

NEW SERIES  
**WILLAMETTE UNIVERSITY BULLETIN**

(Published Monthly)

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VOL. V

SALEM, OREGON, MARCH, 1913

NO. 9

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Entered as second-class matter, August 24, 1911, at the Post Office at Salem, Oregon. Under the Act of July 16, 1894

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A PAPER ON

**“Jason Lee as the Founder of Willamette  
University”**

Read by CHARLES B. MOORES, of Portland.

On the occasion of the dedication of the Jason Lee Memorial Church  
at Salem, Oregon, June 15, 1912.

We have been asked to say a few words on this occasion upon “Jason Lee as the founder of Willamette University.” The task is accepted as a congenial one, for, although Jason Lee passed away years before our time, our whole literary education was obtained in the institution which he founded. For one who was for a time a pupil of Mrs. C. A. Willson, the first teacher in the school, in later years a pupil of Lucy Anna Lee, the daughter of the great missionary, for more than a full generation in continuous service as a member of the Board of Trustees of “Old Willamette,” it is a pleasure to pay, in a small way,

tribute to the memory of Jason Lee, and in this task to be associated with those who have taken up and are carrying on the great work he began many years ago, for memories of his pioneer associates, and their familiar figures are indissolubly linked with the most vivid impressions of our boyhood.

It may not be historically exact to say that Jason Lee was the founder of Willamette University. He had been years in his grave when this name was adopted, and there were a number associated with him in the initial work which was consummated after he had passed away. It must be conceded, however, that

in its incipency, and in the earlier stages of its development, no other man was a more potent factor, and to no other man is so well due the title of Founder.

The career of Jason Lee in Oregon covered a period of but ten years, but he was literally "in at the beginning," and during that crucial ten years he was a dominant factor as educator, ecclesiast and statesman. No other figure of that era looms up in comparison save Dr. John McLaughlin, who had the distinct advantage of being at the head of a great and wealthy English corporation, and of having occupied this field in its service for a long series of years. Both were great men. No true friend of either would tear a single laurel from the brow of the other.

While Lee is credited by Bancroft, the historian, with having raised, during his entire career, the sum of \$250,000 for missionary purposes, he came to this coast as a missionary at a time when the great Methodist Church was spending less than \$18,000 yearly on Foreign Missions, and this was then a foreign field. And what a potential field it was! How little conception had even the cheeriest optimist of that day of the vast possibilities of "the Oregon country," or of what the little influences then set in motion meant for the two generations that has since elapsed, or for all of the ages that are to come.

The parents of Jason Lee were natives of the United States, but he was born in Stanstead, Canada, on June 27, 1803. Having in early life become a member of the Wesleyan Church of Canada, in 1827 he entered Wilbraham Academy. Here he was a classmate of O. C. Baker, in later years a Bishop of the M. E. Church, who describes Lee as "a large, athletic man, six feet three inches in height, with a fully developed frame and a constitution of iron." Returning from Wilbraham to his birthplace Lee contemplated missionary work among the Indians of Canada, but while still considering this move he was offered an appointment by the Bishops of the M. E. church to head "a mission among

the Indians west of the Rocky mountains," and on July 17, 1833, he was officially designated as the leader of that great missionary venture. It was a position of vast responsibility, and its offer to this young man of 30 was a certificate of high capacity. He accepted the responsibility, and went forth in the blush of early manhood, the sole leading representative of a great church, into an immense field, then unexplored and almost unknown; today a vast commercial empire with millions of people and billions of wealth, a country of boundless resources, whose existing, wide-spreading and rapidly-developing industries offer but a faint suggestion of what the future holds in store.

Preparatory to his departure upon his mission he made a tour of New England and the Eastern States, and in a series of addresses aroused great interest in the mission upon which he was about to embark.

In March, 1834, he left New York with Daniel Lee, his nephew, who was but three years his junior. A few weeks later, having been joined by Cyrus Shepherd and P. L. Edwards, they joined the expedition of Nathaniel Wyeth. After a journey of almost eight months they reached Oregon, October 1, 1834, and five days later they pitched their tents on the banks of the Willamette river ten miles north of the present site of Salem, and there founded the Methodist mission, and there established the first civilized American settlement west of the Rocky mountains. This location was on the east bank of the Willamette, near a place later known as Garrison's Landing, one-half mile from the town of Wheatland.

Lee and his companions, upon their arrival, erected a log school house, and there gathered some dozens of Indian children, and immediately established what was called the "Oregon Mission Manual Labor School." Although this was primarily purely a missionary enterprise, here was the germ of what ultimately developed into Willamette University. This mission school, and one at Vancouver, were the first that were opened on the Pacific coast for instruction in the English language.

The growth of the work at the mission led Lee to appeal to the Missionary Board for reinforcements. Among those to respond to the appeal were Miss Anna Maria Pitman and Miss Susan Downing, who left the city of Boston in July, 1836, and reached the Willamette valley May 27, 1837.

On Sunday the 16th day of July, 1837, near the mission house, in a beautiful grove, Mr. Lee led a remarkable religious service. At its close he announced his approaching marriage. He then stepped forward and led Miss Pitman to the altar, and they were there married by Rev. Daniel Lee, who immediately performed a like service for Cyrus Shepherd and Miss Susan Downing.

In the interest of his work at the mission Mr. Lee started for the Eastern States, March 26, 1838. Upon his way, on September 1, at Westport, Missouri, through a courier dispatched by Dr. John McLaughlin, he learned of the death of his infant son, and of the subsequent death of his wife on June 26, 1838.

During the twelve months following his arrival in the East he was busy enlisting interest in his missionary enterprise on the Pacific coast. He succeeded in persuading the Missionary Board to appropriate \$42,000 to provide for sending the ship *Lausanne*, with its human cargo of over fifty souls, to the mission fields of Oregon. In the meantime, at Barre, Vermont, he was married to Miss Lucy Thompson, and their bridal trip was a voyage of 10,000 miles around the Horn on the good old missionary ship to the extremest Western verge of the continent.

The main object of this expedition was to reinforce the missionary work in a field predestined to failure, but it served a great and successful purpose in contributing to the educational enterprise that culminated in the founding of Willamette University. Among the passengers of the *Lausanne* were Lee, the first president of the Board of Trustees of the Oregon Institute, and Miss Clark, who later, as Mrs. C. A. Willson, was the first teacher, and Parrish, Waller, Hines, Abernethy, Judson and others, who were active and conspicuous among the founders of Ore-

gon's pioneer institution of learning. On that good old ship, away out on the waters of the Atlantic, on October 25, 1839, the centennial of Methodism, there was taken up a collection of \$650 for the cause of education in Oregon. That collection, and the \$42,000 appropriated for dispatching the "Missionary Family" to Oregon, never reached the coffers of Willamette, but in that contribution, and in that appropriation, and in that passenger list, there was laid the foundation of that endowment fund of Willamette that has so grown in the recent days as to make it a million dollar institution, with millions more to follow.

Returning to Oregon to resume his work at the mission it soon became apparent to Lee that the location of the school on what was, and has ever since been, known as "Mission Bottom," was unsuitable, and it was resolved to remove the headquarters of the mission to Chemeketa, now Salem, and in connection with this removal it was determined, with consent of the Mission Board, to build a suitable house for the accommodation of the mission school. This work was consummated in 1841 in the erection of the old "Oregon Institute," a three-story wooden building, at a cost of \$10,000, on what is now the campus of Willamette University, at a point east of Eaton Hall, near the present location of the University gymnasium. This building, in which all the classes of Willamette University were educated up to 1867, was destroyed by fire in 1872. The Indian Mission School moved into this building in 1842, and there remained for two years, when, because of various adverse conditions, it was abandoned.

In the meantime, the first decisive movement for the founding of Willamette University took form at a meeting held in the home of Jason Lee in Chemeketa, when, on January 17, 1842, a committee consisting of Gustavus Hines, David Leslie and Dr. J. L. Babcock, was appointed to consider the feasibility of founding an institution of learning. This committee called a meeting for February 1, 1842, at the "Old Mission." Here the initial work of the enterprise was consummated, and the proposed

school was, on motion of Gustavus Hines, named "The Oregon Institute." The parties participating in this meeting appeared in their individual capacities and not as representatives of the mission. The first Board of Trustees consisted of Jason Lee, David Leslie, Gustavus Hines, J. L. Parrish, L. H. Judson, George Abernethy, Alanson Beers, Hamilton Campbell and Dr. J. L. Babcock. Jason Lee was chosen president of the board and was empowered "as agent to labor for the interests of the school in the United States whither he was going soon to promote further the civil and religious welfare of Oregon." Jason Lee was also named as one of "the committee on location." After considering various localities this committee reported in favor of the upper end of what is known as "French Prairie," a beautiful location, but without living water. For this reason it was later abandoned and a site on "Wallace Prairie" was selected. This location is two and one-half miles north of Salem, and covered land now owned by Asahel Bush, who is today one of the two survivors of the first Board of Trustees of Willamette University, Rev. John Flinn being the other. A prospectus, constitution and code of by-laws, prepared by Judson, Parrish and Hines, a committee appointed March 9, 1842, were adopted at a meeting held at the home of L. H. Judson in North Salem on March 15, 1842. The prospectus set forth that the institution was to be placed "in the hands of that Society of Evangelical Protestant Christians which shall first pledge itself to sustain it." At that time there was no money in the country. All was barter. Three thousands, nine hundred and seventy dollars was subscribed for starting the institution, and orders on either the mission store, or upon the Hudson Bay Company's store at Vancouver were accepted as cash. Among the subscribers were Jason Lee, David Leslie and L. H. Judson, each of whom pledged \$500. Hines and Beers each subscribed \$300 and Messrs. Waller and Parrish \$200 each. A number of the subscribers pledged one-half and one-third of all they possessed.

Subsequently, at a meeting held at

the "Old Parsonage," which was located on the present site of the Thomas Kay Woolen Mills, Jason Lee, as superintendent of the Oregon Mission, was requested to call a meeting of the members of the M. E. Church in Oregon to consider the importance of adopting the Oregon Institute, and, at a meeting held October 26, 1842, the school was adopted, and this action was later confirmed at a meeting held on the Institute premises at "Wallace Prairie," May 29, 1843.

During 1844 Jason Lee returned to the United States, carrying with him a commission as agent of the Board of Trustees to solicit funds for the library, physical apparatus, etc., for the Oregon Institute. At Honolulu on this, his last journey, he learned that, under a total misapprehension of actual conditions in Oregon, the Missionary Board had superseded him as superintendent, and had appointed Rev. George Gary in his stead.

Upon his arrival in Oregon Superintendent Gary found conditions such, in his judgment, as to warrant an abandonment of the mission school, and a proposition was made by him to the trustees of the Oregon Institute to sell them the mission school building in Salem for \$4,000, although it had cost \$10,000, and although the Catholic Church had made an offer of \$8,000 for it. Having an opportunity to sell their property at Wallace Prairie for \$3,000, the Board of Trustees of the Institute accepted Mr. Gary's offer. This step marked the final disappearance of the Indian Mission Manual Labor School, and thus began the history of Willamette University in its new home upon the campus, under the shadow of the State Capitol Building, where it has been doing its work for nearly seventy years.

The Oregon Institute opened in September, 1844, with Mrs. Chloe A. Willson as the only teacher. After an existence of ten years, or more, under that name, the Oregon Institute was formally chartered by the Oregon Legislative Assembly, in January, 1853, as Willamette University. Since that day, in the continuous work of its various faculties, and in the useful and effective careers of its hundreds of alumni, it has amply

justified the tremendous sacrifices of Jason Lee and his pioneer compeers.

Jason Lee, upon his return to the East in 1844, attended his conference, the New England Conference. He was urgently requested to accept an appointment in that Conference, but his heart was in Oregon and his only desire was to be appointed "agent of the Oregon Institute." He then proceeded to his native town, Stanstead, and there, a few months later, on March 12, 1845, he passed away, longing for Oregon and his infant daughter, and remembering the Oregon Institute with a final bequest of \$100 in his will. His last sight of his daughter was in February of the year before when he left her in Honolulu in the care of Rev. and Mrs. Gustavus Hines. It is a pathetic incident that a year or two later Mr. Hines, who had returned to Oregon, having the opportunity, thought it a duty to return the daughter to her father, and on the 13th day of September, 1845, with her in charge, he left the mouth of the Columbia river for the Eastern States. The father had then been six months in his grave, and it was not until reaching New York on May 4, 1846, more than a year after his death, that they had knowledge of it. Returning to Oregon, that daughter, eighteen years after her father's death, appeared, on July 13, 1863, as one of the graduating class of the institution founded by her father, and afterwards gave a number of years of acceptable service as a member of its faculty.

In the pioneer cemetery of Oregon, the "Lee Mission Cemetery," in Salem, "beneath the first sod broken in Oregon for the reception of a white mother and child," rest the remains of Anna Maria Pitman, the first wife of Jason Lee, and their infant son. She was "the first American woman married west of the Rocky mountains and the first American wife and mother to find sepulcher in Oregon." By her side rest the remains of Lucy Thompson Lee, the second wife, who died March 20, 1842. Thirty-nine years later, on April 25, 1881, Lucy Anna Lee Grubbs, his only daughter, died, and found her final resting place in the same family plot, to be followed less than two years ago by

her college classmate and husband, Professor Francis H. Grubbs. Their only daughter, Ethel Waif Grubbs, of Portland, survives.

For more than sixty years the body of Jason Lee lay in the old home cemetery in Stanstead, Canada, but Oregon claimed him as her own. His body was returned and, on June 15, 1906, in the sixty-second annual commencement week of Willamette University, 103 years after his birth, the remains of the great Oregon missionary were laid away in the cemetery which bears his name, Dr. John H. Coleman, President of the University, officiating, in the presence of a great concourse, not one of whom had known him in life, but all of whom were deeply impressed by their knowledge of his life work, which had closed nearly two generations before.

This is but a bare, hard, material outline of Lee's achievements along the single line of his relationship to Willamette University. His was a life of romance and of tragedy, of sacrifice and achievement. We stand today upon a platform of a church that is being dedicated to his memory, located upon the immediate field in which he was the pioneer bearer of the standard of Methodism. Here were planted the seed from which has germinated the existing state. This beautiful capital of 20,000 people had its real origin in 1841 in the Old Mission Mill, the Old Methodist Parsonage, and the Old Oregon Institute. The early history of this community is the early history of what we now call "Old Willamette." Here on September 5, 1849, in the chapel of the Oregon Institute, was organized, by Rev. William Roberts, "The Oregon and California Mission Conference," the pioneer Conference of the western half of the American continent, and during that year Roberts shipped from this state the material to build the first church in the city of San Francisco. That pioneer Conference was composed of but six members: Roberts, Wilbur, Waller and Leslie—all famous in the annals of Oregon Methodism—and Taylor and Owens of California, Taylor in later years being known, the world over, as the great missionary Bishop. The field of

that Conference of six members covered what are now the states of California, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and a large part of Montana. In this Conference, organized more than four years after the death of Lee, the Oregon Institute was officially adopted as an educational institution of the Church.

On every hand are there reminders of Lee and the heroic men and women who were here the pioneer torch-bearers of civilization. Just over the way lies all that is mortal of the great leader. Among his comrades in those early days was David Leslie. For twenty-five years, as the successor of Lee, he officiated as President of the Board of Trustees of Willamette University. Here was his home and here is his grave. Two miles to the south, but within the corporate limits, is the Leslie Memorial Church, dedicated to his memory. The third president of the Board of Trustees of Willamette was Rev. J. L. Parrish, Lee's fellow passenger on the Lausanne. Here he lived and here he died. Here in the heart of the city, with Willamette University and the State Capitol in its very center, is the donation claim of William H. Willson, Willamette's first secular agent, and of Chloe A. Willson, Willamette's first teacher. And here, too, is the donation claim of Rev. A. F. Waller, another passenger of the Lausanne, the builder of the first Methodist Church in Oregon, the builder of the Old Mission Mill, the builder of the first brick building on the campus of Willamette, and for many years her effective and indefatigable financial agent. At every step are there suggestions of Lee and suggestions of Willamette. Lee, the founder, has gone to his reward. Willamette remains, the continuous conservator of his fame. With the record of but seventy years already made, every sacrifice is justified, and every hope and promise is fully met, yet that record is but a suggestion of the possibilities of the days that are yet to come. Who can tabulate the ulti-

mate results of that crucial period of ten years in the life of Jason Lee on this Northwest coast in the closing years of the first half of the nineteenth century? Standing today on the summit of her latest achievement, with an equipment of one million dollars, with her hundreds of alumni, and looking out, and away beyond the field of her present endeavor, Willamette is but entering upon a new career that is to immortalize the name of Lee, and that is rich in its promises for Methodism, for Oregon, and for our common humanity. With her past history, with her history yet to be made, with all her students past, and yet to come, with all of the radiating influences of their life work as they march out and on, from year to year, invading every avenue of thought, of endeavor and of achievement, there will go some part of Jason Lee, the great Canadian-American evangelist, and of his loyal and devoted comrades. They builded upon an enduring foundation. They did their work wisely and well. That work will live, for it will be perpetuated by men imbued with the spirit of the fathers:

“These men of prayer, of lives  
austere,  
Of faith unwavering and of toil  
severe,  
Here where Mount Hood on vale and  
stream looks down,  
And, towering high, St. Helens lifts  
her crown,  
Waller, Leslie, Wilbur, Judson, Lee!  
Why name them all? They live in  
memory.  
Not monumental bronze nor marble  
tomb  
Need these the story of their lives  
t' illumine,”

for that story is to find its incarnation in the highest type of Oregon's future citizenship, and the influences set in motion in those old days of small beginnings will illumine the way, and carry with them hope and strength and inspiration for all of the coming generations.