

THE HISTORY OF FORT VANCOUVER

(A radio talk given over Station KOMO August 3, 1958 on BOOKS AND PEOPLE)

In one of the new exhibits at the museum of the Washington State Historical Society in Tacoma - - an exhibit which celebrates the history of Fort Vancouver - - there is an ancient key. This key is, by modern standards, old and unwieldy, corroded and rusty, but it bears the patina of history. Today, no one can say what door at the old Hudson's Bay post this key once opened. All that we know is that the key was found under a century of dirt among the artifacts recovered during the excavation of Fort Vancouver by archaeologists from the National Park Service. There were many doors at Fort Vancouver and presumably many keys. Each door, in the early 19th century, swung open to reveal a part of the fascinating history of the greatest post maintained by the Hudson's Bay Company between the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Ocean. For here, at Fort Vancouver, was the capital of the great fur trade empire of the Columbia.

History, too, is a house with many doors. For every door to history's house, there are many keys. For us to enter, to enjoy the stored-up riches which History keeps within her mansion, we must find the proper keys.

One of the keys with which we may gain entrance to the fabulous mansion is, of course, the written record of man's achievement. But the written record is not the beginning. The word itself is most often the end result rather than the cause of discovery. For example - - there is the key of archeology. Now this word, rich and classical in its connotations, may conjure up exotic visions of the tombs of the Pharohs, or the sunken streets of Pompeii. Or, lately, we note, archeology as practised along the shores of the Dead Sea, becomes an amazing blend of caves and diggers, wandering Arabs and scholars from Johns Hopkins, culminating in the glory of the scraps of parchment we have come to know as the Dead Sea Scrolls. Probably Mr. Average Reader does not tend to think of archeology as a science being exploited in his own backyard. But the excavation of Fort Vancouver is just one of the recent important

archaeological achievements in the Pacific Northwest.

The Washington State Historical Society has recently published a beautiful book called THE HISTORY OF FORT VANCOUVER AND ITS PHYSICAL STRUCTURE. This is the first book in a projected series on the history of the Pacific Northwest which the Society plans to publish. Using our archaeological key, Dr. John Hussey, historian for the National Park Service, has unlocked a treasure house of regional history. In several respects, this handsome volume symbolizes a whole cluster of northwestern "firsts". For after it had become apparent that the Columbia River was the only navigable route by which the interior fur trading posts could reach the sea, Fort Vancouver became the headquarters for all the operations of the Hudson's Bay Company west of the Rocky Mountains.

Here, near the banks of the mighty river, was begun the first large-scale farming in the Pacific Northwest. Lumber from the first northwestern sawmill, pickled salmon, dairy products, and other products of early industry, were supplied for other fur trade posts, as well as for commerce with such distant ports as those of the Hawaiian Islands, California, and the Russian settlement in Alaska. The first shipyard, the first school, the first theatre, and the earliest churches were raised at Fort Vancouver. Here existed the "Columbia Library", first circulating library in the Old Oregon country. Most historians agree that the history of the Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Vancouver and the history of the Oregon country were, for a time, at least, almost identical.

In his Journal kept while commander of the United States Exploring Expedition in 1841, Lieutenant Charles Wilkes gives us a vivid picture of the impact of the physical setting of the Fort upon the visitor. He wrote:

"The view from this place is truly beautiful. The noble river can be traced in all its windings for a long distance through the cultivated prairie, with its grove and clumps of trees; beyond, the eye sweeps over an interminable forest, melting into a blue haze, from which Mount Hood, capped with its eternal snows, rises in great

beauty." And another officer on the Wilkes' expedition, Lieutenant George Colvocoresses, gave a vivid account of "roughing it on the frontier Fort Vancouver-style:"

"The bell rings for dinner; we will see the 'hall', and its convivialities. The dining hall is a spacious room on the second floor, ceilinged with pine above and at the sides. In the southwest corner of it is a large close stove sending out sufficient warmth to make it comfortable. At the end of the table, 20 feet in length, stands Governor McLoughlin, directing guests and gentlemen from neighboring posts to their places. Chief-traders, traders, the physicians, clerks, and the farmers, slide respectfully to their places, at distances from the Governor corresponding to the dignity of their rank in the service. Thanks are given to God, and all are seated. Roast beef and pork, boiled mutton, baked salmon, beets, carrots, turnips, cabbage and potatoes, and wheaten bread, are tastefully distributed over the table among a dinner set of elegant Queen's ware, burnished with glittering glasses, and decanters of various colored Italian wines. Course after course goes round, and the Governor fills to his guests and friends, and each gentleman in turn vies with him in diffusing round the board a most generous allowance of viands, wine and warm fellowship. The cloth and wines are removed together, cigars are lighted, and a strolling smoke about the premises, enlivened by a courteous discussion of some mooted point of natural history, or politics, closes the ceremonies of the dinner-hour at Fort Vancouver."

When a friend of mine read the passage we have just quoted, he said he would quite willing to "serve a hitch at the old Fort, provided, of course, that the cuisine and the service were as good as the board set by Dr. McLoughlin."

Well, of course, life at Fort Vancouver was not all "beer and skittles". John Holms, in his poem delivered at a recent Commencement at Harvard - - a poem called THE ELEVENTH COMMANDMENT - - asks, "What does he hear **for** news who has only heard from his own island?" And we know there are islands in time as well as in space, and much may be learned from studying them. Though on the mainland, Fort Vancouver was, in effect, at first an island, surrounded by the western wilderness of the rugged

fur-trade era, then a British Island in a hostile sea of American expansionism, finally to be engulfed by the waves of westward migration, Yankee-style. But the old Fort had its day, and a stirring day it was! From its founding in the winter of 1824-25 until the decline of the fur trade in the 1840's, in the great region between the 42nd parallel and the line of fifty-four north, the influence of the great post was supreme.

The new book, THE HISTORY OF FORT VANCOUVER, captures the sweep and the grandeur of this story. No longer will it be necessary for an author to write as did Richard Montgomery in his fine biography of John McLoughlin, THE WHITE HEADED EAGLE, now, unfortunately, out-of-print; "Since no accurate description of Doctor John's original fort can be found, we can only surmise its character." The four seasons of archaeological excavations at the site by the National Park Service have documented what was known of the amazingly diverse operations at Fort Vancouver. The magnificently feudal way of life shown in the description of the dinner-hour we mentioned earlier, with the neat lines of power radiating down the dinner table from Chief McLoughlin to the lowliest clerk is made clearer by the recovery of many of the artifacts, such as pieces of the Queen's ware. Some of the elegant china has found its way into the exhibit case with the rusty old key we told you about in the museum at Tacoma.

The book is divided into four sections. The first is the history of the Hudson's Bay establishment itself, from the time of its founding in the winter of 1824 until it was finally abandoned in 1860. The second part is a detailed description of the fort structure, its buildings and general layout. A third section is devoted to maps, charts and drawings, and photographs of artifacts discovered during Park Service archeological explorations. The last section contains an extensive index and the most complete bibliography ever assembled on Fort Vancouver. The cover of the book is a reproduction of a portion of the map compiled for our old friend, Lieutenant Wilkes and the United States Exploring Expedition. The map shows the Oregon

Country in the 1840's.

One of the most fascinating things in the book, I think, is the wide range of source materials researched by the author. The bibliography gives a sharp indication of how diffused around the globe are many of the bibliographical treasures of our own Pacific Northwest. It is a matter for thanksgiving and regret that the Hudson's Bay archives, for example, contain many thousands of reports, letter-books, journals and diaries that pertain specifically to this region. We are grateful, of course, that these people were history-minded and preserved them. We are less happy that they are housed in far-away London. And many of the diaries and letters so important to Dr. Hussey's work are in such far-flung centers as the Yale Library or the Bancroft Library in Berkeley. When we see what the historian of our region has to do in spading up source materials on his own Northwest, we must fervently hope that the people of this area will become increasingly conscious of the necessity for preserving the early letters, family diaries, reminiscences, early business records, an account of "crossing the Plains" or the early political intrigues of Washington Territory, etc. We have several fine institutions - such as the Washington State Historical Society, the University of Washington, and the Seattle Public Library - - equipped to preserve and to make available for scholars the source materials which the people of the Pacific Northwest entrust to their keeping.

One of the great aids to the working historian is the private collector - - the man who is not only aware of the importance of early records, but who may have spent years in gathering those materials in the exact area of the historian's needs. The author of FORT VANCOUVER has spoken gratefully of the help he received from Mr. Howard Burnham. Mr. Burnham, a member of the Board of Curators of the Washington State Historical Society, is a walking encyclopedia concerning the confusing and controversial land-claims in the Fort Vancouver area. For years, his hobby has been to run down the evidence concerning the conflicting claims of the government, the churches, and the private individuals who revolved around the periphery of Fort Van-

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couver. Such information proved immensely valuable to Dr. Hussey in the preparation of the book. Several of the fine plates in the book were loaned from the Burnham collection.

It would be impossible to compile quite a roster of experts in various segments of Pacific Northwest history. Your State Historical Society, for example, represents a nice balance of talent, with the scholarly businessman working in harmony with the business-like scholar. A publishing venture such as **THE HISTORY OF FORT VANCOUVER** represents a peak in achievement in several respects, since it drew upon the combined resources of the National Park Service, the Washington State Historical Society, the private collector, and the treasures of the Hudson's Bay archives. Unquestionably, this beautiful book will be a prime source in years to come, not only for the historian, but also for the discriminating collector of western Americans -- and his name is legion.

Bruce Le Roy
Seattle, Washington
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