FORT SIMCOE

Frontier Army Post, 1856-59
Indian Agency and School, 1859-1924

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FORT SIMCOE IN 1858
From rare, rare, contemporary sketch by C. M. Schultz, Pvt., Co. G, 9th Infantry. Missing here are two residences to the left of the commandant's, part of blockhouse to extreme left, part of lieutenants' quarters, Mule-power sawmill at lower left.

Noted Chief Moses of the Sinkiuse, Superintendent Lewis T. Erwin (Agent 1893-97), Chief White Swan, Klickitat Tribe. Photo courtesy of Mrs. J. J. (Suzanne) Bartholet, daughter of Judge Erwin, and girlhood resident at Simcoe.

Situated in an ancient oak grove in Simcoe Valley, where the sloping Toppenish plain meets the piney foothills of the Cascade Range, Fort Simcoe seems delightfully remote. Yet it is only seven miles by road from the nearest town, White Swan, and 38 miles southwest of Yakima.

Before the military came in 1856, the pleasant site was known far and wide among the tribes as Moolmool (Bubbling Water) for its gurgling cold springs. At the intersection of main trails it was a favorite camping place.

Fort Simcoe was one of two interior Washington Territory army posts established as a result of Indian hostilities that started in the fall of 1855 and ended in September, 1858. The other post was Fort Walla Walla.

Of the original military structures that framed Simcoe's 420-foot square parade ground, five remain — the commanding officer's gabled, two-story house, three dwellings that were captains' quarters and a hewn log blockhouse at the southwest salleyport—all on the west side of the grounds.

Other fort buildings included lieutenants' quarters and troop barracks on the north and south sides of the parade; a storehouse, subsistence warehouse, guardhouse and hospital — on the east side; laundresses' quarters, and just beyond the southeast corner of the quadrangle a little mule-power sawmill.

Simcoe was not a stockaded post but board fences enclosed the back yards of the senior and junior officers' quarters.

The residences on "officers row" are of stock-brick construction — brick walls boarded and battened, and there is a brick fireplace in every room. The bricks were made on the grounds.

As related by Louis Scholl, supervising architect at The Dalles, Ore., for the army, "All doors, window sashes, mantels, bookcases, etc., for these far posts (Walla Walla and Simcoe) were transported, some by pack mule but mostly by large six-mule wagon trains." For two years, he said, "a pack train of nearly 50 mules moved between Fort Dalles and Simcoe." Scholl drew the working plans for Forts Dalles, Simcoe and Walla Walla and, in 1859, for Fort Colville.

Simcoe, first written Sim-co-oe, is from the Yakima "sim-ku-o-e" (accent second syllable)—"saddle" in a ridge north of the fort. Near-by Simcoe Creek was mapped as "Simkwo" by Capt. George B. McClellan in 1853. Over the Simcoe Mountains to the south, Capt. Frederick T. Dent, brother-in-law of U. S. Grant, pioneered a military road to Fort Dalles (65 miles) in 1856.

The Fort Simcoe Historical Park covers 140 acres, leased in 1953 from the Yakima Indian Nation. Preservation of the existing original military buildings is the State Parks and Recreation Commission's immediate objective. Eventually, if sufficient funds are made available, complete restoration of the post is contemplated.
As It Happened

Col. George Wright, 9th Infantry, chose the location for Fort Simcoe in August, 1856, as he was returning to his headquarters at Fort Dalles from a pacification campaign through the Yakima Valley and the Wenatchee country. Although the principal war chiefs — Kamiakin, Owhi, Skloow and Qualchan — had evaded him, Wright felt he had accomplished his mission. The Indians agreed to follow the path of peace.

In the fall of 1855, the Yakimas had defeated Maj. Granville O. Haller and a force of 100, musket-armed regulars in a two-day battle on Toppenish Creek, a scant three miles from Mool-Mool, and harried the command over the Simcoe Mountains half-way to Fort Dalles. Haller had taken the field to punish the Yakimas for the slaying of their special agent, Maj. Andrew J. Bolon, in the Simcoe Mountains by a few reckless braves, and the reported killing of several gold prospectors. Shortly after Haller's defeat, the Yakimas skirmished with a strong punitive expedition led by Maj. Gabriel J. Rains, and easily escaped following a noisy demonstration at Union Gap. Second Lieut. Phil Sheridan, commanding a detachment of 20 dragoons, and other officers chafed at Rains' extreme caution and voted the campaign a "wretched failure."

Maj. Garnett, with Companies G and F, 9th Infantry, started construction of Fort Simcoe on August 8. The first quarters were of hewed pine logs which were cut in the hills back of the post. All lived in tents until, in the cold December of 1856, the first barracks were completed under the direction of Capt. J. J. Archer. Garnett had gone East in the fall to claim his betrothed, Miss Marianna Nelson, New York City belle. He brought her to Simcoe on May 17, 1857.

Writing, on April 29, 1858, to a friend in Buffalo, Mrs. Garnett told about her infant son, Arthur Nelson Garnett, "a nice, fat, happy and healthy child," remarked on the "very pretty and conveniently arranged" house and spoke of the "fragrant and plentiful" wild flowers.

Upon the renewal of Indian hostilities in the summer of '58, Col. Wright moved to smash the power of the Spokanes and Couer d'Alenes east of the Columbia River and Maj. Garnett struck north and west of the river.

Lieut. George Crook, who became one of the West's famed Indian fighters, was with Garnett's expedition, which resulted in the capturing of some Indians and the execution of 10 accused of murdering miners.

Second Lieut. Jesse K. Allen was mortally wounded in an early morning charge on an Indian camp on Swauk Creek. In his report, Garnett believed that Allen "was shot accidentally by one of his own men in the darkness of the hour."

Garnett marched his column 550 miles in 45 days. Within a day's return march of Simcoe, he received the stunning intelligence that his wife and son, age seven months and five days, had just died of "bilious fever."

The Major took the bodies of his wife and child to New York for burial. Capt. Archer moved into the Garnett house and continued in command until the post was turned over to the Department of Indian Affairs on May 22, 1859.

Maj. Garnett

Maj. Robert Selden Garnett, Simcoe commandant, of a prominent Virginia family, was a West Point graduate of 1841. He was aide-de-camp to Maj. Gen. Zachary Taylor in the Mexican War, in which he was breveted captain and major for gallant and meritorious conduct. In 1849, he accompanied "Old Rough and Ready" from Baton Rouge, La., to Washington, D. C., for the latter's inauguration as twelfth president of the United States. In 1852-54, he was commandant of cadets at West Point. On March 27, 1855, he was appointed major of the newly organized 9th Infantry.

In 1861, he espoused the cause of the South. A brigadier general in the Confederate Army, he died from a Yankee bullet at Carrick's Ford on the Cheat River, northwestern Virginia, July 13, 1861. The commander of the Union troops was Gen. McClellan, namer of "Simkwe (Simcoe) Creek." Col. (later Gen.) R. H. Milroy of the Indiana Volunteers saw Garnett fall. Some 20 years later, Milroy became superintendent of the Yakima Reservation and lived in Garnett's house.

Rev. James H. Wilbur

The Rev. James Harvey Wilbur (1811-1887), Methodist Episcopal minister and missionary, exerted a profound influence on the Yakima Reservation Indians for two decades. To the Indians, whom he ruled firmly, and to the white settlers, he was "Father Wilbur." Large-framed, powerful and fearless, he brooked no flouting of his authority. With his efficient helpmate, Mrs. Wilbur, he dominated the reservation scene. Native of northern New York, he resided in the Willamette Valley, Oregon, in the 1840's and '50's. In 1860, he organized a school at Simcoe and in 1864 received his appointment as reservation superintendent from President Lincoln. Under his energetic guidance, the Indians began their progress from the old ways to the new.