Empty Harvest at WAIILATPU

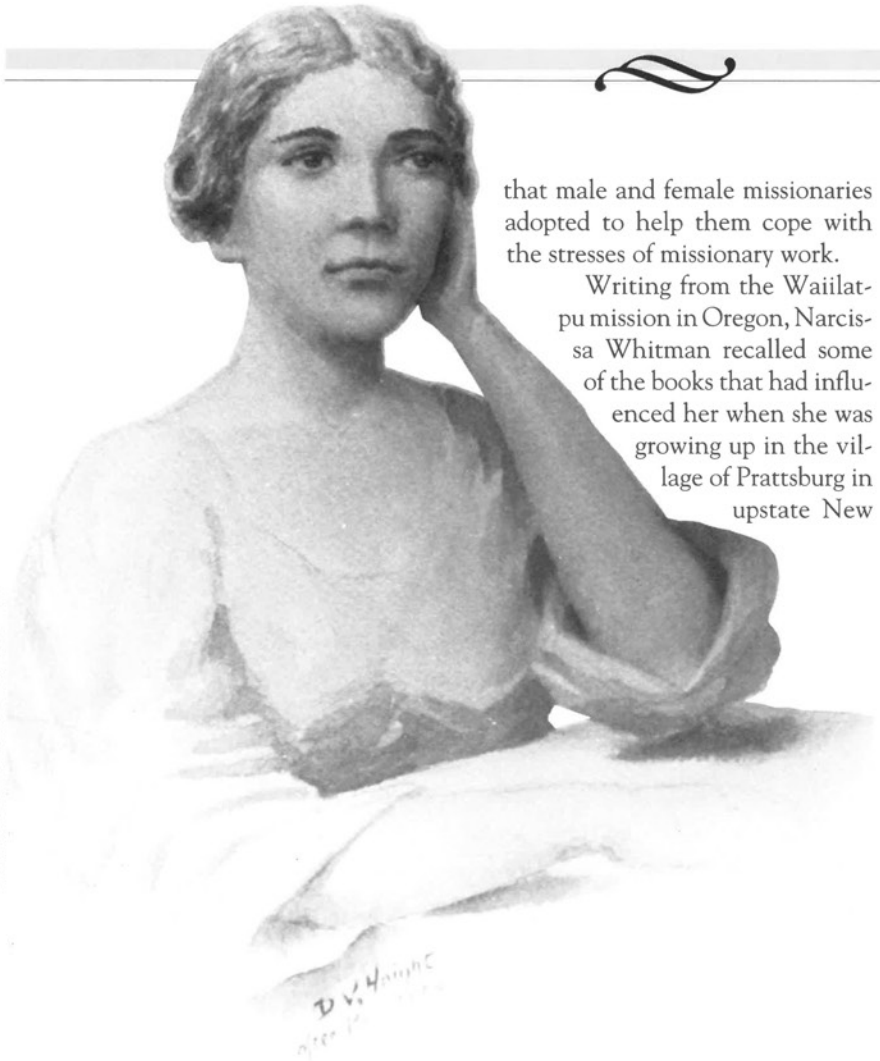
BY JULIE ROY JEFFREY

The Mission Life of Narcissa Whitman

THE AMERICAN MISSIONARY movement has often been considered irrelevant or embarrassing. Recently, though, historians and others have been reexamining the significance of mission work both within and outside the United States. New studies point out that missionary impulses to do good and to refashion other peoples and cultures have been central themes in American history since the 17th century. As their efforts expanded outside the continental United States in the early 19th century, missionaries became important agents of modernization.

While missionaries can be considered successful proponents of modernization, it is striking to modern observers how many of these efforts at transformation failed. Perhaps contemporary uncertainties about the ability of the United States to deal with problems at home and abroad encourage an emphasis on the limits of American influence and a reconsideration of the appeal of American values and ideals.

This reassessment of the American missionary movement suggests the need to reexamine the Protestant missions established in Oregon Territory during the 1830s and '40s. Their history reveals some of the general themes and issues that are central to understanding the American missionary enterprise and provides useful



Courtesy of National Park Service, Walla Walla

Drury Haight painting of Narcissa Whitman based upon an 1847 sketch by Paul Kane.

insights into 19th-century cultural attitudes and practices. New studies have been done on Protestant evangelicalism, middle-class culture and the position of women in pre-Civil War or antebellum America. These studies and the work done in Indian history over the last two decades contribute to an understanding of the complexity of cultural and religious encounters between white missionaries and the Indians they hoped to convert. A look at the lives of individual missionaries like Narcissa Whitman and her husband Marcus reveals the crucial role gender played in mediating and shaping the character of the encounters between two races. It also helps to explain differing strategies that male and female missionaries adopted to help them cope with the stresses of missionary work.

Writing from the Waiilatpu mission in Oregon, Narcissa Whitman recalled some of the books that had influenced her when she was growing up in the village of Prattsburg in upstate New York. One book she remembered reading was a popular biography of Harriet Newell, an early 19th-century American missionary in India. The moving account, which included excerpts from Harriet's journal, letters, and a sermon preached after her death, highlighted Harriet's spiritual struggles with her "cold, stupid heart." As a young teenager Harriet was already anguishing over her sinful nature, the time she wasted with "trifles," and her light and gay behavior. When she was 18 she met Mr. Newell, who intended to go into the foreign missionary field. His proposal that she share his calling led to more soul-searching. Was she qualified for the work? Were her motives pure? Was she courageous and persevering enough to take on "the dangers, the crosses, and the manifold trials of such an important undertaking?"

IN THE END, of course, Harriet sailed for India. She died of consumption within a year—never realizing her ambition to save the souls of those who she believed were doomed to hell because they had not heard of her Christ. The ironic contrast between Harriet Newell's long, anguished preparation for a life of Christian work and her brief career as a missionary was one her biography did not highlight. Instead, the book provided an encouraging message for pious readers like Narcissa.

Prevented from reading novels, which her mother considered "vain trash," Narcissa found excitement and inspiration in such missionary biographies. The depiction of heroic Christian women fueled her own dreams of converting the heathen in some exotic place far from Prattsburg. The likelihood of being able to follow in the footsteps of these women, however, was not great. While the expansion of the American foreign missionary movement in the early decades of the 19th century had made it possible for women to participate, the missionary board was reluctant to commission single women. However, since wives offered "a protection among savages," and "men can not . . . make a tolerable home without them," a handful of American women gained missionary appointments, usually as their husbands' assistants.

No matter how fervent Narcissa's desire was, no matter how much her family and church might encourage her commitment to the glorious cause, as a single woman Narcissa could do little to shape her own future. She spent her early twenties awaiting "the leadings of Providence," as she put it; more specifically, she hoped for a marriage proposal from someone who, like Reverend Newell, had a missionary appointment and needed a wife "well selected in respect to health, education, and piety."

Though she could scarcely have

known him well, Narcissa was quick to accept Marcus Whitman's offer when he approached her in 1835. While middle-class Americans in the 1830s expected a courtship and marriage based on romantic love, would-be missionaries like Narcissa had other values and norms. As one contemporary novel entitled *The Wife for a Missionary* made clear, missionaries "do not *fall in love* . . . [or] let fancy run away with . . . judgment."

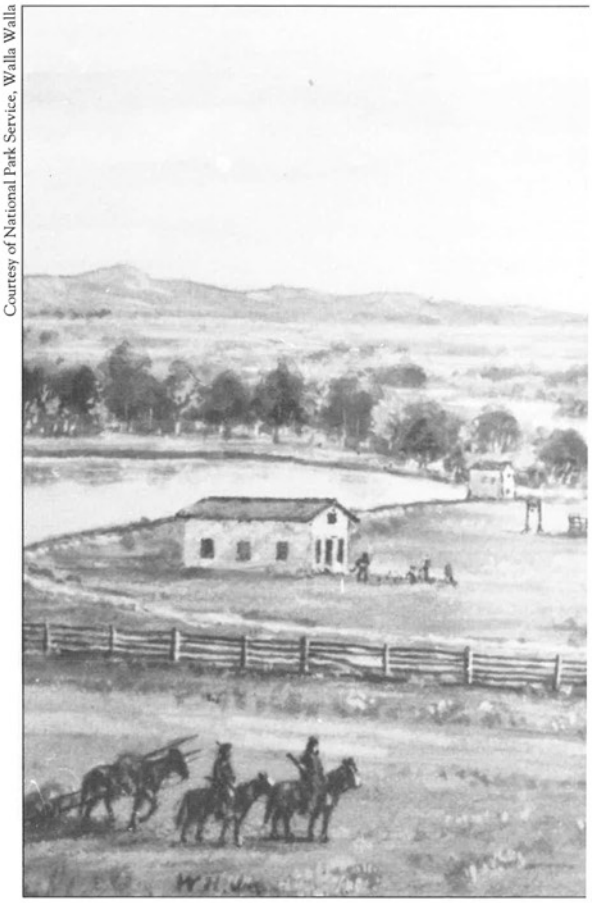
LIKE HIS FUTURE wife, Marcus Whitman had also thought about missionary work for many years, though it is less clear than in Narcissa's case what role reading played in fueling his ambitions. Young men like Marcus who hoped for missionary service usually first prepared for the ministry and then applied for an appointment from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), the interdenominational organization directing Congregational and Presbyterian foreign missionary efforts. When at age 18 he broached the subject with his family, however, they opposed his scheme, too proud to have Marcus attend seminary as "a charity scholar." After spending several years working in his stepfather's shoe and tannery shop, Marcus escaped from the family business and apprenticed to a local doctor. Eventually he secured his license and began to practice medicine.

Writing from the Waiilatpu mission in Oregon, Narcissa Whitman recalled some of the books that had influenced her when she was growing up in the village of Prattsburg in upstate New York.

Though by all reports Marcus succeeded as a country doctor, he found it impossible to forget his youthful ideals. At 28 he gave up medicine and tried to prepare for the ministry by reading theology on his own. His course of study was ended ostensibly by ill health, although his early "deficient" education and practical mind may well have contributed to the failure. A few years after this frustrating effort, however, he began to think about the possibility of becoming a medical missionary. Another disappointment was in store, for the ABCFM board concluded that his health was not "such as to justify your going on a mission at all."

Most men would have abandoned their efforts, but Marcus was as stubborn as the Reverend Samuel Parker, who was recruiting in New York state for what he hoped would be a new ABCFM mission among the Oregon Indians. Parker was inspired by the widely published report that Flathead Indians had journeyed to St. Louis in 1831, supposedly seeking knowledge of Christianity. The ABCFM board was much less enthusiastic about a possible Oregon mission than was Parker and only approved his exploratory trip after he had raised much of the money for it from other sources.

When Parker reached central New York to recruit members for the Oregon initiative he talked to Marcus on several occasions. Reporting to the ABCFM board that the doctor was a "choice" candidate, now apparently in good health, Parker pressed for Marcus's selection as being "beyond any . . . doubt." The board's secretary, David Greene, was inclined to look favorably on Marcus's second application—he was finding that, despite the dramatic appeal to save the western Indians, few future missionaries were much interested in the American West. "They had rather learn a language spoken by tens of millions & live among a dense and settled population," he concluded,



Courtesy of National Park Service, Walla Walla

"than to spend their lives in what they apprehend will be almost fruitless toil in reclaiming small tribes of sparsely settled migrators."

THE BOARD APPOINTED Marcus to accompany Parker on his exploring trip during the spring of 1835. Although the trip resulted in the eventual establishment of an ABCFM mission in Oregon territory, the board shared the misgivings of many of its own missionaries. It never viewed the missionary activities with the western tribes as important or as worthy of financial support as efforts in more populated parts of the world.

The appointment led to Marcus's marriage proposal to Narcissa and provided the means for both of them to

William Henry Jackson painting of the mission at Waiilatpu as it appeared prior to 1847.

undertake their long-dreamed-of vocation. But dreams nourished by reading, prayers and inspirational sermons had left much about this vocation ambiguous. While the goal of missionary work was clear, the means for its accomplishment were far less obvious.

The ABCFM's monthly publication, the *Missionary Herald*, and inspirational books about missionaries suggested some of the activities missionaries usually undertook. Wives taught school and sometimes led prayer meetings with native women; husbands preached, cared for the sick if they were medical missionaries, and often farmed. Somehow these activities, collectively or individually, precipitated far-reaching spiritual and cultural transformations: the acceptance of the Congregational-Presbyterian doctrine of human depravity, a valid spiritual conversion, and ultimately the adoption of the customs and behavior of the missionaries themselves.

If the young missionaries' understanding of the mechanism of conversion had a fanciful quality, their commitment was not tempered by any solid information about the Oregon Indians or their culture. The published story of the Flatheads' trip to St. Louis suggested that the western tribes were interested in learning more about Christianity. It is impossible to know how well Marcus understood the Indians he and Parker met at the fur traders' rendezvous of 1835. He reported, however, that the Indians said that white religion had only "reached their ears; they wish it to affect their most vital parts." He judged them "very much inclined to follow any advice given them by the whites . . . [and] ready to adopt anything that is taught them as religion." His views reaffirmed what he and Narcissa had both read. The *Missionary Herald* pointed out that "probably no heathen nations entertain less definite prejudice against the gospel, or the arts of civilized life" than American Indians.

THE REALITY OF what Narcissa initially called her "pleasing work" could not have departed more radically from the vague missionary scenario suggested by her reading. The story of the Whitman mission at Waiilatpu hardly needs retelling. The varied activities the Whitmans undertook did not lead to conversion. The Cayuse tribe's initial interest in the Christian message faded. As Christianity led to division within the community, opponents became angry and even threatening to the Whitmans themselves. Ultimately some of those who opposed the Whitmans most vociferously killed Narcissa and her husband and several other whites connected with the mission.

The Cayuse Indians bore little resemblance to the literary descriptions of eager western tribes intent on adopting the white man's religion. Their motives for inviting the Whitmans to settle among them are open to conjecture. The quarrel between the Nez Perce and the Cayuse tribes about where the missionaries would locate suggests that the Cayuse may have hoped that the missionary presence would strengthen their position relative to other plateau tribes. Their desire to have the Whitmans act as traders also points to an interest in obtaining white goods, while the effort by some of the men of the tribe to act as religious intermediaries between the missionar-

ies and the tribe highlights the possibility that a few may have hoped to use the missionary presence to enhance their own status in the tribe. It is doubtful that any of the Cayuse, had they known more of the evangelical faith the missionaries wished to impart, would have been so eager to have them settle on the banks of the Walla Walla River.

AS THE WHITMANS eventually discovered, many barriers stood in the way of cultural and religious transformation. By the time the Whitmans arrived the Cayuse had adopted some aspects of white civilization; at least a few wore articles of European clothing and raised cattle as well as horses; many prayed in the morning and evening and on the Sabbath, observances taught to them by Hudson's Bay Company traders or by Iroquois in the company employ.

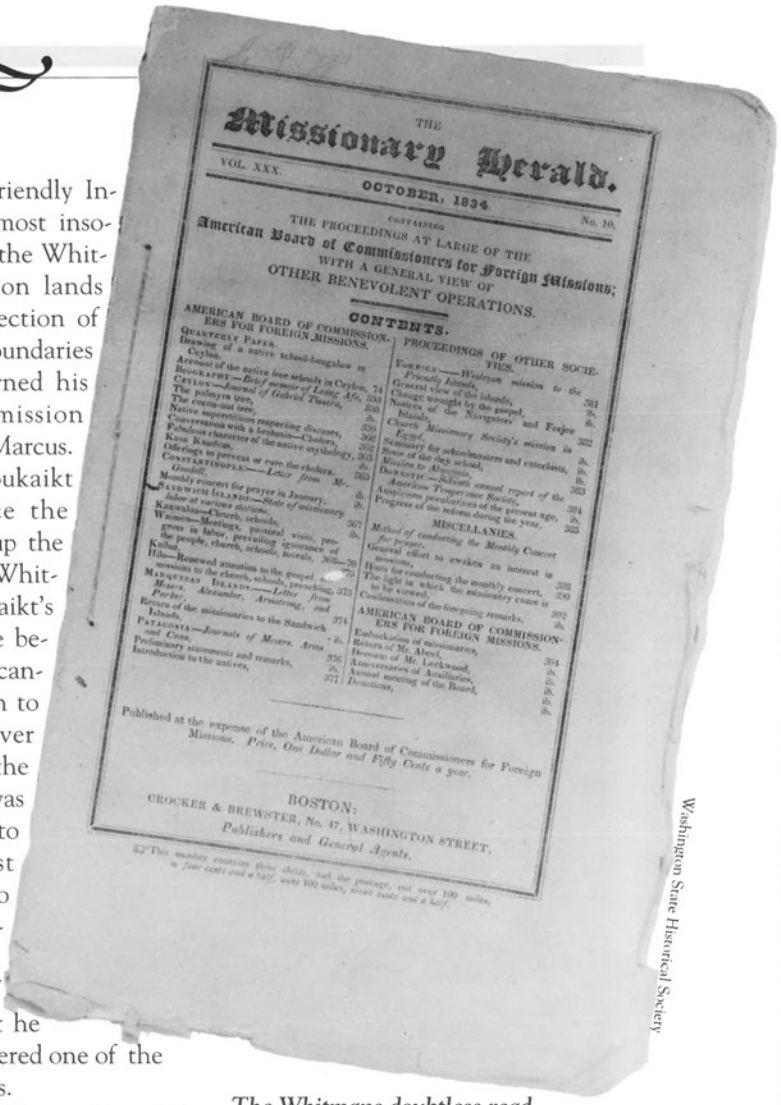
But their cultural borrowing was selective, and their way of life was vigorous enough to withstand the kind of wholesale change the missionaries sought. During the 11 years of the Whitmans' activities *tewats*, or medicine men, continued to play an important role in Cayuse life; fields were cultivated by slaves and women, not by the men of the tribe as Marcus wished; Indians pressed the missionaries to act like their own tribal elders and to tell them marvelous stories (from the Old Testament) rather than explicate doctrine.

The behavior of Tiloukaikt, who became headman of the band that wintered near the mission, illustrates the uncertain cultural dynamics in Waiilatpu. At the beginning Tiloukaikt seemed interested in what the missionaries had to offer. Narcissa identified him as a "friendly Indian"; indeed, it was Tiloukaikt who, in 1837, called their newborn daughter Alice "Cayuse girl." By 1841, however, Tiloukaikt had become disillusioned with the missionary presence. The friendly Indian had become "most insolent"; he demanded the Whitmans pay for mission lands and, in a direct rejection of white notions of boundaries and trespassing, turned his horses onto the mission fields and assaulted Marcus.

Most likely Tiloukaikt was trying to force the Whitmans to give up the mission. When the Whitmans stayed, Tiloukaikt's attitude wavered; he became one of the few candidates for admission to the church. Whatever interest he felt in the church apparently was not strong enough to allow him to resist those in the tribe who wanted the Whitmans killed in 1847. Some accounts of the massacre suggest he may even have delivered one of the fatal blows to Marcus.

Although the evidence about his role in the Whitmans' deaths is inconclusive, Tiloukaikt was one of those convicted and hanged for the crime. He gave his final comment on the Protestant missionary effort by accepting Catholic baptism just before his death.

The character of this cultural encounter between western missionaries and an indigenous people has a rather timeless quality. Anthropologists and historians have identified similar patterns of interaction in many parts of the world and in many different time periods. One might argue that the Whitman story could be set in Africa, Latin America or China rather than the Pacific Northwest. If, as one scholar suggests, the Peace Corps is the modern equivalent of the 19th-century missionary movement, the same cultural dynamics might be played out today.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CONTAINING
THE PROCEEDINGS AT LARGE OF THE
American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions;
WITH A GENERAL VIEW OF
OTHER BENEVOLENT OPERATIONS.
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Washington State Historical Society

The Whitmans doubtless read with interest this monthly publication on foreign mission activities.

A HISTORIAN CANNOT rely on general behavior patterns as explanatory devices, though. A close investigation of the Whitmans' work among the Cayuse suggests that, however much their missionary experience may resemble efforts in other times and places, specific social, economic and religious circumstances in white antebellum culture contributed to their expectations, frustrations and failures. The role that books and journals, accessible to Americans as never before by the time Narcissa and Marcus were growing up, played in inspiring religious vocations and obscuring realities has already been suggested. Other aspects

of the Whitmans' background illuminate the troubled history of the Waiilatpu mission.

The intensity of religious life in rural New York during the Whitmans' youth and early adulthood left an indelible mark on each of them. Over and over again in letters home Narcissa and Marcus expressed their desire for a "harvest season" at Waiilatpu. Family and friends knew exactly what the missionaries had in mind: the type of revival that produced so many changes of heart in New York state.

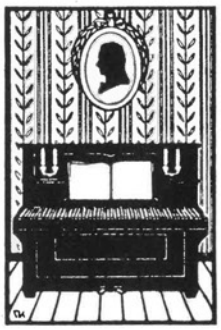
Although conversion had once been a private and individual experience, during the wave of revivals that made up the Second Great Awakening of the 1820s and '30s it became a public and collective event in evangelical churches. To some extent conversion demanded awareness of the Calvinist belief that all who had not experienced conversion were destined for hell. But new strategies, played out in a group setting, appealed to the emotions rather than to the intellect as the means for bringing about spiritual change.

A good example of one of the successful "new measures" was the anxious seat. The anxious seat, a special seating area usually placed between the congregation and the sanctuary, focused group attention on a few selected members of the congregation who were weighed down by the knowledge of their transgressions against God. Separated from family and friends, these sinners expressed their feelings of guilt and dismay while the pastor and members of the congregation prayed and wept over them. Urgent personal appeals to repent mingled with cries to heaven for help.

Many of those on the anxious seat were eventually overcome by the emotion of the moment and swept into the experience of conversion. Even those who were not ready for the anxious seat might find themselves influenced by the highly charged atmosphere. Even those who were not particularly pious might feel pressures to conform.

CHORAL MUSIC, WHICH had long played a role in Protestant services, now fostered the emotional moods that facilitated conversion. As a young woman Narcissa proved skilled in using her voice to move the congregation. A family friend remembered that many Prattsburg residents traced "their first serious [religious] impressions to her charming singing and tender appeals to yield to the overtures of mercy." He left a revealing description of her approach. During one of the revivals at Prattsburg, at the conclusion of what was no doubt a graphic and frightening sermon on the final judgment,

> *by a previous arrangement Miss Narcissa, with two or three leading sinners, took their seats near the pulpit and the moment the speaker closed his sermon they struck in and sang the old judgment hymn . . . Christians were melted to tears, and hardened sinners bowed their heads and wept bitterly.*



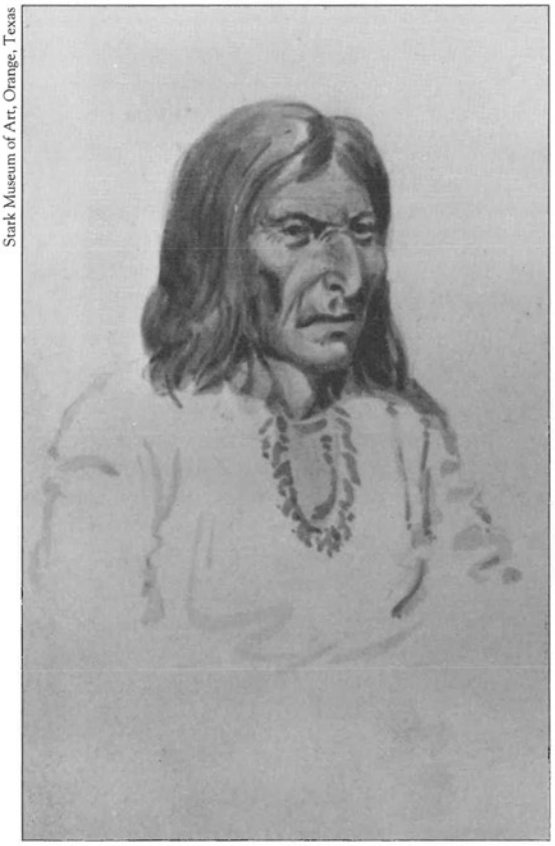
Choral music, which had long played a role in Protestant services, now fostered the emotional moods that facilitated conversion.

Nineteenth-century revivals worked, as one historian has pointed out, partly because of "the boldness, frenetic activity, emphasis on public [emotional] pressures, and general readiness to experiment." The cultural homogeneity of the areas where the Second Great Awakening ran its course also contributed to the large numbers of conversions during revival time. Perhaps the most important factor in explaining the success of these "harvest seasons" was the community's desire for the revival.

At Waiilatpu Narcissa and Marcus repeatedly looked forward to a "precious season," when sinners would cry out, "What must I do to be saved?" and where there would be many a "tearful eye" and heartfelt supplication. They were repeatedly disappointed. The emotional techniques just did not work when there was no collective expectation of and desire for change. While a few might be moved, there were never enough to create the highly charged atmosphere that promoted conversions at home. Moreover, the particular behaviors that evangelical congregations in New York found so necessary and compelling—weeping and shaking, for example—did not have the same meaning for the Cayuse who did not readily respond to them.

A source of continuing tension between the Whitmans and the Cayuse, and surely one of the root causes of the mission's abrupt end, was the particular style of interaction that the Whitmans used with the Indians. Like other evangelical Protestants of the period, the Whitmans believed it was their duty to draw clear and often public distinctions between nonbelievers and believers, and between "sinful" and "Christian" behavior. They felt obliged to chastise rather than to tolerate, to warn rather than keep silent.

As early as 1838 Narcissa noted that some of the Cayuse were blaming the missionaries for pointing out the "eternal realities" of their certain damnation. Despite the "bitter opposition" that emerged to what some of the Cayuse labeled tellingly as "bad talk," Narcissa and Marcus repeatedly singled out as sinners those who followed tribal customs like polygamy, and the couple warned the Indians that they were on



Stark Museum of Art, Orange, Texas

Paul Kane portrait of Tiloukaikt, headman of the Cayuse band that wintered near the Waiilatpu mission.

the road to hell. Some Cayuse became convinced that the Whitmans were condemning their entire way of life. As Narcissa wrote, "One said it was good when they knew nothing but to hunt, eat, drink and sleep; now it was bad."

The more the Cayuse demanded that the Whitmans keep silent, the more compelled the Whitmans felt to continue. As Marcus explained, "If he did not tell them plainly of their sins the Lord would be displeased with them. . . . It was his duty to tell him that . . . [they] had done wrong." Without greater tolerance, frustrations grew on both sides.

Many of the Whitmans' ideas about privacy, comfort and style, as well as their understanding of gender roles and acceptable behavior, also contributed to a problematic relationship with the Cayuse. These notions, so familiar even today that it is tempting to think of them as detached from any particular historical context, resulted from the process of middle-class formation. Although most attention has focused on the development of a self-conscious working class in the early decades of the 19th century, an urban middle class was also in the making.

Different from middling workers of the previous century because its members did not work with their hands but with their minds, this new class of clerical and professional men and their wives was increasingly differentiating itself by adopting new norms for behavior, family life, leisure time, consumption and housing. Although Narcissa and Marcus had both grown up in small towns, they shared many of the attitudes, values and tastes of this new middle class.

NARCISSA WAS, as a member of the Methodist mission in Oregon observed, especially fitted for "*civilized* life . . . a polished & exalted sphere . . . [and] for society, *refined society*." Appreciative of gentility and the society of ladies, Narcissa esteemed "polish," "mental culture," and "tasteful" domestic arrangements. These values not only contributed to her sense of psychological distance from the Cayuse but also led her to judge Cayuse life harshly. She saw Indian culture as the antithesis of her own, and because she did so, she feared it. The Cayuse, she explained, were savage rather than polished; hypocritical, deceitful and cunning rather than sincere; dirty rather than clean; and lazy rather than industrious. Instead of devoting themselves to their children, mothers neglected them; they were their husbands' slaves, not their companions. Narcissa felt herself in a "dark and savage" place.

Narcissa's behavior gave the Cayuse many reasons to question her commitment and friendship. During her daughter's infancy Narcissa kept Alice off the floor because she thought the Indians had made it so dirty. By carrying her child in her arms for months, she must have made her disapproval clear enough. It was no wonder that one of the Methodist missionaries who knew the Whitmans well reported after Narcissa's death that she had maintained "considerable *reserve*" towards the Cayuse. "Her carriage towards them was always considered *haughty*. It was the common remark among them that Mrs. Whitman was 'very proud.'"

Like other members of the middle class, Narcissa set a high value on family privacy. She was aggravated by the Indians' curiosity and their inclination to peek in her windows. As soon as she could Narcissa secured not only venetian blinds for the windows but also a fence to make the demarcation between her house and its surroundings clear. She realized that she could not bar the Cayuse from the house altogether, but she was determined to confine them to one room and one door.

Used to free access to one another's lodges, the Cayuse objected to Narcissa's effort to carve out a private and exclusive space in the house. While this disagreement over space may seem trivial, neither the Whitmans nor the Cayuse considered it as such. In 1840 the Cayuse pressed the Whitmans to hold services in the new mission house. When the missionaries refused, telling them "they would make it so dirty and fill it so full of fleas that we could not live in it," the Indians "murmured" and demanded that the Whitmans pay for the mission land.

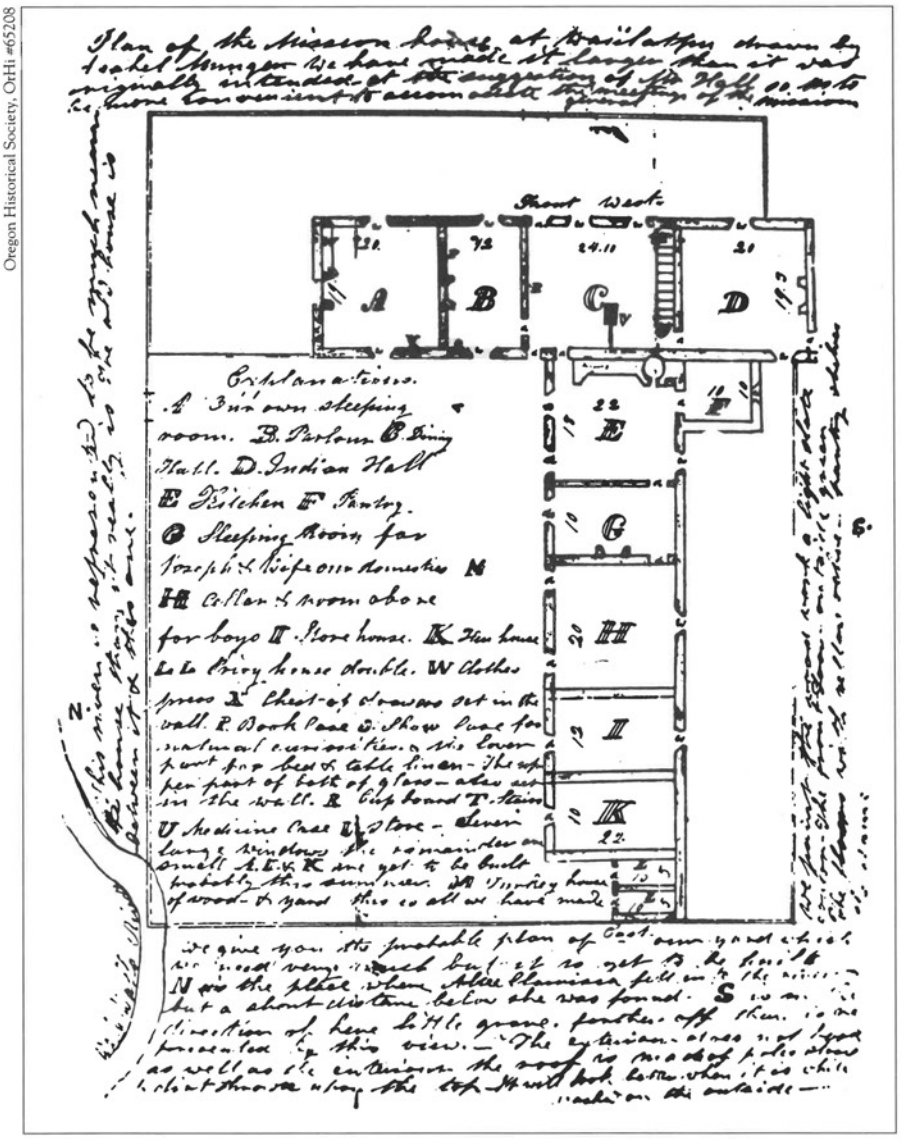
THE FOLLOWING YEAR a much tenser confrontation occurred over the same issue. One Saturday afternoon the Indians rushed through several doors into the house, axing one door to pieces along the way. After threatening Marcus with a gun and hitting him on the mouth, they demanded that the Whitmans "not shut any . . . doors against them." When Marcus refused, many stayed away from the Sabbath service the following day. Others broke some of the hated windows in the mission house. Although the crisis passed, due to the intervention of a Hudson's Bay Company trader at Fort Walla Walla, the anger lingered.

Some historians object to using the term cultural clash to describe the relationship between whites and Indians because it minimizes the peaceable exchanges that routinely occurred—such as the transactions between Narcissa and Indian women for berries, or her fan with Indian decorative motifs, or her little daughter lustily singing hymns in Nez Perce. But the term captures an essential truth about relations at Waiilatpu. Both cultures were assertive, willing to accommodate the other only to a limited extent.

In 1843 Elijah White noted how "brave, active, tempestuous and warlike" the Cayuse were, how "boisterous, saucy and troublesome." He added that Narcissa's feelings for them resembled those "of a mother towards ungrateful children." Narcissa's comment, "We have come to elevate them and not to suffer ourselves to sink down to their standard," suggests her energetic commitment to her own culture.

The Whitman's mission house plan as drawn and described by Narcissa in an 1840 letter to her father.

Oregon Historical Society, OrHi #65208

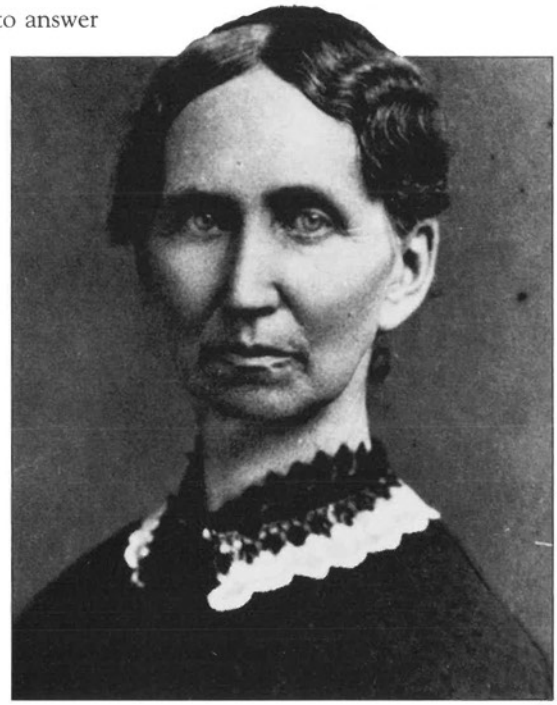


BECAUSE NARCISSA knew that her letters to her family were often shared and that her sister had had her travel journal published, she found it difficult to be candid about the trials of missionary life when she wrote home. Some members of the ABCFM mission party, however, quite frankly admitted in their correspondence the drastic gap between expectations and reality. Asa Smith told his sisters not to delude themselves, as he had surely done, about missionary work. "You . . . paint scenes which are far different from reality. The heathen are far different from what you imagine & they do not listen to the truth as you suppose. . . . Missionary labor viewed from our native land is all poetry, but here it is stern, severe reality."

The Smiths eventually fled from the Oregon mission field, but the Whitmans stayed. Remaining, however, forced them to devise ways for dealing with the disappointments they encountered. Both, for example, eventually blamed the Cayuse for not accepting the Christian message and justified turning their attention to white settlers by pointing out that the Indians

were on the way to extinction.

Gender played a role in what coping strategies were available to the Whitmans. A formal structure of support existed for the Oregon mission's male appointees. As corresponding secretary for the ABCFM, David Greene wrote Marcus several times a year to answer questions and encourage, support, criticize and advise him. He was able to provide Marcus with a perspective that came from his knowledge of ABCFM efforts around the globe and, to some extent, could serve as a safe sounding board for Marcus's frustrations. But because the ABCFM considered Narcissa only as her husband's assistant, Greene saw no need to write to her or even address her problems in his letters to Marcus. His infrequent inquiries about her suggested that the women of the mission were not important enough to warrant more than a passing thought.



Washington State Historical Society

Mary Richardson Walker, with her husband Elkanah Walker, operated a mission in the Tshimakain valley among the Spokane Indians from 1838 until the Whitman massacre in 1847.

THE ORGANIZATION of the Oregon mission also provided its male members with regular support. At least once a year the men of the mission gathered for their annual meeting, which lasted for several days. While wives often came along, they did not participate in the mission meetings, nor did they have the opportunity to debate or vote on mission policy or decide what news to send to the board in Boston. The men could take official action to change their realities; their wives could not.

Finally, Marcus as a man and a physician had a good deal of physical mobility. Although his appointment as a medical missionary suggested that his primary involvement lay with the Cayuse, in fact, he provided medical treatment to the scattered members of the mission family as well as to Methodist missionaries, Hudson's Bay Company employees, and other white settlers in Oregon Territory. He could often leave the frustrations at Waiilatpu behind him for weeks at a time.

Although his absences caused him some misgivings, he was able to rationalize his choices without much difficulty. As he told David Greene, it was unfortunate that there was "little room for the more important spiritual part of our duty." He often wished "to give my whole time to the instruction of the people and resolved to do so more than heretofore, but then a call of sickness [comes] . . . which as a Physician I must regard as superior to any other."

Narcissa's options were more limited. Without direct access to the official channels of support she had no experienced voice to advise her. Nor could she pour out her frustrations in writing letters to families and friends, knowing as she did that her letters were passed around at home and might even be published without her knowledge or consent. As a result, she was extremely careful about what she revealed in her personal correspondence. Nor did she have the freedom to leave the mission as did her husband. Although in the first few years in Oregon she often accompanied Marcus on his trips to other mission stations, she lacked an official excuse to abandon her missionary duties at Waiilatpu.

UNABLE TO ESCAPE the physical reality of missionary life, yet needing to offset the frustrations she experienced at the mission, Narcissa relied on those powers of imagination that had helped to attract her to missionary work in the first place. Her letters suggest a habit of fantasizing that she was back in Prattsburg. They contain vivid pictures of Prentiss family life, perhaps an image of resting in the cool inner room during a hot summer day or sitting and reading aloud to her mother. Writing these descriptions helped to carry Narcissa back to the safe and predictable world of her childhood and adolescence. Her constant pleas for family correspondents to provide her very detailed information ("You cannot be too particular," she told her sister Mary Ann, while she informed her sister Clarissa, "I want to see how you look and how you live") suggest how important it was for her to have enough material to continue imagining that world even after years had passed. Her moving and often repeated reminders that "I am still one of your number" make it clear, too, that she sought not only the satisfaction of imagining herself in familiar places with familiar people, but the sense of emotional

sustenance that came from family love and acceptance.

Because letters tied her imaginatively to home and made her life bearable, Narcissa found the first few years at Waiilatpu difficult. "Not a single word has been wafted hence . . . to afford consolation in a desponding hour," she mourned.

When letters came her feelings were of "inexpressible joy." Her description of receiving a letter from her mother suggests the vital role these communications played for her. "We were in bed and had just got to sleep," Narcissa reported, "when [an Indian] . . . announced that letters had come. We could not wait until morning, but lighted a candle to read them. . . . It was enough to transport me in imagination to that dear circle I loved so well, and to prevent sleep from returning that night." On another occasion a letter from her sister Jane had her thinking "of nothing else but you [for a whole day] and weeping." When no letters came, Narcissa often "read over old letters and answer[ed] them over again" to assuage her disappointment.

As it had in her youth, reading allowed Narcissa to escape to other worlds. Although she felt she was in a dark and heathen land far from every civilized influence, she had access to the kinds of books and journals she had enjoyed at home: the *New York Observer*, the *New York Evangelist*, missionary biographies, a book entitled *The Pastor's Wife, Mother's Magazine*.

While Narcissa's reliance on reading as one means of coping with stress helped her survive at the mission, she paid a great price for those moments of solace. Absorbed in her book one quiet Sabbath afternoon in June 1839, Narcissa never really comprehended her daughter's little speech that she was going down to the river to get water for dinner. There, while her mother read, the two-year-old fell into the water and drowned.

Sohon Collection, WSHS

Drawing of Sti-hass, a Cayuse council-chief and friend of the Whitmans.

THERE WERE LIMITS to how often Narcissa might withdraw from daily reality. She was aware of the need to construct a new world for herself, one with female friends who could provide her with the emotional support she needed. There were, of course, no white women for miles, but Narcissa was not daunted. She began a series of friendships that she nourished through loving and personal letters, exchanges of small presents and, when possible, occasional visits.

Some of the women, like those posted at the ABCFM mission in Hawaii, she never met in person. Others, like the mixed-blood wives of Hudson's Bay Company officials, she probably would never have called her friends in other settings. Even the female members of the Oregon Methodist mission who became her intimates might not have played this part in Prattsburg, where sectarian differences loomed large.

When letters came her feelings were of "inexpressible joy." When no letters came, Narcissa often "read over old letters and answer[ed] them over again" to assuage her disappointment.

In Oregon Narcissa freed herself from some of the strictures that shaped behavior at home, but never to the extent that she made friends with native women. They were too different, and Narcissa could not "feel a meeting of hearts" with them. But with women like Laura Brewer at The Dalles' Methodist station, she could. Two passages from her letters to Laura poignantly suggest the quality and meaning of these ties. "I often think and dream of you," Narcissa wrote on one occasion. On another she told her friend, "Be assured, I shall love you and think of you with increasing interest, and if we meet no more in this world, it gives me joy to think we may meet in Heaven."

In order to compensate for the frustrations of missionary life Narcissa needed to establish an alternative to it—her own sphere of activity, interest and gratification. From the first days at Waiilatpu it was clear that she had determined at the very least to create a reassuringly familiar physical setting. Marcus devoted two sentences to describing the first mission house, thereby suggesting that home did not serve the same psychic function for him as for his wife. Narcissa, on the other hand, filled her early letters with numerous details of her domestic situation, her windows, her furniture, even her washtub and pets. Considering her isolated circumstances, she was amazingly successful at fashioning a cozy haven that shielded her from what she called the "thick darkness of heathendom."

As time passed and the mission station grew, the Whitmans moved into a new mission house. Visitors were surprised at how civilized, even familiar, it was. Whitewashed on the exterior and trimmed in green, the house included a dining room and parlor. The floors were painted yellow and the woodwork was slate colored. There were settees, clothes presses, rocking chairs and a display cabinet for Narcissa's curiosities. Her family ate off

blue and white English china at a table covered by a tablecloth.

This setting testified not only to Narcissa's genteel taste and determination to have comforting physical surroundings but also to her belief that the proper household arrangements were the necessary underpinnings for meaningful family life. This home circle was to be Narcissa's alternative to missionary work. Her efforts to create it were, of course, sanctioned by 19th-century middle-class culture, but her decision to make her family, especially the children, central was her own. Some missionary women felt distracted from their calling by their children, but for Narcissa the children who saved her from many "melancholy hours" became her real work.

Whitewashed on the exterior and trimmed in green, the house included a dining room and parlor... Her family ate off blue and white English china at a table covered by a tablecloth.

BECAUSE THERE was such ambiguity in the role of missionary women—on the one hand they had made a commitment to Christ, but on the other hand all agreed that women had a sacred responsibility to their children—Narcissa could justify her choice to herself and to others. At times, however, Narcissa suspected that her involvement, especially with her daughter, was excessive. To her Methodist missionary friend Mrs. Perkins she wrote, "You like us, are solitary and alone and in almost the dangerous necessity of loving too ardently the precious gift, to the neglect of the giver."

Narcissa was overcome with grief when little Alice drowned. Face to face with the stark reality that, as a childless missionary, her obvious duty now lay with her "savage" charges, she became depressed and subject to a variety of different ailments. Like many other 19th-century women, Narcissa may well have retreated from what she considered an intolerable situation through sickness. Whatever the causes of her ill health, it severely limited her contact with the Indians. But she was too resilient to resolve her problems by keeping to her room. Unable to conceive again, she began to create a new family by adopting first two young mixed-blood girls, then a mixed-blood boy. In 1844 the Sager orphans appeared at the mission and the Whitmans decided to take them all in. Narcissa saw "the hand of the Lord" in their arrival.

Narcissa threw herself into the physical and spiritual care of her large and interesting family. Many of her ailments disappeared or ceased to bother her. The tone of her letters became happy and positive. As she told her sister Harriet, "We have as happy a family as the world affords." She added, "I do not wish to be in a better situation than this."

Believing that the children would be corrupted by too close an association with the Indians, she prevented them from learning Nez Perce and supervised their activities carefully. As she explained to Mary Walker, "I can not rest to have them out of my sight for a moment unless I know what they are about—but prefer to have their work as well as their play all done in my presence." By the time of the massacre Narcissa had redefined her mission in a way that excluded most contact with the Cayuse. As she wrote to her mother, "Mother will see that my hands and heart are usefully employed, not so much for the Indians directly, as my own family. When my health failed, I was obliged to withold my efforts for the natives, but the Lord has since filled my hands with other labors, and I have no reason to complain." If the Cayuse had ever seen her as their friend, few now thought of the woman who held herself so aloof as such.

FAMILIAR AND even predictable as parts of the Waiilatpu story may be, it still has much to tell us about the racial and cultural dynamics of the 19th-century West. On one level, the history of the ABCFM missionary endeavor makes it clear that two vital cultures were confronting one another. As the abrupt end of the Waiilatpu mission suggested, many Cayuse did not undergo the transformations the Whitmans had in mind. Rather, members of the tribe resisted and rejected white middle-class evangelical values and attitudes.

On another level, the mission story points to tensions within white culture. The missionary experience was a gendered one that allotted men and women different responsibilities and resources. Because Narcissa Whitman was only an assistant missionary the ABCFM paid little attention to her. Like many women in the mission field, Narcissa faced her failure with little in the way of institutional support.

While it is easy to criticize her for not being sensitive to another culture, it is important to recognize Narcissa's courage and her success in creating strategies, drawn from the limited number available to women, that allowed her to survive. Women who followed her into the mission field throughout the century selected similar strategies as they confronted similar problems.

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***FRONT COVER:** This view of the "Whatcom City Hall" (pre-Bellingham), at the intersection of Prospect and Flora streets, was taken around the time of the newly-installed streetcar line, c. 1900. (From the collection of James Doidge, Ferndale, and courtesy of the Whatcom County Museum of History and Art)*