The American Spirit

United States History
as Seen by Contemporaries

Eleventh Edition

Volume I: To 1877

Houghton Mifflin Company
Boston    New York
3. Two Pioneers Describe Oregon (1847)

While statesmen debated, settlers continued to pour into the Oregon Country. They did not all have the same reaction to the virgin wilderness they encountered. In these two descriptions of the new territory, what observations are made by both writers? On what do they disagree? How might their different perceptions be explained?

Hezekiah Packer to his Brother,
Willamette Valley, March 1, 1847

I arrived in the Willamette Valley on the 30th of September, and my calculations are all defeated about Oregon. I found it a mean, dried up, and drowned country. The Yam Hill is a small valley, destitute of timber. I soon got sick of this place, and then went to the mouth of the Columbia river. I can give Oregon credit for only one or two things, and these are, good health and plenty of salmon, and Indians; as for the farming country there is none here—wheat grows about the same as in Illinois; corn, potatoes, and garden vegetables cannot grow here without watering. The nights are too cold here in summer. The soil is not as good as in Illinois—the face of the country is hilly, and high mountains covered with snow all summer, and small valleys—the mountains and hills are covered with the heaviest timber that I ever saw. We have had a very hard winter here, snow fell two feet deep, and lay three weeks, by reason of which hundreds of cattle have died of starvation. The thermometer fell to three degrees above zero.—Prairie grass here is the same as in Illinois. There is no timothy nor clover. Mechanics are very numerous here. Of the ships that sailed from New York last April, but one arrived, and she was ice bound for 50 days, in latitude 50° 1-2. It is supposed the other has gone to her long home. A United States man-of-war [Shark] was recently wrecked on the Columbia. Money is very scarce here—and they have a kind of currency here (orders on stores and scrip)—they value property very high, but if they would put things at cash prices, they would be about the same as they are in the States. Oregon is rapidly filling up with young men, (but no girls,) of whom two-thirds are dissatisfied and many would return to the States if they were able, but the road is long and tedious, and it is hard for families to get back; my trip was pleasant until I got to the South Pass—after that the country was rugged, and bad roads. Tell young men if they intend coming to Oregon, to drive no teams unless it is their own. We were uninjured by the Indians, though they were very saucy—they have no manners; they worship idols [totem poles], and I saw one of their gods at the mouth of the river. There is no society here except the Camellites [Campbellites—a liberal Protestant group first organized in Pennsylvania in 1810]. I shall return to the States next spring. Don't believe all that is said about Oregon, as many falsehoods are uttered respecting the country.

Richard R. Howard to a Friend in Illinois,
"Oregon Territory," April 6, 1847

We arrived safe in Oregon City on the 12th of September last. We reached Fort Laramie in 42 days from Independence; Fort Hall in 33 days more; the Dalles in 37 days more; and Oregon City in 16 days more—making in all 128 days. Our journey was two weeks longer than necessary had we lost no time. We met with no serious obstructions on our journey. We had to raise the front of our wagon beds two or three inches in crossing the Laramie Fork to keep the water out; sometimes we had long drives to find a good place for camping, with water and grass. [The writer gives a long detail of the necessary outfit for the journey and cautions to be used on the road—which we omit. Illinois Journal] No single man should come to this country. One third of the men in Oregon at this time are without wives. Nothing but men of families are wanted here to till the soil, to make this one of the greatest countries in the world. This country does not get so muddy as Illinois. There is no dust in summer here. The good land in this country is more extensive than I expected to find it. The hills are not so high as represented. From the Cascade mountains to the Pacific, the whole country can be cultivated. The natural soil of the country, especially in the bottoms, is a black loam, mixed with gravel and clay. We have good timber, but there appears to be a scarcity of good building rock. The small streams furnish us with trout the year round.

My wife to the old lady—Greeting; says she was never more satisfied with a move in her life before; that she is fast recovering her health; and she hopes you will come to Oregon, where you can enjoy what little time you have remaining in health.

The roads to Oregon are not as bad as represented. Hastings in his history speaks of the Falls of Columbia being 50 feet and roaring loud, making the earth tremble, &c. The falls are about like that of a mill-dam. Every thing in this country now is high, except molasses, sugar and salt; but when we raise our wheat crop to trade on, we will make them pay for their high charges. I think no place where a living is to be made out of the earth can be preferable to Oregon for that purpose—and let people say what they may—all agree that it is healthy. It is certainly the healthiest country in the world, disease is scarcely known here, except among the late emigrants, ninety-nine out of a hundred of them get well the first season. I have heard of only two deaths since I have been in Oregon; one of them was a man who came here diseased and in one year died; the other was a woman who is said was near dead ten years before she came here.

Richard R. Howard