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## [Early Portland Folkways]

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Project worker Claire W. Churchill

Project editor

Remarks

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Form A

Circumstances of Interview

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker Claire W. Churchill Date March, 1938

Address 509 Elks Building, Portland

Subject Early Portland Folkways.

Name and address of informant Anne Abernethy Starr.

Monroe, Washington (visiting Portland)

Date and time of interview Noon hour - 11 AM to 1 PM

Place of interview Office Myler Bldg.

Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant

Through informant's sister, Miss Camilla Abernethy.

Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you None.

Description of room, house, surroundings, etc. Federal Writers' Project office room.

(Note. This interview was obtained before the folklore survey was begun.)

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Form B

Personal History of Informant

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker Claire W. Churchill Date March, 1938.

Address 509 Elks Building, Portland, Oregon.

Subject Early Portland Folkways.

Name and address of informant Anne Abernethy Starr.

Monroe, Washington.

Information obtained should supply the following facts:

1. Ancestry
2. Place and date of birth
3. Family
4. Places lived in, with dates
5. Education, with dates
6. Occupations and accomplishments with dates

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7. Special skills and interests

8. Community and religious activities

9. Description of informant

10. Other points gained in interview

1. American ancestry.

2. Born in Portland, Oregon, 1869.

3. Sarah Fidelia Gray (daughter W. H. Gray, pioneer missionaries) and William Abernethy (son George Abernethy, 1st provisional governor Oregon country).

4. Portland, 1869-1890.

5. Portland public schools.

6. One of the first telephone operators in Portland. Later worked as draughtsman for Park & Lacey Machinery Co.,, Portland.

7. Seamstress, where "stitches could not be seen." An expert knitter, where three pair of socks was no unusual output for a day's work. Draughtsman or draughtswoman.

8. No religious affiliations mentioned, presumably Congregational.

9. None given.

10. An exceptional personality.

Form C

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Text of Interview (Unedited)

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

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Monroe, Washington.

Text:

(See succeeding pages)

### INTERVIEW

with Anne Abernethy Starr

Mrs. Anne Abernethy Starr, who now lives in Monroe, Washington, is the daughter of Sarah Fidelia Gray and William Abernethy. She was born in Portland in 1869. Sarah Fidelia Gray, her mother, was born at Salem, Oregon, November 1843. She was the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. W. H. Gray, pioneer missionaries to the Oregon country. W. H. Gray was the author of Oregon History. This book, according to Mrs. Starr is now worth \$25.00. William Abernethy, her father, son of George Abernethy, was born in New York State, New York City, 1831. George Abernethy, who arrived with the Methodist mission

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contingent, became a merchant at the Falls of the Willamette (Oregon City) and was elected the Provisional governor of the Oregon country, an office to which he was re-elected.

After the flood of 1861 George Abernethy removed to Portland where he again engaged in merchandising. His establishment at the Falls was furnished merchandise by his own ships which brought supplies from the east and from the Sandwich Islands. Abernethy money, a kind of scrip issued by the Abernethy store, was commonly used during the pioneer period when U. S. coins were scarce. Abernethy was prominently identified, according to Mrs. Starr, with the provision for and the coining of Beaver money, the gold five and ten dollar pieces minted by the Oregon Exchange Company at Oregon City.

Mrs. Starr spent her early life in Portland. Being the oldest of eleven children she found many things to occupy her hands. Children in those days learned to knit at an early age, so young, in fact, that Mrs. Starr cannot remember a time when she could not knit. When questioned as to whether an output of three socks a day was not very large, she replied that it was not, explaining that the hand spun yarn used in those days was soft and large, and knitted very fast. Mrs. Starr was taught to sew by her Grandmother Abernethy, a wonderful seamstress who required that any stitches that could be seen must be ripped out.

Material was bought by the bolt, rather than by the yard. As a girl, Anne made dozens of pairs of panties, dozens of petticoats, aprons, and dresses for her younger sisters. Her family did not have one of the hand-turned sewing machines, but they did have one of the earliest sewing machines used in this country. William Abernethy, son of George Abernethy, had the first sewing machine agency in the Northwest. His agents, as far north as Walla Walla, found a ready market for the old Wheeler-Wilson machines. Some of the correspondence relating to the sales of sewing machines is still in the possession of the family. Before they had a machine, all sewing was done by hand. Anne made a complete hand-sewn dress for herself when she was eight years old.

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She attended school at the old Central school in Portland. Miss Fannie Holman was her teacher advancing with the grades. The recent visit of President Roosevelt to Portland recalled to her the visit of President Hayes in 1878. The children of old Central School, lined up on the sidewalk and street, greatly excited over the appearance of so distinguished a caller as President Hayes. He addressed them from the steps of the schoolhouse.

The Portland George Abernethy residence was at the corner of 7th and Salmon Streets. It was moved back from its original location, and then, several years ago, was dismantled entirely. About 1868 William Abernethy bought 163 acres of land at what is now known as Abernethy Heights, not far from Oswego on the River Road. The house built there is still standing, but it has been considerably remodeled, presenting today the appearance of a colonial structure. Originally it was of two-story construction with a balcony along the second floor and a porch on the first. The kitchen was at the back, either in an addition 3 or under the extended roof. Elk Bluff and Elk Rock are both on the old Abernethy property. This farm was on the first macadam road out of Portland, a toll road, with the toll gate at the Red House, a tavern on the river road. Some distance farther up the river, and nearer the Abernethy place was another road house, the White House, near which there was a race track where horse races were held. A bachelor named Leonard owned the White House. Mrs. Starr says she can remember when this road was built, and recalls seeing the chain gang of prisoners breaking rock for construction purposes. Mr. Bader, 316 Railway Exchange Building, Portland, can tell something of the present owners of the Abernethy place or at least can give directions for reaching it. Harvey Starkweather can do the same. The Abernethy place was occupied by the Summervilles, then by Will Ladd and later by the McKay family. They may own it now.

Anne Abernethy was a niece of Caroline Gray Kamm and used to make trips on the river boats owned by Jacob Kamm, her uncle by marriage, and Captain Will Pope, a cousin of her father, Wm. Abernethy. She said that one of her happiest memories was taking

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a trip up the Columbia, accompanied by a girl chum, Anne Pope. They were the only passengers. That evening at dinner the crew amused their guests by telling tall tales. When the engineer, who was supposed to be the greatest liar of them all had finished his tale about the fish that flipped right out of the frying pan and into the sea, Anne Abernethy told her tale. It happened that she had considerable experience as a narrator, being trained from youth to entertain her younger brothers and sisters with folk tales. The story she told concerned a cat that couldn't be killed. After trying innumerable means of death, the irate owner took the cat into the woods and chopped its head off with an axe. Well satisfied that he had at last killed the animal, he returned home. Imagine his astonishment when he reached home to discover the cat sitting on the doorstep, holding its head in its mouth!

The Abernethy children were a healthy lot. Ten of them lived to 4 maturity. For fifty years their circle was not broken. Then, in January, 1937, one of the ten died. The others, still living, are as follows:

Mrs. Ocia Swanton, Eugene; and her twin, Mrs. Sarah Hahn, University, Va.; Mrs. Pearl Miller, Dora, Oregon; Mrs. Frances Hahn, married to a man with the same name as her sister's husband; with even the same initials, but no relation to him; Miss Camilla Abernethy, Forest Grovo, Oregon; Mrs. Mizpah Waterman, 2222 S.E. 19th St., Portland, Oregon; William Abernethy, Route 4, Tacoma, Washington; and Edwin Abernethy, Dora, Oregon.

In pioneer times, even a merchant such as George Abernethy did not have white sugar for daily use. White sugar, packed in blue paper in cubes, was brought from the Sandwich (Hawaiian) Islands and was served only on feast days, special occasions, or for company tea. Brown sugar, coarse-grained, was used for daily fare. Both brown sugar and flour were always bought and sold by the barrel. "Bread and butter with sugar on", as the children said, was a favorite for lunch and for those in-between meals that youngsters love. "Grandma always does".

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Anne Abernethy was one of the first telephone operators in Portland. The exchange, located down toward the present waterfront, was operated by four girls. They not only had to know the names of all the phone patrons, but had to memorize the exchange numbers as well. Directories were not used at first, and patrons rang central and asked for the party they wished by name. Pat Bacon, now prominent as a telephone company official, retired, worked for the company when Anne Abernethy did.

Later she worked as a draughtsman for Park and Lacey Machinery Co. It was her responsibility to go into the yards, measure the various patterns and then make drawings of them. She was so adept at this work that when she quit the firm to be married the foreman was greatly chagrined.

She was married to Benjamin Wallace Starr, in the old Congregational Church in Portland, September 17, 1890. Rev. Walker performed the ceremony. Mr. Starr was descended from the Massachusetts Starrs, who were the common 5 ancestors of the other Oregon Starrs who lived in Benton County.

Dr. Comfort Starr owned (1632 ? - date he arrived) a farm on the present site of Harvard University. What the students identify as the college "yard" was formerly the front yard of the Starr farm. Benjamin Starr was born 1860 in Missouri, although his people had formerly lived in New York State. He grew up in California, came to Oregon in 1887. Wm. Abernethy went from Oregon to California in 1849 during the gold rush. He reported that the mosquitos in the Sacramento Valley were so large and so vicious that they could drill holes in iron pots, and that their stingers were so long they could be clinched on the other side of the pot.

Play parties were frequent in the early days, and once a year at least "balls", which were real social occasions, were held. The Governor's Ball and the Pioneer Ball, were specially fine. Singing schools were held in an earlier day. Mrs. Starr says that her grandfather Gray led and taught singing by playing upon his flute, but that he never sang a note. Birthdays

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were festive occasions in the Abernethy family, and Christmas, Thanksgiving, and the Fourth of July were always observed.

When queried about pioneer foods, Mrs. Starr recalled the cracked wheat “gems”, hot bread now generally called “muffins” and a kind of sour milk biscuit or hot cake made of stale bread. Stale bread was soaked overnight in sour milk. The next morning soda was added for leavening, and perhaps an egg for binding the mass together. It was then fried in cakes or baked in iron gem pens.

Governor Abernethy was originally buried in the Lone Fir Cemetery but his body was later removed to the Riverview Cemetery where it is guarded by a shaft on which the D.A.R. has placed an appropriate plaque. Other members of the family are also buried there. W. H. Gray and his wife are buried now at the site of the Waiilatpu Mission, near the Whitmans. They were buried originally 6 on Clatsop Plains. A tall shaft on a small hill commemorates all the workers at the Mission.

Among documents which the family has preserved is an original James Douglas letter. It was once published in the Spectator many years ago. The family also has letters signed by Peter Skene Ogden and some by Douglas and Ogden. Douglas and Ogden, she says, were joint factors at Fort Vancouver, following Dr. McLoughlin's retirement.

The family also has a piece of printed material, a special newspaper or bulletin issued as a call for volunteers when the Whitman massacre occurred. They also have several printed papers, but there may be duplicates in the Oregon Historical Society.

There is also an old account book, kept by George Abernethy, but Mrs. Starr is not positive where it is now kept. It should show the transactions of a pioneer store, what was bought and sold, and the general trend of business and price levels and changes, and should be of considerable importance.

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There are probably a good many letters written by Grandmother Gray in the archives of the Connecticut D.A.R. Mrs. Gray kept a diary, but it was burned when the house in which they lived in Astoria, was burned. She wrote her letters in a diary form and sent long ones to relatives in the East. It took from one to three years to get an answer.

One of the incidents told about Grandmother Gray was that concerning the removal of the Gray family from the Whitman Mission to the Willamette Valley. When the family, Mr. and Mrs. Gray, and three small children, reached a place near The Dalles, the snow fell so fast they could not go on. Threatened with death by exposure, Mr. Gray sent an Indian to Vancouver for help. Dr. McLaughlin sent a boat. Ascending through the storm, the pilot was at loss to discover the people he was sent to rescue. Then across the wind-blown water, he heard a sweet voice singing hymns. Mrs. Gray was undaunted in her faith in the Lord. Guided by the song the boatman reached the family and took them to safety.

Form D

Extra Comment

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

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Monroe, Washington.

Comment:

Descendant of one of Oregon's prominent early families, Mrs. Starr remains an outstanding personality.

Alert, intelligent, very cooperative. Has some material on imprints, I believe. Informant read interview and verified details.