

Story of James H. Wilbur as the  
Yakima Indian Agent at Fort Simcoe

Told by  
George W. Olney, a member of the Yakima tribe: June, 1951

Mr. ~~Geor~~ Wilbur was known to Indians and whites as Father Wilbur at the time he was the Indian agent. Mr. Wilbur was Indian agent here at Fort Simcoe from 1866 to 1882.

Wilbur first came to Ft. Simcoe as the first Indian school teacher under the first agent that was appointed by the U.S. government, he was-----Mr. Bancroft. Fort Simcoe was turned over to the Indian department by the war department as I understand an officer stationed at the Fort was in charge of the Indians up to the time Bancroft took the agency. Bancroft was dismissed and then Father Wilbur was appointed as the second agent in 1866<sup>4</sup> and served for 16<sup>2</sup> years.

Father Wilbur and Nathan Olney got acquainted in The Dalles, Ore. ✓

James H. Wilbur was said to be the first city police of The Dalles, Ore. Nathan Olney was the first sheriff of The Dalles, Ore. and when Wilbur became school teacher, at the fort, he induced Nathan to come to the Yakima country and take up a homestead. Nathan Olney came over about the year 1865 and settled on the Antanum creek.

When Nathan Olney died about the year 1867 Mr. Wilbur, then agent, had a coffin made for the body, brought Nathan Olney to the Fort and had him buried at the east of the Fort Simco(copy) about one quarter of a mile from the buildings.

An emigrant family, shortly after that, in crossing the Toppenish creek ford--a woman and 2 of her children were drowned and Father Wilbur had them buried alongside of Nathan Olney. The names unknown to me, graves unmarked. The only name I remember is of the ox team driver of the emigrant family, Mr. Ashley.

The names of this woman and her two children may be in Father Wilbur's files at the Yakima agency(Indian) at Toppenish.

When I was about eight years old I stayed at Father Wilbur's home. The house that was built for the agents to live in, a modern building, made of lumber that was milled and framed, ready to put together in the state of Maine and shipped around the Horn and hauled by wagon, I believe, from Astoria, Oregon (I don't know how but was told it was)

When Father Wilbur made trips to The Dalles he used to take me along as his interpreter as he would meet Indians on these trips.

Father Wilbur was also an arresting officer before there was a U.S. marshal appointed here. He used to arrest bootleggers and place them in his jail. One of the blockhouses was used as a jail at that time. He went as far as an Indian camp near Mount St Helen's, they picked huckleberries, horse raced and gambled. Father Wilbur did not allow gambling and horse racing, also drinking intoxicants on the reservation so the Yakima Indians would go to this camping ground on a prairie and away from Father Wilbur's presence.

The bootleggers would take whisky to this camp and trade for money and horses. Some Indians reported this to Father Wilbur so he took his saddle horse named Calico, a big horse with spots on, thus the name Calico.

The two Indians that came to Wilbur with the news of the bootleggers went with Father Wilbur and led 4 horses, as they were four of the men bootlegging. The Indians told that these men would be back to the Indian camp on a certain day again with more whisky to sell. The name of this huckleberry camp is Chequesh.

He arrested these bootleggers and took them to Fort Simcoe and put them in jail, had ball and chain put on them, then made them work out their fines by grubbing out oak trees, clearing the land for farming. They raised grain on this land after it was cleared. These men sawed the oak wood for fuel.



After Father Wilbur converted them to the faith of the Methodist church he took the ball and chains off of them and took them to church on Sundays. After that he trusted them and they were free to work without guard or ball and chain. Later he released them, hauled them to The Dalles, Oregon and they went their way.

He built the first saw mill run by waterpower, also a grist mill to grind the Indians' wheat into flour on the Simcoe creek in Simcoe valley. The saw mill was not sufficient to get out lumber fast enough to build houses for the Indians so he bought a steam engine and put up a sawmill on Mill creek, the creek named after the mill was built.

He got a white man to train Indians to run the sawmill. When they learned to run the mill the Indians took over. Charley Barnaby, a half blood, became the engineer. Hampton Lumley, Lancaster Spencer (copy) Wilbur Spencer were the main operators. Loveless was the name of the white man that taught the Indians to operate the saw mill.

The first sawmill that was built on Simcoe creek, run by water power was the old type. Cross cut saws were up and down and slow when water got low it would have to stop operations. The later one with steam; run circular saws. The other one used what was known as whip saws.

The Indian name for the creek where the saw mill was last set up is or was Na Nu Na Nu.

Father Wilbur would go to see how his Indian boys were getting along with their work, often taking a hand in the sawing and handling of the lumber. The first lumber from the Simcoe whip saw mill Father Wilbur built a church in Simcoe valley near Yesmowit's home, another church at Tup Uah, now White Swan. Later he gave these two old churches, one to Yesmowit, the other one to Joseph Stwire.

(then our head chief) His Indian name was White Swan. Tupuch was changed to Stwireville, then when A.C. Coburn bought the Joseph Stwire allotment and layed it out into a townsite, he named it White Swan after our late chief. White Swan was a nick name. His name he got because he wore a cap made of white swan feathers.

The next church he built with the lumber from the mill on Mill creek, was by a (carpenter teacher) Father Wilbur had to learn Indians carpenter trade. Miller and his pupils built the big church in 1879 at Stwireville. He, Father Wilbur, trained young Indians to be ministers. One was a full brother to Joe Stwire but had different names, he was George Waters. Also Thomas Pearne and Coke Helm, they are all dead now. They also brought many Indians into the faith. Father Wilbur preached every Sunday and he built houses for the church members first, so to get a house built the Indians joined church. I do not remember the time but he had built a church on the lower Satus for the Shusters. It was too far for them to come to Stwireville church.

Only the Methodist members of Wilbur church got houses. Many white people came to Fort Simcoe to a big camp meetings with the Indians every year, about the first of July and would stay till after the Fourth of July. They would also celebrate the Fourth before returning to Klickitat as most of them came from there. Father Wilbur would butcher cattle, sheep and hogs and furnish vegetables from the agency garden. Beef and other meats were issued to all visitors to the camp meeting, Indians and whites alike. Many were converted to the faith at these camp meetings. Tents and fuel were furnished, also free, to visitors. Klickitat people had a long journey over the mountains on the old military road which was rough and very steep. In placee they had to tie the young trees with the branches on to hold



the wagons on these steep places, especially on the dug hill as they called it. Harness on those days had no breeching, breaks could not hold wagons on this Dug hill. This road was used ~~and~~ till about 1900 or even later.

Father Wilbur had a herd of weathers (sheep) at the Fort agency to butcher for the school. When he butchered the last sheep he did not get any more. He had a large bunch of Chester White hogs running around everywhere at the Fort. They would sleep under the block houses. The big crickets were plentiful then and hogs would live on them in season besides the roots and acorns from the big oak trees there. The hogs were fed grain raised on the agency farm to fatten them. In the late fall they were butchered for bacon and hams. He had a smoke house. John Hadley was the agency farmer and he did the curing of the pork for bacon and hams. He had a blacksmith shop, carpenter shop, harness shop. Many Indians learned their trades at these shops. They made wagons, bobsleds for winter hauling as wagons were out of the question in snow. Dog sleighs were used to haul logs to mill and cord wood to the agency.

My brother, Frank Olney learned the wheelright trade under a white teacher. He shaped the woodwork for wagons and sleds. Abe Lincoln, a half blood and brother-in-law was learning the blacksmith trade and put the iron on the wagon geers. Daniel Doon learned the harness making trade and built harness. All these things were issued to the Indians. Food was issued to old Indians, annunties like cloth, blankets, clothing was issued to all Indians free. The blacksmith made plows out of sheet steel and braces and suparts ??(supports) on the wood work was made by these Indians. Many other steel tools weremade at the blacksmith shop and handles and wood work by the carpenter shop boys. All planing of wood was done by hand like doors, casings for doors and windows. Most of the young men were full blood Indians. Daniel Doon was a full blood and an excellent harness maker. He also repaired

shoes for Indians.

The Indians learned to till the soil and raise food under Wilbur. Father Wilbur went to see his wards and if they were idle he put them to work. He would hold the plow, drive the team to show them how it was done. When leaving his man he would tell him now you have so much of this work done, or else. They all minded the father.

He was a strong man with a strong character. He was kind to all and rough when he encountered a rough man. Sometimes he had to deal with tough white men.

He established the government hay ranches. One is northwest of White Swan. The big cattle ranch was on the north side of lower Toppenish creek, was fenced in with boards from the mill. It was one mile wide and six miles long. Hay was cut and stacked for feeding. It was wild hay which grew abundantly then. These hay ranches were abandoned and were allotted to Indians later.

Indians that wanted a start in the cattle business Wilbur gave them work on the many agency farms and he paid them in cattle, branded ID for Indian department (check letter looks like I.D.'is) Father Wilbur was a good friend of mine. He was the one that married us, Betsy Yesmowit and me, in July, 1881. On his last trip here he visited my wife and I and had dinner with us. About the year 1883 he bade us good-bye for the last time.

Father Wilbur was the finest man and friend I ever had. He done much for us Indians, morally and financially. He was a fast friend of my late father, Nathan Olney.

I write this from my memories of him. I am 88 years old now.

Dedicated to a good man, James H. Wilbur.

Signed George W. Olney

Written this day June 1, 1951.



Miscellaneous Notes on Father Wilbur for checking:

At the time of establishing Fort Simcoe H. H. Loundale was general superintendent located at The Dalles. A. A. Bancroft became the first resident agent, and that was in 1861. In 1861 James H. Wilbur became superintendent of schools. It is generally said that there was much graft and dishonesty in these first short administrations. To a man like Father Wilbur anything short of complete rectitude was so obnoxious that he had no hesitation in making his sentiments known. The result was that he was "fired" as superintendent of schools.

He went to Washington, laid the whole case before President Lincoln and did it with such effect that he returned with a commission as agent in his pocket. That was in 1864.....upon <sup>the</sup> his retirement of Father Wilbur in 1864 ...History of Yakima Valley, Vol 1 pps 540-541.

Office Yakima Indian Agency, Washington Territory, Fort Simcoe,  
August 10, 1871.

Sir: I have the honor to submit the following report which owing to the short time since I resumed my duties as agent will not be as full as might be desired:

I entered the Indian service first as superintendent of teaching in the fall of 1860, and as Indian agent in 1864....I would as soon put out wolves among sheep or rattlesnakes among children as immoral men upon an Indian agency. Reformation of moral character has been the great point at which I have aimed

When I contrast the condition of the Indians of this agency with what they were eleven years ago when I first came among them I find the result of my labors a perfect justification of my theory in respect to the possibility of giving to the Indian race the comforts and respectability of civilized life. From the time I took charge as agent in 1864 to the day of my suspension and turning over to Lieutenant J. M. Smith, September, 1869, all branches