

LOVE, HENNIE

Writing Home about Pioneer Life on the Columbia, 1853-1854

By Martin N. Chamberlain

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In the summer of 1853 Major Granville Owen Haller arrived at Fort Vancouver, having just completed the sea voyage from New York and around Cape Horn with his wife Henrietta, their two small children, and Company I of the Fourth Infantry Regiment. From there they were posted at Fort Dalles, 100 miles up the Columbia River. Both Gran and Hennie kept up a regular correspondence with her mother and sister back east. These letters, somehow preserved, provide a glimpse into the pioneering lives at a new military post that served as an important way station on the Oregon Trail.

Having grown up in the well-manicured rolling hills of southern Ireland and then York, Pennsylvania, Henrietta Haller was a bit overwhelmed by her first glimpse of the Pacific Northwest. In a letter to her mother, written shortly after her arrival at Fort Vancouver, she said, "Everything is a surprise to me on the Pacific Coast. I had heard and read of Astoria but could scarcely realize it would be such a small village. Also I could not understand the virgin woods and entirely uncultivated country." She was impressed by the Columbia River. "It is a magnificent river, larger than any I have ever seen but the La Plata. The banks are very high and picturesque—far superior to the Hudson. There are four snow-covered mountains to be seen from the river, but it has generally been cloudy."

After a few days at Fort Vancouver, Companies H and I were transferred to Fort Dalles. Hennie wrote,

We went up the Columbia from the Cascades to the Dalles in a small steamer, the Allen, with a tiny locomotive engine for a motor. The propeller threw water on the deck at every revolution. The dining table was on deck. At night we passengers slept on and under it. Our baggage was towed on a raft. It took us part of two days and a night to get there.

The fort, though it had been operating for a couple of years, was still being built. The officers' quarters were open shells, some yet lacking roofs. Hennie wrote, "Our quarters are of rough hewn logs chinked with marl and full of bed bugs which, with every precaution, we are not able to keep out of our beds altogether." The job of getting settled was an ongoing chore. Fortunately, most of their baggage came through undamaged.

According to Hennie, "The body of my dark green silk alone is spotted—nothing broken. Everything looked as nice and smooth as if it had not been moved at all, but we have lost a good many things, such as our two boxes of claret, our firkin of butter and three of our hens."

Improving and adjusting to their new quarters took some doing, noted Hennie:

Gran has, with some old boards, made, in a great part by his own labor, a pig pen and a chicken house. We have 12 hens and 20 half grown chickens, which cost us \$26, and one sow with 5 pigs,

\$25 more. Eggs are \$1.50 a dozen but our hens will lay enough for our use. Everything we brought is worth a great deal to us. The price of soap is \$11 a bar. The Indians give high prices for old clothes. I got \$75 for an old military coat. Old shirts and pants also sell well. I wish we had brought a chest of old clothes. We hope to get the things we need in that way.

We get Commissary things at the same price as we used to. If we only had vegetables for the winter we could get on. Potatoes cost \$6 to \$7 a bushel. Salmon, three feet long, we get for 25 cents. It is without exception the most delicious fish I have ever tasted and though we have been eating them everyday since we came here we are not in the least tired, only sorry the season is nearly at end. We have salted a panel and pickled a bucketful for winter. The garden is nearly a mile off through sand and burrs so I cannot go there often. Our cow cost us \$90 and gives very rich milk but not much of it, as she has been let run wild with her calf. We hope she will improve with attention. We take only two quarts of milk, leaving the rest for the calf. That's the way they treat cows in this country.

Gran also wrote about settling in:

The so-called quarters was a mere log shell with a roof to it. By my wits and with my own hands together with soldier's assistance for which I pay occasionally, I have got a good chicken house, a good pigpen and an apology for a stable. We have two horses, one cost \$103 and the other \$25. The lat[t]er has run away but will be brought back, I think, by bad weather. I bought a wagon for \$30 and sold it for \$50. I received \$75 for my stove. An old frock coat, too small for me, was fixed up a little and brought \$20. An old pair of straps sold for \$6. I expect to make a small profit on my Mexican embroidery. The Indians are very fond of embroidery, especially such as officers wear.

Hennie complained about the weather:

The Dalles is a healthy post but the climate is not very pleasant with high winds and drought all summer, generally cold winters though during one we had no snow and not much frost... I wish we had rain. Everything is so parched. It never rains from April to September and consequently nothing will grow except by irrigation. Our quarters are perched on top of a hill surrounded by sand and pine trees, the latter being thinly scattered. The wind blows at 10 or 11 am and continues blowing a perfect gale all day, raising clouds of dust, which fills the eyes, mouths, and nostrils. There is up here not a single green thing to be seen except for the trees and how they grow I can't imagine for the ground as far as they have dug our root cellar [is] as dry as tinder.

"I spend most of my time with the children, the cow and calf, the pigs, and chickens." In November Hennie opined,

Mai does not give me a moment's peace. I cannot write at night—I am generally too tired. Morris creeps in a sitting position. The floors are very rough and he scratches his legs and wears out his diapers. Mai has christened the bobtailed nag "Selina." He is gentle as a lamb and can go very fast, too. We go out riding about once a week. I cannot go oftener though I would like to for I have never enjoyed riding before. We always ride along the river bottom to get mushrooms of which there are great quantities.

You would not expect to hear that we have much company in such an out of the way place but we have had someone to dinner or supper two or three times a week for ever so long. Sometimes they are people Gran has some reason for inviting; other times Indian chiefs—all unexpected. I never make any differences. We generally have pork and some kind of vegetable and dried apple pie, the crust being made from biscuit dough. Our fare is wholesome enough if it has no other recommendation.

The eastern relatives were quite concerned about the local Indians, but Hennie reassured them:

We are not under any apprehension about the Indians here for they are not able, if they were willing, to hurt us. The Nez Percés and the Cayuses are powerful and warlike, but they are friendly to the whites though not to the Wishrams and Wascoes about here. The whites are too necessary to the Indians in trading and in various other ways for them to wish to get rid of us, I think.

The Indians can be troublesome though. I have been a great deal bothered by the Cayuse Indians. They were down trading last week and paid us constant visits which were not very edifying as they did not know much more of the Chinook jargon—the court language of all of these tribes—than we did. We, of course, do not know either the Nez Perce or Cayuse tongue. We have to learn Indian instead of their learning English and I suppose I'll be able to "wak wak" pretty well before we leave this country.

Tonight we have been entertaining Kaskala, the chief of the Wascoes. He is a neighbor and the only Indian with the exception of William, his interpreter, that I am ever glad to see. I really quite like them but hope they won't come too often.

We are not concerned with the Indians about our children. I keep them close to the house because of snakes.

As the first year drew to a close, Hennie noted, "Our porch looks nice hung with clean canvas. I feel quite comfortable now. Our yard is nearly fenced in and we will be able to keep out those villainous pigs and chickens, not our own, that come and torment us. I intend trying to raise a few flowers around the house next summer."

Wildlife presented an ongoing problem. Hennie wrote, "We have wolves. Those great wretches come into our yards in broad daylight but only early in the morning. They sometimes attack and kill young cows so we have to make sure our calves are shut up carefully. The coyotes and prairie wolves pick only on chickens."

On New Year's Day, 1854, Hennie reported, "The day before Christmas a hen that had laid astray brought us seven little chicks, which are thriving well. Our little sow was found up the creek with a litter of seven pigs—pretty little spotted and black things." And later, "Since New Year's Day we have had real winter. The river is frozen nearly across and it is very cold. All of the hills and mountains are covered with snow, but we have had only a light sprinkling here. Our communication with the outside world is cut off and will be as long as the cold weather lasts."

By mid January several inches of snow had fallen. Hennie continued to fume about the cost of things: "The Commissary price of pork is double—it is now 14 cents a pound and flour is \$7 a barrel. We pay 15 cents a pound for beef. It is very hard to save money here but we do some, for we are getting out of debt. I wish we were at home."

By spring things began to improve. Hennie wrote: "The children are very well and very good. They both are growing fast. I made 5 dresses for my self this last winter and a great many aprons, dresses and sacks for the children besides a great deal of other sewing and some knitting." She reported:

We now have 17 pigs. We find beautiful wild flowers now. They have been blooming ever since the middle of February. The frogs have been singing for weeks.

I have the loveliest little mare you ever saw. She has black eyes but everything else is white. She eats out of my hand and has not a single trick or fault. She only cost us four good blankets, a pair of greasy pantaloons and two old white shirts. Her tail reaches within two inches of the ground. I

often put my arms around her neck and kiss her. I wish you were here just for riding but there is not another inducement but perfect health in this place.

In April Hennie wrote, "Gran has made me a little garden and if I can keep the chickens off will have some comfort with it. I now have nearly 80 chickens." Their diet had more variety, too, as Hennie reported,

I got a present of six buffalo tongues today. They are splendid. Salmon are running, but we do not have any yet. I rode out the other day to see a large flock of sheep that were being brought across the plains by the Indian agent. Mutton will make a valuable addition to our larder. He made us a present of 14 of the sheep. We got some pemmican, which is dried buffalo meat, and fat from the gentleman who gave us the buffalo tongues.

In May the salmon were back and the price of shoes had dropped. Hennie noted:

We got fresh salmon again and they are delicious. We get small ones for 12 ½ cents. We have had radishes and lettuce this spring. I got a good pair of shoes for \$2. A pair that I got last winter lasted only a month. There are wild roses in profusion along the streams. There are plenty of fine gooseberries and currants—black, red, and yellow—and another berry I have not seen before, and some strawberries. I have preserved them all. They are a great treat for us. Morris is getting fatter since I weaned him. His dresses and aprons are of a jaded kind, being Mai's castoffs. He wears a green gingham sunbonnet. I guess I'll dress him like a girl until he is about 8 years old. Their amusements are riding stick horses and playing Indian and Lion.

In all of this Hennie had the help of a young girl called Mary who came with the family from York. She had been paid eight dollars a month, and Hennie reported, "She seems to be contented and never says a word about her wages. She is everything I could wish for. She was disheartened when we first came here and told us it would kill her to stay the winter but she did. Gran gave her \$20 a month since \$8 would not anything like keep her in clothes." Mary got married that summer, leaving Hennie to try to get along with an old soldier to help with the cooking and cleaning.

The letters stopped at this point, but in November 1854 Gran described an important event:

About 5 pm as Hennie was dishing up the dinner she remarked she ought to lie down. Soon after she called and asked to see Mrs. Roper for whom I sent. I also sent for Mrs. MacCullough, and these had hardly arrived before she told me to call the doctor. He arrived and had not been here long before I heard him say, "It's all right," and then I heard a lusty bawling. It was over in less than an hour's time. A lovely daughter, Charlotte, was born at 6 pm."

Presumably, Hennie was too busy with the new arrival to write more. Still, it is remarkable that so much was written and somehow saved. Letters took as long as six months to reach their destination, if they got there at all.

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