

# HERITAGE

## The Death of A. J. Hembree

by Bonnie Miller

*"Dear Sir I have just returned from the Yakima Country I was gone 18 days I have had the most disagreeable trip that I ever had in my life I have bin in the snow for the last six or seven days from one to five feet deep with out tents or fier I've had to take it as it came we have had sevel little running fights with the indians have killed some 8 or 10 + got 3 of our men wounded slightly . . . I have bin nearly all over the yakimaw nation after the Indians with my companey we have run them from their country + I have returned to the Dalles + awaiting further orders. I hope to be at home in the course of 15 or 20 days on a furlow. I hope you are all well. I want you to wright tell Matilda god bless hir + take good care of the baby, good by A. J. Hembree"*

Absalom Jefferson Hembree was about 250 miles from his Yamhill County home in Oregon when he wrote this letter to his son-in-law, H. H. Snow, on November 21, 1855. Born in Tennessee on December 14, 1813, he was a married man with four children when he left Missouri and crossed the plains to Oregon in 1843. Traveling in company with several other Christians and family members, he had experienced the heart-wrenching tribulations (including the death of his 6-year-old nephew) that would become commonplace for the thousands who would follow in their tracks on the Oregon Trail.

Gifted with leadership abilities, his neighbors often looked to "Uncle Abb," as he was affectionately known, for guidance. In 1846 he was elected to the Oregon Provisional Legislature as the representative from Yamhill County and was reelected in 1847 and 1848. After Oregon became a territory, he continued to serve in the same position in 1849, 1851,

and 1854. He was appointed a director of the Portland and Valley Plank Road Company in 1851 but it closed a year later amidst a financial scandal. Subsequently he organized the Pacific Telegraph Company and served as its president in an effort to connect communication lines between Oregon and California.

In religious matters, he was also a man on whom others depended for leadership. Although earlier associated with the Baptist Church, Hembree's parents, James and Nancy, and his sister Matilda, had joined with the Restoration Movement and are listed in 1839 as charter members of the oldest Christian Church in Dade County, Missouri. A. J. was already married (to Nancy Dodson on January 22, 1835) and likely still living in Tennessee at the time his parents joined the Christian Church, but his ties to the movement would deepen as he became surrounded in Yamhill County with fellow Christians.

It was Dr. James McBride, an old friend of the Hembrees while living in Missouri and a pioneer Restoration preacher in Oregon, who sought A. J.'s assistance in 1846. As the McBride wagon train neared the end of their six month journey near The Dalles, the doctor had sent word ahead to his friends, the Hembrees, requesting that they send fresh teams and supplies if possible to aid them on the last leg of their journey. A. J.'s brother Joel Jordan and another Christian friend, Chesley B. Gray, responded by taking the animals and provisions to The Dalles in person. One of McBride's sons, John Rogers McBride, later recalled



Nancy and Absalom Hembree were among the pioneer Christians who settled in the Oregon Territory, Yamhill County, in 1843.

the incident. "They had received the letter, and with a promptness which none but pioneers could emulate, and a generosity that makes gratitude a pleasing burden, they had answered the call, and three yoke of fresh oxen and two horses laden with provisions and supplies came to our assistance..." "It took another eight days to complete

their trek to the settlement in Yamhill County. There McBride remembered, "A few more hours, and we were under the roof of an old friend of other days, A. J. Hembree, and the long journey was at an end." (John Rogers McBride, "Overland 1846," ms #458 Oregon History Center).

Later that fall, McBride and another gospel preacher, Glen Owen Burnett, would lean on Hembree for aid again. As McBride and Burnett teamed up to hold the first gospel meeting in Oregon, they met at "the Hembree settlement" in Yamhill and borrowed a horse from A. J. to ride to neighboring Clackamas County where the meeting was to be held. (Jerry Rushford, *Christians on the Oregon Trail*, pp. 72-73.)

Hembree also helped the emerging Oregon Territory by supplying the militia during the Cayuse and Rogue River Indian Wars. In the early settlement of the Pacific Northwest, a series of conflicts arose between the native inhabitants and the immigrants as a result of greed, gold and cultural differences. When his neighbors prevailed upon Hembree, he agreed to lead a company of Oregon Mounted Volunteers north some 250 miles into Washington state when the Yakima Indian

War erupted. His son, who bore the same name as A. J.'s brother, Joel Jordan, recalled being out in the field helping his father build a fence when "George Olds and several other settlers rode up and told him that the company of volunteers had decided to ask him to be their captain." (Fred Lockley, "Observations and Impressions of the Journal Man," *Oregon Daily Journal*, April 17, 1922, p. 8.) Joel was only 6 years old at the time, but the request left an indelible impression on his young memory.

A. J. was elected captain of Company E of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment, Oregon Mounted Volunteers, which he organized in October of 1855. His troops spent most of the winter in the Walla Walla Valley where

portunity to let you know what we are doing in this god-forsaken country. We have been living for the past 15 days on horse beef. Our horses are all very weak, many of them giving out right and left. We are laying by at present to recruit horses and get provisions. We have been across the Snake river and all through the Palouse country. The Indians fled. We have run them all out of their country." He mentions as he closes that his two nephews, Wayman and Lafayette, who were part of his company of Volunteers, were both well. (Jim & Reita Lockett, *Settling the Land of Promise*, pp. 73-74).

On the morning of April 10th, Captain Hembree took a scouting party of ten soldiers across the creek and started up

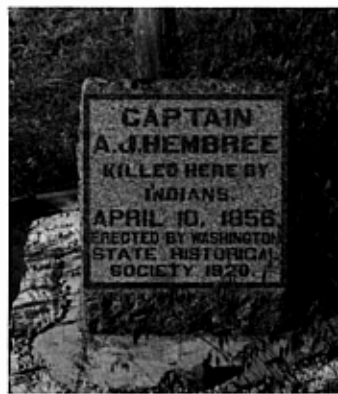
just before starting down a hill, the captain was shot from his mule. "He was shot in the right side just above the hip bone," Stillwell reported, "the shot coming out on the left side at the second rib; the ball going clear through. He called to the boys not to leave him."

However, the small scouting party was sadly outnumbered and in order to save their own lives, they had to retreat. Stillwell remembered that Hembree was "braced up with his right hand and was using his revolver with his left... Just then an Indian ran up to him and fired, shooting him through the heart." The battle continued most of the day and it wasn't until that evening that they were able to recover Hembree's body which by that time had been stripped and scalped.

A "squaw rig" consisting of a pair of poles carried by two ponies, was used to carry Captain Hembree's body as far as the Columbia River. There, according to John Young Todd (a fellow Christian from Yamhill County in Hembree's Company who accompanied the body) they were held up by high winds for several days until it was safe to cross the river. At The Dalles they secured a large box from the fort's carpenter and packed ice about the body. When they reached the Lower Cascades the wind was still blowing hard and they had to wait another two nights and a day before finally being able to sail to Portland where they arrived on Thursday, April 17, a week after his death.

When they reached Hembree's home near Lafayette one of the largest funerals ever conducted in the county was held in his honor. Harvey Scott noted in his *History of Oregon* that a handkerchief was arranged to conceal the loss of Hembree's scalp. He was buried on his homestead four miles north of Lafayette in Yamhill County. He died at the age of 43, leaving a wife and nine children.

See Death of A. J. Hembree  
page 15



The desolate landscape west of Toppenish, Washington, is the setting for a historical marker (see the post in the center of the photo on the left) placed by the Washington State Historical Society. The marker commemorates the death of Captain Absalom Jefferson Hembree.

they were poorly supplied. Ice on the Columbia River prevented a fresh supply of rations from arriving until spring. His letter to his son-in-law that November refers to the deprived conditions they endured and a furlough he was anticipating shortly. Hembree made it home on furlough and then returned to the Indian war. His daughter, Nancy Matilda Snow, recalled that when his leave of absence expired they felt he might come home again, but they never saw him alive again. He died in battle on April 10, 1856.

Just a few days prior to his death he had written to his brother Joel about the dire condition of his men. "I take this op-

some bluffs on the north. They spotted what appeared to be a group of riderless horses coming towards them. However, as they neared the herd, they discovered too late that it was an ambush with each horse carrying an Indian hidden on the opposite side of the steed. Hembree ordered his men to charge. About half way up the hill the Indians began to fire. At this point the Volunteers realized there was another band of Indians coming at them from the rear and they were cut off from camp with nearly 100 Indians in front and over 40 in the rear. According to an eyewitness, Lieutenant W. D. Stillwell, Hembree ordered a retreat and

## New Leadership for Pepperdine's Church Leaders Council



Garth Black



Rick Gibson

The Church Leaders Council announces the appointment of two new leaders: Garth Black of Bakersfield, California, and Rick Gibson of Pepperdine.

Garth has taught numerous classes for the Pepperdine Bible Lectures program and he and Doris, his wife of 49 years, received an outstanding Christian Service Award in 1996. He retired from full-time preaching in 1995 after preaching for 45 years, and currently lectures for seminars, and preaches and teaches on a regular basis. He and Doris have four children, and nine grandchildren, two of whom are currently enrolled at Pepperdine.

Working alongside of Garth is Rick Gibson. Rick came to Pepperdine in 1998 and is manager of University Publications. Prior to his work at Pepperdine, Rick was a minister at the Mission Viejo Church of Christ for 12 years.

Garth and Rick are working with a number of active members to revitalize the Church Leaders Council. "We want to continue the good work that Terry Giboney started and to fulfill his dream of recruiting 300 members," said Rick. Currently there are 80 active members.

The Pepperdine University Church Leaders Council is a group of ministers, elders, deacons, and other leaders from the Churches of Christ who are dedicated to Christian education. Each member contributes a minimum of \$500 per year

which goes directly to students from the Churches of Christ to help pay their unmet educational needs. In addition to providing these scholarship funds for Church of Christ students, the Council works to raise the profile of the value of Christian education at Pepperdine within the Churches of Christ.

The Council meets annually during the Pepperdine Bible Lectures in April. At that time, Council members share their ideas and enjoy Christian fellowship.

If you have the vision to see how Christian education plays a role in influencing the direction of the church and the nation through preparing future leaders, and if you are interested in becoming a member of Church Leaders Council, please contact: Rick Gibson at (310) 456-4181 or email: rgibson@pepperdine.edu.

## Death of A. J. Hembree

*continued from page 13*

In 1920, at the age of 92, W. D. Stillwell, the lieutenant who witnessed Hembree's death, returned to the scene of the Indian attack and identified the place where Hembree had fallen. The Washington State Historical Society placed a marker on the spot. Another monument was placed in a park in the city of Toppenish, Washington. It directs people to the marker on the site of his death, "7 miles south and 10 degrees west" of Toppenish.

One of his fellow soldiers wrote at the time of his death, "No man in the Regiment was more highly esteemed, and none more active and serious in the discharge of his duty." *The Oregonian* stated "In the death of Capt. Hembree the territory have lost a useful and enterprising citizen, the community a worthy man, and a large circle of relatives a friend, protector and support." (*Oregonian* April 19, 1856) It was a great loss for the Restoration Movement in Oregon also. With the death of A. J. Hembree the church lost a willing servant and respected leader.

## Cascade College's Annual Conference on the Family

Cascade College's annual Conference on the Family will be held October 27-30, 1999 on the Portland campus.

Leading chapel and offering evening keynote addresses are Prentice Meador, Willard Tate, James Walters and Don McLaughlin.

The conference offers something for everyone including a breakfast series for men beginning at 6:30 a.m. each morning, classes for women and singles and practical classes designed to enrich families and churches.

Concerts and drama provided by *Witness* and *Vision* will be presented along with the Cascade Concert Choir and Cascade Kids Choir. Following the conference there will be an area-wide worship service with guest speaker Don McLaughlin on Sunday, October 31.



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