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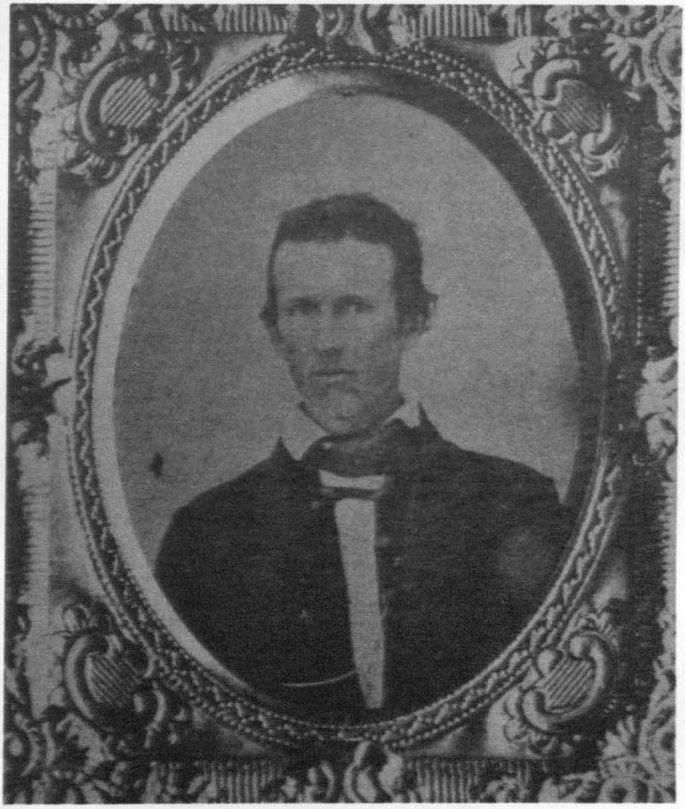
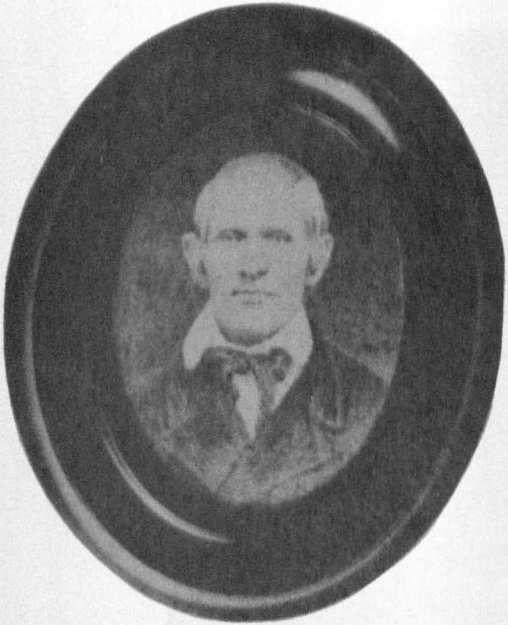
Christmas in Oregon Territory in 1853

Leonore Gale Barette



Harrison Kincaid at 17



Grandfather and Grandmother Kincaid.

Christmas in Oregon Territory in 1853

Leonore Gale Barette

"May Hope, with shining feet, walk on before thee,
And Friendship hold thy hand in lonely ways;
May Peace, who dries all tears, watch ever near thee,
And Love, through all the years, shine on thy days."

(From an old Christmas card)
1860

EUGENE, OREGON,
CHRISTMAS, 1950

MEMORIES of the sparkling days of childhood, happy times of long ago, come in one's mind at Christmas with a sharper poignancy than at any other season of the year. We miss beloved parents, with their gentle voices and tender care, when we hear the chimes from the church tower, when we cut the sprigs of holly with their glistening red berries and our homes and churches are fragrant with the pungent evergreens of our western country. Everything about the season is twined and encircled with sacred memories. We drift back, in dreams, to childhood and early youth.

Vivid and clear are recollections of the tales my parents told about their own childhood and youth. Particularly appealing to a small child was the story my mother related so many times of the first Christmas her family spent in Oregon. Mother was ten years old when her father and mother and two brothers and two sisters made the long journey over the old Oregon Trail in 1853. In a little over two years it will be 1953 and a century will have passed. The courage, endurance, resourcefulnes and sufferings of the pioneers will have faded from the memory of almost every living person.

The Kincaid family left their home in Indiana, near Indianapolis, in February, 1853, starting out alone, as they had no neighbors nor friends who wanted to come to the Oregon country at that time. They began the three thousand mile journey with a covered wagon drawn by three yoke of oxen, steers and cows, the latter brought along for a milk supply. They had a small carriage with two horses, some loose stock and the old family dog.

More than seven long weary months were spent on the road; and on September 29, 1853, after the perilous descent over the Barlow Trail, the family arrived at Foster's, twelve miles from Oregon City. They had a few days' rest for the footsore, almost exhausted animals, and then the family started out for the head of the Willamette Valley. They crossed the Santiam River at Comer's ferry, the McKenzie River at Spores' ferry, and the Willamette River on a ferry about where the Eugene bridge is now.

It was the 11th day of October, 1853, when they drove their weary horses and oxen into what is now the town of Eugene. There was not a house on the townsite then, only stakes in the grass to mark the ownership of lots and blocks, which had been platted the year before. There were a few houses outside the town lots; a small store at the ferry; Eugene Skinner's house on the west; Hilyard Shaw's home where the University of Oregon is now; and perhaps two or three other small houses beyond the plat of the lots then laid out.

Every member of the family was tired and worn from the long hazardous journey, the difficult and

frightening Barlow Trail, the lack of all comforts, and the monotony of a restricted diet, all that was possible from the supply of food that could be carried in the old covered wagon. At Foster's the family had tasted fresh vegetables, cabbage and other greens, for the first time since they left home, and at The Dalles they had fresh salmon which they bought from Indians there. This long journey is a tale of its own; but the first Christmas in 1853 has always seemed a pathetic and courageous effort to make the best of the scant supplies they had and to show thankfulness and appreciation for the safe arrival at the end of the trail, and as a harbinger of hope for the new home in a green and pleasant land.

My grandfather, Thomas Kincaid, was fifty-three years old. All the way across the plains he had suffered with an aching, throbbing felon on one of his hands. There was no medical or other assistance at hand, nothing to do but endure the biting pain and keep on with the hard tasks of every day. By the time the family reached Lane County, Grandfather had partially lost the use of one hand. That did not keep him from daily work and he still drove the ox team, changing off with his oldest son to ride horseback and drive the stock.

After the family arrived in what was then the very beginning of Eugene, Grandfather rode over the country to locate a homestead, going twice to Oregon City on horseback, a long ride of more than one hundred and fifty miles as the rude trail then ran. He took another ride to Marysville (now Corvallis) to have wheat ground into flour, as that was

the nearest mill in 1853. He had bought fifty pounds of flour at a mill on the California River, at the rate of $5.00 per hundred pounds, and that was all the flour they had that winter of 1853-54, except the grist from the wheat they purchased after coming to Eugene and which was ground at Marysville. The rest of the family provisions consisted almost entirely of potatoes, bought from Zara Sweet, an adjoining homesteader, part of them being dug on the shares. Some of the potatoes froze during a cold spell and were not very appetizing.

Grandfather Kincaid finally located on some fractions of land, including a long narrow strip over a mile long, that nobody would have in surveying out their claim, which they had taken in every shape, picking out the good land. This homestead is situated along the south side of the Zara Sweet claim, now almost adjoining the town of Eugene, and extends about one and a half miles south of the Sweet claim in the hills and brush.

As soon as the homestead was established and legally entered, Grandfather and his oldest son, Harrison, then seventeen years old, went to work on a log cabin for their home; cutting the trees, stripping them, making the logs for the walls and puncheon floor, joining them, gathering field stones for the fireplace and chimney, which they built and plastered with mud. This, in addition to the numerous chores of every day, kept them busy from the first faint rays of daylight till it was too dark to work. Even after dark, they often toiled by the flare

of a pitchlight until they were so weary they barely had strength to climb into the old covered wagon for a night of sleep, the sleep of exhaustion. Harrison, writing in later years, told that he and his father worked for fifteen hours a day in the spring and summer when there was enough light.

Early in the month of December, 1853, Grandfather and Harrison had finished a one-room log cabin with a fireplace for cooking and a large storeroom on the north. Later another cabin was built on the north side of the storeroom and then there were two rooms, with the entry, or storage room, in the middle. That first winter the family had to get along with the one room and the storage space.

Beds were made from trees, trimmed into poles and fastened to the wall. The soft and fragrant tips of fir boughs were placed on shelves in the bottom of the frames to make a foundation for the wool mattresses and feather beds which Grandmother had brought across the plains and on which the family had slept in the covered wagon and by camp fires. The gay colored quilts which came across in a big chest, and which had been used as wrapping for a few cherished dishes and other treasures, were unpacked. The plates and pieces of crockery were carefully placed on shelves built in the rough wall. A little mirror which Grandmother had brought from Indiana was hung where the light from the one tiny window shone on it. Grandfather used it when he shaved. He had no beard nor whiskers on his face, which was rather unusual in 1853, but he carefully shaved every few days, even during the

wearisome plains trip. Mother said they had brought a few cakes of Castile soap which were carefully saved for the shaving rite. Other bits from the old home three thousand miles away were placed on the crude shelves: a picture of grandmother's parents, an old tintype which was dim and indistinct (at least it was when I first saw it); a few books; the family Bible; the litttle treasures which had been slipped between the bedding in an old chest and a queer looking trunk lined with bright flowered paper.

They were now at home. Grandfather and Uncle Harrison were busy every minute, plowing, slashing, bringing piles of wood to burn in the fireplace, building pens for stock, putting up sheds, beginning rail fences for the homestead. Grandmother sent the children one day on an errand to the McBee claim which was not far away. Kind, friendly Mr. and Mrs. McBee gave the children, Elizabeth, John and Mary Alice, a little dog to replace the old family friend that had died on the Sweetwater. The children named him "Watch" after the dog they had loved in Indiana and who did not survive the perils of the Oregon Trail. For many years this little dog was with the family, till he passed on to his dog heaven after they had proved up on their homestead and moved down to Eugene City, as it was then called. Many the story Mother and Grandmother told of the intelligence and devotion of this beloved little dog friend.

The days were nearing Christmas and Grandfather and Grandmother, remembering the joyous and merry times in the old home in Indiana with its

full larder and storehouses to draw on, churches and stores within a day's driving distance, and their own friendly parents and relatives living nearby, felt they must try to make some small observance of the day to give the children a bit of happiness and to express their own thanks to God for a safe journey and the beginnings of a new home in this golden and fruitful land.

They were hard put to it to know what to do. They had nothing in the way of food with which to make a dinner festive, only flour, potatoes, a bit of dried fruit and a little brown sugar and some bacon. Their money was practically all spent in preparing for and making the long trip, in expenses incident to entering the homestead and in the purchase of a few essentials necessary to maintain life until spring. There was no church to attend in the little settlement of Eugene, even if the old oxen were again hitched to the creaking wagon. One ox had died and one had broken a leg and had to be put away. There was still one big fellow, "Old Buck", and some cows, but it was doubtful if they could have drawn the wagon over the rough trails, as there were no roads in 1853. Anyway, there was no place to go.

Grandfather and Grandmother talked it over with Uncle Harrison, their right hand man, who was a resourceful, industrious and understanding lad, even if he was only seventeen years old. They took Rebecca Ann, who was thirteen, and my mother Elizabeth, who was then ten years old, into the conference. They all decided the best thing to do was to plan a little celebration for the younger children,

John who was a bit over seven, and Mary Alice then four and a half years old. Rebecca as a big girl of thirteen and mother at ten felt quite grown up, so they tossed their heads, squared their tiny shoulders and said they felt far too old for Christmas festivities themselves, but would plan something for the small brother and sister.

A few rods from the cabin was a flowing spring which supplied the family with water, and on one side of this Harrison built a screen of fir boughs and small trees. It made a lovely little green wall. In the middle of this he set a small stump and hung a little hatchet or hammer on its side. At each end of the screen he put in, carefully, stakes or long sticks which were full of pitch and which were wound about with string-like flexible pieces of pitchy wood; the old pitchlights of pioneer days which were used everywhere then, at camp meetings, political rallys, talks and gatherings of any kind held after nightfall. Harrison had some small bags hung away in the loft, and these were blown up so they would pop with a bang when struck with the little hatchet.

The story of these small bags is a pathetic bit. A neighboring homesteader rode over the hills on his horse one morning, asking if he could get help in butchering his hogs. Grandfather and Harrison mounted their own horses and rode home with the man. In 1853 the men on the homesteads had to help each other, as there was no other way to manage, no extra men in the county, no employment agencies, no seasonal or migrant workers, nothing but help from the children and their own grit and

resourcefulness. Every man knew he could call on a neighbor in an emergency, and aid was never refused. After the butchering, the bladders from the hogs were given to Grandfather and Harrison. We wonder now why they brought them home. Perhaps they had in mind then the very way they would use them, for it was only a short time before Christmas. The bladders were carefully cleaned, inflated and hung up to dry.

Shortly after dusk on Christmas eve the children heard loud clangs, big brother knocking on an iron from the old wagon. They all rushed out toward the spring. The pitchlights were burning gaily, sending up sparks and giving off the resinous, tangy odor which no one can ever forget who has looked on the old torches.

Harrison had made a little mask of fir twigs and atttached to it a long beard of dry grasses, which he had collected around in the nearby brush and woods. He looked more like a wood elf than Santa Claus, but the children shouted with laughter when they saw him. Pop, pop, went the bags, the children drawing close and laughing and dancing. Even the big girls skipped about, sharing in the fun, and finally they all joined in a song Grandfather had started. The pitchlights burned and crackled, threw off sparks and that pungent fragrance. Reluctantly the children finally went inside, where Grandmother had hurriedly set the crude homemade table, lighted with tallow candles. She used the few pretty dishes she had, and managed somehow an extra treat for the dinner. Supper they called it then. Grandfather

had brought in a fat grouse and Grandmother had made, almost out of thin air, some little cakes. She had contrived a few little figures from potatoes with sticks for legs, and for their faces she scraped the skin from the tuber and had tiny buttons for eyes. They wore jaunty little hats made somehow from bits of paper and leaves. These centered the table, and the children admired them with "Oh's" and "Ah's" and wide eyes.

For Mary Alice there was a small doll, dressed in a wide skirt with white pantalettes gathered in about the ankles, as the little girls wore them in the 1840's and the early 1850's. This had been made by Grandmother and Aunt Rebecca out of scraps and what else no one will ever know! Mother did not remember where the doll came from, whether her father had found it in Oregon City on one of his trips there, or whether it came across the plains, but as she recalled it after many years, it was a real doll not just a rag one.

For litttle John, Grandfather had made a small cane with a dog's head carved on it. He was clever with his jack knife and could take a piece of wood and cut on it grotesque and funny faces and figures. John was surprised and delighted. He carried the cane on many a tramp through the woods, pointing with it to the mountains, to a grouse hiding in the ferns, or just swinging along with the litttle treasure, feeling like a grownup man.

After supper Harrison put logs in the fireplace to build up a big crackling fire. Grandfather took down his worn Bible and read again the old old story

of the Three Wise Men, The Shepherds Who Watched Their Flocks by Night, The Manger, The Birth of Christ. Never were the chapters more reverently read nor more intently absorbed than in that crude little log cabin, almost a hundred years ago. During the evening they talked over the verses, and Grandfather explained his understanding of "Peace on Earth, Good Will Toward Men". "Good Will", he told them, was in essence only kindness. Kindness and consideration for everything and every person alive. Always they should, every day of the year, remember never to say an unkind word nor to make a cutting or sarcastic remark that would leave a sore place or a scar in a heart for many days or even years. Always they should be ready to help a fellow man carry a burden. "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them", that was what Good Will meant and one must carry that thought in his heart.

Grandfather Kincaid was from an old Scottish family, all of them members of the Presbyterian Church since it was founded. They had lived in Scotland and later, in Ireland, in the old Covenanter days. The first Kincaid who came to America was an old minister, accompanied by his three sons. Grandfather himself, with his kind heart and great love for humanity, leaned toward the Universalist faith, though he had always been a member of the church of his fathers. Tiny Grandmother, with her merry brown eyes, said her parents were "shouting Methodists", but she preferred to go along with Tommy.

Thomas Kincaid related again, that Christmas night, stories of his boyhood on his father's plantation in old Virginia. These tales always seemed new and exciting and the children listened eagerly. He told of his own grandfather Thomas, for whom he was named, and of his early life when he fought in the Indian wars. He painted again the scenes his grandfather had known in the Revolutionary War when he served in Capt. Andrew Lockridge's company in the Battle of Point Pleasant. It all seemed very near, for when Grandfather Kincaid was born in 1800, his own grandfather was still a strong, active man and he lived to a very old age, coming over the Wilderness Road when the family decided to move to Ohio and Indiana which was then unsettled country.

Grandfather told that Christmas evening of his boyhood on the plantation, which was a little world of its own. He spoke of the cobbler's shop where he learned to make shoes and mentioned how valuable his skill in this craft had been in the new pioneer territories where he had so often made shoes for his family and for himself. In the long building where there were several blacksmith forges he was taught the trade of smith, and he was able to make the shoes and shoe his own horses. He learned to make a wagon and all the irons that belonged on it. He pictured for the children the sheds where they made syrup from sugar cane; and the sunny open building where his grandmother spun and carded and wove. They made their own soap in huge iron pots. He recalled the slaves and the pickaninnies who lived

on his grandfather's plantation in old Greenbrier County, and told of the kindness and consideration with which he treated every person, child and animal on his lands.

While the children listened to the old tale they had heard so often before, but which was always fascinating, Grandfather told how his own grandfather, another Thomas Kincaid, had searched his heart and soul and spent hours on his knees with only his conscience and his God, and had finally reached the conclusion that slavery was evil and vicious. While he was kind and considerate with his own slaves, some owners were brutal, selfish and overworked and abused their people. The system of slavery seemed to him iniquitous and in his own mind he felt it was an abhorrent thing for one man to own another. As soon as he reached this conclusion he acted. He called all his people together and told them they were to have their freedom. He explained that he would not leave them helpless with no home, nor tools, nor way to take care of themselves. He managed to provide all of them with the means and implements so that they would be able to make their own way.

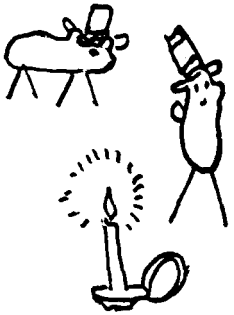
Thomas Kincaid had been a man of considerable property before he freed his people and provided for their needs, but as his possessions consisted mostly of his plantation and the appurtenances thereof, he was greatly reduced in fortune and was not in a position now to maintain what land he had. To a true Scotsman right is right and good fortune or ill fortune will not sway a man of principle from his honest convictions.

A family conference was held. Thomas Kincaid's father, Francis; his grandfather, Thomas; and his greatgrandfather; all cherished the same opinions and were known as "Abolitionists". Francis Kincaid, the father of my Grandfather Thomas, and his brother, another Thomas, were married to Nancy Murdock and Elizabeth Murdock, respectively, the daughters of James Murdock who served in the American Revolution and who had married Jane, the daughter of the Rev. William Graham of Pennsylvania. Their marriages are still on record in Greenbrier County, now in West Virginia, in the Marriage Records, 1780 to 1819, under the letter K. Francis and Nancy became the parents of my grandfather Thomas, and other sons, James, Francis, John, Washington, Mathew, Allen, and daughters, Nancy, Hannah, and Mary (Polly).

At the time great great grandfather Thomas freed his slaves, most of his children were married and lived in the surrounding country. As he could not work his land without help, it seemed to him it would be a good thing to leave the slave state and get a foothold in a new country where every man was free. My mother remembered hearing her father tell of the home of his grandparents in Greenbrier County on or near the Gavely Mountain, on a main traveled road, where they often saw people going west to the new territories. They were not very far from the great Kaneway River. They lived there until nearly all of their children were born. Mother's father, Thomas, was next to the oldest and he was seventeen years old when the family left Virginia

Harrison with his beard of dry grasses looked more like a wood elf than Santa Claus. The pitchlights were burning gally.

For John, Grandfather had made a small cane with a dog's head carved on it.



The potatoes wore jaunty paper hats.

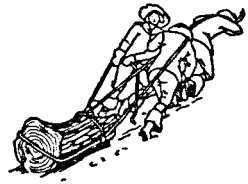
For Mary Alice a doll.

and came west to Ohio and Indiana in the year 1817. The family came down the Great Kaneway in a canoe or skiff, and Grandfather Thomas came by land, riding a valuable horse they were bringing to the new country.

The family settled in different places in Ohio and Indiana. Grandfather Thomas Kincaid was married to Nancy Chodrick on January 9, 1831, in Madison County, Indiana. Thomas lived for thirty-six years in Ohio and Indiana before he decided to take the Oregon Trail. Their farm home in Indiana was surrounded by swamps and there was much illness which they attributed to low, wet and undrained lands. The children were ill much of the time with what they called "miasma". Harrison had several spells of "lung fever", and while their farm was fertile and produced crops of amazing size and variety, the weather at times was stormy, there were thunder storms and hurricanes. Some houses were blown down. After careful thought and reflection the family decided to make the long trip to the Far West, of which territory they had heard such glowing stories from relatives and returned travelers. So, in 1853, Thomas Kincaid and his little family started out with courage and determination to try and reach and establish a home in what they felt was almost the Promised Land.

On that Christmas evening so long ago, the Kincaid family had been in Lane County, in the Territory of Oregon, for only seventy-five days, but they had a snug, warm little cabin, a beautiful hill claim with timber and clear sparkling water; they had

some stock and planned to get more; they had a team of good horses, a friendly little dog; the children were in splendid health; a small school had just been started within walking distance over the hills. The road to the future looked promising and they all determined that if hard work and grit would lead to success, they would reach it.

That faraway Christmas night ended with Grandfather playing old carols on his violin, the happy children joining in singing the words. When the little folks were tucked in bed, Grandfather and Grandmother looked at each other with firm chins, but there were tears in their eyes.

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