H. K. W. PERKINS, MISSIONARY TO THE DALLES*

by Frank L. Green

The wind blew briskly from the northwest and the decks were covered with ice and snow as the brig Peru left Boston for the Sandwich Islands on January 24, 1837. The Rev. Henry Kirk White Perkins, a young missionary bound for the Oregon country, had said goodbye to his friends and now sought the warmth of his quarters so as to organize his scattered thoughts.

The call that had come for missionaries to this far off region had found a ready response in him, partly from religious sentiment, partly from romance. His commission from the Rev. Nathan Bangs, Secretary of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, directed him to place himself under Jason Lee of the Willamette Mission to aid in promoting the cause of Christ among the aborigines. Henry and Miss Elvira Johnson, who had left for Oregon six months earlier, were all but engaged and his thoughts were understandably with her as well, for perhaps she was already laboring among the savages in that lonely mission field without a protector.

Jason Lee, his nephew Daniel, Cyrus Shepard, a teacher from Lynn, Massachusetts, and Philip L. Edwards and Courtney M. Walker of Richmond, Missouri, had been ministering to the Indians of the Willamette Valley since October of 1834. The Lees left records of their activities and their story has been told and retold. In all of this there is little more than passing mention given to the man whose “work in Oregon among the Indians was probably more successful than that of any other man connected with the Methodist Missions.”

*Most of the source material for this article was taken from a portion of an autobiography and a collection of letters given to the Washington State Historical Society by the Rev. John M. Canse, as copied from the originals owned by Miss Grace Albee of Boston, grand-daughter of the missionary. I am indebted for further material on Perkins to Mr. William E. Zimpfer, Librarian, Boston University School of Theology, and Miss Elizabeth Hughey, Librarian, Methodist Publishing House.


2 Hines, op.cit., 362. (Editor: This quotation refers to the works of the Rev. Jason Lee in the present state of Oregon. It should not be confused with the missionary service of James H. Wilbur who later was Indian missionary to the Yakimas in the present state of Washington.)
Perkins was born November 21, 1814 in Penobscot, Maine, the son of Chesley and Deborah Morgrage (or Muggridge) Perkins. His early years were filled with tragedy and frequent moving from place to place. At the age of sixteen he found himself all but alone in the world after his parents and five brothers and sisters had died. It was then that he began to think for the first time of what he should do with his life. After turning the question over in his mind he determined that if he should be allowed to live he would become a minister.

Under the direction of the Rev. Mark Trafton of the Castine and Penobscot circuit he prepared himself for admittance to Maine Wesleyan Seminary in Readfield, Maine. While there he met Elvira Johnson whose departure for Oregon has already been noted. Their relationship had grown so that it came as no surprise to their friends when, shortly after his ordination, Perkins decided to follow her.

Before word of his appointment came Perkins was given a charge in the small village of Mercer where he found very soon that he had no idea of how to run the daily business of a parish. Not only that, but he had been given little instruction in homiletics or the use of the Bible and was unable to argue doctrinal theology in such a way as to justify the existence of the separate denominations.

While still agitated by these problems he attended his first camp meeting as a minister. Here, in a prayer meeting, he received the first indication of divine influence in his life. He could give no rationale for the change that took place in his feelings, but he had lost the self-consciousness that had hindered him and his sermons seemed to come without effort for a while. Before long, however, he fell into perplexity again and his ignorance of many theological subjects appeared more serious than before.

The young minister began reading extensively in theological books in order to make up his deficiencies. He soon tired of this and was about to give up the struggle when he was informed that the brig Peru would be sailing from Boston on January 2, 1837. He was directed to make his way there at once and take passage on the vessel with the Rev. David Leslie who had also been assigned to the Oregon Mission.

Perkins left immediately and, travelling on horseback through the snow drifts left by a recent storm, arrived in Boston only to find that the ship had been delayed and would not sail for several days. When all was in readiness for the voyage Perkins was shocked to learn that the ship was loaded with cannon and small arms which the owners hoped to sell either to Peru or Chile who were at war with each other at the time. With the mission party, in addition to Perkins and Leslie, was Miss Margaret Smith, a teacher, who would share the duties of instructing the Indian children with Miss Johnson. Also among the passengers was a young man named James Jackson Jarves who was later to write of this trip in his History of the Hawaiian or Sandwich Islands.

Never having been out of New England, Perkins was charmed by the sights along the coast of South America. In order to catch the
trade winds the ship was running close enough so that the tropical vegetation could be seen. Coming around Cape Horn the weather became so intensely cold that the passengers had to keep to their beds with all the blankets they could find wrapped around them. Close to Tierra Del Fuego they were struck by a gale which made it impossible to gain a mile for two weeks. To Perkins it was the most dreary fortnight of his life. After catching a favorable wind they made a good run to Valparaiso where it appeared the Chileans were too poor to do business. The Peruvians were no better off and Perkins was relieved that the privateering aspect of the voyage had proven a failure.

Perkins had grown so accustomed to lush scenery that the first view of the Sandwich Islands made little impression on him. He had only a short time to make the acquaintance of the missionaries and inform himself of their progress, though he noted with wry humor that the missionaries were waited on by servants. It appeared that the climate caused such enervation that until one was used to it one could hardly find the strength to do common tasks.

The annual barque of the Hudson's Bay Company was about to sail for Fort Vancouver and readily took the missionaries on board. It was a beautiful September afternoon when Perkins first caught sight of the Columbia River. At first not a sign of human habitation could be seen, but soon the red men began to stream on board and throng the decks. Perkins knew right away he did not love the hideous savages. They seemed, in fact, to be a blot on the scenery.

He fell in with the proposal to leave the barque immediately and proceed up the river to Fort Vancouver. It was already late in the evening and they were able to go only a short distance before drawing their canoe to shore to make camp. Perkins was almost too excited to sleep. This, plus the effects of the cold damp air of the river, made it difficult for him to proceed the next morning, but he took his place in the canoe and the group went on to Astoria. Here they were shown such trees as Perkins had never dreamed of in Maine. What a barrier to agriculture. How could a single field be cleared?

After a short delay at Fort Vancouver, the long awaited meeting with his intended took place when the party reached the Willamette Mission House late in the evening of September 20, 1837. Surprisingly enough Perkins met with a coldly correct welcome from Miss Johnson who appeared to treat him merely as a friend she hadn't seen for a while. He was unable to account for this until he found that letters from the Sandwich Islands had preceded him criticizing his orthodoxy. Perkins never saw these letters and never discovered who wrote them, but they had a damaging effect. He confessed to having been under infidel influence during the voyage. Perhaps he had talked a little too much with the missionaries about his doubts. At any rate, he had not succumbed to them and Miss Johnson was quickly disabused of that notion.

Elvira was teaching between twenty and thirty Indian children, but lacked a suitable school room. The log house which served as head-
quarters for the mission was unpartitioned and the scholars were often distracted by the smells and sounds of cooking which was done on an open fireplace next to where they sat. Henry, who was no stranger to carpentry, quickly remedied this deficiency by erecting the needed partition. It was a labor of love although Henry's ardor had cooled somewhat after the reception he had gotten. Finally, however, he was able to direct Elvira's thoughts toward the subject of marriage. Further blandishments were necessary until at last she consented.

His colleague, Mr. Leslie, had by now established his family in a small block house within a short distance from the mission. Here, on the night of November 21, 1837, Henry's 23rd birthday, Leslie joined the two in marriage. The ceremony was a simple one with most of the missionaries in attendance.

The newlyweds made their first home in the attic of the Leslie residence. The rough logs of the ceiling were lined with Indian mats which kept out some of the cold. Trunks and boxes were made into a table and a desk. To this Henry added two chairs he had bought on the ship and also constructed a wash stand. Small and meagerly furnished as it was, it contained probably the happiest couple in Oregon.

As winter gave way to spring in 1838 the uncertainty of the couple concerning their future in Oregon was dispelled when Superintendent Lee decided that Perkins could be used most effectively in helping to establish a new mission up the Columbia beyond the mountains. Accordingly he sent Henry and Daniel Lee on an exploring expedition in March with instructions to find a suitable location with enough Indian population to make a mission worthwhile. Of course Perkins could not take his wife on such an expedition into unknown country. She was left with the Leslies until proper preparations could be made for her comfort.

Two wooden canoes of differing size were provided for the journey. Perkins took the smaller one and loaded it with baggage and provisions. Lee took the other with larger items, tools, cooking utensils and a supply of goods to trade with the Indians. The two said goodbye to loved ones and friends on March 14, 1838 and proceeded down the Willamette River to Fort Vancouver.

After a brief stop-over at the Fort where more supplies were obtained, Lee and Perkins set out once more with six Indians including an old chief named Marnicoon who proved to be an excellent guide. Perkins was apprehensive about what he felt was a final break with civilization but took courage when he thought of the work to be done and pressed on. The canoes were almost swamped at one point while shooting the rapids and the foodstuffs were dampened, but the party arrived at Wascopam without further incident. It had taken them a week to cover 150 miles.

Wascopam, or the place of the Wasco, was named for the type of bowl made by the Indians from the horn of a mountain goat which
was hunted in the surrounding mountains. The tribe inhabiting this area was in an excellent position to practice extortion upon those passing up and down the river. All routes of travel met at this point three miles below the lower end of the narrow rock-bound channel known to the French fur traders as Les Dalles. Lewis and Clark managed to obtain horses for their return journey only after hard bargaining with these Indians. Nathaniel Wyeth, who passed that way in 1832, noted their reputation for thievery. Thus is was to a very strategic location, but also to a very sly and devious tribe of savages that Perkins and Lee had been called.

The village consisted of fifteen board and mat houses containing perhaps 100 to 150 permanent inhabitants. About 50 of them were on hand to greet the missionaries. Perkins found these Indians somewhat more handsome and well-clothed than the first ones he had encountered on board ship at the mouth of the Columbia.

That night after erecting a tent and enjoying a supper of stewed ducks and chocolate Perkins and Lee went through the ceremony of smoking with the principal men of the village. The next day they explored the country for several miles around until they found a suitable place to build a house and start a small garden.

As the work progressed the missionaries found they could not avail themselves of Indian help as they could find none who would work for nothing. Until hoped for provisions arrived from Fort Vancouver they had nothing to offer. They did, however, have the services of a Hawaiian named George who cooked for them and helped with the building. The so-called house was to be merely a stone wall which enclosed their tent and a combination dining room and kitchen covered with boughs. They stayed in this makeshift dwelling until fall.

Before long the supply of provisions arrived and with them came Chief Wamcutta of the Wascos who had been trading at the fort. The missionaries received him with all due ceremony and explained their purpose in coming, all of which he received in a friendly manner.

Being assured that the disposition of the Indians was peaceful, Perkins set out for the Willamette Mission to bring back his wife. While there he was able, through the kindness of Dr. Elijah White, the resident physician, to obtain the services for one year of a mulatto by the name of Anderson. Mr. Anderson also had a family which made the return trip to Wascopam a hard one. On May 5, after an eight and one-half day journey, Mrs. Perkins got her first glimpse of her new home.

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5F. G. Young, ed., The Correspondence and Journals of Captain Nathaniel J. Wyeth. Eugene: University of Oregon, 1899, 175.
Home was still the humble tent with its stone fortification. It was not until August that they exchanged the tent for the shell of a house twenty by thirty feet made of hewn pine logs. It had no roof as yet, but was welcomed by Mrs. Perkins who was now well advanced in pregnancy.

In the early part of September Lee, with four Indians, set out for Willamette on an unmarked trail over which they intended to return with stock for the mission. When they returned Perkins planned to take his wife to Willamette for the delivery of the baby, but days passed into weeks and there was no sign of the party. It finally came to be known that Lee's guides had proven worthless. After three or four days travel they had become completely lost. With provisions for only six days they were obliged to shoot a horse to keep from starving before they reached their destination.6

Perkins never lost his sense of humor even under the most trying circumstances. Though undoubtedly he was anxious about getting his wife to Willamette before signs of winter appeared, he wrote a light-hearted note to his partner when it became apparent that he could wait no longer. He reminded Lee to look out for troublesome mice who would get into anything that was not covered. He pictured an emaciated Lee returning and hoped that his protruding cheek bones would not break the looking glass. With little time to spare the Perkins arrived at Willamette and Elvira gave birth to a son, Henry Johnson Perkins, on November 3.

When young Master Perkins was only five weeks old the family started once again for Wascopam hoping to get home before the river became impassable. After going a short distance from Fort Vancouver, high winds and bitter cold forced them to turn back. They enjoyed the hospitality of the Hudson's Bay Company for Christmas and two months thereafter until they were able to return home, arriving February 18, 1839.

Lee, who had been alone in the mission house for four months, was overjoyed at the return of the Perkins family. He was also happy to surrender part of the Sabbath duties as Henry was now conversant in the Indian language and could take his turn at preaching.

Since he could find no way to accommodate the language to the English alphabet, Perkins was obliged to construct a new one with its own orthography. In the absence of a printing press he lettered by hand simple scripture lessons which he could give to the Indians and refer to in his teaching.

The territory covered by the missionaries stretched from the Cascades on the west to the Deschutes River in the east, and from the Walla Walla village of Tilhanné, twenty-five miles south to the land of the Klickitats on the north.7 For the most part Lee dealt with the Chinooks on the north bank of the Columbia and Perkins visited the Walla Walla villages.

6For a first-hand account see Lee and Frost, op.cit., 155-61.
7Hines, op.cit., 165
These villages were composed of simple dwellings six or eight feet square linked together under a common roof which slanted at one end to provide protection from the rain. Under this shelter were the rough-hewn beds spread with skins where the families slept huddled together like sheep. A small hole was dug in the ground for a fire and a small opening made in the roof above it for the smoke to escape if it had a mind to. If it didn’t it mingled with the aroma of decaying fish and other offal.

When Perkins entered the village he was usually greeted by one of the chiefs. The Indians seemed to have no form of salutation among themselves, but had acquired the white man’s custom of shaking hands. The people were then called together usually in a mat-covered area used for drying salmon. There might be as many as 300 in the congregation seated in a circle, the women on one side and the men on the other. In the center was a mat covered with a bear skin which was the preachers’ place. Several of the principal men of the village would join in prayer. Perkins would then give them a short discourse followed by singing and more prayers. In the evening there was usually a meal of boiled salmon with hazel nuts or choke cherries for dessert. After sitting by a roaring fire and being hemmed in by the crowd all evening he was usually so near suffocation that he welcomed the chance to bed down in the open air.

The average day at Wascopam was taken up with a set pattern of devotions, reading and chores. As the spring of 1839 approached the missionaries found themselves increasingly taken up with the more secular of these activities. If they were not constantly to be sending to Fort Vancouver and Willamette for supplies they had to give some attention to farming. Accordingly they began to break in their cattle, rig farming equipment and build fences. When this had been done they broke up about twenty acres of land and planted beans, corn and potatoes. They had no return from their labor as much of the corn and some of the potatoes were taken by the Indians as soon as they were grown.

It appeared that the welcome given to the missionaries was beginning to wear thin. The Indians had been on their best behavior and had been willing to follow whatever practices the pair suggested for whatever material advantages they might gain by so doing. Their expectations were never fulfilled and the depredation on the crops signalled their disappointment, giving the missionaries an idea of what might be in store for them. Understandably alarmed the two agreed that when Brother Lee went to Willamette for supplies he should bring back with him a quantity of arms as well.

With the idea of attracting a greater attendance at their services it was also decided to build a meeting house of about the same size as their dwelling. It was to be a Spanish wattle house a story and a half in height. After most of the work was completed, Lee departed on his trip down river for supplies leaving Perkins to put on the finishing touches with the assistance of a man named Benjamin Wright.
who was passing through and offered to help.

As Mr. Wright gave every evidence of being a man with a past he was looked upon with suspicion. He seldom spoke unless spoken to and then in a very guarded manner as though fearful of being exposed. A heavy sadness seemed to weigh on him especially at worship services and Perkins was certain he must have suffered some recent sorrow. Eventually Mr. Wright revealed he had been a circuit rider in the Methodist Episcopal Church. With great reluctance he told of how he had deserted his calling for the transient joys of the world. He had gained and lost a fortune in the east before fleeing from civilization in a futile search for happiness out west. The family devotions in the mission house had stirred the old feelings in him and at length he determined to begin preaching again. Since he had the command of no Indian languages, his only audience could be the Perkins family. Therefore it was agreed to institute preaching in the family devotions and Mr. Wright soon proved himself a revivalist of no mean caliber by lashing out at the couple as if they were on the road to perdition.

The earnest declamations coming from the mission house every evening around twilight could not help but excite the curiosity of the Indians. Perkins finally began to explain what was being said for the benefit of those who gathered nightly around the house. As their interest grew they expressed a desire to have their own sermon to which Perkins consented by giving them a talk in their own language. He then dismissed them and the meeting was continued in English. The Indians, however, were unwilling to leave and insisted on staying until the meeting was over which, as the spirit moved them to progressively greater heights, was often very late.

One incident in particular seemed to give added impetus to the Indians' new-found interest in religion. Aside from thieving, the setting sin of these natives was gambling. While walking along the river one day Perkins spotted a group engaged in a high-spirited game. Jumping into their midst Perkins began expostulating on the evils of gambling. They appeared affected and he dropped to his knees beseeching God's mercy on their behalf. He pointed to a pile of clothes which constituted the pot, urging each man to take his apparel and go home. The Indians promised to disperse after finishing the game then in progress and Perkins was invited to supervise the activity. Instead he withdrew a ways to continue praying for them.

In a few minutes he heard angry voices as the natives began quarreling over the stakes. Hurrying to the scene he saw two of them squaring off for a fight. It was explained to him that a stolen cap was the cause of all the trouble, whereupon he readily took off his own and gave it to the man who claimed he had been robbed. The Indians were disgruntled at being unable to see a fight, but the cap was finally accepted and the crowd began to break up. No sooner had Perkins walked away when the other party to the dispute returned with a knife and rushed at the missionary. Quickly the other Indians placed themselves between the two, thwarting the homicidal attempt.
It was not long after Perkins returned home that one of the elders of the village came with the Indian to whom the cap had been given. The old man reproached Perkins severely for giving away his cap and explained how he had settled the dispute and regained for the Indian his own cap. After having set the missionary straight he returned Perkins' cap and left.

Even though Perkins' behavior on this occasion seemed highly irregular to them, the Indians began coming in increasing numbers to the meetings. The new meeting house was filled every day and over flowing on Sundays. Perkins was devoting himself fully to the spiritual needs of the Indians, when into the midst of all this activity, Lee returned to his astonishment and delight that the supply of arms he brought would probably not be needed. Shortly thereafter it was necessary to make preparations for the arrival of a new band of missionaries in the summer of 1840 and Perkins turned reluctantly to more secular pursuits. 8

The ship Lausanne brought more than forty men, women and children for the Methodist mission including the fiancée of Daniel Lee, as well as a farmer and a doctor for the station at Wascopam. Lee married Maria Ware in June and, with Mr. and Mrs. Henry Brewer and Dr. Ira Babcock set out for the station shortly after. Perkins met them at the Cascades and for some weeks to come he was taken up with the housing of the new families and had to fit in his preaching where he could. 9

Mrs. Perkins, who had not seen another white woman for a year and a half, was delighted to have female companionship once again. Mr. Perkins was no less pleased to have Dr. Babcock relieve him of the responsibility for the medical care of the natives. His respite was short-lived, however, as the doctor was soon recalled to Willamette. To make the practice of medicine seem even less desirable, at about that time an Indian doctoress had been murdered in full view of the congregation as Perkins preached one Sunday. An Indian, whose son had died under the woman's ministrations, took his revenge with a large butcher knife.

In the years that followed preaching duties were mixed with the task of providing supplies and a resting place for the emigrants who were beginning to pass that way. During the summer of 1843 he participated in the first camp meeting for white settlers in Oregon held in Tualatin Plains. Shortly after that Daniel Lee decided that in the interests of his wife's health it would be best if they returned to the States. The Rev. Alvan F. Waller, who had come on the Lausanne, was eventually sent to Wascopam to replace Lee.

In 1844, not long before the Perkins themselves decided to leave

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8 For Lee's account of the revival of 1839-40 see Lee and Frost, op. cit., 182-95.
9 For descriptions of Wascopam at this time see Thomas J. Farnham, Travels in the Great Western Prairies, the Anahuac and Rocky Mountains, and in the Oregon Territory. Poughkeepsie: Killey, 1843, 86; Z. A. Mudge, Sketches of Mission Life Among the Indians of Oregon. New York: Carlton & Phillips, 1854, 16-21.
Oregon, an incident occurred that demonstrated the extraordinary perseverance of the missionaries. One of the local chiefs, who had resisted all attempts to convert him, had a son of whom he was inordinately proud. The boy had a companion who had been captured in a raid on a neighboring tribe and the two were together so much as to appear inseparable. When the chief's pride and joy was struck down by a fatal disease, the grief-stricken father made it known that the boy's companion was to be buried with him so that he would not be alone in the mysterious world to which he had gone. The house of the dead was located on a long rock in the center of the Columbia near the falls where the current is extremely rapid. It was completely enclosed except for a narrow opening at one end just big enough to carry in a corpse. Here they took the live boy and tied him as closely as possible to his dead companion to smother his cries.

Mr. and Mrs. Perkins heard of this atrocity late at night and had no choice but to wait until daylight before attempting the boy's rescue. After a sleepless night, looking almost like corpses themselves, they fought the current for three miles reaching the rock just after sunrise. Perkins forced open the tomb and braved the incredible stench until he found the boy unconscious and scarcely breathing. After being carried out into the fresh air the boy slowly began to regain his senses. At first he thought he was still in the tomb and began to scream, but when fully conscious he threw his arms around Mrs. Perkins and covered her with kisses. They took him home and gave him the name Ransom after they had compensated the old chief for his loss.  

By the fall of 1844 Perkins felt he could accomplish no more by staying in Oregon. The constant conflict between duties to the Indians and to the emigrants, who were now coming in a steady stream, weighed upon him. He was quite capable of a thorough identification with Indian ways of life and forms of expression, so much so that he had begun to find it difficult to preach in English. However, in the best interests of his family, which now included three children, he decided to return to the more civilized life of New England. The family left November 13, 1844 and arrived in New Bedford, Massachusetts, August 1845. Perkins had been away eight years and seven months.

In looking back after many years of reflection upon his experiences in Oregon, Perkins felt that he had been right in pursuing his calling there. During only a part of the time spent at Wascopam did he feel he had truly acted as he should. If only he could have continued to spread the revival of 1839-40 what a difference it might have made. He had at least tested the sufficiency of the gospel to reach a most be-

nighted segment of mankind. He had done what he could and was glad to have had some measure of success.

Until 1848 Perkins again served charges in the Maine Conference at which time he withdrew from the connection. He appears to have labored independently in and around Boston, keeping in touch from time to time with his co-workers during the days in Oregon, until his death in Somerville, Massachusetts, April 16, 1884.