

## A REPORT UPON FORT NA-CHESS

By Walter J. Purdin

Fort Na-chess was constructed in 1856 as a result of the hostilities of 1855. It has been described as, "A field-work of earth and gabions, called by early settlers 'The Basket Fort', on the south bank of the Naches River about eight miles from Yakima and four miles above Painted Rocks Historical Park. Built and named by Col. George Wright, commanding the 9th Infantry, when in the Yakima country to treat with the Yakimas or otherwise bring them to terms."

Fort Na-chess was commonly known as the Basket Fort. Its location on the Naches River is at the place where the old Indian Trail crossed. This trail led from Canada to California. It was used by the Indians for many years crossing the Columbia at Celilo. The trail from Goldendale to Fort Simcoe was called the Eel Trail because of the Eel Rocks of Indian legend. Sometimes the whole trail was called the Eel Trail. From Fort Simcoe across the Ahtanum, Cowiche, the present Naches Heights, across the Naches River where the trail branched, one going west to Nisqualli, the other across the Wenas, Kittitas, Klokum Pass, up the Columbia to Okanogan and Colville. This trail was used by the Wilkies Expedition in 1841, by Winthrop in 1853, and by McClellan in 1853.

Col. Wright camped for about four weeks on the Naches River, in May and June, 1856, with five hundred men, exclusive of pack-train detachments, waiting for the water to recede. He finally had a trestle bridge built across the river "by great labor", and crossed on the morning of June 18th with eight companies (450 rank and file) - one company of dragoons, one of artillery, two of the 4th Infantry and four of the 9th Infantry - and marched nine miles to the Wenatchee and encamped. Thence he proceeded to the Kittitas Valley and Wenatchee country, on a successful campaign to roundup various large bands of Indians and persuade them to the paths of peace.

Col. Wright first mentioned the earth fort on the Naches in a communication to the Assistant Adjutant General, Department of the Pacific, at Benicia, California, on May 30, as follows:

"I am now throwing up a field-work of earth and gabions of dimensions sufficient to contain a company or two and all our stores. This depot will enable me to move unencumbered with a large pack-train."

He mentions the fort by name for the first time on June 20, in dispatch from camp in the Kittitas Valley; relates of crossing the Naches, and refers to Major Robert S. Garnett's arrival there on June 13 with two companies, and of leaving Lt. Col. Steptoe with three companies to occupy "Fort Na-chess . . . . . an important point as a depot and within easy marches of the great fisheries." On July 25, returning to Fort Dalles from the Wenatchee country, Col. Wright said, "I halted two days at Fort Na-chess, at which place I was visited by a party of Nisqually Indians under old Chief Leshi, who were temporarily living upon the upper waters of the Na-chess . . . ."

On AUGUST 3, 1856, writing from "Camp on To-pon-ish Creek," Col. Wright said he had abandoned "the camp on the Na-chess" and had ordered Col. Steptoe with his command to the Toppenish. About the middle of August he had Maj. Garnett and two companies starting to build Fort Simcoe.

Fort Na-chess was one of importance in that summer of 1856, and until the starting of Fort Simcoe was the military strong point in the Yakima Country. It was located by the main Indian Trail which led from California to Canada and which was particularly useful to north central Washington Indians going to Celilo Falls in the Columbia, the greatest of all the fisheries.

A portion of the old trail, which was used by the Wilkies expedition in 1841, by Theodore Winthrop in 1853 and by Lt. George B. McClellan in 1853, still is clearly visible from the site of Fort Na-chess, where the trail angles down a slope of Naches Heights toward the river bottom.

While Col. Wright made his headquarters at Fort Na-chess he interviewed many Indians, including various leaders, on the hostilities the preceding year, although Kamiakin, after promising to appear, left the country. Two years later Wright was to have the satisfaction of defeating Kamiakin and allies at the battle of Four Lakes. Among the Indians stationed at Fort Na-chess or Basket Fort during the stay of Col. Wright were Owhi, Moses, Leshi (coast), Nanumkin (Methow), Ice, Kamiakin, Lo-kout, Qualchan, Skloom and Show-a-way. After the older Indians made their treaty with Col. Wright, Kamiakin, Qualchan and Lo-kout left the Yakima country permanently to join with the Palouse and Spokane Indians who would still fight. These Indians never accepted any government allotments.

As explained by Mrs. Claude Smith, pioneer daughter, who resides a short distance from the site of Fort Na-chess, the term "Basket Fort", used by the local people well described the construction -- "large basket affairs made of woven willows and filled with rocks, the baskets piled high to form the fort." . . . . . Mrs. Smith has a number of mulo shoes which were plowed up in the meadows surrounding the old camp.

One J. H. Fairchild in 1884 wrote a series of letters concerning the history of Fort Simcoe to the Editor of the Washington Farmer, a Yakima newspaper. One letter written by him on December 17, 1884, contains the following excerpt which is of interest:

"In the month of June, 1856, I went, in company with a train of commissary supplies, escorted by one or two companies of troops to the camp of Col. Wright, commanding an expedition to the

'YAKIMA COUNTRY'.

. . . . .

"The next night we camped on the Cowychoo, and at about 10 A.M. of the eighth day, entered the camp of Col. Wright, at what was called the "basket fort," on the Natchez River. The river was too high to ford, and the Indians from the opposite side kept up a constant and annoying fire on every soldier who ventured near the bank. Orders had been issued that no reply should be made, but many officers and soldiers were unable to resist the temptation to accept the challenge of the Indians, and the result was a constant interchange of shots. To provide a depot for his supplies, in case the water fell sufficiently to cross, the Colonel had caused a breast-work about 50 feet square to be built, the top of which was surmounted by a row of gabions, or willow baskets filled with earth. This gave the place its name. The troops remained at the Natchez till the river fell somewhat, when a detachment crossed, and found the Indians gone, 'bag and baggage.'"

It is our opinion that a suitable marker should be placed on Highway No. 410 where the old trail crossed the river at Basket Fort.

WALTER J. PURDEN

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Basket  
— Last

The following information was obtained from the records of the  
Department of Health, State of California, for the year 1950.

CHICAGO, ILL.