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## [Reminiscences of Mrs. E. W. Wilson]

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### Oregon Folklore Studies

#### Reminiscences REMINISCENCES OF MRS. E. W. WILSON AN OREGON SCHOOL TEACHER OF 1851

Covering her arrival in the Oregon Country and her early months of teaching.

Transcribed at The Dalles, December 7, 1899 and loaned to the Federal Writers' Project by her daughter, Mrs. Joseph T. Peters. Complete copy submitted to the Historical Records Survey. Obtained by Sara B. Wrenn for the Oregon Folklore Studies.

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.... The trip was quite favorable. Our entrance over the bar was a prosperous one. We landed at Astoria. Saw Gen. Adair who had first come there as a collector of customs and his family. Then shifting our belongings to the newly-built steamer Lot Whitcomb, we made our way up the river. The impression on my memory is more of homesickness than of the majesty and beauty of the lordly river. There were but a very few woodsmens' huts on the banks between Astoria and Vancouver, and the less said of any thoughts or feelings the better, but the dread of the end of the journey was becoming heavier and heavier as it approached. I was exceedingly worried about my purse. Neither Frank or I had a dime, and it was not in me to throw off all anxieties as to the very near future. A little diversion was very agreeably given at Vancouver, then occupied by the Rifle Regiment under Col. Loring, afterward of the Egyptian Service called Loring Bey. Mrs. Preston had a cousin among the officers, and 2 we were taken to the commandant's quarters, but, though we were kindly invited to stay longer, and everything looked beautiful there, the Lot Whitcomb was ready and we must go.

The Hudson Bay Company's buildings and stockades were then all complete and full of interest. We were soon at Portland and walked up from the steamer's gang plank through a double line of gazers composed of the entire population of Portland. No arrival had yet

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taken place of so many women. The one-sided community was exceedingly interested. I suppose the rest of the party were allowed to be and look just as they pleased without criticism. But the teachers, who had been sent for, and who had accepted the invitation, were the objects of many remarks. We heard of these afterward. They seemed to think we had too much experience among us, and some seemed to think the limit should have been set that none should have been accepted who were out of their teens.

Again on the river, this time in a whale boat, expecting to reach Oregon City, the then capital and our destination at 4 p.m. I had a heavy blanket shawl. The sun was very warm and seeing my trunk, unlocked it and put the shawl away. We approached the Clackamas, but much later than had been planned, and then found ourselves fast on the bar. I do not remember much of the efforts to dislodge the boat. The boatmen were under the influence of whiskey, and when the lights of Oregon City shone out brightly, we, in full view, lay there all night supperless. I had no wrap. Some blankets were divided among the ladies. The men had reached the shore and started a monstrous fire, which dissipated the gloom a little but not the chill. The blanket did not reach me and I became very ill. Youth and a strong constitution carried me through, but my trip was nearly ended that night for all time. I never felt worse in my life.

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Now we can look back and see some of the dangers that were incurred by some of our party, who could not content themselves to lie there, or rather stalk about in the wet woods, for a cold rain set in with nightfall, while the lights of Oregon City were within full view. Several of them started. There was only a trail. They groped their way to the Clackamas .... where they found a canoe. Wholly unused to such a boat they, not by their own skill or wisdom, got across with/ out capsizing. There were then only blind trails, cow paths, impassable gullies, piles of burnt logs crossing the ways in all directions, but in the rain and darkness, in five hours they finally reached the streets of Oregon City, gave the news of Mr. Thurston's death and the fact that we were stuck on the rapids and then, we may suppose, tumbled into bed. Early next morning measures were taken for our relief. A

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collection was taken and eatables sent down in a small boat. There seemed to be a great quantity of mince pie, and a very good breakfast, that is for supperless people. I was too ill to eat, but there was cheer in the thought that some one cared for us. We, as soon as possible, started on the path to the City. The sun was bright, the clouds gone, and the trail was easily followed. With my after experience I often wondered that we all were safely canoed over that whirling torrent with inexperienced boatmen, but we found ourselves trudging along. My personal difficulties you can fancy if you ever have cholera morbus and attempt to keep up with a line of march. To be left behind was impossible. But the attack was nearly over. On a bridge a little north of the Congregational church we met Dr., than Mr. Atkinson. He was a fine looking man, really quite young, 32, but I had a way then of thinking everybody old who was out of boyhood. He was from Vermont, and naturally, I am sure, of a grave and serious temperament. This seemed to me increased by what he thought the necessities of the case.

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There certainly was no warmth or effusion in his greeting, and one of us then needed a little as a medicine. He said in the stiffest manner, "Will you walk over to my house?" The alternative might have been to say, "No, thank you, we will take seats on this log." (Remember where my purse was and how vagabondish I felt). But we went with him. A little fresh homesickness at parting with the friends who had been such true friends in a time of need. They all went to the Main St, House, kept by S. Moss. Mr. Atkinson's house was a small, neat building. An improvement in the mental thermometer was visible as soon as we entered. The exquisite neatness and homelikeness of everything, and a dainty dinner which soon followed our arrival, did much to put us at peace with the world.

In the afternoon many ladies called and the band of teachers separated, I believe only a few times ever to meet again. I went with Miss Smith to the house of Judge Thornton, where I immediately began to repair damages of the long voyage and the illness. A sad duty was before us of meeting Mrs. Thurston. Mr. Asahel Bush, a personal and political friend of Mr. T., crossed the river and climbed the hill to her little cottage. She had just

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laid her baby, Blandina, now Mrs. Stowell, in the crib, saying as she did so, "I think it will be your father who will waken you." It was an awful blow, but she was a woman of extraordinary poise of character, and the way she conducted herself in this sorrow has been a lifelong lesson to me. We told her what we had to tell — little enough. She had to bestir herself as soon as possible for the support of her family. At first, keeping house for her brother, Frank McLeach, on a farm in Spring Valley, Polk County. Afterward teaching in the Wallamet Institute, now University, for several years. She afterward married Mr. W. K. Odell and lived on a farm near Lafayette. Some mileage that had accrued to Mr. T. under the then rulings was paid to her, and she was comfortable. But me go back. My 5 brother remained in Portland, getting a situation immediately. This relieved the situation by half. For the rest I needed no money, not even for a shoestring. I shall always remember the story of the preacher who borrowed a \$5 bill from one of his people Saturday night and returned it Monday morning, because, he said, he could preach better with it. It was hard for me to keep the appearance of good feeling in receiving and making visits. We were invited to many houses. Governor Gaines' wife made a tea or dinner for us, and it began to look as if even in these wilds there might be some hope for friends that should some day be valued. All this time I was mentally repeating to myself "I have not a dollar." Remember, I did not have any use for one. Every possible want for years to come had been provided for, but still I would badger my brains about possible complications when I might be sadly mortified. Now I can see that it was all fright. My outfit was arranged for a country where we supposed there was nothing to buy. That was a mistake. Ship loads of goods were being sent 'round the Horn even faster than the soon rapidly increasing needs of the country required.

During this impecunious state of affairs I was invited to spend a few days with one of the oldest settlers. The head of the house, who had to make an early start the following morning, said, "I'd give a dollar if I could find a bright fire at five o'clock tomorrow." Thinks I to myself, "You shall." I do not know if I thought of the promise then, or took it as in earnest. It was natural to do such a thing for a very busy and often tired man. But he took

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it in earnest, and with a moment's wonderment at the fire and the steaming kettle, laid a dollar on the table. Then I was indeed a capitalist, and had a dollar more than I had any use for. The same day my brother sent me five dollars from Portland — and all was serene as far as money went. Immense quantities of wild strawberries were in the streets for sale by Indians. I bought some sugar 6 and berries and hunted long for something to put them in. Mr. Moss of the Main St. House heard of my vain efforts among the stores, presented me with four empty Chinese ginger jars — two of which are now on my pantry shelves. These I filled, sealed and directed to mother. The family arrived six weeks later and after I had gone to my work in Forest Grove. An Indian who could speak a little English carried the four jars to the little house where the family went to housekeeping on their arrival, while waiting for their goods which were sent 'round the Horn. Mother refused to receive them, saying there was a mistake, she had not ordered them, but the boy insisted and she presently recognized the penmanship. That made a sort of pleasant welcome for her and could not have happened if I had not come on in advance.

The four weeks of my stay were very pleasant, full of kindness from those who were settled then a little in advance of us. An interesting chapter might be written on one phase of the new country as it appeared to a young lady. Of this part of humanity there were so few that, speaking after the manner of chemists, one would say “scarcely a trace.” The provisions of the Donation Land Act had stimulated the natural tendency to early marriage, always found in a new country. It was incredible to the community that anyone should wilfully reject 320 acres of such land as then went begging in Oregon, with a wedding thrown in. But in addition to this, the non-agricultural past of the settlers, those who had come in the desire of commerce or trade, had been long deprived of the customs of their age and social standing. The incidents illustrating this were many and peculiar. But this chapter will hold over.

The first week in June, under the escort of Deacon Naylor and Rev. H. Clarke, accompanied by Mrs. Thornton, we mounted our nags and took our way over the hills back of Oregon City, enroute to Forest Grove, where I was 7 engaged to teach. I was

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not in a state of mind any longer to have misgivings or fears or presentments. Just to get on somehow from minute to minute. Much was said about the excellence of my mount. Dea. N. had borrowed him especially for the new teacher's use. I cannot conceive what it would have been had any common horse been put to my service. I had never ridden except that mule ride across the Isthmus, [ was large, was soft, muscles all unused to such violent exercise. ] The sun was extremely fierce. I had been recently very ill and was in no condition for a thirty mile ride on the best beast ever under a saddle. There was no comparison between the pains of this ride and that on the little mules. Mules forever for me! The first ten miles were endured. The next ten were torture. The last ten I have no words to write about. I thought the men cruel as Indians. Just imagine anyone thinking that of those two good, tenderhearted men, because they would not let me drop off my horse and lie by the roadside. I wanted to die. Meeting some Indians in their usual string, instead of being afraid I would have been glad to know that they were going to shoot me. The wise men in charge would not let me dismount, even when I gave my word I would walk on and not lie down — but kept me right straight to the end. Perfectly regardless of first impressions I went in at a door, staggered to a trundle bed and there lay like a log, refusing supper. I do not remember of speaking at all. The only thing I knew how to do was to keep my mouth tight shut.. If I spoke, it would be as the Psalmist said “unadvisedly”. ... I never became a good rider, but use made the exercise possible. After the family came I went in to Oregon City to see them. The old dear faces of the old home were delightful to see. I had no word from the time of leaving New York, except that Gov. Abernathy called at Judge Thornton's to tell me that some gentlemen who had made a quicker passage than father, and seen them and wanted me to know that he, my mother and sister were all well. My sister! I had left 8 two. But that was all the information he could give. However, when we met, all were there, and none lost by the way.

This was a delightful break in the homesick days. The two little rooms with mother over them looked like home. And bread and biscuit! None like hers had touched my lips since the doors of the South Argyle home were closed. I enjoyed them utterly, but Monday saw

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me again mounted for the ride. The previous Friday I had broken the distance by going 12 miles to about the present site of Reedsville, which helped out very greatly. I went back once more before they left for the upper country of the Wallamet, but then was taken ill... so it was a week before it was possible to return to my work. Rev. Harvey Clarke, always kind, always sacrificing himself for others, did my work in the schoolroom.... I went back to my work, and they, aided by some good Linn Co. friends, moved their goods which had come 'round the Horn with Mrs H. W. Corbett's stock of goods, up to Albany.

At Forest Grove there were many things to mitigate the lonesomeness of life. I did not think of them at their full value, though I seemed to enjoy them. Mr. Clarke was a graduate of Oberlin, an agreeable and educated gentleman, with a lovely wife, who was always pleasant and friendly. These friends would have been valued anywhere and at all times. Besides Mr. Clarke had a present from Capt. Crosby of a chaise, "one hoss", and he had a well broken horse which he was willing, no matter how busy, to hitch up for my use. I drove hundreds of miles over those prairies, up the mountain wood roads, often with Mrs. Clarke and sometimes with one of the older school girls. A good horse, a comfortable chaise — I have never seen a finer vehicle — it is an ideal way of getting over the country. One has the comfort of a barouche, and the independence, almost, of being on horseback. I loved much to ride 9 alone too, and there were few places to which my trusty horse, Lucas, could not pull the two wheels which carried my chariot.

Once I followed up the Tualatin on a road where many wheels had gone, but no sign of a settlement on either side. The mystery was explained by coming to a sawmill, evidently running, but with no man to run it. I drove up among the piles of lumber. It looked amid the embowering woods and vines like a fairy place, and for a time it seemed as if fairies only ran the machinery. For a place newly opened in the woods my vehicle could get on very well, and I drove around to this mystery explore. Presently from behind a pile of lumber a face looked up and a mouth spoke. I did not ask him why are you not attending to the setting of the saw, which was running up and down in the air sawing nothing. But I made up some questions about the roads — could I go farther into the woods in any way

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from there? No, that was the end of the world, it appeared. There was nothing to do but retrace my steps. As I turned round several more faces appeared from hidden corners. The next Saturday, as these millers came down to the store for supplies, the account of my unexpected visit was hilariously recited with much frontier exaggeration. They said they had clubbed their resources to provide a stunning suit, in which, one wearing it at a time, they would come to town, go to church and see the new stranger. But before this could be accomplished I had made them a visit on their own premises. Everyone of these men must have met your father in after years and told him perhaps more than once, so many times he came home from the circuit and would tell me he had seen another one of those sawmill men I went to visit. The story of the scantiness and raggedness of their apparel did not lose anything as the years went on.

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Another great comfort was the presence and counsel of Mrs. Tabitha Brown, a wise woman about 75 years of age. She was the widow of a clergyman who had taken her family to Missouri where land was cheap. It was cheap and good, but life was then and there almost impossible. I have never met her equal in some things. She broke her arm in crossing the plains. Without surgeons she directed the unskilled help of some of her party in such a manner that the bone was set, bandaged with splints, and she was able to mount her horse and continue on her journey with no more delay than necessary to put her arm in good shape. Her leg or hip had been broken long before and badly set, so that she was very lame. She had seen and read a great deal and remembered keenly the incidents of her life. She was of great use to me in my limited experience, always kind and helpful.

A great trouble to me was my visitors. I never liked them in my teaching. / They destroyed the power of the pupils to study and mine to do the best I could for them. I often read directions to parents to "visit the schools". Well for some this may do ... Once it was worse than common. A young man had ridden out from Portland and walked to the schoolhouse and came in to wait the hour of dismissal, when he would make his intended call. Some of the older girls began to giggle and look knowing, others followed. I heard a whisper

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“teacher's got a beau”. My cheeks burned, not at the alleged fact, I was proof against that, but with mortification that I did not know how to meet the case. That evening I told Mrs. Brown. She listened to my tale of woe, as I said I must give up teaching, not having sense or dignity enough to control such outbreaks of the pupils it was useless to go on. Her bright eyes snapped a little, and she called the girls before her and such a lecture 11 as they got... The result was I might afterward have had a procession of callers without disturbing the studies of the scholars or the comfort of the teacher. But there were many lonesome evening hours. I often walked over the prairie alone late at night to induce sleep. I was not timid and w'd keep on till I could hear cougars, or, as they were called, “panthers” screaming in the woods by my side. I kept in the open and was in no danger yet even now there comes a sense of pity for the poor girl that I was ... One evidence of the primitive life there was given the first Sunday of going to church. It was very hot weather. There was no fans. Each lady had a twig from the bushes bent round and both ends held in place in her hand and a silk handkerchief thrown over the whole. It made a very fine fan. This custom is spoken of in W. E. Barton's “Hills of Kentucky.”

After Christmas, 1851, I went in, on horseback thro seas of mud, to Portland. I spent some weeks visiting in Oregon City. There were some charming homes there. The families of the different officials were lavish in entertainment. There was much simplicity still ruling, but it was a highly cultured simplicity, and it seemed to me of choice not of necessity. We had parties enough to satisfy the most exacting lover of pleasure, and with the judgment of maturer years I can honestly say the pleasure was of the most wholesome kind. Dr. John McLoughlin's stately presence graced the most of these entertainments, and nothing finer or more impressive could have been found on the round world. Then to Albany where father had been building the house which was to be the home of our family as long as that family as then constituted would need a home. They were probably as glad to have me home as I was to be there. Father had been greatly delighted with [m?] 12 the compactness and convenience of the octagon house as built by Fowler H. Wells on the banks of the Hudson, and explained in a book published by them. Our experiment proved

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its correctness, but we also found out that compactness and convenience are not the only desirable things about a house. Abundance of carpets, books and bedding, pictures, etc. had been sent 'round the Horn to make us very homelike. Some chairs also were sent, called "knockdowns". These would have been a success if they could have been properly set up. But something went wrong with the glue and their frequent collapse under mortifying circumstances were part of the house's history. We were glad when a chance offered to buy some of the country chairs, with seats of woven rawhide. These never collapsed under the most aggravating circumstances. With this picture of the octagon house (a faded snapshot, Worker) I will close this account "From the old home to the new."

Mau

December 24th, 1899.

(Mrs. Elizabeth M. Wilson)