

OREGON BIOGRAPHIES



NATHANIEL J. WYETH

**Naturalist Nathaniel Wyeth
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Nathaniel Wyeth
(1802-1856)

During his lifetime, Nathaniel Wyeth held fourteen patents related to the cutting and transportation of ice and ran a successful trade in ice between New England and the West Indies. He is most famous, however, for what became known as his two failures. In 1832 and 1834 Wyeth led overland expeditions to Oregon, intending to establish a trading empire. Both times he was plagued by bad luck and his efforts came to naught.

Nathaniel Wyeth's two expeditions into this region encompassed many of America's interests in the Oregon Country. Wyeth's initial trip in 1832 provided the foundation and experience for the

1834 trip. In 1834, Wyeth and his companions, Jason and Daniel Lee, Thomas Nuttall, and John K. Townsend each sought elements of Oregon that we cherish today. Wyeth dreamed of framing, lumbering, and fishing opportunities. The Lees were fueled by religious missions and perhaps more practically, by the opportunity to build a community. Nuttall and Townsend, renowned naturalists, were compelled by a deep scientific curiosity about the region's natural history and ecosystems. Wyeth's route was a precursor to the Oregon Trail route followed by hundreds of thousands beginning just a decade later. Wyeth and his compatriots traveled already established Indian and trapper trails from the Snake River to the Hudson's Bay Company post at Fort Vancouver.

Historical context

In 1830 and 1831, a Boston school teacher, Hall Jackson Kelley, began promoting the Oregon Country to any who would listen through the Oregon Colonization Society. Among those who heard were Nathaniel Wyeth and Benjamin Bonneville. Kelley appointed the two men "captains" and continued developing the Oregon Colonization Society's strategies. When Kelley's plans fell apart (due, in part to poor logistical planning and outright impracticality), Wyeth and Bonneville both set forth on independent expeditions to the Oregon Country in 1832 and 1834.

Nathaniel Wyeth was a Boston hotelier's son employed in the ice making business. He was fascinated by the fur trade and the potential for shipping dried salmon to eastern US markets. At 29, Wyeth was a bright and gregarious advocate for Oregon. He researched and studied available materials, borrowing books from Hall Kelley and reading Lewis and Clark's journals.

Wyeth formed the Pacific Trading Company and invited all comers to join. He enlisted only about half the number he had hoped for. When he departed Boston, bound for the Columbia River and the Oregon Country in March of 1832, Wyeth had 21 men in his entourage, each wearing a uniform and carrying a rifle, bayonet, and axe. Ten bugles were carried to help inspire a quick step and speedy movement across the country. Wyeth sent trade goods around the horn on a sailing ship, the *Sultana*, hoping that its timely arrival would provide goods to trade with the Indians and, competition being competition, the HBC trappers.

After steaming across waterways, hiking through mountains and riding the rails, the group arrived at St. Louis, where Wyeth and his company met Kenneth McKenzie of the American Fur Company. McKenzie, charmed by Wyeth or perhaps seeing this group of "greenhorns" as a potential distraction to both the Hudson's Bay Company and the emerging Rocky Mountain Fur Company, encouraged Wyeth to join up with William Sublette at Independence, Missouri.

After joining efforts, Sublette and Wyeth set out with 80 men, and oxen, sheep, and horses. Over the next months, the group endured freezing nights, scorching days, dusty trails, mountain fevers, dysentery, turbid water, dangerous stream crossings, and snow squalls. They followed trappers' trails along the Platte River (on what would later become the Oregon Trail) to the Green River, then north to the Hoback and the Snake Rivers.

The annual Rendezvous was held in Pierre's Hole that year. Nine members of Wyeth's group, concerned over an apparent lack of direction, resigned. With eleven men still in his company,

Wyeth worried about their chances in Indian country. Problems between the Blackfeet, the Gros Ventres tribes, and the white trappers had more than once erupted into violence. As Wyeth made arrangements to return to southern Idaho, the Blackfeet and Gros Ventres moved toward the rendezvous site at Pierre's Hole. Meanwhile, Sublette gathered allies from the Nez Perces and Flathead tribes and worked back to attack. A brief and bloody battle ensued in which at least twenty-six Gros Ventres were killed, including women and children, and perhaps a dozen whites and Flatheads. Many more were injured, including William Sublette, who returned to the States for medical care.

Following the battle at Pierre's Hole, Wyeth and his men moved towards the Snake Plains, across the Blackfoot River, returning to the trapper's trail that evolved into the Oregon Trail (and where, in 1834, he would build Fort Hall). The party zigzagged across the trapper's trail, working toward streams that might hold beaver, but trapping was poor. The Hudson's Bay Company had already worked many of the streams and those animals remaining were in lower-grade summer fur.

By mid-September, Wyeth and his men returned to the Snake River where it flowed northward (south of Nampa, Idaho on today's maps). After a month, Wyeth's company traveled to the Hudson's Bay Company post at Fort Nez Perces, on the banks of the Walla Walla.

While there, Wyeth and his men enjoyed the hospitality of the HBC and Pierre Pambrun, the Chief Trader at the post. Pambrun provided clothing, food, and loaned Wyeth and his company a barge and a guide for the remaining miles down the Columbia River to the HBC post at Fort Vancouver.

The Columbia enthralled and terrified Wyeth's company; the flat waters were serene but the rough falls and cataracts were frightening. Wyeth hired Indians to portage the barges and belongings around the falls, and back on the river, they enjoyed a smooth sail to Fort Vancouver. When they arrived, the *Sultana* was nowhere in sight.

To kill time, Wyeth and four of his men canoed the hundred miles to the mouth of the Columbia. Along the way, they investigated Indian fishing operations with an eye toward establishing an international salmon market. At Fort George (the HBC's renamed Astoria), Wyeth learned that the *Sultana* was wrecked en route and that his supplies were lost.

It is likely that John McLoughlin, Chief Factor at Fort Vancouver, never considered Wyeth a legitimate threat and so entertained the American hospitably at the Fort. In spite of the loss of the *Sultana* and the subsequent resignation of his entire company, Wyeth remained steadfast in his desire to develop the Pacific Trading Company. After McLoughlin loaned him a canoe and crew with which to explore the Willamette Valley. Wyeth recognized the commercial opportunities the Valley presented for a new venture, the Columbia River Fishing and Trading Company.

In February, 1833, Wyeth and two of his former company members joined Francis Ermatinger's brigade as it traveled north toward Fort Colvile. Wyeth noted in his journal:

I parted with feelings of sorrow from the gentlemen of Fort Vancouver... Doct McGlaucland the Gov. of the place is a man distinguished as much for his kindness and humanity as his good sense and information and to whom I am so much indebted as that he will never be forgotten by me.

By April, the party was camped on Clark's Fork of the Columbia, where Wyeth noted in his journal: "went out to collect some flowers for friend Nuttall." Even though the HBC held the fur trade in tight control, Wyeth saw other opportunities for trade including using with the HBC as an intermediary, trading with American trappers at the annual rendezvous, and through agricultural development. Wyeth's good nature and generosity got the best of him, and after developing the idea, presented it in a formal letter to the HBC Governor George Simpson. Simpson was far less amenable to working with Americans than McLoughlin was and turned Wyeth down.

From Fort Colville, Ermatinger continued into Flathead country, and Wyeth began working his way southward, aiming for Bonneville's party and the 1833 Rendezvous. Wyeth watched as pelts were traded and imagined breaking through old trade patterns to establish new partnerships that would allow him to participate in the business. He envisioned building a post on the Columbia, in direct competition with the HBC, modeled after Fort Vancouver complete with farms, shops, and stores. He would go one step further than the HBC and establish salmon fisheries.

Wyeth negotiated a contract with Milton Sublette, William's brother, and Tom Fitzpatrick to bring their 1834 supplies from St. Louis to the Rendezvous. In so doing he cut out William Sublette and Robert Campbell -- and would pay for it later. Wyeth, Milton Sublette, two engages (laborers hired for the trip) and two Indians (a 20 year old Nez Perce and the 13-year-old son of a Flathead woman and a French Canadian trapper), set out for Boston. En route, Wyeth's small party met Milton's brother, William, and Robert Campbell building a fort at the confluence of the Yellowstone and the Missouri Rivers.} Milton stayed behind with his brother while Wyeth forged ahead with his two engages and the Indian boys.

By November Wyeth was back in Cambridge, Massachusetts, repudiating negative rumors about his previous expedition and raising funds for his next venture. A number of investors supported Wyeth based solely on his contract with Sublette and Fitzpatrick and the Rocky Mountain Fur Company.

1834

In early 1834, Wyeth bought supplies, which were loaded onto the *May Dacre*, bound for the Hawaiian Islands and then the Columbia. He also arranged for the ship's crew to buy livestock and plants while in the Islands. Wyeth secured the necessary livestock and goods for an overland trip. In the process, he met naturalists Thomas Nuttall and John Townsend,} who both hoped to join the venture, collecting specimens of plants and animals during the trip. In addition to the naturalists, Wyeth was approached by Reverend Jason Lee and his nephew, Daniel, Methodist missionaries eager to bring the white man's God to the western tribes, especially the Flatheads.

Wyeth consented to all. He provided lists of goods and livestock that the other party members would need to survive the trip. Townsend recorded in his journal that Wyeth...

Accompanied us to a store in the town, and selected a number of articles for us, among which were several pairs of leathern pantaloons, enormous overcoats, made of green blankets, and white wool hats, with round crowns, fitting tightly to the head, brims five inches wide, and almost hard enough to resist a rifle ball.

Wyeth suggested routes to the Missouri and took time to explain what he knew about the tribes and the western landscapes. With as many as 50 persons in the party, he set out for the Oregon Country. Townsend described his excitement at beginning his western adventure:

On the 28th of April, at 10 o'clock in the morning, our caravan, consisting of 70 men, and two hundred and fifty horses, began its march; Captain Wyeth and Milton Sublette took the lead, Mr. Nuttall and myself rode beside them; then the men in double file, each leading, with a line, two horses heavily laden, and Captain Thing (Captain W.'s assistant) brought up the rear. The band of missionaries, with their horned cattle, rode along the flanks...

It was altogether so exciting that I could scarcely contain myself. Every man in the company seemed to feel...the same kind of enthusiasm.

Wyeth's second group encountered trials and tribulations similar to those experienced by the previous expedition: furious rain storms, dysentery, extreme temperatures, lost or stolen livestock, and stampeding horses. Throughout however, bright hope and deep appreciation for the land and its potential was noted. Townsend and Nuttall kept diaries, recording and collecting plants and animals, and events -- the day a hunter brought in a small pronghorn, no larger than a kitten and the tender care they administered to the little animal. Jason Lee quickly emerged as a stalwart traveler, hunting, even on the Sabbath, and sustaining the group's temporal and spiritual needs.

Wyeth pushed his group to the limit of their endurance. He worried that William Sublette would double-cross him and that he would be left with a full load of supplies and no buyers for the goods. It took just 51 days to travel from St. Louis to the Green River rendezvous. He sold as much as he could to all comers before Wyeth arrive.

Ray Billington describes Wyeth's reaction to being swindled:

To his shocked horror he found that the Rocky Mountain Company partners, aware of their small year's catch and reluctant to share any of their returns with an outsider, had hurriedly dispatched their own caravan westward under William Sublette...

No Yankee of [Wyeth's] shrewdness would stand quietly aside while a contract was violated in this inexcusable manner. 'Gentlemen,' he was reported to have said, 'I will roll a stone into your garden that you will never be able to get out.'

Wyeth had been beaten again, but he still pressed on. With the naturalists, and the missionaries, with Scottish sportsman Sir William Drummond Stewart in tow, Wyeth left the bawdy rendezvous continuing west. With a full load of goods meant for the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, but now available to anyone, Wyeth decided to make the most of the opportunity and level a bit of revenge. Tom McKay, McLoughlin's stepson, joined Wyeth's party, just to see what Wyeth might do with all that merchandise. Clearly, the HBC was very concerned about the impact the Americans would have on their already dwindling business in the West.

Wyeth selected a site and built a fort on the Snake River, the 'stone' in the Rocky Mountain Fur Company's garden. While the Lees and Stewart went ahead with McKay, Wyeth set to building the rough fort, naming it Fort Hall after one of his financial supporters. After leaving a dozen men or so to run the Fort, Wyeth continued west with the remaining members of his party.

McKay led the missionaries and Stewart as far as (present-day) Glenn's Ferry on the Snake River. Upon reaching the Snake, McKay turned away, ostensibly to trap streams to the north, but really to circle back and build Fort Boise on the Boise River, five miles from its confluence with the Snake River, and a post situated between the HBC's Fort Vancouver and Wyeth's Fort Hall. McKay clearly hoped to provide an option to Indians well-familiar with the HBC's generous practices and the American's unknown business operations.

The Lees and Stewart worked west alone on what trails they could find. They crossed the Owyhee, then the Malheur Valley, and rejoined the Snake. They followed Burnt Canyon into the desert and then moved in the Powder River Valley.

Once through the Powder River Valley, the group continued on a northwesterly track along established Indian trails to the Grande Ronde Valley. Fires burning in the valley obscured the view for miles. After meeting briefly with Bonneville, who was out reconnoitering, the group continued over the Blue Mountains.

Townsend recorded their efforts through the Grande Ronde Valley:

About half an hour's brisk trotting brought us to the foot of a steep and high mountain, called the Blue. This is said to be the most extensive chain west of the dividing ridge, and, with one exception perhaps the most difficult of passage. The whole mountain is densely covered with tall pine trees, with an undergrowth of service bushes and other shrubs, and the path is strewn, to a very inconvenient degree, with volcanic rocks. In some of the ravines we find small springs of water; they are, however, rather rare, and the grass has been lately consumed, and many of the trees blasted by the ravaging fires of the Indians. These fires are yet smoldering, and the smoke from them effectually prevents our viewing the surrounding country, and completely obscures the beams of the sun. We travelled this evening until after dark, and encamped on a small stream in a gorge, where we found a plot of grass that had escaped the burning.

September 1st. - Last evening, as we were about retiring to our beds, we heard, distinctly, as we thought, a loud halloo, several times repeated, and in a tone like that of a man in great distress. Supposing it to be a person who had lost his way in the darkness, and was

searching for us, we fired several guns at regular intervals, but as they elicited no reply, after waiting a considerable time, we built a large fire, as a guide, and lay down to sleep.

Early this morning, a large panther was seen prowling around our camp, and the hallooing of last night was explained. It was the dismal, distressing yell by which this animal entices its prey, until pity or curiosity induces it to approach to its destruction.

Once the summit had been gained, the cattle drivers (both members of Lee's group) stayed behind with the animals while the rest of the party hurried on to Fort Nez Percés. Townsend provides vivid narrative of their course through the Blue Mountains:

September 1st. [Later in the day.] The path through the valley, in which we encamped last night, was level and smooth for about a mile; we then mounted a short, steep hill, and began immediately to descend. The road down the mountain would constantly, and we travelled in short, zigzag lines, in order to avoid the extremely abrupt declivities; but occasionally, we were compelled to descend in places that made us pause before making the attempt: they were, some of them, almost perpendicular, and our horses would frequently slide several yards, before they could recover. To this must be added enormous jagged masses of rock, obstructing the road in many places, and pine trees projecting their horizontal branches across the path.

The road continued, as I have described it, to the valley in the plain, and a full hour was consumed before we reached it. The country then became comparatively level again to the next range, where a mountain was to be ascended of the same height as the last. Here we dismounted and led our horses, it being impracticable, in their present state, to ride them. It was the most toilsome march I ever made, and we were all so much fatigued, when we arrived at the summit, that rest was as indispensable to us as to our poor jaded horses. Here we made a noon camp, with a handful of grass and no water. This last article appears very scarce, the ravines affording none, and our dried salmon and kamas bread were eaten unmoistened. The route, in the afternoon, was over the top of the mountain, the road tolerably level, but crowded with stones. Towards evening, we commenced descending again, and in every ravine and gulley we cast our anxious eyes in search of water; we even explored several of them, where there appeared to exist any probability of success, but not one drop did we find. Night at length came on, dark and pitchy, without a moon or a single star to give us a ray of light; but still we proceeded, depending solely upon the vision and sagacity of our horses to keep the track. We travelled steadily until 9 o'clock, when we saw ahead the dark outline of a high mountain, and soon after heard the men who rode in front, cry out, joyously, at the top of their voices, "water! water!" It was truly a cheering sound, and the words were echoed loudly by every man in the company. We had not tasted water since morning, and both horses and men have been suffering considerably for the want of it.

2d. - Captain W[yeth] and two men, left us early this morning for Walla-walla [Fort Nez Percés], where they expect to arrive this evening, and send us some provision, of which we shall be in need, to-morrow.

Our camp moved soon after, under the direction of Captain Thing, and in about four miles reached Utalla river, where it stopped, and remained until 12 o'clock.

As we were approaching so near the abode of those in whose eyes we wished to appear like fellow Christians, we concluded that there would be a propriety in attempting to remove at least one of the heathenish badges which we had worn throughout the journey; so Mr. N.'s razor was fished out from its hiding place in the bottom of his trunk, and in a few minutes our encumbered chins lost their long cherished ornaments; we performed our ablutions in the river, arrayed ourselves in clean linen, trimmed our long hair, and then arranged our toilet before a mirror, with great self-complacence and satisfaction. I admired my own appearance considerably, (and this is, probably, an acknowledgment that few would make,) but I could not refrain from laughing at the strange, party-colored appearance of my physiognomy, the lower portion being fair, like a woman's, and the upper, brown and swarthy as an Indian.

In the afternoon, soon after leaving the Utalla, we ascended a high and very steep hill, and came immediately in view of a beautiful, and regularly undulating country of great extent. We have now probably done with high, rugged mountains; the sun shines clear, the air is bracing and elastic, and we are all in fine spirits.

The next day, the road being generally level, and tolerably free from stones, we were enabled to keep our horses at the swiftest gait to which we dare urge them. We have been somewhat disappointed in not receiving the expected supplies from Walla-walla, but have not suffered for provision, as the grouse and hares are very abundant here, and we have shot as many as we wished.

At about noon we struck the Walla-walla river, a very pretty stream of fifty or sixty yards in width, fringed with tall willows, and containing a number of salmon, which we can see frequently leaping from the water. The pasture here, being good, we allowed our horses an hour's rest to feed, and then travelled on over the plain, until near dark, when, on rising a sandy hill, the noble Columbia burst at once upon our view. I could scarcely repress a loud exclamation of delight and pleasure, as I gazed upon the magnificent river, flowing silently and majestically on, and reflected that I had actually crossed the vast American continent, and now stood upon a stream that poured its waters directly into the Pacific. This, then, was the great Oregon, the first appearance of which gave Lewis and Clark so many emotions of joy and pleasure, and on this stream our indefatigable countrymen wintered, after the toils and privations of a long, and protracted journey through the wilderness. My reverie was suddenly interrupted by one of the men exclaiming from his position in advance, "there is the fort" We had, in truth approached very near, without being conscious of it. There stood the fort on the bank of the river; horses and horned cattle were roaming about the vicinity, and on the borders of the little Walla-walla, we recognized the white tent of our long lost missionaries. These we soon joined, and were met and received by them like brethren. Mr.N. and myself were invited to sup with them upon a dish of stewed hares which they had just prepared, and it is almost needless to say that we did full justice to the good men's cookery. They told us that they had travelled comfortably from Fort Hall, without any unusual fatigue, and like

ourselves, had no particularly stirring adventures. Their route, although somewhat longer, was a much less toilsome and difficult one, and they suffered but little for food, being well provided with dried buffalo meat, which had been prepared near Fort Hall.

At Fort Nez Percés, the group found little food, only bread and fish, but Pierre Pambrun, the post's chief trader, was willing to supply what he could and agreed to care for the missionaries' cattle and rent a barge to carry the missionaries and Stewart to Fort Vancouver.

Wyeth followed a few days behind. En route, he met with Bonneville, where they apparently discussed a joint venture "against the common enemy," before hurrying on toward Fort Nez Percés. Wyeth crossed the Lees' trail, and followed it through the burned Grande Ronde Valley to Pambrun's post.

Their time with Pambrun was short. The group quickly gathered their belongings and went down the Columbia -- some went overland, following the river bank, the others traveled in scattered canoes. The trip down the Columbia was as treacherous as before. Canoes floundered or were lost, belongings were soaked and the straggling party was in dire need of help when they arrived at Fort Vancouver.

John McLoughlin was, as was his custom, generous and hospitable to the Americans. He provided guides to Jason and Daniel Lee who led them through the fertile Willamette Valley. The Doctor welcomed the missionaries sobering and soulful influences on the retired trappers and traders, and Indians around the Fort. The Lees found an appropriate site 60 miles up the Willamette River in an area partially settled by retired voyagers and their families near French Prairie. The Lees and their assistants began building a home and school house immediately.

While the missionaries were on tour, Wyeth met his supply ship, the *May Dacre*, which arrived at Fort Vancouver the day after the Americans. The ship had been delayed in storms damage and arrived too late to capitalize on the spring salmon season. Nonetheless, Wyeth saw opportunity. He moored the ship to a rock on Wapato Island (now Sauvie Island) at the mouth of the Willamette River and unloaded his shipment of hogs, sheep, goats, poultry, and a variety of plants. As long as he stayed out of the fur trade, the HBC 'allowed' Wyeth to fish and trade in the sphere of their influence. He proceeded to build the second of his forts, this one named Fort William, and traveled up the Willamette to select a farm site in the Valley.

Returning from his excursion into the Valley, Wyeth moved up the Columbia to trade what he could and to check on the fortunes of Fort Hall. Wyeth's misfortune followed, and his crew of Hawaiian Islanders (Kanakas) deserted, taking valuable horses with them. Wyeth continued trapping into the north country, where he realized that the fur trade was a dying industry; streams were over-trapped and the yields were ever diminishing. He returned to Fort Vancouver and Fort William in February 1835.

While the missionaries were building their mission in The Willamette Valley, Wyeth explored the region for commercial opportunities, and the naturalists, tired of the oppressive winter rains, boarded an HBC ship bound for the Hawaiian Islands where they spent the winter of 1834-5

researching the Islands' flora and fauna. In May, 1835, Townsend and Wyeth met again. Townsend reported:

May 20th, 1835. Mr. Wyeth, came down from Walla-walla yesterday, and this morning I embarked with him in a large canoe, manned by Kanakas, for a trip to the Wallammet falls in order to procure salmon. We visited Fort William, (Wyeth's new settlement upon Wappatoo island,) which is about fifteen miles from the lower mouth of the Wallammet. We found here the missionaries, Messrs. Lee and Edwards, who arrived to-day from their station. ... They give flattering accounts of their prospects here; they are surrounded by a considerable number of Indians who are friendly to the introduction of civilization and religious light, and who treat them with the greatest hospitality and kindness. They have built several comfortable log houses, and the soil in their vicinity they represent as unusually rich and productive. They have, I think, a good prospect of being serviceable to th[e] people; and if they commence their operations judiciously and pursue a steady, unwavering course, the Indians in this section of country may yet be redeemed. ...

The spot chosen by Captain W. for his fort is on a high piece of land, which will probably not be overflowed by the periodical freshets, and the soil is the rich black loam so plentifully distributed through this section of country. The men now live in tents and temporary huts, but several log houses are constructing which, when finished, will vie in durability and comfort with Vancouver itself.

As seemed to be Wyeth's luck in the west, Fort William was a marginal success. He traded some with Ewing Young, and the small group of Americans settled in the area. Trade was controlled by the HBC and a newcomer was easily defeated. The water in and around Sauvie Island was a breeding ground for outbreaks of a variety of diseases, including malaria and typhoid. Trading trips inland from the Columbia, both up the river and into Oregon's interior, were unsuccessful. Wyeth stayed at Fort William until 1836, when, after losing 17 men to disease or violence, he sold Fort Hall to the HBC in 1837, and left the West forever.

Wyeth returned to Boston where he was reinstated in the ice business. With his old partner, Wyeth found success in the East as an inventor and entrepreneur. His personal successes in the East far outweighed his misfortunes in the West. Still, Wyeth found reward in his western adventures, never regretting, openly at least, his losses or the time spent here.

Source: The End of the Oregon Trail Museum website at <http://www.endoftheoregontrail.org/oregontrails/wyethroute.html>.

For transcripts of Wyeth's Journals of these expeditions see <http://www.xmission.com/~drudy/mtman/html/nwythint.html>.