In 1847, before the California gold rush and in the early years of the Oregon Trail migration, the Reverend William Roberts arrived in the Willamette Valley, to become the third superintendent of the Oregon Mission.

The Reverend Jason Lee had come west by horseback thirteen years earlier, in 1834, sent as a missionary to the Flathead Indians. But with the encouragement of Dr. John McLoughlin, the Hudson’s Bay Factor at Fort Vancouver, Lee and his party of five went instead to the Willamette Valley, setting up missions for the Indians, both on the Willamette and at The Dalles, Oregon.

In 1839, the “Great Reinforcement” left New York on the ship Lausanne, arriving in Oregon after an eight month sea voyage via Cape Horn and the Sandwich Islands. This group of over half a hundred included five ministers, two doctors, two farmers, two carpenters, a blacksmith and several school teachers. Nearly all the men had families with them. It has been said that what the Mayflower was to the Atlantic coast, the Lausanne was to the Pacific coast in 1839. It brought a ship load of Methodists, who, by the settlement they made and the work they did, established an American Commonwealth in Oregon. The workers were assigned by Jason Lee to several fields of labor:

- The Clatsop, near the mouth of the Columbia;
- The Dalles, up the Columbia River about 80 miles east of Portland;
- Nisqually, on Puget Sound, in the present state of Washington;
- Umpqua, a coastal river in southern Oregon;
- Willamette Station, in Salem;
- Willamette Falls, Oregon City.

Lee’s glowing reports of the area brought settlers overland, whose many wagon wheels later carved the Oregon Trail. At the same time the Indian numbers were dwindling from illness and disease, and soon the Oregon Mission was ministering to more whites than Indians. This fact, coupled with some discontent of a few of the missionaries, created among the members of the Mission Board in New York a feeling of uncertain purpose. This was compounded by the fact that information was so slow to reach either end. When reports were sent from the Mission to the
Board, it took a year for the report to arrive and a reply to reach the Mission. The Board replaced Jason Lee with the Reverend George Gary as Superintendent of the Mission in 1844.

Gary's leadership brought a different direction to the Oregon Mission. Though opposed by those working in the field, The Dalles Mission was sold to the American Board, represented by Dr. Marcus Whitman, Presbyterian missionary doctor at Waiilatpu, near Walla Walla, Washington. The other Indian missions were abandoned, the mill and stock and other mission property sold. The Indian Manual Training School building and one square mile of land, now in the center of Salem, was sold to the trustees of the Oregon Institute, now Willamette University. Gary then requested that the Mission Board in New York appoint a successor, as he wished to return to the United States. That successor was William Roberts.

William M. Roberts was born in Burlington, New Jersey in 1812, was city reared and educated, and entered the Methodist ministry in the Philadelphia Conference in 1834. His early pulpit work marked him as a man destined to become a leader in his church. He was a friend and peer of Jason Lee, and entertained Lee in his home in Paterson, New Jersey in 1839, when Lee went east to ask for reinforcements; and Mr. Roberts was present as a member of the Missionary Board in July 1844, when Jason Lee made his defense of the Oregon Mission. Roberts was familiar with the Oregon Mission situation and was a logical choice for the post of superintendent.

An associate wrote the following description of William Roberts at the time he became superintendent of the Oregon Mission:

He was 34 years of age; a very Chesterfield in appearance and manners, and yet as affable and approachable to the lowly as to the exalted. In the pulpit his elocution was nearly faultless, and his sermons were thoroughly evangelical and charmingly eloquent. He was energetic in execution. Though not a large man, and yet not a small one, physically, when he entered upon his work here, his figure and poise drew the instant attention of the passerby, and introduced him to the favorable regards of the people at once.1

William Roberts, his wife Hannah and two sons sailed from New York on November 27, 1846, on the ship Whiton. On the same ship were the Reverend James H. Wilbur, his wife and daughter. The sea voyage took seven months. The ship did not head south from New York, but sailed eastward into the midst of the Atlantic storms which were unusually severe. They were close to the west coast of Africa before they reached the southbound trade routes and headed for South America and Cape Horn. Sometimes they met other vessels bound for New York, and passed letters to them — the only way to send word to relatives and

friends back home.

Sailing up the west coast they reached San Francisco, then known as Yerba Buena. William Roberts and James H. Wilbur had been charged by the Board of Foreign Missions to make a survey in California en route to Oregon. They landed at Yerba Buena April 24, 1847, and took stock of the land and the people. Roberts wrote: “The Valley of San Francisco is small. I counted about sixty tenements including houses, barns, tents, etc., and rents are at highest New York prices.” The next day, April 25, 1847, Roberts preached in Brown Hotel. “The bar was closed and the billiard room locked up until the service was over.” In May a Methodist Class and Sabbath School were organized. This is the first Protestant church of record in California.

After a long layover while the ship discharged cargo, they continued north, reaching Baker Bay, at the mouth of the Columbia River on June 23, 1847, and reached Oregon City six days later. On the occasion of their arrival, George Gary wrote in his diary, June 29, 1847:

...Am introduced to Bro. Roberts, my successor, and here is also my old friend Bro. Wilbur and his family ... We have no letters in this arrival except one old one from Dr. Pitman [Mission Board] of Sept. 20, 1846, and another from Bro. David of September 21st. These were picked up in California by some means by Brô. Roberts. ... the general expectation so far as I can learn was, we should leave last Fall.

July 1, Thursday. We go down to Portland and engage a passage, in the Brutus, Capt. Adams, to the Sandwich Islands, give a draft for $120 for our passage.

Sunday, 4th. This day Bro. Roberts attends meeting at Portland, Bro. Wilbur and myself at the Falls. We now feel this work is in good and safe hands.

Saturday, 10 July, 1847 ... I have given my papers and counsels to Bro. Roberts, my successor in this mission.

Sunday, 11. Bro. Roberts preaches at 5 o'clock p.m. I am pleased with him. I feel easy in leaving this mission in his hands.

Monday, 12. Today we leave the Falls for Portland ... Bros. Roberts and Wilbur are starting about the same time ... for Yam Hill to attend camp meeting, so while we are leaving or retiring from the work, they are engaging in it.

The Yamhill Camp Meeting was described by J. H. Wilbur, who set off on foot with William Roberts the morning of July 12, carrying their baggage to a point one mile up the river from Oregon City, past the falls, where they took a boat. They stopped overnight with a family, then traveled through the rain until two the next afternoon, to reach the Yamhill landing. Their hands were blistered from poling the boat and pulling it up over many rapids. People began to arrive and the first service was held at 6 o'clock in the evening. The Camp Meeting lasted from Wednesday night through the following Monday morning. Hamilton

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Campbell, Rev. William Helm and Rev. David Leslie joined them in preaching, taking turns to deliver sermons morning, afternoon and evening. They began with an attendance of 21, increasing in number until 230 were gathered on Saturday. Wilbur wrote, "Still the people are constantly coming." No doubt a higher number was reached by Sunday. This was the first of many such Camp Meetings.\(^4\)

Robert Moulton Gatke edited Roberts' letters of 1847-1849, and described William Roberts as follows:

\[\text{[He] was a keen observer, and his letters were usually directed to men whom he felt must be made to understand Oregon as he saw it. They are the product of a man who was himself one of the molding factors in the State's development as the leader of one of the great formative forces of our State — the Methodist Mission.}\]

As the third Superintendent of the Oregon Mission between the years 1847-1849, Mr. Roberts directed the newly founded church through the danger period of the Indian troubles and the mad rush for California at the time of the Gold Discovery. He organized the Oregon-California Mission Conference of the Methodist Church, and exercised a wise control over the newly established church in California as well as Oregon. When the Mission Conference was formally organized into two Annual Conferences, Roberts continued his work as an aggressive pioneer minister. His position, ability and interest gave him a marked influence in the civic and educational life of the new country, as well as its religious life, so we find his influence touching many phases of Early Oregon History.\(^5\)

The Reverend C. O. Hosford related that when he came to Portland in 1847, to spend a day in looking up Methodist people and to arrange for a Sabbath service where Roberts would preach, Hosford followed a trail from Oregon City on the east side of the Willamette River and was ferried across the river and landed where Stark Street now is. After clambering over a lot of logs he found Portland and counted just fourteen rude houses. Roberts came later and preached in the "Coopers Shop." Sometime in 1848 a "Class" was formed. Oregon City had a church building and thirty members, and Salem had 109 members but no building except the school chapel. The Yamhill circuit had the most members at that time.\(^6\)

Oregon was not yet a territory when William Roberts came in 1847. The so-called Oregon Country, or "Old Oregon," included the states of Oregon, Washington and Idaho as well as parts of Montana, Wyoming and British Columbia. The residents of the Willamette Valley, meeting at Champoeg in 1843, had organized a provisional government that was begun two years earlier. An "organic law" was adopted, based on the laws of Iowa. George Abernathy was elected Governor in 1845. He had


\(^6\)Youngson, p. 94.
come to Oregon with the "Great Reinforcement" of 1839, aboard the *Lausanne*, as a business manager for the Oregon Mission.

William Roberts set energetically about his work as Superintendent of the Oregon Mission, preaching wherever people gathered, supervising the pastoral work, traveling to the scattered settlements within his field of responsibility. On July 4, 1847, he gave the first Independence Day address in the new little town of Portland.

In August, 1847, Roberts went to The Dalles to finish Superintendent Gary's work of transferring The Dalles Mission to Dr. Marcus Whitman of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. A. J. Waller and H. B. Brewer, then in charge at The Dalles, still felt the Methodists should retain the Mission, but Roberts felt bound to honor the actions of his predecessor, George Gary, and the wishes of the Mission Board. In September, 1847, Perrin Whitman, nephew of Dr. Marcus Whitman, and Alanson Hinman took charge of the property in the name of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.

H. K. Hines wrote: "Thus the last Indian missions established by Jason Lee in Oregon was discontinued, and in their place was instituted a work connected with the white race that was now fast supplanting them on the fields of their former possessions."

On November 29, 1847, Marcus and Narcissa Whitman and several others were killed by the Cayuse Indians. The immediate cause seemed to be an epidemic of measles among whites which spread to the Indians, and the belief of the Indians that Dr. Whitman was causing the deaths of the Indians.

Indian unrest grew in the Oregon Country, due in part to the rising numbers of whites settling in the area. William Roberts estimated that 4,000 to 5,000 had come in 1847. This incident at the Whitman Mission caused the closing of every Indian mission in the Pacific Northwest east of the Cascade Mountains.

The legislature of the provisional government was meeting at that time in Oregon City, in the Methodist Episcopal Church, the only building available for such a meeting. A sense of danger permeated the Willamette valley settlements, and the people feared possible invasion by Indians from east of the Cascades, over numerous passes and trails through the mountains. The provisional legislature decided it was necessary to send a special messenger to Washington with information of the massacre and the condition of peril in the Oregon Country.

The provisional government had no resources for such a journey. There was literally almost no money in the country, as incoming settlers from across the plains reached Oregon with all money resources.

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1Hines, p. 366.
exhausted. Barter served in most dealings, and there was little market for their crops or industry.

Joseph L. Meek (Joe Meek, well-known mountain man) volunteered to make the journey if the necessary expenses were provided. A winter journey by horseback would be a perilous one. William Roberts wrote:

During the winter of 1847 and 1848 the legislature was called together. . . . Money was needed to send a messenger to Washington. The Superintendent of the Methodist Mission was applied to for $1,500 to aid in the emergency. Jesse Applegate . . . was the commissioner. I furnished the funds. These were trust funds and not my own money, and there was no security: none whatever. It took some courage to handle the money then, for we lived by faith largely in those days.9

Following the Whitman tragedy, Dr. McLoughlin of Hudson's Bay Company sent Peter Skene Ogden and several men to ransom back from the Indians the women and children they had captured at the Whitman Mission. The ransomed captives were taken to the Oregon Mission and into the homes of various settlers. William and Hannah Roberts took Catherine Sager, age 13, into their home as one of their family.10

An indication of Roberts' approach to his work is found in an appeal he made to the Mission Board for materials for building homes and barns (materials such as windows and nails) and money to pay for work done. He wrote in one letter to the Mission Board:

I will say that my action in this case will be widely different from that of Bro. Gary. He did not travel about except as he was taken. I travel incessantly when angry swollen rivers will permit, hence not only are my personal expenses greatly increased, but I must have a barn and Fodder; and a man or boy to work for me, and travel with me when on long and perilous journeys. There is no Barn at the Institute and the Brethren spend nearly one third of their working hours in hunting and catching their horses, and sometimes fail to get to their work because no horse can be found. This must not be and I have no alternative but to build. I have already built one in this place.11

In William Roberts' report to the Mission Board, dated April 24, 1848, we find a picture of his work, and of the Oregon of that day:

Oregon City has a population of nearly one thousand persons; there are in it one hundred and eighty-five houses, with two churches, — one Methodist and one Catholic; two flouring mills, and two saw-mills. About two miles distant there is quite a little village springing up on the Clackamas river, which empties into the Willamette, just below the city. Twelve miles below, on the river, is the little town of Portland, just springing into existence. It is about the head of ship navigation. We have not been able this winter to supply this place with preaching. About twenty-five miles west of Oregon City there are a number of beautiful prairies called the Tualitin Plains. In these fertile plains quite a population has collected, and, some four or five years ago, we had regular preaching in a log building erected for the purpose but

10 Correspondence from Wilbur E. Roberts, Jr., great-great-grandson of William Roberts, August 10, 1981.
since that time occasional visits, very few and far between, are all the people have received at our hand. In eight months I have paid them only one visit. Since the annual meeting the place is included in the Yamhill circuit, and we hope to furnish the people with stated pastoral labor.

The Salem Circuit receives its name from the town of Salem which is just rising into notice, and is the seat of the Oregon Institute. It is fifty miles above this city [Oregon City] on the east bank of the Walamet river. The situation is most beautiful and many suppose it will become quite a city in a very few years. Directly on a line between Salem and this city and about thirty miles from here lies what is called the French Settlement peopled chiefly by Canadian speaking French and all holding to the Catholic church.

[In reference to the greatest difficulties faced, he says] What I refer to chiefly is peculiar to newly settled countries, such as the scattered state of the population. It was estimated that there was a population of 8000 in the country previous to the arrival of the last Emigration which of itself amounted to from three to five thousand but the difficulty is to find them. The arrangement of our provisional government by which a person under conditions can secure a mile square of Land tends directly to distribute the people all over the country and operates most prejudicially against the gathering of any considerable congregation in any one place. Our only recourse is to go from one cabin to another through prairie and forest which is a slow process requiring more time and men, and, I may add, grace, than we have at present. Add to this the almost impassible state of the roads during the rainy seasons. We have as yet very few bridges and the crossing of many of the streams is perilous and often impossible. 12

The Oregon Institute — schoolhouse and land — which Gary had been in such haste to dispose of, Roberts took immediate steps to repurchase. The Board was hesitant. On September 21, 1848, it gave conditional sanction, and then on November 15 decided that the repurchase was “inexpedient at present.” Finally, on August 15, 1849, purchase was authorized. 13

Ketturah Belknap, of the Belknap Settlement south of Corvallis, gives us a picture of the scope of Roberts’ responsibility in 1848:

Brother Roberts, the superintendent of this whole Pacific coast has been here to look over the ground and see if it will be best to put another man on [here] with Brother McKinney. Brother Roberts is General superintendent and Bishop and Presiding Elder all in one. his District takes in California and Oregon and Puget Sound. 14

In the early summer of 1849, Roberts again visited California. Asa White, a local preacher, had reached San Francisco May 10, 1849, with a blue tent which he pitched on the ground later chosen as a site for the Powell Street Church, and engaged in evangelistic preaching. Asa White

brought with him his family, consisting of his wife, two sons, eight daughters, six sons-in-law, and thirty grandchildren — a ready-made congregation. The blue tent became a legend in California Methodist history. On June 26, Roberts went on to Sacramento, Stockton, San Jose, and other principal places, and also visited the mines, preaching wherever opportunity offered. At several places he secured lots on which to erect churches. Before leaving Oregon he had assembled lumber for a church building, and had it framed and shipped. It arrived before he left California.\(^{15}\)

Oregon became a Territory in 1848, as did California. The Oregon Mission memorialized General Conference for the creation of an Annual Conference. The General Conference decided to include Oregon, California, and New Mexico in a single Mission Conference. The organizing session was held in Salem, Oregon, on September 5, 1849, in the chapel of the Oregon Institute. As no bishop was present, William Roberts, Superintendent, presided. Such a widespread conference proved to be a geographic impracticality: no members from California or New Mexico were present at the first, second, or third session. There were but six charter members, of whom only four were present at that first conference: William Roberts, David Leslie, Alvin F. Waller, and James H. Wilbur. Isaac Owen had been transferred from the Indiana Conference and William Taylor from Baltimore but neither had yet arrived on the field. Owen and Taylor soon arrived in California and became leaders in the Methodist work there.

At the second session, 1850, thirteen appointments were listed for the Oregon District, with four left to be supplied; for California, fifteen appointments, seven to be supplied. Church members in Oregon numbered 469, including probationers; in California, 738. Oregon had seventeen local preachers; California, twenty-one.\(^{16}\) The loss of people from Oregon to California in the gold rush, 1848-1850, was later offset by immigration brought on by the land donation law of Congress in 1850. Under this law, settlers in Oregon between 1850 and 1853 procured large tracts of land free of cost.

Ketturah Belknap wrote of a camp meeting at Belknap Settlement in 1851:

Dr. Roberts and his wife came from Salem on Horse back and had A Poney packed with their Tent and blankets, and pitched a little tent. had their bedding and Books and was right at home. They visited a round and dined with the brethren, but when they wanted to rest they went to their own little tent where all was quiet.\(^{17}\)

In November, 1851, the Annual Missionary Conference was held in

\(^{15}\)Barclay, p. 233.

\(^{16}\)Barclay, p. 229.

Portland by William Roberts, who divided the work into two districts. The Oregon District (William Roberts, Superintendent) included Salem and all below it; northward, to the sea; also Olympia, Steilacoom, Seattle, Mound Prairie and Cowlitz, the last five named being in the present State of Washington. Mary's River District (Thomas Pearne, Superintendent) included the work south of Salem: Lebanon, Calapooia, Albany, Marysville, Belknap Settlement, Eugene, Roseberg, Jacksonville, Phoenix. This district required twelve weeks of travel four times a year — with one rest-week each quarter — making 2,250 miles of travel a year, on muleback, horseback, steamer, canoe, quite full enough of exposure, hardships and peril.¹⁸

In an article from the Christian Advocate and Journal, William Roberts tells of his tour of his missionary district in 1852. It is a delightful description of travel in that day, of the differences and similarities in the country and its people, and the dedication of the circuit riders. Roberts and J. H. Wilbur left June 1, 1852, for Puget Sound, in the present State of Washington, traveling down the Columbia River.

_Steamer Lot Whitcomb._ Passing down the Columbia on the steamer Lot Whitcomb,
... we landed at Fox's, opposite the mouth of the Cowlitz, and immediately crossed over in a small boat. ... The Columbia River is now experiencing its annual overflow, and the mosquitoes are terrible. ...

_Mail Canoe!_ We engaged passage up the Cowlitz in the mail canoe to Warbuses, a distance of 30 miles, for $10. Next morning we were fairly set off at 8 o'clock. Our general course was north. The Cowlitz is an exceedingly rapid stream; its shores are hilly, and there will be difficulty in making a road along either of its banks; but up to this time no other good route to Puget's Sound has been found. By six in the evening we had reached the forks, a distance of 20 miles, and concluded to camp for the night. Our fare was coarse and scanty. Resumed our journey early the next day, and reached the head of canoe navigation at 3 P.M. ...

In going to the Sound, the usual course is to hire horses here and go overland; the distance is forty miles. The horses furnished us were most miserable. We rode out that evening about eight miles, To Capt. Jackson's. ... On our way we passed a most beautiful plain, ... this prairie commands one of the most enchanting views I ever saw. St. Helens covered with perpetual snow, is in full view. This mountain is a volcano, and the smoke or steams may frequently be seen issuing from its crater, which is low down on the north-eastern side. [St. Helens was semi-active at that time; an 1842 eruption carried ash as far as The Dalles, Oregon, 65 miles away, and action continued intermittently through 1857.]

_Head Waters of the Chehalis._ There are Protestant families enough in this vicinity to justify an appointment. We arranged to preach on our return. Next morning our trials began; such horses, with such backs, and such saddles, were too much for our notions of humanity.

_Bute Prairies._ ... We find families every now and then along our route. At 2 P.M. we reached a Mr. Ford's who has resided here for four years. ... Towards evening we came to one of the Bute Prairies, so called because covered with tumuli or small

¹⁸Youngson, pp. 97-98.
mounds at regular distances asunder. These hillocks are from two to ten feet in height, and from twenty to forty feet in diameter. . . . Some of them have been opened, to see if they contained relics; nothing was found but a pavement of round stones. . . .

A flock of 3000. Just before night we met some men with a flock of 3000 sheep from Nisqually, on their way to California. Three months later I saw these very sheep near Yreka, just south of the California line. . . .

Coloured Farmer. Towards noon we reached the house of a coloured man, named Bush; a man of large family, considerable enterprise and wealth. He came to the country upwards of four years ago, and spent the winter at the Dalles, while brother Waller was in charge of the station. . . . I have seen but few better managed farms in the Territory. He had a very respectable barn, five head of cattle, good orchard, (including apples and peaches) and was just building an excellent dwelling. . . .

Olympia. On Saturday we crossed DeShute River and after traveling two miles reached Olympia. This destined to be a place of importance. It is situated on a tongue of land jutting out into Budd's Inlet, and is the nearest accessible part of Puget's Sound to the Columbia River. . . .

Nisqually. . . . A thorough exploration of all the parts that ought to be visited would lead us down the Sound to Nisqually Fort, Stillacom, Whithby's Island, and Fort Townsend, and would require a month's time. . . . Our conclusion was . . . to visit Nisqually, collect such information as we could, and return. . . .

Fort Nisqually. On Monday, with a crew of two Indians, we were on our way to Nisqually, in a small canoe, where we arrived by the middle of the afternoon. . . . Fort Nisqually is an establishment of the Hudson Bay Company at present under the charge of Dr. Tolmie, a very intelligent man, who received us with great cordiality. . . .

A Circuit in a Canoe! In the event that steamboats are not soon brought into requisition, an enterprising Methodist preacher with a good canoe could navigate these waters without material difficulty. By taking advantage of the tides, which are very strong, a good distance can be made in a day. . . .

"Ride and Tie". When we returned to Bush’s but one of our horses could be found. . . . Mr. Bush loaned me an animal that would return home if turned loose. With him I reached Mr. Ford's very comfortably. The following day, as we had but one horse between us, we tried what is called "riding and tying." One man takes the horse and baggage as fast as convenient some two or three miles, and ties him by the road, immediately walking on as fast as possible. The footman coming up takes the horse, and after passing his fellow a suitable distance, again proceeds on foot. In this manner we reached Capt. Jackson's by 2 P.M., and brother Wilbur preached to about fifteen persons. We reached the Cowlitz on Thursday evening, about two hours after the mail canoe had left.

Canoeing. Next morning we bought a canoe of some Snohomish Indians, who had just returned from a trip to Vancouver, with which we safely navigated this rapid river, reaching the settlement at its mouth by 6 o'clock. . . .

On Sabbath brother Wilbur and myself preached to a congregation collected from various parts of the settlement, amounting to 107 souls. . . . We went home with some of the congregation who had come from Rainier (Foxes Place) directly across the Columbia river. . . .

Steamer Willamette. On Monday . . . the steamer Willamette came in sight at noon, and took us up to St. Helen's. Finding it doubtful if the mail would come in for a day
or two, I bought a horse and started home overland. Went six miles out that evening on the slough of the Willamette and camped at the foot of the Tualatin Mountain. Before 4 o'clock on Tuesday I was in the trail, and crossed the mountain in four hours. . . . By 10 o'clock at night I reached my family in the Waldo Hills, having traveled 80 miles. I have no disposition to institute a comparison between the Puget's Sound country and other parts of Oregon. The population is small; it must soon be large. We must have at least one man to go there by next conference, and Olympia should be his headquarters. 19

The General Conference of 1852 authorized division into two Conferences, Oregon and California. The Oregon Conference was organized on March 17, 1853, by Bishop Ames. The area of the conference was “the Territory of Oregon,” which in 1852 included the entire region of which the title of the United States had been confirmed by the Treaty of 1846 with Great Britain, including the present states of Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and parts of Wyoming and Montana. The missionary personnel had been strengthened by transfers of ministers from eastern Conferences, including C. S. Kingsley, L. T. Woodward, Gustavus Hines and two younger brothers, J. W. and Harvey K. Hines.

Jason Lee had established a mission, which served its day; William Roberts had organized a Church.

This Oregon Conference was a young man's conference. Not a man was 60 years of age, the oldest being David Leslie who was 56. William Helm was 53; Alvin Waller, 45; Gustavus Hines, 43; J. H. Wilbur, 42; William Roberts, 41. Of the rest, none had reached his fortieth birthday—they were all in their twenties and thirties.

One historic incident of the Organizing Conference of 1853: William Roberts presented his trunk to the Conference to provide a place in which to keep “whatever documents of interest could be collected regarding the progress of Methodist Work in Oregon.” A committee of Roberts, Waller, and Wilbur was appointed to “gather up and deposit with the Secretary, Documents of interest connected with the work of the church in this country.” 20

The second session of the Oregon Conference was held in March, 1854, at Belknap Settlement, named for the Belknap family which had traveled across the plains in 1847 and settled in this area in the spring of 1848, in Benton County, south of Corvallis. Belknap Settlement had no church building, so the conference met at a Camp Ground with a grove of trees and a living spring. Ebenezer school house was built of logs in 1850, and here the meetings were held, Thomas Pearne presiding, William Roberts secretary. Ketturah Belknap’s Chronicle describes the Con-

ference:

Many of us had never seen a Bishop. We had a Beautiful Early Spring. . . . Wednesday, March 15 the preachers have commenced coming in, Pearne, and Close from Puget Sound and Wilber from Umpqua. . . . Thursday the 16, today the conference opens, and we see the Lonely Pioneer Preachers coming on Horse back. It is said by some one their were Giants in the Oregon Conference in those days. At least they were men who dared great things and possessed the ability to do them. This Conference which covered the entire North west and was composed of men who had braved the Perils of A long Journey to Preach the gospel in this new land, was now to convene. After a year’s separation and hard toil they greet each other with great warmth and fervor, after which their first inquiry is concerning the Bishop. Has he been heard from? or Has he yet arrived? Where can he be? Is it Possible he has been lost at sea?. . . . The session opens, the Bishop has not arrived. . . . All this time the Bishop, having been delayed by an ocean storm . . . is on a slow going Boat, fast on a sandbar in the Wilamet River not far from Oregon City.

[Sunday, the fourth day of the Conference there was still no word from the Bishop.] The Subject had been talked over in the morning: If he should come, would anyone know him? No. No one had ever seen him. . . . [The Bishop got a team and a guide, which took him to Corvallis, and he traveled horseback, with a guide the last 20 miles.]

Just as Brother Pearne was closing the Morning sermon the Bishop stepped in, someone near the Door gives Him a seat. . . . Pearne thought by his look and the look of his grip that he looked like A Preacher. Pearne ceases to Preach, Amid breathless silence utters these words . . . if the stranger who just came in is Bishop Simpson, He will Please advance to the front. . . . The stranger who had traveled all night over Corduroy Roads and stump Roots, and mud of . . . varying depths, who had changed from Wagon to Saddle . . . and badly be spattered with mud . . . Advanced to the front amid shouts and Hallelujahs from all sides, I was there and surely the scene was beyond description. 21

At this Conference of 1854, Bishop Simpson appointed William Roberts as Superintendent of the Puget Sound Missionary District, where Methodism was still in its infancy. The Nisqually Mission, under John P. Richmond, and built by William H. Willson in 1839, had been abandoned in 1842.

Washington Territory had been separated from Oregon in 1853, and included all the Oregon Territory except the present State of Oregon. Preaching services had been held occasionally at Vancouver and Cowlitz by circuit riders living on the Oregon side of the Columbia. As early as 1852, Roberts and Wilbur had visited Olympia and preached there. Benjamin Close, Superintendent of the Puget Sound Missionary District in 1853, lived in Olympia and preached there occasionally. The church at Coupeville, on Whidby Island, was organized in July, 1853. In August, 1853, John J. DeVore organized a Methodist Church in Steilacoom, and David Blaine organized the Methodist Church in Seattle later that same year. The city of Seattle had been founded in 1851 at Alki Point.

In 1844 there had been but six Caucasian families, not attached to the Hudson’s Bay Company, living west of the Cascade Mountains in the future State of Washington. When Washington became a territory (1853) the population had reached 3,963. There were few members, yet Roberts was confident that the harvest would be plenteous. Roberts served again in Washington, 1863-1865, as a Presiding Elder.

In the early 1860s, gold discoveries were made in what is now Idaho. It was then still a part of Washington Territory. Idaho became a Territory in 1863. The Boise Basin region, thirty miles north of present Boise, Idaho, became briefly the largest population center of the Pacific Northwest with inhabitants numbering 14,000 to 16,000. By mid-September, 1863, Idaho City, in Boise Basin, with a population of 6,267, had surpassed Portland to become the largest city in the Northwest.

C. S. Kingsley, a supernumerary from Oregon Conference, went to Idaho City in the fall of 1863. He held services and built a church. William Roberts was appointed “Missionary to Idaho” in September, 1865, a post-conference appointment. William Roberts came to Idaho in October, spent two or three weeks in Boise City, then located in Idaho City, where he preached twice each Sunday and held Sunday School. He visited in the course of the year Boise City, Centerville, Placerville, Pioneer, and Owyhee and preached in these places.

Roberts expressed the opinion that missionary work in Idaho was more difficult than on the coast, in part because of the constant shifting of the population as new gold discoveries were made and in part because of the large proportion of Roman Catholics — Pioneer City, for instance, at that time was called New Dublin. The Mormon influence was a third factor.

In October, 1866, Roberts went to Utah. He was perhaps the first Methodist preacher to make a survey of religious conditions in Utah and to report his findings to the bishop and the Church. On hearing his findings, the Oregon Conference in 1867 adopted a report on Utah, decrying:

- the Mountain Meadow massacre by Mormons of a party en route to California.
- the lack of enforcement of the laws of the United States.
- the increasing practice of polygamy.
- the lack of freedom of worship, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press.

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Roberts left Idaho in 1869. Some of his fields of service not yet mentioned included pastor at Salem one year; agent of the American Bible Society, seven years; Presiding Elder of Portland District, six years. He was superannuated in 1875 because of impaired health, but later he was restored to the effective relation and was pastor at Forest Grove, Astoria, and Dayton.

In 1879, when Roberts was 67 years old, we find him taking an aggressive interest in the problems of the Chinese on the Pacific coast. This was the period of intense public excitement over the Chinese problem and the demand for their exclusion from our country. He was chairman of a committee which brought to the Oregon Conference a report urging special church effort on behalf of the Chinese. The report closed with the resolution:

That we will warmly invite the Chinese into our own Congregations, churches, and Sunday Schools, and make special effort to Christianize and Americanize these immigrants to our shores. We recommend that the doors of our academies and colleges be kept open to them as to other nationalities.²⁷

Roberts established a night school for the Chinese, which met six nights each week. Chinese paid the rent for the school room, paid for books, fuel, lights and bought an organ, and also hunted up students — about 50. The Chinese population of Portland was listed as 4,500.²⁸

William Roberts died in Dayton, Oregon on August 22, 1888, at the age of 76. To his fourteen years in the Philadelphia and New Jersey Conferences are added 41 on the Pacific coast, or a total of 55 years in the Christian ministry.

William Wallace Youngson spoke of William Roberts as:

... Oregon's first great circuit rider. ... He would have graced the board of bishops. His character, his eloquence and executive ability opened to him the leading pulpits of the East — but he came west and stayed. ... Roberts took up the mantle of Lee. Back of them was a wilderness. ... There were trappers, traders, and a few white men. ... William Roberts took this raw material and built it into a social order and into a house of God.²⁹

Erle Howell, Northwest church historian, stated that during William Roberts' years in the church as superintendent of the Oregon Mission, and later as pastor, presiding elder, and missionary to the Indians and Chinese, he traveled more than 200,000 miles, a record equalled by no other American circuit rider except Francis Asbury.³⁰

From the thoughts of Nehemiah Doane, who gave a memorial

²⁷Minutes of the Twenty-seventh Session of the Oregon Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church (1879), pp. 31-32.
²⁸Minutes of the Twenty-eighth Session of the Oregon Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church (1880), p. 10.
²⁹Youngson, p. 103.
³⁰Howell, p. 201.
tribute to Roberts at the Annual Conference of 1888: religion was the center of his life. It was not impulsive or irregular, but uniform. He had the utmost confidence in the future of Christianity. He loved his brothers in the ministry. For over half a century he never missed meeting with them in their annual gatherings, and on the day before his death he called all their names he could think of, and invoked the blessings of God upon each one of them by name in their work. 

Mrs. Roberts lived to be almost 100 years old. She was blind in her last days, but her memory was a store-house of Scripture. William and Hannah Roberts had two sons, William and John, born in 1839 and 1841, and they came with their parents around the Horn to Oregon in 1846. Correspondence from a great-great-grandson, Wilbur Eugene Roberts, Jr. (named for Rev. J. H. Wilbur) tells of descendants now living in Silverton, Umatilla, and Baker in Oregon, and in Randle, Washington.

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32 Parsons, p. 303.
33 Correspondence from Wilbur E. Roberts, Jr., August 10, 1981.