

## **ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS, II: HENRY H. SPALDING**

by Tom Cox

The founders of the First Presbyterian Church in Pocatello were heirs to the work of countless others. Appropriately, we have honored some of the more important of these by naming rooms in the church after them. But memories grow dim. Who were these giants whose names appear in our halls? Who, for example, was Henry H. Spalding? There is a short answer: Spalding founded the first Presbyterian mission, indeed the first Christian mission, in what is now Idaho. But there is more to the story than that.

Recognizing that they shared a Calvinist heritage that set them apart, early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Presbyterian, Congregational, and Dutch Reformed churches decided not to compete in their missionary efforts, but to divide up the turf. The body in which they joined to accomplish this, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, assigned the Rocky Mountain and Pacific Northwest area, then known as the Oregon Country and not yet a part of the United States, to the Presbyterians. Spalding's mission — and that of Marcus Whitman near present-day Walla Walla, Washington, were the first fruits.

In 1836 Spalding, Whitman, their wives (the first white women to cross the continent by land), layman William H. Gray, and several Indian boys and hired men came west in company with the annual fur traders' caravan. In addition to their Bibles, they brought wagons of goods and a small herd of cattle — all of which slowed their progress. At Fort Laramie, in an effort to speed things up, Spalding's heavy wagon was reduced to a two-wheeled cart; taken through to Fort Boise, it was the first vehicle to go so far on the overland trail. Not until they reached Fort Vancouver, where the Hudsons Bay Company had its regional headquarters, did they realize how much easier it would have been to have sent their goods by sea.

After a brief respite at Fort Vancouver, Spalding and Whitman returned to the interior — what fur traders called Upper Oregon — to establish their missions. Spalding settled in the heart of the Nez Perce country at the juncture of Lapwai Creek and the Clearwater River, a few miles east of present-day Lewiston. It seemed a good choice, for the Nez Perce had already shown an interest in the white man's ways and his religion.

For a time things went well. With the help of Indian laborers and of Gray, who worked at the mission as a mechanic and artisan, Spalding had soon erected mission buildings and a small water-powered saw and grist mill. He also built a system of ditches to irrigate fields laid out for crops on the Lapwai meadows. Spalding was convinced that the spiritual and physical salvation of the Nez Perce lay in abandoning their traditional hunting and gathering economy to become farmers; only that, he believed, would lead whites to respect their claims to the land. The fields would not only to supply food for the mission, but also demonstrate the benefits of agriculture.

Charles Geyer, a German botanist who collected in the area in 1844, was full of praise for Spalding's efforts, calling him "by far the most successful Indian missionary deputed by the American Board [of Commissioners] for Foreign Missions." Spalding had "boldly left off the absurd custom of teaching the Indian to pray, before endeavoring to fill his empty stomach" and

within eight years had made “the greater part of the tribe independent of hunting, by cultivating the soil, and rearing cattle and sheep.”

But trouble was brewing — indeed, it had already raised its ugly head before Geyer appeared on the scene. Gray was an unhappy man, jealous of Spalding and eager for a mission of his own; he was, as historian Dorothy Johansen put it, “a catalytic agent of disharmony.” Gray carried tales to Whitman and to missionaries more recently arrived at Kamiah (in Nez Perce territory) and at Tsimakain (in the Spokane country), and they were all too ready to believe him. To them Spalding’s secular concerns hardly seemed proper for Christian missionaries; moreover, there was always a degree of friction between Spalding and the Whitmans — in part because Spalding, inordinately thin-skinned, had once been a suitor for Narcissa Whitman’s hand but had been spurned, in part because the burdens of missionary life were wearing on them all, and in part because they simply had sharply different personalities. In 1841, concerned by the complaints it was receiving, the American Board ordered Whitman’s and Spalding’s missions closed, directed the two to transfer to Tsimakain, and ordered Gray and Asa Smith, the missionary at Kamiah, back to the states. Fortunately, by the time the order arrived, the Whitmans and Spalding had patched things up, and Gray had left the scene; in the fall of 1842, Whitman made a dash to the East Coast in a successful effort to persuade the Board to rescind its directive.

Given a reprieve, Spalding continued his work at Lapwai, pushing Christianity and agriculture as the dual forces of salvation for the tribe. Using an alphabet worked out by Asa Smith during his short tenure in the area and an old press obtained from missionaries in Hawaii, Spalding published a translation of the Book of Matthew — the first work printed in the Nez Perce language. Spalding left the Nez Perce in 1847 and moved to the Willamette Valley, but a Presbyterian presence remained as others — including converts — took up the cause of preaching the Gospel.

To the present, Nez Perce society has remained divided between traditionalists and those who followed the path laid out by Spalding. And while there are those who would question the value of what he did, there is no question but that Charles Geyer was correct — Henry Spalding had a far greater impact on his charges than the more purely evangelical missionaries with whom he oftentimes clashed did on theirs. . . . But it is not true, in spite of claims put forth at the potato museum in Blackfoot, that Spalding introduced potato cultivation into Idaho — that had already been done by the Coeur d’Alene, who had acquired potatoes (and knowledge of how to raise them) from traders at Fort Spokane some years earlier.