party to Portland, where once again the hospitality of a western metropolis was enjoyed, this time on an automobile ride through the city and along the Columbia River Highway, with a stop for a picnic supper at Multnomah Falls.

A day was spent at Pacific Beaches, the end of the Lewis and Clark trail, before the expedition turned eastward again. Many special trips were arranged to neighboring points of interest, including Astoria, where the next day, July 22, on an eminence overlooking the city a column erected in honor of Robert Gray, Lewis and Clark, and John Jacob Astor was formally dedicated with impressive ceremonies and addresses. Canadians and Americans, from the East and from the West, business men, and historians joined in doing honor to these pioneers. Greetings were conveyed from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and the influence of the Yankee skippers and New York merchants in opening the West was emphasized in the addresses, particularly in that of Dr. Samuel E. Morison, who in his paper on "Two Centuries of Oregon" told of the maritime

routes followed by many of the adventurers who went to the Oregon country. In a delightful informal sketch Mrs. Richard Aldrich, descendent of John Jacob Astor, told a bit of the family tradition about her great-grandfather and his father. Before leaving, many energetic members of the party climbed to the platform at the top of the column for a better view of the mighty Columbia and another glimpse of the ocean. Here, too, the party again enjoyed Oregon hospitality and continued refreshed on their wanderings, stopping for brief tours through salmon canneries before boarding the train for Longview, a modern town that has grown up in the last three years on the Washington side of the Columbia. A most interesting afternoon and evening was spent in this very new community, yet here, too, were points of historic interest, as was brought forth in a pageant and program in the grove on the edge of the town. A supper in the cafeteria of one of the mills was followed by a tour through a section of the world's largest lumber mill.

The next day, July 23, the members of the expedition were again the guests of the cordial people of Spokane, with the annual Indian congress as the spectacular feature of the occasion. During the morning the Spokane battlefield monument was dedicated with proceedings in which army officers and Indians took part, concluding with a peace pipe ceremony. During the afternoon the Indians were again the center of attraction as they paraded through the town. This second day in Spokane concluded with a banquet and with appropriate addresses. The next two days were spent in Glacier Park and very delightful days they were. The concluding event of the trip was the dinner at Glacier Park Hotel, broken up all too soon by the call of the trainmen. The passengers boarding the train for the East that night had dwindled to a fraction of the party, for many who had a few more days of leisure had stopped off along the way, but those who returned East spent a pleasant day visiting around on the train as it crossed Montana and North Dakota.

Thus ends the chronological record of events. Comments on the historical significance of this expedition must be left to another, one who can form a better perspective of the events than one who made her first trip to the Far West as a member of the expedition.

GERTRUDE KRAUSNICK

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ST. PAUL

THE MUSEUM CAR¹

As a means of visualizing the Old West of the Indian, the explorer, and the fur-trader — the West that was commemorated in the Columbia River Historical Expedition — a baggage car was fitted out as a traveling museum to accompany the train. Since the expedition included some forty high school students from all over the United States, the educational possibilities of such an historical exhibit were many. The car, too, was thrown open for inspection to the public at the various stopping places from Chicago to the Pacific coast.

A free trapper's cabin of the type used in the mountains was reproduced in scenic work, with fireplace, balsam bough bed, rough table, traps, and packs of furs, and constructed in one end of the car. Close by it stood a figure in buckskin hunting costume, fur cap, and moccasins, as if approaching his cabin after the day's hunt. Canoe, bull boat, and dog sledge, his customary means of transportation, were displayed nearby.

The seven museum cases installed in the car contained Indian, fur-trade, and pioneer material generously loaned by institutions of the Northwest, including the Missouri Historical Society of St. Louis, the State Historical Society of North Dakota of Bismarck, the Eastern Washington State Historical

¹ The museum car, one of the unique features of the expedition, was planned and arranged by Mr. Babcock, curator of the museum of the Minnesota Historical Society, who has written this brief report of the venture. *Ed.*

Society of Spokane, and the Minnesota Historical Society of St. Paul, as well as the Hudson's Bay Company of Winnipeg, Canada. Mr. L. A. Huffman of Miles City, Montana, brought on his extensive collection of photographs of cowboy and Indian life in frontier Montana as well as a considerable number of relics of cattle days in the West, and much of this material was exhibited in the car.

During the twelve days of the tour between eleven thousand and twelve thousand persons viewed the exhibit and had their interest in the historic past of the Northwest quickened.

WILLOUGHBY M. BABCOCK

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ST. PAUL

GENERAL COMMENT

The task of pointing out the broader significance of the expedition is left to one of the luckless many who would gladly exchange the detachment of the non-participant for the thrill and color and excitement that were the reward of the favored few.

The outstanding importance of the transcontinental expedition described in the foregoing reports lies in its promotion of the popularization of the history of the West. A private enterprise has become a matter of public importance, for an effective object lesson has been given in the exploitation of historical backgrounds as a means of furthering interest in and understanding of a vast region. Scenic beauties have been exploited to an almost wearisome degree in the past. Now alert business men are becoming alive to the fact that land and people must be observed in conjunction, that the two are inexplicable save in the light of historical development. What seems monotonous to the eye becomes interesting as the setting of a human drama. Scholars need not become apprehensive because the stress is upon interest. It is doubtless true that the romantic aspects of the story of the opening up of

the West are put in the foreground. Two facts must be remembered. Interest come to life leads to further study and reflection and this in turn leads the mind away from the merely picturesque side of the story to its deeper significance. Much of the exaggeration, furthermore, is in matters of detail. After all, the story as a grand whole is dramatic in the best sense. All the explorers were not "intrepid," all the pioneers not brave, all the events not colorful and picturesque. But all the human virtues and also the foibles were represented in the men and women who made the West, and their actions, staged on half a continent, certainly played the major part in winning the wilderness to civilization. Here is a big theme. Call it a drama or merely a progression of events. In either case it is both interesting and important — interesting because life is interesting and because life in the setting of a great transition is particularly interesting, important because it is important to know how America has come to be what it is. It is not enough that a minority of the people, the scholars, should grasp the implications of the dictum of the German historian that the roots of the present lie deep in the past. A popular historical consciousness is needed.

The Columbia River Historical Expedition must not be viewed as an isolated episode. Its deepest significance lies in the fact that it symbolizes an awakening popular interest in history. Monuments are being erected, expeditions organized, new historical societies started. The flood of historical publications is unprecedented and can only be explained on the theory that it is a response to a popular demand. The truth is that the people are reading and studying history as never before. The public interest is felt in the state historical societies, the colleges, the libraries, the national associations, and even in business organizations. To explain it one needs to study the currents of opinion in America and the world during the last decade or more. One of the most promising signs of

the times is the present campaign of the American Historical Association to raise funds that will enable it to expand its services to meet the needs of present-day America. The recent expedition to the Pacific and the endowment campaign of the national association are two phases of one great movement, the movement to bring history more fully into the service of the people and thus to contribute to the interest and meaning of life. Let those who believe in the value of this movement come to the aid of the American Historical Association. It asks for one million dollars. Let us give it five millions.

Two features of the Columbia River expedition are of special interest. The traveling museum, presided over by Mr. Babcock, vividly and successfully illustrated the possibilities in what one may call extension museum work. The expedition not only visited the West; it carried the West with it in the baggage car. The organizers of the expedition apparently did not trust wholly to speeches — though there was a plethora of them — to bring out the full story of the region traversed. A little library of pamphlets and leaflets was printed. A number of them, graceful and popular in style and not without considerable merit as historical productions, came from the facile pen of Grace Flandrau. Unusually effective maps and well-selected illustrations add to the value and interest of the pamphlets. Special mention may be made of *Historic Northwest Adventure Land* (32 p.); *Red River Trails* (47 p.); *Frontier Days Along the Upper Missouri* (40 p.); *Koo-koo-sint, the Star Man* (36 p.); and *Astor and the Oregon Country* (48 p.). A pamphlet of general announcements bearing the title *The Columbia River Historical Expedition, 1926* (31 p.) contains, among other items, an excellent brief bibliography prepared by Gertrude Krausnick on the French in America and especially in the Northwest. An interesting seven-page leaflet tells *The Story of the Astor Medal. A Selected List of Books from the Works of Members of the Columbia River*

Historical Expedition lists no less than twenty authors. A leaflet on the museum car contains a sketch by Willoughby M. Babcock entitled "Passing the Old West in Review." A charmingly written and illustrated pamphlet distributed at the beginning of the expedition is Mabel McIlvaine's *Chicago: Her History and Her Adornment* (47 p.).

THEODORE C. BLEGEN

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ST. PAUL



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).