

T. F. MCELROY

Pioneer Publisher of Washington's First Newspaper

By Harry McElroy Strong

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Thornton F. McElroy came west by wagon in 1849, seeking California gold. He wanted to strike it rich. Although things didn't work out as planned, he did eventually acquire the wealth he sought—as publisher of the first newspaper in Washington Territory.

The last of 12 children in his family, Thornton McElroy was born in West Middleton, Pennsylvania, in 1825. His father was a Methodist clergyman who came to the United States from Ireland in 1790. He died the year after Thornton was born. Thornton's mother then took the family to Ohio to be with her parents. McElroy left home at 18 and found a job as an apprentice printer at the *Free Press* in Pittsfield, Illinois, where he met Sarah Bates. The two were married in 1847.

About this time many restless young men from large Scotch-Irish families decided to seek their fortunes in the West. McElroy, too, found this idea attractive and, despite urgings from his family, decided in April 1849 to make the trip. He left his wife, Sarah, behind, planning to call for her when he was settled. Neither anticipated that five long years would pass before they would see each other again.

McElroy's sister Lizzie was most upset. On March 1, 1849, she wrote Sarah:

So your husband is going to California? I do declare! Doctor [Zenon McElroy, TF's brother] was in the notion for a few days, but I think he has quite abandoned the idea of such a wild goose chase, thinking it better to acquire a fortune slow and sure. These California riches may prove a "will o the wisp" to many an adventurer, I think. I think your husband will surely give up the idea, for I cannot think he loves the Gold, more than his wife. Not any use for you to advise, for these men are such knowing creatures, they know their own business best.

Countless stories have been written about traveling west by covered wagon on the overland trail. McElroy's experience was similar to that of many others. The rugged 2,000-mile trek required five months of travel on terrible trails, across raging rivers, over steep mountain passes, and through all kinds of weather.

McElroy traveled with his brother-in-law, Norton Bates, in a train of 16 wagons, all from Illinois. The first few days were cold and the trails were deep in mud. During one stretch they crossed the same river 27 times. The party soon realized that their wagons were overloaded—a common experience for the early travelers. McElroy and Bates lightened their load by selling 250 pounds of pilot bread, 200 pounds of flour and 50 pounds of "other stuff." When they approached the higher elevations of Wyoming, the load needed to be lightened again. The pair

shortened their wagon by cutting off a third of its length, and they left behind another 500 pounds of flour, a barrel of sugar and several hundred pounds of bacon.

When they reached South Pass in western Wyoming, "our team failed wrote McElroy, and the group split. They had heard rumors that it was "sickly" at the gold mines and that it would be best to avoid them for awhile. McElroy and Bates took the advice, traded their stake in the outfit for horses, and turned north toward Oregon. The rest of the party went south toward California. McElroy arrived in Oregon City, capitol of the Oregon Territory, on August 20, 1849.

For a few months he worked at the local newspaper, the *Oregon Spectator*. In November he headed south for the goldfields, canoeing down the Columbia to Astoria and then taking passage on a sailing ship to San Francisco—a "very stormy trip."

McElroy wrote Sarah that he had reached the goldfields near Placerville, California, on December 1, 1849, and achieved "tolerable success for a green hand." He averaged one ounce (\$16) per day. Once he mined two ounces, some days much less. A half-ounce a day was considered by the miners to be an average find. He was proud to report that he made between \$300 and \$400 during the month of December.

Unfortunately, his good luck did not continue—he fell sick in early January 1850 and was unable to work for three months. Sick care cost him \$30 per week and soon took most of his earnings. By April he was well enough to work again, but high water made the streams difficult to mine. So he decided to return to Oregon City.

Oregon City was founded in 1829 and in the early days was a gathering place for trappers, hunters, traders and voyageurs of the Hudson's Bay Company. It became the first incorporated city west of the Rockies in 1844 and in 1849 was named capitol of the newly recognized Oregon Territory. Many travelers taking the Oregon Trail stopped at Oregon City—by 1850 the largest city in the territory—because the land in the Willamette Valley was fertile and there was plenty of water.

Oregon City gave birth to the first newspaper west of the Missouri River, the *Oregon Spectator*, in February 1846. The *Spectator* had a modest beginning: four 11 1/2 x 17 pages, four columns wide, issued twice a month at a subscription fee of five dollars per year, paid in advance.

When McElroy arrived in Oregon City in 1849, he worked two months in the printing shop at the *Spectator* for the princely sum of \$6.50 a day. When he returned in October 1850, he received a wage of \$140 per month. He stayed with the paper as shop foreman for a year and a half, until it suspended operations.

McElroy wrote his wife in April 1852 and apologized for not returning home, explaining that he was broke and could not get his money from the *Spectator*, which owed him \$300 in back wages. He moved to Portland and found a job with the *Weekly Oregonian*. Established in December 1850, the *Oregonian* was the fifth newspaper published in Oregon. It outlived the many other papers that started in those early days.

The editor of the *Oregonian* was Thomas J. Dryer, former editor of the *California Courier*. Dryer largely devoted himself to Oregon's economic development and soon recognized the potential of northern Oregon, the area north of the Columbia River that became Washington Territory. He decided to start a newspaper in Olympia and selected McElroy and James W. Wiley, both of

whom were working at the *Oregonian*, to run the operation. He sent them north in August 1852. The new paper was called the *Columbian*, in recognition of the name being contemplated for the new territory—Columbia.

McElroy and Wiley were a strange pair, but in retrospect, Dryer had selected a good combination. Wiley, age 32, the designated editor, was a talented writer and a happy-go-lucky Irishman who "liked to drink as much as he liked to write." He would boast that "he couldn't write until he got so drunk he couldn't walk." McElroy, 27 years old and the designated publisher, was, on the other hand, a churchgoing man and a "two-fisted, strong-willed" business manager. Wiley was described as "wild" in appearance, while McElroy was a "proper" red-bearded Scotsman. Furthermore, Wiley was a Democrat and McElroy a Whig. The two men did not get along well together from the very beginning. And yet the paper got off to a good start due to Wiley's editorial ability and McElroy's "keen business sense."

McElroy continued to struggle with the pressure to return home to his wife in Illinois. He did not want to go to Olympia and complained about the winter rains. But he still had the pioneer spirit and wanted to prove himself. In his dilemma, and probably to appease his wife, he wrote her from Olympia in August 1852:

I came here for the purpose of helping to start a newspaper. The office belongs to Mr. Dryer (the man I have been working for in Portland), and he says he places the utmost confidence in me and insisted on me coming here to take charge of the mechanical and financial departments of the paper. I consented on condition that I stay no longer than until I get my affairs settled up, and until he finds someone to take my place.

Starting a newspaper in little town of Olympia was a challenge. Fewer than 300 people lived in the area (in about "26 houses and shanties") and there were few businesses in town. Nonetheless, it was the chief population center of the territory. Seattle was still only a dream in the minds of the Denny party who had arrived at Alki Point just seven months earlier. Incidentally, Seattle did not have its first newspaper until 11 years later, in 1863, when the *Seattle Gazette* began publication.

The first problem for the new paper was getting a printing press. Dryer published the first *Oregonian* on a Ramage press. It was built by Adam Ramage in 1790 in Philadelphia and had been used to print official government releases and later to print newspapers in Mexico and California before coming to Oregon. Dryer sent it by ship to Olympia. The press was not a model of efficiency. Built of wood and iron, it required four impressions to turn out a newspaper, one for each of the four pages. With this painfully slow process, an expert pressman could produce but 60 to 70 perfect papers in an hour. Type fonts were also a problem. The number available was limited, and they were well worn. It took Dryer, McElroy and Wiley nearly seven months to assemble all the necessary equipment in the little one-story cabin that served as their office on the corner of Second and Washington streets.

Securing subscriptions and advertising was difficult. The population was limited; business advertisers were few. The largest advertisers were the steamship companies and stagecoach lines. They bartered advertising in exchange for carrying newspaper supplies to the *Columbian* from San Francisco and other cities. Besides delivering supplies, the ships brought newspapers from other parts of the country. These papers were the main source of national and international news since the paper was without the benefit of Pony Express or telegraphic

dispatches. While the exchange of advertising for shipping proved mutually advantageous, it generated little cash flow.

A cannon salute welcomed the first issue of the four-page *Columbian* on September 11, 1852. Typical of early newspapers, the front page was a "sea of type" and featured international and national news obtained from other papers. The first issue included a feature from the *National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.) on the "Empire of Japan," a story of the death of Henry Clay three months earlier, a Brazilian adventure titled "Misfortunes of Jack Beckler," rules on writing for the press as published in *The London Morning Post*, a story about a duel in San Francisco between an editor and a county politician, and the complete text of a speech delivered by D. R. Bigelow at Olympia's Fourth of July celebration two months earlier.

A one-year subscription to the *Columbian* was five dollars, "when sent by mail or taken at the office." A six-month subscription cost three dollars. Advertising rates were "One square, (twelve lines or less), three inserts, \$5.00; for every additional insert, \$1.00." Payment was required "invariably in advance."

The third page of the paper was largely devoted to advertisements. They were not very attractive, mainly because of print restrictions and the desire of advertisers to get as much information as possible into as small a space as possible. This was the only place in the paper where illustrations were to be found. Ads came in from many places: San Francisco, Cowlitz Landing, Oregon City, Monticello, Steilacoom, Portland and Seattle, as well as Olympia.

Also on the third page was a "Statement of Purpose" over the names of "J.W. Wiley, T. F. McElroy." (In the first issue, McElroy's name was misspelled as "McElyoy.") The *Columbian* was "Neutral in Politics" and "Devoted to the interests of Oregon in general and the territory north of the Columbia River in particular." Wiley then went on to write, in rather colorful language, an elaboration on this basic statement.

The paper appointed agents who were authorized to "receive subscriptions." They were located throughout the territory. One was on the East Coast. By the third issue the list included: Isaac N. Ebey, Whidby's Island; Henry C. Wilson, Port Townsend; Balch & Palmer, Steilacoom; W.W. Miller, Nesqually; E. D. Warbass, Cowlitz Farms; Chas. C. Terry & Co., New York; D. F. Brownfield, New Dungeness; F. S. Holland, Oregon City; A. A. Denny, Seattle; S.D. Howe, Penn's Cove, Whidby's Island; John R. Jackson, Jackson's Prairie, Lewis County; A. M. Poe, Poe's Point; and S. S. Williams, Washington City.

By the end of six months the paper had 350 subscribers and was paying for the cost of printing. The territory was beginning to grow, from a population of 2,000 settlers in 1852 to 6,000 by 1854. In 1852 the territory had but two sawmills; in 1853, 33 mills were reported. The number of homes in Olympia increased from 26 in the fall of 1852 to 90 in 1854, and the roads were "much improved."

The founders of the *Columbian* experienced many difficulties in the first few months of publication. These were exacerbated by the different personalities and political views of its principals. Finally, in March 1853, Mr. Dryer fired James Wiley and replaced him with J. J. Beebe. When Dryer arrived in Olympia with the new man, McElroy thought he was the one to be replaced. "But alas," he wrote his wife, "it was not so...and I will be compelled to stay until this volume of the '*Columbian*' is out. I can't help it. I tried my best to have Mr. Dryer let me go, but

he said he did not know of any person he would trust with the position I now occupy." Once again his plan to reunite with his wife was delayed.

Beebe failed to last as long as Wiley, and McElroy was left to run the paper alone from July to September of 1853. By this time McElroy's patience was wearing thin, and he told Dryer that he definitely wanted to be relieved. In a September letter to his wife he wrote,

You will see by the paper that for the last three or four months I have been Editor, Publisher, Compositor, Devil and all hands, besides having his financial affairs to attend to, which is about three men's work, and I am determined now to have rest, and a little time to look at the country.

Within a few days help arrived, but no replacement.

During this time Dryer considered selling the paper but had not been offered enough money. The Democratic Party wanted the paper but was not willing to pay for it. Dryer wanted \$2,500. Finally an agreement was reached and, in December 1853, the paper was sold to Wiley and Alfred Metcalf Barry, another former gold miner who had come to work for Dryer on the *Oregonian* in 1850. The new owners immediately changed the name of the paper to *Washington Democrat*—for political reasons and because Congress had named the new territory "Washington" instead of "Columbia."

McElroy immediately wrote his wife.

The long looked for time has arrived. The Columbian establishment has changed proprietors, and I am almost a free man. I am relieved of a great responsibility, and all the perplexities incident to the management of a printing establishment. I now have the unsettled accounts of the first volume of the Columbian to collect which will keep me about two months, maybe longer.

McElroy continued to work at the paper, renamed the *Pioneer & Democrat*, for another six years, until 1860. During this time, he wrote his mother, he "was foreman of the backshop and had received good wages." Wiley stayed with the paper until 1860 when he died of "intemperate drinking."

When a new printer, "Bible-Back" Doyle, had arrived in town with his own press in 1854 and threatened to start a new paper, Wiley had brought him in as a partner to stymie the competition. The old Ramage press was then sold to Olympia's *Overland Press*. Subsequently, it was sold again and printed Seattle's first newspaper, *The Seattle Gazette*, in 1863, and *The Intelligencer*, Seattle's first daily, in 1867.

McElroy and his wife, Sarah, wrote each other faithfully during the five years they were apart. McElroy kept searching for the time when he was "settled" and could call for her to join him. Sarah, on the other hand, kept hoping that he would return to her in Illinois. When McElroy was relieved of the pressure of publishing the paper in 1853 and became the full-time printing foreman, he felt that perhaps the time had come.

In December 1853 he wrote,

When I first came here there was but two ladies in town....There are now a large number of ladies in town and more are coming. The ladies are all very fond of dancing, and they have a Cotillion Party every two or three weeks....I have recently learned to dance a little.... Last Monday evening I was at a party....There were sixteen ladies present. I believe I danced with all. We kept it up until one o'clock.

Subsequent letters urged her to come west and told of how lonely he was.

The letters apparently broke down her resistance—in April 1854 Sarah expressed a willingness to come west, "anywhere to be with him." McElroy was delighted. He sent her money for the trip and said he would begin "setting up housekeeping for her arrival." Her father took her by train to New York where she caught a steamship to Panama, a train across the isthmus and then another ship up the coast to Puget Sound. She was accompanied by six other ladies in the company of the Edmund Sylvester family, which had established a home in Olympia.

After a period of adjustment, Sarah found pioneer life quite enjoyable. She wrote her mother about the "delightful parties" at Christmastime. "They have parties here every two weeks...and dances twice a week." She enjoyed gardening and became active in Episcopal Church affairs. Their first and only child, a son named Harry, "just because she liked the name," was born on February 23, 1861. An Indian woman lived with them, doing all the housework and taking care of the baby. "She is making me quite lazy," Sarah wrote. Life was good in Washington Territory.

When he finally lost his job at the newspaper in 1860 McElroy was not exactly financially embarrassed. "I have done tolerable well," he wrote his mother. He owned his own home, six lots, and "now command \$6,000...in cash, besides my own property. My money is all loaned out at two and a half per cent per month interest."

McElroy had learned a valuable lesson during his time with the paper. Founding a newspaper in Washington Territory without political patronage was almost impossible. The richest political gift, as far as printers were concerned, was to be appointed public printer. Depending on which side of the political fence he stood, the public printer was a gentleman charged with the "printing of the laws and journals," or he was a capitalist and trickster, "determined to euchre Uncle Sam if it takes every card in the deck." The position attracted many different types, but all were dedicated to making it a highly profitable political plum.

There were many changes in public printers in the early days, but the "golden years" were considered to be from 1853 to 1873, when there was little control over the purse strings in either Olympia or Washington, D.C. The printer was paid for an item according to the number ordered, not by the number printed and delivered. The legislature tended to order more than they needed; after all, they had nothing to lose because the federal government paid the bill. The result was a flagrant "padding" of orders, from which the printer profited handsomely. It was not until 1871, when Congress was asked to approve a special appropriation for a printing bill of \$9,222 (the total annual budget for the Territory averaged only \$25,000 to \$35,000) that the Treasury Department took notice of the problem.

After McElroy stepped down from management responsibility at the paper, James Wiley assumed control and obtained the first appointment as public printer in 1854. He held or controlled the public printer's position until 1861. When he lost the job as public printer, the *Pioneer & Democrat* failed and went out of business. It was during this period that a rival newspaper was started—*The Washington Standard*, under the leadership of George A. Barnes.

In 1863 McElroy was elected public printer. By this time he had learned the political process, made the proper alliances, and had set up the first print shop independent of a newspaper in the territory, the Union Book and Job Office. His principal ally was Elwood Evans, secretary of the territory and a powerful political figure. The legislatures elected a public printer each year and awarded him a one-year contract for all the territory's printing work. With the help of Evans

and some skillful political maneuvering, McElroy held the position for four years. When McElroy lost the fifth election, he allied himself with the winner, and the benefits continued. Several years later (in 1869) the *Territorial Republican* referred to McElroy as "Shylock" and wondered how he managed to profit regardless of what party he supported. At this time he was a Democrat, so such a remark from a Republican newspaper was not surprising.

McElroy did well as the public printer. "The profits must have been considerable," said one writer, "for McElroy rose from an impecunious printer to one of the wealthiest men in the Territory." When the 1872 Congress cut appropriations for the printing budget nearly in half, public printing became less attractive.

McElroy then devoted his full attention to private banking—Olympia was without a bank until 1890. He did his banking with Phillips, Horton & Company in Seattle, established in 1870, the forerunner of Seafirst Bank. McElroy was careful with his money and invested his earnings wisely, "taking property mortgages for security." Active in civic affairs, he was appointed a commissioner for the proposed new railroad, served on Olympia's board of trustees, and was elected mayor. He died in 1885, having acquired the "riches" he sought when he left Illinois 36 years earlier, but in a far different way than he had envisioned.

Harry McElroy Strong is a retired banker and financial adviser, and Thornton F. McElroy's great-grandson.