



---

Life on the Lower Columbia, 1853-1866

Author(s): Helen Betsy Abbott

Source: *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, Fall, 1982, Vol. 83, No. 3 (Fall, 1982), pp. 248-287

Published by: Oregon Historical Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20613861>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



*Oregon Historical Society* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Oregon Historical Quarterly*

JSTOR

HELEN BETSY ABBOTT, ed.

## Life on the Lower Columbia, 1853-1866

SILAS Bullard Plimpton<sup>1</sup> and Lydia Pollard Wright were married May 19, 1853, in the first wedding ceremony performed in the town of Rainier, Oregon Territory. He had left Massachusetts in 1852 with the understanding that Lydia would follow him to the West when he was established. Many of the letters they wrote back to Massachusetts from 1853 to 1866 were given to their son, William Wright Plimpton, when he visited his mother's old home in Wakefield in 1893; other family papers were kept by their younger son, Ortleigh, and their daughter, Sarah Plimpton Winterbotham. The fragile old letters and the story they tell of life in the early days on the lower Columbia River convey much about Silas and Lydia, as well as their Oregon experiences, and are treasured by their descendants.

Brought up in rural villages near Boston, both Silas and Lydia were children of families that had been in Massachusetts since the 1600s. Silas was born in Medfield September 20, 1826. His father was Wales Plimpton, a farmer, a captain in the militia, and often a selectman in the town. The family was descended from Sgt. John Plympton, one of the founders of Medfield in 1651 and later an early settler of Deerfield. Silas' mother was Sarah Bullard Plimpton who died in 1828. The next year his father married Lucy Morse, and she became stepmother to seven, with four more of her own when she died in 1849. Of these children, six eventually came to Oregon. Descendants of Silas, of his half-sister Lucy Plympton Young, and of two half-brothers, George Lowell Plympton and Charles Frederic Plympton, live in Oregon and elsewhere.

After their father died in 1851 and their ancestral homestead passed to new ownership, Silas decided to go west where an

1. Silas changed the spelling to Plimpton sometime after Westport's Plympton Creek was named. See fn 33, also *Oregon Geographic Names*, by Lewis A. McArthur, revised and enlarged by Lewis L. McArthur (4th ed., 1974). Usage within the family varies, some retaining the "y," some using "i."

older brother, William, had been in California gold fields since 1849.<sup>2</sup>

Lydia Pollard Wright was born September 26, 1833, in South Reading (later renamed Wakefield), Massachusetts. Her father was a farmer, Nathaniel Cummings Wright, born in 1796 in New Hampshire; he died at Wakefield in 1869. Her mother, Judith Farmer Wright, was born in Tewkesbury on April 1, 1799, and died at Wakefield in 1868. These were the “Dear Parents” to whom Silas and Lydia wrote. Lydia had three sisters and a brother, Dexter Cummings Wright, who was eight years younger. Some of the Oregon letters were addressed to him.

Silas left Boston for San Francisco via Cape Horn on February 20, 1852, on the ship *Victory* and arrived at San Francisco, without mishap, on the 23rd of June. He tried mining, but “met with nothing but desceas, distress and very near death from typhoid fever that swept the mines of hundreds,” as he says in recollections. By the spring of 1853 he had decided to go on to Oregon. The mails were necessarily slow in those days, so he wasn’t sure when (or if) Lydia would come. However, he left word in San Francisco for her to join him at Rainier, Oregon Territory.

Actually, Lydia had sailed from New York on March 5, 1853, in the company of Mrs. John S. Hawkins who, with her two children, were going to join Mr. Hawkins in Rainier. They sailed on the steamship *Star of the West* via the Nicaragua route. Crossing Nicaragua to the Pacific Coast was hazardous, the last 12 miles by mule train. From there Lydia boarded the steamer *S. S. Lewis* for San Francisco. Eighteen days later, with 385 passengers on board, the ship ran aground in the fog north of the Golden Gate and was a total loss. Passengers and baggage were saved.<sup>3</sup>

Silas had just left San Francisco on the steamer *Columbia* bound for Oregon. Years later he wrote: “as fate would have it I sailed through miles of wreckage . . . while Lydia was ashore at

2. A copy of William’s letter is at OHS, and also a copy of the Plympton-Plimpton Family Genealogy. The Medfield Historical Society has additional information about the family and their old home—a part of which dates back to 1690—now called the Plimpton-Hamant-Bartlett House.

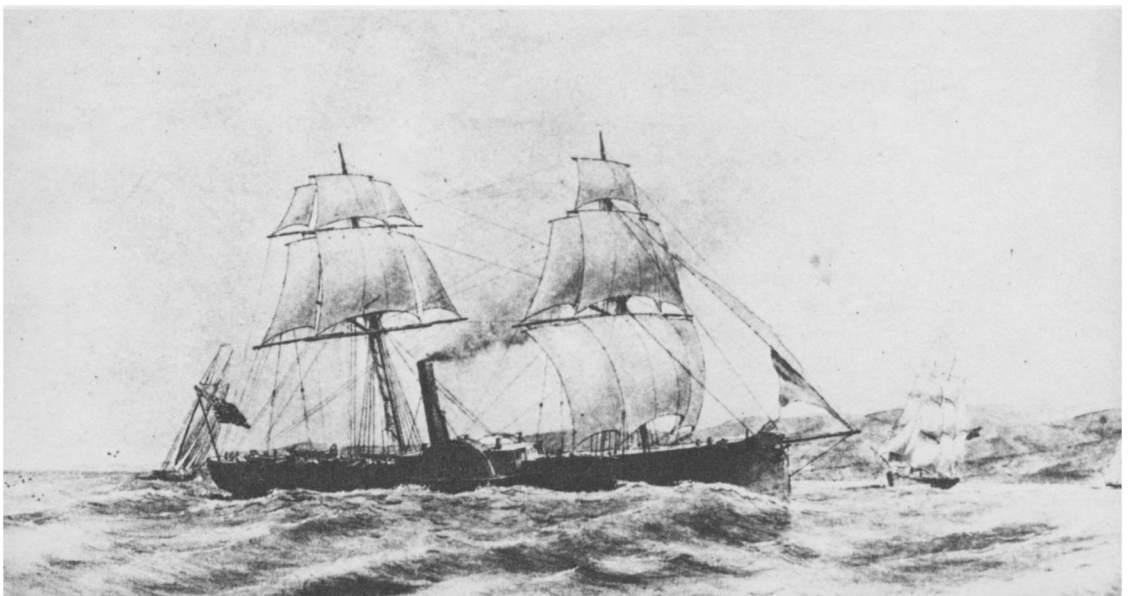
3. An account of the wreck appears in Oscar Lewis, *Sea Routes to the Gold Fields* (Ballantine Books, Comstock Edition, 1971), 207.

Bolinas Bay, and was near enough to see the passengers on shore, but knew not of her being among them. . . . After a few days she took the Brig *I B Lunt* for the Columbia River, landing at Rainier May 1853. Married May 19 1853 and went to house-keeping with only a bed, chair, stove, and little else but Wife and I.”<sup>4</sup> In the first letter written home after her arrival at Rainier, Lydia said: “I have arrived at last to my journey’s end, safe and in good health & spirits.” This young lady, not yet 20, obviously saw no reason to dwell on hardships already encountered as she and Silas began their life together.

The letters from Silas and Lydia run from 1853 to 1866. Due to space limitations, parts dealing with news and questions about family members in New England have been omitted (indicated by . . .). Occasional punctuation and capitals have been added to clarify meaning; editorial comments are in brackets or footnotes. The spelling is the Plimptons’ own; the variations were usual in those times. Postscripts after signatures are usually written in any remaining blank space, around the edges, etc. Complete copies are in the Oregon Historical Society Library. The letters dated July 24, 1853, and July 20, 1856, were found in 1976 by a great-grandson, Glen M. Blackstone of Portland.

4. A copy of Silas Plimpton’s recollections (copied from the end of an old ledger of his), written late in his life (1826-1913), is at OHS. Included in the “little else” was the old sundial that Silas had brought from his Medfield home, and which descendants donated to the Oregon Historical Society in 1979.

An old print of the busy *Columbia* (built in New York, 1850). Ship made 102 trips between Oregon and California in her first five years. (OHS Cols.)



Rainier June 2<sup>d</sup> 1853

Dear Father & Mother

Permit me to address you as above as I now have a legal right to do so. One week ago last Thursday evening your daughter & I were united in marriage at this place by the Rev. C. S. Kingsley of Portland O.T. This was the <sup>first</sup> ceremony of this kind that ever took place in this town. I trust the time will never arrive that we shall regret the course we have taken although it has been attended with severe hardship, we are content in our rude habitation & if health is our portion our happiness is sure. We never enjoyed better health than at the present

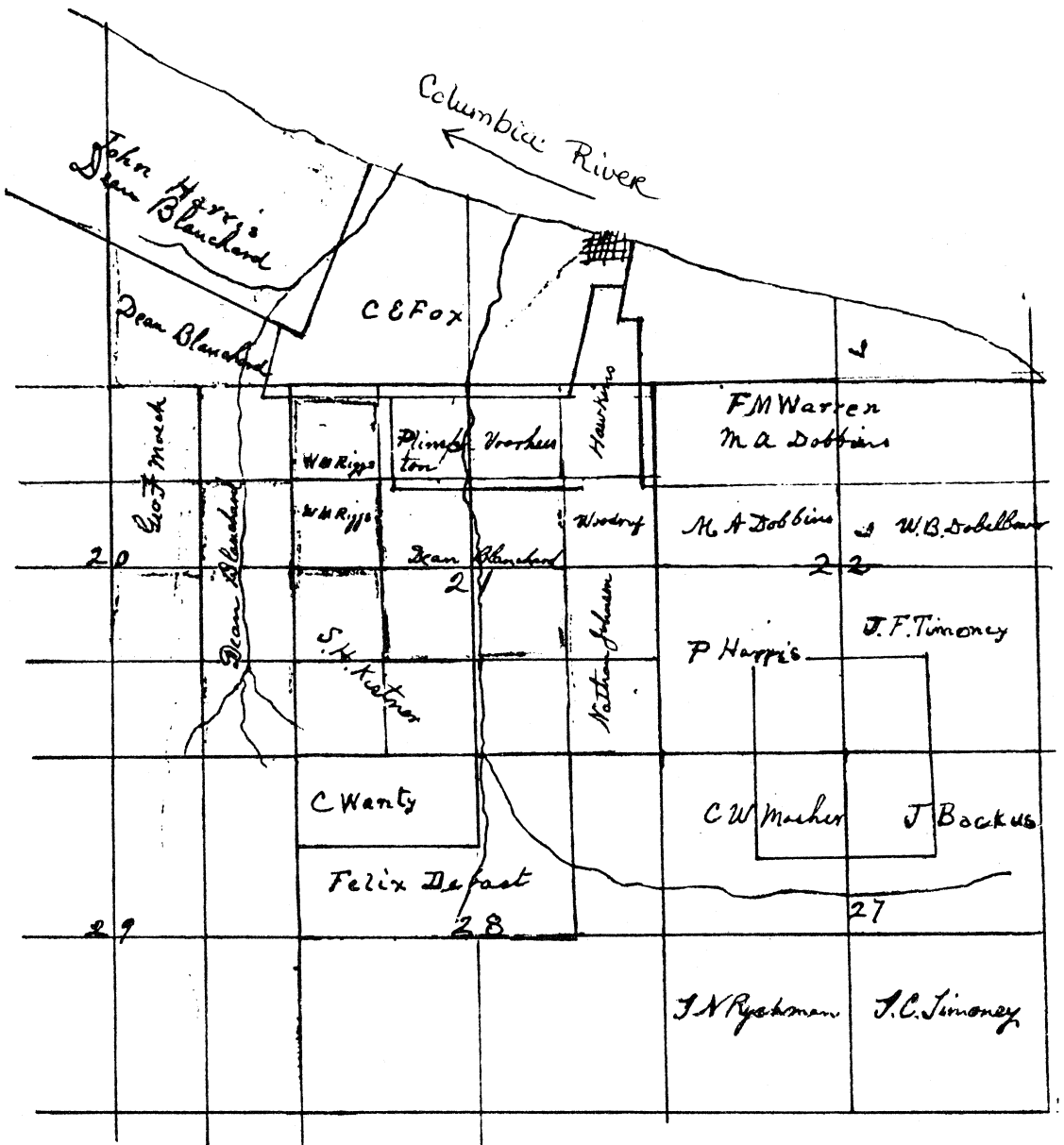
Ra[i]nier June 2d 1853

Dear Father & Mother<sup>5</sup>

Permit me to address you as above as I now have a legal right to do so. One week ago last Thursday evening your daughter & I were united in marriage at this place by the Rev. C. S. Kingsley of Portland O.T.<sup>6</sup> This was the first ceremony of this kind that ever took place in this Town. I trust the time will never arrive that we shall reg[r]et the course we have taken although it has been attended with severe hardship. We are content in our rude habitation & if health is our portion our happiness is sure. We never enjoyed better health than at present time & this is the greatest gift that can be bestowed on the children of Man. I have reasons to feel proud of her with whome I am united for life; when I think that it was for my sake that she left Father & Mother brother & sisters her home & friends & all that was near & dear to her from her childhood years to settle in the almost unexplored regions of Oregon & to endure trials that she never

5. As noted, most of the letters from Silas and Lydia are written to her parents, Nathaniel and Judith Wright of South Reading (later Wakefield), Mass. (Silas' parents were dead.) Silas wrote in a beautiful Spencerian hand.

6. Rev. C. S. Kingsley, who performed the marriage ceremony, was one of the original trustees of Willamette University, appointed in 1853. The Methodist preacher came to Oregon in 1850, and was in charge of Portland Academy at its opening, Nov. 17, 1851. See Harvey Scott, *History of the Oregon Country* (6 vols., Cambridge, 1924), II:84, 276-77.



Drawing of Rainier townsite (on river edge in Fox claim) and surrounding claims, found in Silas B. Plimpton papers. Neighbors (Fox, Hawkins, Voorhees and Blanchard, etc.) are mentioned in the early letters Silas and Lydia wrote. (Columbia River has been added.) (Plimpton Family Col.)

dreamed of, it is then that I feel my unworthiness, but I shall do all in my power to make her comfortable & happy.

I am sure that she can do more good here than at home. Yesterday she commenced keeping school. I think she will have between twenty & thirty scholars. She has six dollars a quarter & might have had ten had she asked it. The children are very backward & most of them never had but a small idea of schools. Lydia is abundantly able to teach such scholars as she has & if she can get six or seven hundred dollars a year it is much better than she could in the States.

Mr. Hawkins<sup>7</sup> & I are building a house & intend to move into it in a few days. We are staying with his family & shall do so for the present. I cannot say whether I shall settle here or not. Mr. [Charles E.] Fox the owner of the township<sup>8</sup> has offered me a good chance & I have had inducements elsewhere but have declined excepting any propositions from any of them. We have not done planting as the water is to[o] high yet; the farmers plant as late as July & August.

When Brother William comes [from California] I shall conclude what to do. I expect him soon; there is a great amount of work to be done here this summer. We have a church & school house dwelling houses & wharves to build; a steam saw mill is nearly completed; all our business men here are Yankees & some of them natives of Boston. . . . Lydia sends much love to you &

7. Donation land claim of "John S. Hawkins & heirs (OC 5285), Columbia County, 32 acres in T7N, R2W, secs. 16, 21." He was born in 1818 in New Hampshire, arrived Oregon August 1852, settled claim Dec. 1, 1854, married Elizabeth Lane June 12, 1841, in Meredith, N.H. Among his claim witnesses was S. B. Plympton. See *Genealogical Material in Oregon Donation Land Claims*, comp. by Genealogical Forum of Portland, Oregon, vol. II.
8. Charles E. Fox DLC (OC 5119), 293.32 acres, in T7N, R2W, secs., 16, 17, 20, 21. Fox settled on the claim in 1850. Silas B. Plympton's donation claim (OC 5282) is given as 39.91 acres in T7N, R2W, sec. 21. His settlement date in *Genealogical Material in Oregon Donation Land Claims*, *op. cit.*, is Oct. 31, 1854. There is a great deal of correspondence in family papers; much legal work was involved in getting a certificate and clear title for Silas' land at Rainier. A man named Farr made an erroneous claim involving the DLC of Silas Plimpton and his early neighbors, Isaac Voorhees and John Hawkins, and suit was brought. The U.S. Land Office at Oregon City wrote to Silas in 1883 (he was then living at Westport), stating that records filed indicated he "commenced residence" on his claim on Oct. 31, 1854, and lived there until Jan. 21, 1856. Evidently the original 320 acres he filed on Silas amended to 40 acres, the part he actually improved; and later, because Charles Fox had filed four years earlier and some of the Plimpton claim was included in the Fox claim, his 40 acres was cut to 32.46 acres. The correspondence went on for many years and title was finally settled early in 1897.

to all inquireing friends. Ever your Affct Son, S. B. Plympton  
Lydia will write soon Please write often Direct to Ranier O T

Rainier, Oregon Territory, July 24th 1853

Brother Dexter

Perhaps a discription of this part of our country might be of some little interest to you. By looking on your atlas you will see a small river emptying into the Columbia but a short distance from its mouth on the north side, it is the first river from its mouth that empties into the columbia. You will see by your atlas that this river has no name attached to it. The name given to this is Cowlitze river, directly opposite this river or the mouth of it is where we live, we are situated on the south bank of the Columbia; the country on this side is very hilly & heavily timbered. The old growth of trees are now lieing prostrate & cover a great portion of the land. I have traveled a great distance upon ceder logs that were three & four hundred feet long & from 4 to 10 feet in diameter such trees as these would surprise you were you to see them. Most of the timber that is standing is very large & lofty. The way we clear this land is some what singular—we bore holes in the trees & set them on fire with a match & they will burn down in a few days & then after they are down they will burn the inside of the tree all out & leave nothing but the sap & bark. We are building a house of this kind of material, we saw the log off eight feet long & then split it endways. these pieces are then placed upright on sills & forms the outside into half circles, this looks very odd yet it is very pretty. There are no pine trees in this country that I have seen & but very few oak; the greatest part of the timber is fir. Crab apple trees are very plenty there are some plumbs & other kind of fruit trees that grow wild. berries grow in abundance; I could gather more than a bushel in a day. there are nearly all kinds here that you have at home & a great many kinds that you never saw or heard of. I went out across the river (which is about a mile wide) to get some blackberries but the mosquitoes drove me out of the woods. You can have no idea of this troublesome insect untill you live on the bank of the Columbia river. We have ten thousand to your one. I begin to get used to them & mind but little about them unless there [are] fifty biteing me at a time, then I go in for [a] fight. Our crops look finely & if nothing happens we shall have 700 bushel of potatoes. Potatoes are selling for \$5.00

[254]



per bushel & have been selling for ten dollars. A man told me that he saw a man pay \$8.00 merely for the eyes of a bushel of potatoes. You may think this a large story but it is true. Some farmers made their fortune last year raising potatoes alone. Last week we had some rain which I suppose is the last we shall have untill next fall, vegetation needs no rain as the heavy dews is sufficient to moisten the earth. We are not troubled at all with heat, the climate is delightfull; we are never troubled with the heat nights, as it is always necessary to sleep under two blankets, & were I to make a climate to suit myself I could not make any alteration that would suit me any better. It is delightfull here this time in the year. We can see ten miles down the river, vessels of all descriptions glide over its surface; there are five steamboats past here every week & many sailing vessels. The river has been very high & overflowed its banks in many places & destroyed a great deal of property. My garden was four feet under water & everything was killed. The water has fallen about twelve feet; our house was surrounded at one time & we lived on an island only leaving a space of dry land about 4 feet wide, but it did not last long & we could easily get across on a plank.

I suppose you would like to hear something about the indians. Where I have been at work clearing the land is a place formerly used by the indians as a burial place for their dead. When one of their number dies they put him into his canoe & cover the body with blankets & place every article of property belonging to the deceased into the canoe no matter if it is a thousand dollars worth if he happens to be worth as much (which is seldom the case however). I have found spears, beads, copper plate & many other trinkets. They never bury their dead but leave them on the ground, but the wild beasts & birds soon devour them. They sometimes put the body into a box & place it in the branches of trees I have often seen them twenty feet from ground. There are only a few left as most of them died last winter; they say they can't live with Boston men. They were once a large & powerfull tribe & very savage too; hunting & fishing is their principal employment. Salmon are very plenty & are selling for twenty dollars per barrel. I have seen sturgeon seven & eight feet long but no one can catch them but the indians. I have seen no bears yet but there are a plenty of them about here they are very shy; deer are also very plenty but the

[255]

under brush is too thick to shoot them. I shall write you much more about the country soon as I intend to go to the top of Mount St Helens; it is about three miles high & 30 miles from here. This is a volcano but it is covered with perpetual snow except in places where it is melted by the heat within. We were pleased to receive a letter. . . . write all the news & what you are doing. . . . Lydia will write next mail. She continues to teach school but is at the present time engaged in making blackberry pies. . . . I can earn from 3 to 10 dollars per day when I work for wages. Board is very high here. I paid 18 dollars per week for myself & Lydia when she first came. We send much love to you all. Write Soon. Silas

Rainier, August 24th 1853

My Dear Parents,

Your letter dated July 11th is just received and I improve the first opportunity which presents itself of answering it. It gives us great pleasure to hear from our friends. . . . Would that we could hear oftener. It hardly seems possible that I have come so far from all my friends. I often think of it. . . . If things continue to change as they have done, by the time that I shall visit you<sup>9</sup> it will not seem much more like home to me than Oregon did, at first. I must say that I like Oregon as well as I did So. Reading for all its being a rough looking country; it has every advantage that we could expect from such a new country and even more than I had any idea of finding. There has been two dwelling houses and a meeting house under way. We can pass the time very pleasantly one way and another; there are some very good singers here and we often spend the evenings in singing.

I finished my qua[r]ter in school last Saturday, which will be the last I shall keep. Silas knows of a claim very pleasantly situated on a small stream that flows into the Columbia about six miles above here; the Gentleman who has the one next to it says he will not be obliged to settle on it before December if he should choose not to so; we have concluded to stop here until that time. Silas can earn very good wages and it does not cost us much to live.

Two of Mr. Hawkins's children have been sick with the *Fever*

---

9. Lydia didn't see her old home in South Reading (Wakefield) until 1876, when she and her oldest son, William (then 22), traveled east by train (probably by ship to San Francisco) to visit her relatives (her parents had died). They also went to Philadelphia to see the wonders of the Centennial Exhibition.

*and Ague* but they are getting better fast now. The climate here is delightfull. I often think how much we used to suffer there from the heat. We have had four or five pretty warm days but they are nothing to be compared with what we used to have, there is always a good cool breeze here. . . . Ever your afct. daughter, L. P. Plympton

Lydia says she can think of nothing more to write so rather than send a blank sheet I will try to finish it. We were much pleased to hear from you. . . . Give yourself no uneasyness about Lydia for she is in good health & spirits & what is more she is doing more good here in a short time than she would be able to at home in a whole life time. Were it not for her there would be no school here at present; besides we enjoy ourselves as well as we could anywhere that I know of. . . . We have good neighbors & very kind & that is all we can expect anywhere. Most of the farms are a half mile apart which is quite a respectable distance; there is no quarreling about neighbors *hens here*. . . . Ever your Affct Silas

**Rainier March 18th 1855**

Dear Mother,

As Willie<sup>10</sup> and I are alone today I purpose writing a few lines to you. . . . Mr. Hawkins' family are all well; we were there a few weeks since and had quite a pleasant visit. He has sold (or rather traded) his place where we lived to Mr. Fox for other land and takes enough joining to entitle him to a claim; they live about half a mile from us. Mr. H. holds the office of "Justice of Peace."<sup>11</sup> As there is no minister residing here he has had the honor of performing the marriage cerrimony for two couple since he has held that office. The first was that of a young man to a widow lady forty-six years old, the second was a young couple of more equal ages. It was on the bride's Father's birthday. We had an invitation to the wedding but did not attend. Those that were there said they had quite a merry time.

10. William Wright Plimpton was born Sept. 10, 1854.

11. John S. Hawkins appears in the index to the Oregon Provisional & Territorial Government Papers: 2058, Columbia County election returns, 1855; 5290, Washington County census, 1853; 6180, Trustee "Ranier" Seminary, Jan. 1855; 8024, Columbia County tax roll, 1854; 9132, signed petition re liquor laws, 1857. Silas B. Plympton is also on Columbia County tax rolls for 1854 and 1855 (8024 and 8022), and Columbia County election returns, 1855 (2058), as is Charles E. Fox, also on the Washington County census, 1853 (before Columbia County was cut off).



Silas wrote of view of Mt. St. Helens from Rainier. This J. F. Ford photo of Rainier (ca. 1900) reveals mountain top above Washington hills. (OHS Cols.)

We are having fine summer weather now. Our winter has passed (if it can be called winter) for certainly the weather we have here is very different from what we have been accustomed to. About four inches of snow is all that we have had . . . and that laid on the ground three days. You may judge how warm it is for I have done my cooking and most of my work in an open room all winter. Silas has not finished but two rooms yet just so that we can get along comfortably. He has spent most of his time at work on his land; we shall raise our own wheat this year, by another year we shall begin to have fruit. We have got trees enough to make quite a large orchard, comprising apples, pears, peaches, plums, cherries etc.

A man by the name of Voorhees<sup>12</sup> has taken the claim joining

12. Isaac Voorhees (and wife Mary), whose donation claim (OC 5283) consisted of 39.98 acres in T7N, R1W, sec. 21. Voorhees was born in New York in 1851, and his claim settlement date is given as Nov. 23, 1854 (Silas was a witness) in *Genealogical Material in Oregon Donation Land Claims, op. cit.*

ours and lives only a few rods from us. They are a pleasant family and as good neighbors as I ever wish to live by; we can enjoy much in each others society.

Willie is one of the best little babies that every was, he is no trouble at all; he has never been rocked to sleep yet. When he is tired or sleepy I lay him on the settee and he not unfrequently sleeps two and three hours, is growing finely and will soon make a man. . . . Brother William is in San Francisco. We hear from him very often.<sup>13</sup> . . . Once in a great while I bind a pair of shoes for myself.<sup>14</sup> Ever your affectionate daughter, Lydia. . . . Silas . . . gets his Post Horn out once in a while and plays untill he makes the forrests ring with the echo.<sup>15</sup> Write all the news you can find.

Rainier O. T. July 20th 1855

Brothers Solomon & Dexter<sup>16</sup>

Thinking you might like to hear from this part of the world again I will endeavor to inform you of all matters concerning ourselves and of the country we have adopted as our future home. Owing to the severity of the times little or no improvement has been accomplished during the past year. There is but little money in circulation and our business men have been obliged to suspend all trade for the present. But by what I can see by the papers our situation is far preferable to those of you who are living in the eastern States. We are bountifully supplied with the natural products of our soil and could we send to the east the surplus of our crops it might in some degree relieve the wants of the destitute, but it cannot be and we are obliged to see our produce destroyed for want of consumers.

13. William was Silas' oldest brother, born in Medfield in 1822. He died in Portland, Oregon, in 1904 and was buried, as are a number of Plimptons and Plymptons, in Lone Fir Cemetery.
14. There was usually a shoemaker's bench on old New England farms. As shoe factories were established in Massachusetts, many young people left their farm homes to earn money at the factory benches. This may be the way Silas of Medfield met Lydia of South Reading, where they both evidently did some shoemaking. See Silas' letter of July 20, 1856.
15. Silas and his brother, William, had both played in the band in Medfield. They were both hard of hearing—supposedly from marching close to the bass drum in the band. Silas always loved music. A granddaughter used to play the piano for him. He had a way of hearing better as she played by holding a stick in his teeth, with the other end on the piano.
16. Solomon Nickerson married Lydia's sister, Mary; Dexter Wright is Lydia's younger brother, as mentioned.

Last year as the year previous probably there was more than a hundred thousand bushels of potatoes raised in this vicinity and they have not been worth one cent a bushel consequently they were thrown away. One company here got ten thousand bushel upon their wharf ready for shipment calculating to send them to San Francisco but there being no market for them at that place they were thrown into the river. Some are fed to the stock but most of them remain in heaps rotting on the ground. Wheat, Oats, peas, beans and all kinds of vegetables are raised in abundance.

You know but little or nothing about the yeald per acre I suppose but wheat generally yealds from fifteen to thirty bushel in the States and here the yeald is from fifty to sixty bushels per acre and better wheat cannot be raised on the face of the earth. Corn does not do well here, our nights are to cool. Orchards are beginning to bear, our fruit is superior in flavor and beauty to any that grows in the States. Some Oregon pears were sold in San Francisco last year for \$5 a piece. Eight and ten dollars per bushel is the price for apples. Peaches are more plenty. My trees are growing finely and I think my peach trees will bear next year.

Our Spring was quite backward; rain fell to the middle of June. Our rainy season generally continues about four months, commencing the last of December. The weather is now beautiful the days are warm but we always have a clear pure atmosphere.

We are severely anoyed this month by the mosquitoes which are as numerous as Xerxes army; they commence their depredations in the middle of the afternoon and engage in a continual warfare until after sunset. I am not doing much this warm weather, there being no inducement to hurry. I work when I feel so inclined, and when I feel so disposed I go a hunting and berrying. Our lowlands are covered with black berries. Oregon is the land of ease and plenty. It is strange to me that there are no more people emigrating to the Western states than what there are. The eastern states are over populated and there is but little chance for a man to lay up anything against future wants however industrious he may be, and there is no prospect of there ever being any better times comeing. I think those who have gone to Nebraska or Kansas will not better their situation much, for I

am acquainted with men who have traveled the length and breadth of the land and they pronounce it almost worthless for farming purposes, and another still greater reason is it is always very sickly there. When I ask the people here why they left the western states their answer invariably is that it was so sickly there that they could not stay. It has been very healthy here thus far as but four deaths have occurred in this vicinity since the country was settled, and three of those were little children.

Our donation law expires the first of December next consequently those who do not take a claim previous to that time will forever after be debarred from the privilege. Some men here have six hundred and forty acres, but the most of us have three hundred and twenty which is much more than we need. I have never been around my farm yet, but next week I am going to survey it & notify the government officers. We are building roads from place to place so that we soon can travel otherwise than by water. Steamers pass here every day and for a year past have been supplied with wood at this place.

Considerable excitement prevails here at the present time on account of recent gold discovery. It is said that men are making from \$20 to \$80 a day each. Some have gone from here and others are going. These mines are about 300 miles distant near Fort Colville. People here think but little of the distance even were they obliged to go on foot. I believe that Oregon possesses the richest mines in the world and not a long time will elapse before the mines of California will be forsaken for richer ones in Oregon. I do not think of going to the mines at present but should I become convinced that I could make \$50 a day I should give the mines one more trial. My brother William is in lower California in the mines and is doing well. . . . Ever your Afct. Brother, Silas

I wish you would write me about the boys I used to work with . . . and also about the Reading Band. . . . We would like to see . . . more young Ladies out here; there is a great deficiency of the fair sex. Young bachelors are very plenty. . . .

Rainier Nov 8th 1855

Brother Lowell<sup>17</sup>

I received your letter a few days since and have sent it down to

17. Silas' half-brother, George Lowell Plympton, was born in Medfield in 1836, and died in Portland, Oregon, in 1924. Lowell came out to the Pacific Coast and

“Campo Seco” Cal.<sup>18</sup> to William he being at that place mining. Of course you have read the accounts in the papers ere this of our indian war. Well we cannot always expect peace but I have no taste for indian warfare but they chose their own course. We have built a Fort here which I think is strong enough to resist all their efforts. Many have been very much alarmed in this place. Some families reside in the Fort, and at one time we all stayed in it nights, but thinking our fears groundless to some extent we concluded to remain at our homes a while longer.

One night not long sinse some men from Rainier were coming down the river when suddenly they discovered the light of a camp fire on each side of the Columbia River about three miles distant above this place; they made all possible haste to arouse the inhabitants of Rainier, two men came out to tell me and my neighbor of our danger. We got up and dressed and made all possible speed to town (distant ½ mile back). We assembled all the womin together with the children and stationed guards, but no indians that night made their appearance. We continued to keep the town guarded every night for some time, expecting the red skins down on us every moment, but as yet they have kept at a respectfull distance. The war is a just one on the part of the indians but they must finaly yeald as they always have done. We have about two thousand Volunteers who have taken the field against them. I should have gone but our country being sparsely settled we should find warm work to defend ourselves should we be attacked. No volunteers were called for in our County.

The indians have been planing the War for more than a year. Nearly all of the powerfull tribes are united and a greater part of all others will join as soon as the indians gain the least advantage. It is supposed that the indians can raise from twenty to thirty thousand Warriors and many tribes are well armed much better than the Whites. Many families have been barbarously murdered. There may have been fifty whites killed and about

---

reached Rainier (with Silas' brother William) in 1859. Lowell returned to San Francisco to work for the U.S. government as Overseer and Inspector of River and Harbor Improvements. While he was there, Silas and Lydia sent their son, William Wright Plimpton, to live with him and go to school there. That was about 1869, and Willie stayed three years or so. From San Francisco, Lowell returned to Medfield to be married, and lived in the East until 1918, when his daughters brought their parents to Portland.

18. What is left of Campo Seco is located about 30 miles northeast of Stockton, in the Lake Tahoe region.



three times that number of indians thus far. The United States troops have been beaten in one battle which gave the indians renewed [?] courage. The United States troops are nothing but a damnable curse here, and the Volunteers ought to serve them the same as they do the indians. They have protected the red skins long enough for they would not consent to have them punished when they really deserved it. The blood of many families has gone unavenged. This is the last indian war to come upon the stage in my opinion. The Indians, the Hudson Bay company and the Catholic priests<sup>19</sup> combined cannot drive us from Oregon. (I might also add, the U.S. troops.) I consider them all near kin.

We are not thriving in any branch of business at the present time. Of course it cannot be expected; in these times, business of all kinds is suspended. We thought before the War broke out that the times could not possibly be any worse. Produce this year thus far is much higher than last although every article of produce is much lower than in the States. Last spring thousands of bushels of potatoes were thrown into the river at this place consequently none were planted this year. Now they are high, but very few are to be had. . . .

I suppose you have given up all idea of ever coming to Oregon. Could you come prepared to teach school you might do well any where in Oregon or Washington. Lydia is teaching school at home until such time as they can do better; how long that will be is more than I can tell, they have been trying to hire one and have offered him \$60 per month & board. I can have the school again this winter if I would except it but I have other work to do. . . . L. sends love. Ever your Afct. Brother Silas  
Our company at Rainier musters 30 guns. We can defend ourselves against all the indians in Oregon. . . . One woman defended herself all day and all night against a numerous party. After she had shot all her balls away she continued shooting one of Colts with nothing but powder. She saved her own life but her husband and son was killed. There are many women here

---

19. Lest Silas' Puritan background be blamed for this remark, it should be noted that the Protestant clergy seemed to turn him off, too. According to his granddaughter, Ethel Plimpton Abbott, he had no interest in formalized worship of any creed, and later in life became an admirer of Robert Ingersoll's writings. When his wife, Lydia, died in 1903, he refused to have a service for her conducted by a minister, to the consternation of more orthodox members of the family. Instead, he chose a friend to read a short and moving tribute.

that can shoot quite well. Our indians appear quite friendly but they are not to be trusted. . . .

Rainier April 25th 1856

Dear Mother,

It is with much pleasure that I sit down to acknowledge to you the receipt of your letter of Jan 28th. . . . You need not give yourself any uneasiness about us on account of the Indians. As yet no hostile movement has taken place in our midst. On the opposite side of the river the families have left their claims and taken up their residence at Rainier at which place a fort was built last fall. Silas has entered a portion of his claim by paying at the rate of one dollar and a quarter an acre and has rented a farm on the river two miles below Rainier for which he pays eight hundred dollars, have from forty to fifty acres under cultivation. We have sixteen milch cows. We find a ready market for all the butter I can make at fifty cents a pound, have sold milk for the last three months at fifty cents a gallon.

I find I do not get much leisure time beside doing my work. Silas talks very strong at times of making cheese. I do not yet know whether we shall or not. Should we be permitted to remain on the place for one year (the time for which he has hired it) without being molested we have every prospect of making something this year. Produce of all kinds will probably command a very high price next fall.

Our peach and cherry trees have been in blossom two weeks and apple trees are just in bloom. Mr. Dobbins<sup>20</sup> sold three bushels of apples off of this place last fall for fifteen dollars per bushel.

Willie is hearty and well now, is just commencing to walk good. Do you not think he is very backward at nineteen months old? His sickness put him back six months. . . . We think he is a bright little fellow. . . . Write soon, from your aff. Lydia

[Silas continues] . . . I suppose you think that we might write oftener but we find it exceedingly dull work in putting together enough that we think will interest you. We may be in danger of an attack from the Indians & we may not. We cannot tell at any rate we keep prepared for them. Should they attack us in large numbers we cannot escape. Thirty miles from us is the nearest approach to us yet. Our position is not as dangerous as most

20. Dobbins' (probably James, who died in fall, 1856) land is marked on Silas' map.

other places in Oregon. When I hear of their near approach I shall send Lydia and Willie to Portland on the Steamer which runs past here four times a week but I shall stay at all events & defend my property. We have two double barrel guns & a good musket which we keep loaded with buck shot in order to give them a warm reception should they venture to come. There is no prospect of peace at present. Neither do the Indians appear to get much the worst of the war they have proved thus far superior to the whites but they must eventually give ground. In consequence of the present war every thing is high & how the poor who are obliged to leave their homes will get along I am unable to say. Many families have removed to California. An old Chief told me the other day that they would kill & drive all the whites away. they have an idea that we are all going to give up the Territory to them and leave for California but they will find themselves mistaken.

No Indians are allowed to visit Rainier or any other town. It was the friendly Indians (so called) who took the Cascade. One man was killed by an Indian whom he had employed for years & living with him at the time, his treachery was not suspected.

I have had Indians employed this spring helping me plant but they have left now. We have three parties in the field the Regulars, Volunteers & Indians, all enemies to each other. The Regulars & Volunteers do not agree much better with each other than with the Indians. The Volunteers are for killing all the Indians that will not go to the reservation where they will receive protection from the Indian Agent. The Regulars wish to bring them to terms without bloodshed but they will find themselves mistaken. . . . It rains nearly all the time. I have about three acres more of onions to sow but cannot get them in. We sow with a machine. Dexter must write how he & Father are getting along with their Spring work. Remember us to all inquiring friends. Much love to all, Silas

Rainier, July 20th 1856

Dear Brother Dexter:

By the present mail we received your letter of the 1st of June. . . . The people here say that the mail comes to Oregon for my especial benefit, for nearly all the mail matter that comes to Rainier comes to me. By the last mail I received three letters and seven papers. . . . I am well posted concerning the news

[265]

throughout the United States and Europe.<sup>21</sup> The Boston Journal is my favorite paper. . . . We were much pleased to hear that our family and friends were enjoying good health also that business generally was good. I expect to hear soon that those machines for making boots which are in successful operation at Lynn, Mass. and Troy, N.Y. will reduce the price of making to such an extent that the shoe bench will be abandoned. It will eventually be the case that shoemakers will be obliged to seek more lucrative employment. I am thankful that the war [Crimean] in Europe has ended and peace once more restored to those proud, selfish, misguided people. Undoubtedly our affairs with England are somewhat complicated but I hope the war bubble will blow over, for Oregon and Washington would be much exposed to the depredations of the enemy. The Kansas difficulty I view in a most serious light. So long as our high offices are filled with murderers and ruffians of the vilest description, we shall be obliged to suffer until a proper remedy can be resorted to, to purify and I hope annihilate this ruthless set of men who take upon themselves to make our nation's laws.

San Francisco has been in a terrible state of excitement. I suppose you are acquainted with the circumstances. The people have taken the law into their own hands, much to the satisfaction of a majority of the people on the Pacific Coast. I have taken the paper of which Mr [Thomas Starr] King was the editor and I consider him to be the ablest and best editor on our coast. That he should be shot like a dog in the street in the daytime was more than the people could bear. . . .

As for our affairs in Oregon, I have not much news to offer. The Indian difficulty in Southern Oregon has terminated. Twelve hundred Indians passed up the river on the steamship *Columbia* from Port Orford on their way to the Reservation in Yamhill County, at which place all the Indians are to be collected and kept for all future time. I saw them pass but was not near enough to observe their feelings toward their new home and destiny. There are about fifty of these Indians who refused to go to the reservation and are determined to fight it out till the

---

21. All through his life Silas was an avid reader. He had decided opinions and made pithy and pertinent comments about conditions. He never trusted the "big operators" of his day. In a letter to Ortleby written April 21, 1898, he said: "I send you some papers that I take that are going to give the trusts trouble after a while. I have joined the socialists down town just to help them along."

last. Hostilities in Northern Oregon have not yet ceased, although not much fighting now. The danger has passed much to our joy. I tell you it is not very pleasant to sleep with one eye open and guns at the head of my bed expecting every moment to be obliged to have to use them. My large faithful watch dog has always slept at the door and nothing could come near without warning. Had they come upon us, we could not have escaped, neither did I expect to, but I should have done my best with my two double barrel guns and a single musket, which I kept charged with eight mould shot each. I never was much frightened but one night. That night the dog gave the alarm and I never knew him to bark at nothing. I instantly called my man and we were prepared for action in a moment. After a short time, the dog was still again and we retired, but did not sleep much. Upon examination the next morning, I found five sacks of flour missing from the barn. So we had our fright for nothing. What made me more suspicious was I had had some difficulty with the Indians a few days before, the chief of the party threatened to shoot me and the same day, they all left, as I expected to get others to join them. They have not yet returned to their old camping ground because they are afraid of me, but remain about six miles off down the river. They say they are coming back this fall. I told them I would not hurt them.

Our farming operations are prospering finely, all our crops look well. Our harvest will be abundant. I have between thirty & forty acres under cultivation, about seventeen acres in wheat the rest in onions, peas, oats, potatoes and some corn and beans. The season has been very cool thus far, in fact we never have any oppressive heat it is always cool and comfortable. The farmers in California have suffered severely from the drought and short crops will be the consequence. I have about fifty young apple trees the most of them bear, they sold here last year for about thirty-five dollars per barrel. . . .

Willie is going to be a second Dexter, as he has many of his Uncle's ways. He has been very sick with the dumb ague we suppose. Those who were acquainted with the disease said it was. A camp meeting commenced near here last Thursday. Many were present but it has been very rainy. Nearly three inches of water has fallen today on a level. Something quite unusual for this season of the year. We are now enjoying the

mosquito season, they are as thick as snowflakes. Fleas are not as thick as they were when the Indians lived here. You must write often, much love to you and all our family. Remember me to all enquiring friends. From you affectionate Brother Silas

Oak Point WT June 21st 1857<sup>22</sup>

Dear Parents

I fear that you do not get our letters as we get none from you. It is more than eight months since we heard from you. . . . We are still at Oak Point & enjoying good health. I find my work much easier than farming & as I get \$1200 a year & my family boarded it is much better than clearing the forests to make a farm.

How long we shall stay here is uncertain but probably I shall not leave until I can do better elsewhere. My business is to measure lumber & see to loading vessels & oversee the out of door hands, attend to the store & Post Office, and see to getting provisions into the Boarding house. Oak Point belongs to a firm in San Francisco & they keep several vessels running all the time. There are two saw mills & a grist mill here which gives employment to thirty men & upwards.

One of the owners resides here Alex S. Abernethy;<sup>23</sup> he is a candidate for Delegate to Congress this year but whether he will be elected remains to be proved. His family is here, has one grown up daughter & several small children so Lydia has company. There are no other families within two miles of us so you see that our neighborhood is quiet & peaceful. We have a church here & have preaching once in three week[s] of the Methodists denomination. We get together quite a respectable number occasionally.

My farming operation last year was not very flattering. After paying out \$1600 I had but little left. I could have sold my

22. Oak Point, Washington Territory, about 12 miles down the Columbia from present Longview. The old house where Silas and his family lived is no longer standing.

23. Alexander Abernethy, George Abernethy's (first governor of Oregon Provisional Government) brother, came to Oregon by sea in 1850, and purchased a half-interest in George's Oak Point sawmill. He promoted the formation of Washington Territory, was a member of that Territory's second legislature, an organizer of the Republican party in the region, and was nominated by it for delegate. He lost the election, but held some county offices, and was a member of Washington's constitutional convention in 1878. He is described as a "modest, right-minded and moderately successful man" in H. H. Bancroft, *History of Washington, Idaho, and Montana, 1845-1889* (San Francisco, 1890), 205n.

produce at one time for \$2000 but refused to do so, so I shipped it all to California. I sold the most of my potatoes for 60 cts per bushel which did not much more than pay expenses. Here is what I raised off of thirty acres, viz 800 bushells of onions, 800 bushells potatoes, 400 bush wheat, 200 d[itt]o oats, 150 do peas besides a good deal of other produce. We had 15 cows to milk. Lydia made between 700 & 800 lbs of Butter & chees. I had about 20 bushells of apples some of which I sold for 25 & 30 cts per lb. We was our own best customers but I sold about \$200 worth. All the help I had was one man besides a little help in harvesting. I never worked so hard before & never intend to again. I paid \$800 rent & my other expenses amounted to as much more but it is all paid & money left. We had a very wet season last year & I lost a good deal for we could not harvest it. Some farmers here lost nearly all their crops.

Willie is most three years old, can talk quite plain; he is quite a favorite with the men. He & his Mother went to Portland last week; he was much surprised to see so many things. When he came off the Steamer he cried to go back . . . brother William . . . is now in California doing well. Some days he took out over three hundred dollars. He wanted me to go back to the mines but I got enough of the mines years ago. . . . Lydia sends much love to you all & all inquiring friends. Yours truly Silas. . . .

Oak Point Dec 7th 1857

Dear Mother

Your kind letter was received by last mail. I need not say how glad we was to hear from you. . . . We are enjoying good health which is the best news that I can communicate at this time. . . .

I am still in the employ of Abernethy, Clark & Co.<sup>24</sup> The large grist mill is nearly completed, have been grinding some time; it makes excellent flour. The saw mill runs night & day, saw about twenty thousand feet a day. Have between thirty & forty men employed. We are now engaged in putting up a planing machine & I expect a lathe machine will occupy our next attention. Three vessels are engaged in taking lumber to California & one to the Sandwich Islands. I measure & account for all

24. Abernethy, Clark & Co. was George Abernethy's shipping firm (from New York), with San Francisco and Oregon City offices. The firm's operations are described in Arthur L. Throckmorton, *Oregon Argonauts: Merchant Adventurers on the Western Frontier* (Portland, 1961), 218 and elsewhere, and also the business climate and difficulties of the period that Silas refers to from time to time.

the lumber taken away from here, which keeps me pretty busy.

We have had a very dry summer & autumn has passed away very pleasantly. We have had a slight fall of snow today which is nearly a month earlier than usual. There is no News here of interest; hard times is the General complaint although we do not feel it as the people do in the eastern states. What a terrible hard winter the poor people must experience in all the states. If one million could only get to Oregon it would be a benefit to the country & themsevles. There is no country in the world where people can get a good living so easy & with so little labor as this. It is surprising to see what a large quantity of produce can be from one acre & all without manure & but little labor. I have a pretty strong notion of leaving the mills & going to farming again. I do not expect to get one hundred and twenty five dollars per month at farming, but I should have less care on my mind & perhaps it would be better for us—but \$125 per month, or \$1600 a year, and my family boarded is very good wages. But with all that, I think of leaveing the place next spring. I can if I wish open a hotel here which will pay very well, but have not made up my mind to do so yet. I have to see to getting all the provisions into the house. We consume about 50 lbs of meat per day. The Indians bring in a good deel of wild game such as Ducks, Venison & fish (salmon trout); they are delicious.

I attend to the Store & Post Office & keep the men employed. I have come to the conclusion that it is a little more than one man ought to attend to. As a general thing our hands do not stay long; they are generally *dead broke* when they come here & the money being at all times ready for them when they wish to leave they keep on the move. I have had men from almost every nation in the world to deal with & from almost every State in the Union. There are now Scotch, English, Irish, Dutch, Italians, Sweeds, Prusians & Yankees here. . . . Thus far I have never had the least difficulty with any one of them. If they are not good to work I pay them off & let them go. Willie is as streight as a candle & as slim as a rail, just like his Mother; he is learning his letters & can count some. He can speak quite plain although he hears so many different languages that he get puzzeled sometimes. . . . Yours affectionately, Silas

. . . . I suppose you are trying to keep warm while we can live quite comfortable without any fire. I wish you had some of our

[270]



waste wood to burn. We keep a large fire night & day the year round to burn up slabs & other rubbish. . . .

Oak Point is 15 miles below Rainier on the other side of the River, & about 30 miles from Astoria. . . . The Banks are all broke I see by the papers. I am glad of it, for they are a course [curse] to the whole community, those miserable institutions are the whole cause of the hard times. Extravagance has entered into every department of life & when the womin pay millions of dollars a year for the privilege of going bare headed<sup>25</sup> which is all show & sham no wonder that Banks Break. . . .

Oak Point May 1st 1858

Brother Dexter

We received yours & Mothers letter a short time since. . . . The mild winter has had a tendency to releave the wants of the destitute & to make it pass more lightly over the afflicted. Hard times thus far has made no inroads into this far off region; business is very brisk & all kinds of labor is high. It is utterly impossible for us ever to know the effects of hard times here, for he who is so disposed can live like a King & bid defiance to the times. Six months in the year the natural products of the soil will keep us in a very healthy condition. There is a kind of wild potato which the Indians call Wa-pa-toe it grows in marshy lakes in abundance; they are very delicious & healthy. The Indians gather them in large quantities they are very wholesome food either roasted or raw, they grow to about the size of an egg. I have never seen the time yet but what I could obtain all the fish that I wanted, the finest salmon trout that ever lived in water. Wild game is abundant geese, ducks, phesants, deer, elk, Bears & etc.

Last Saturday I was going to see a neighbor of mine and as I was quietly pursuing my way through the woods all on a sudden a large black bear jumped up on a log close by my side, there we stood face to face. I had no weapon & I did not think it prudent to make an attact, consequently we exchanged nods when he quietly made his exit into the brush leaving me to pursue my journey alone.

Not long since one of the largest wild cats I ever saw came into our hog sty not two rods from the house & quietly lie down

25. Perhaps the complaint about women going bare-headed had to do with a fashion for *small* bonnets. The leading business in Medfield, Mass., was the manufacture of straw for hats. Small ones meant less demand for the straw!

with the pigs. We put a ball through its head, this one could have killed a man in a twinkling of an eye if it wished to. Last week we killed a panther measuring over seven feet in length. I tell you it is sport to get among these fellows.

Extensive gold mines have recently been discovered on Frazers River in the British Possessions which is creating a general stampede among the people, the excitement was never greater than now since gold was discovered on the Pacific Coast. Most of the mills are deserted & a general rush is anticipated. Our hands are going next week & if we can get no more to take their places the mill will stop. Men are offered seven dollars per day to dig coal & chop wood to keep the Steamers running. I shall not go at present but if the news continues favorable I may try mining again.

These mines are situated about four hundred and fifty miles from us. There are two routes both of which are at the present time dangerous. Frazers River is a very rapid stream & difficult to ascend, nothing but canoes & skiffs can ascend it. The other route is through the Indian country and they are very fond of a white man for a target to shoot at. Some have already been killed on both routes, but when men can make from fifty to one hundred & fifty dollars per day fire & water will not stop them. I have already seen some of the gold it is very coarse and of an excellent quality.

All kinds of provisions are very high there. Flour is selling for one dollar per pint & everything else accordingly. The Indians lately brought into Victoria Island one hundred and ten pounds of gold which they gathered in baskets. Last week I was in Portland and where ever we go people are knotted together consulting the best means of proceeding to the newly discovered gold fields. Three large Ocean Steamers are plying between here & San Francisco, hundreds are flocking to our midst & away they go into regions seldom if ever traveled by white men before. Very many come & have not a cent to proceed further & are obliged to stop and work to get some money to go on with. . . .

I intended to leave this place next summer and hunt me a farm. There are some very desirable situations around here for farming purposes. I have several in view but have made no selection yet. Lydia & Willie are well I expect. I have not seen them for nearly a fortnight. They have gone some ten miles

away to visit some young girls whose mother died last winter. I expect her home soon. Willie is quite a large boy & is a very good boy too, he learns quite fast; he is beginning to spell out little words [and] he loves his books dearly. Lydia has but little else to do but attend to him. I see by the papers that there has been a great revival of religion in your section of the country. I expect the people had become very wicked, hence the necessity for a change.

I hope you will not be obliged to make shoes for eight cts per pair long for it must be dull business surely. . . . I shall not come back at present, can live too easy here to think of such a thing. . . . Give my respects to all inquiring friends, and write soon. Lydia just got home. She sends much love to all. . . . Your affct Brother, Silas

The mail steamer has just called here on her way up from California. She had about five hundred passengers on board & another one will be up tonight. All is excitement. Our hands are leaving for the Mines, farmers are leaving their crops for the Mines. It is all Hurrah Boys away we go; it is the old days of 49 over again.

**On Board Steamer "Independence," Aug 8th 1858**

Dear Father & Mother

I suppose Lydia has written to you by this mail, therefore I shall say but a few words. My home at the present time is almost any where on the Columbia River. I am running on the Steamer *Independence*<sup>26</sup> for a short time. I say short time because I do not like the business. I have but little to do but keep the books, but the confinement I do not like, besides the boat is of the high pressure kind & we are liable to be elevated without due notice. Thus far we have had but two or three Steamboat explosions upon our waters, but since opposition and an increase of boats have come into existence you may expect to hear of more accidents.

---

26. According to E. W. Wright, ed., *Lewis & Dryden's Marine History of the Pacific Northwest* (Portland, 1895), 75, the *Independence* was built for a ferry, "but the opportunities for any craft which could turn a wheel were so good at this period, that she was placed on the Cowlitz route. In 1860 she was run by Captain Ankeny to the Cascades as an opposition boat, and the following year proved very profitable carrying stock and other freight for the Salmon River mines, connecting with the steamer *Wasco*. Having been built in a cheap manner she was short-lived, and early in 1864 the machinery was removed, and the following year the hull was burned for old iron."



"Willie's Ambrotype," taken in Portland. (Plimpton Family Col.)

I some expect to go to Oregon City to live if I can make suitable arrangements, but not untill next fall. I can have employment in a large grist mill owned by the same company that I worked for last year. I saw a brother of the Firm yesterday he said that I had better go there as I could have a good chance if I would go.

Lydia and Willie are in Portland now, but I think I shall take them back to Rainier this week. She said she would send the money & I expect she has done so. I intended to have got back to

Portland to have done the buisness myself but I told her if I did not get back in season she must attend to it herself. . . . I do hope you will get the money (two hundred & fifty dollars) and Willie's Ambrotype which Lydia has had taken for you, which you can get at Wells and Fargo Express Office in Boston.

Willie is pronounced by many the handsomest child they ever saw. It is true that nature has been very liberal in bestowing both beauty and goodness upon the child, and you may believe that we feel very proude of him. . . .

We are now lieing at the Pacific Mail Steam Ships Co. Wharf at St Helen[s] for it is Sunday. We might have reached Portland last night & I would have done so if I had had the command, regardless of all snags & sand bars, but some of the old foggies were afraid to venture after dark although we do sometimes.

The Frazer River excitement is subsiding a little although many are going & but few returning. This Steamer has been running but about two months and has made nearly three thousand dollars. We carry a great many cattle & horses. The Indians are still troublesome but their time has come when they must forever henceforth remain quiet. The large saw mill at Rainier was burned down last night. I saw it burning as we came past. Some person who has been wronged through the rascality of its owner is supposed to have set it on fire. . . . Very affectionately Yours, S B Plympton

**Rainier April 1st 1859**

Dear Mother

. . . We . . . was very glad to learn that the money and picture reached you safely. . . . Silas is very busy now setting out trees and puting in his crops; the season is very backward on account of haveing so much rain, which causes all his work to come on all together. We have not seen one day entirely free from rain or snow since the first of Jan untill the past week.

William and Lowell have been with us three weeks. Mr. Blanchard<sup>27</sup> one of Silas's shipmates accompanied them from Cal and stoped with us a few days, has now gone up to the country to try and get a place. It was quite pleasant for us to see some of our friends. We had been expecting the arrival of Lowel so long (haveing heard of his ill health) that we began to feel anxious for his safety; he had quite a poor turn a few weeks

27. Silas' map of the land claims has the name Dean Blanchard.

before he reached San Francisco but has recovered. . . . Six years have passed since we left our native land, the home of our childhood; it seems a long time to look forward, and yet how quick the time passes away; how many changes have taken place, one can scarcely realize. . . .

Now I will introduce to you another little granddaughter; unfortunately she has no name yet, so we call her *baby*.<sup>28</sup> She is a pet with us all and Willie thinks there is nothing like his little sister. She is two months old. . . . William is occupied in rocking her now to give me time to write. . . . Abby [Lydia's sister] wants to know how we live here; if I could see her I could tell her easier than I can write. We have a good comfortable house that Silas built himself with the exception of the door's and window sash, and I think we can live just as happy as though we were the owners of a palace. We have plenty to eat, and company enough to make the time pass pleasantly. As to the fashions they are about the same as in the Eastern States. *Huge* skirtes and *tiny* bonnets (as for myself I do not fancy them at all). Silas has just set out 60 pear trees, and has got as many apple and peach trees. This year we shall have apples, peaches and cherries, the fruits of our own labour, and when all the trees get to bearing I hope Silas will not have to work quite so hard as he has had to for a few years past. He enjoys good health and thinks it is hard labour that makes him so strong and hearty.

Last summer I spent a few weeks with Mrs. Hawkins in Portland and enjoyed it much. She has the same family as when she left the States, has buried two children since she has been in Portland. . . . from your aff daughter, Lydia

Rainier Feb 5th 1860

Dear Father & Mother

It is a very long time since I have written to you. I know that we have been very remiss in our duty, but probably what I have to write will be such kind of news as will give you pain to learn. So I will relate the sad story as it happened. On the 20th day of last Aug. I started on a journey of about ten miles distant from home in company with my brother William and a man whose name is Phelps; after having gone about three fourths of a mile from home I stoped in the road & told them that I did not wish

28. The baby was named Lelia. She died in April 1860 (see Lydia's April 16, 1860, letter).



Brother William Plimpton went for the doctor when Silas was shot. (William died in Portland in 1904). (Plimpton Family Collection, OHS.)

to go any farther as it looked like rain, and I had some brush to burn. I told them to go on and I would return. William said Oh come along. And Phelps exclaimed at the same time Give me your gun I'll show you how to get you along. I handed him my rifle supposing that he would take it and go along, but what should the fellow do but take the gun and point it at my head and breast. I put up my right hand to take the gun from him, but before I could take it he discharged the piece. The rifle was charged with shot, the contents took effect in my right arm about four inches from my shoulder tearing the flesh from the bone and breaking the bone besides splitting the shaft in a horrid manner.

I told William to go for a surgeon that lived ten miles distant across the Columbia River in Washington Territory and off he started.<sup>29</sup> I now turned my steps toward home thinking perhaps I might bleed to death before I got half way. Phelps followed along behind cursing himself for having done it. My trail toward my house was beset with fallen timber and thick underbrush, but I made my way as well as I could. At every step I could feel the crunching of the bones. I met Lydia at the door and told her that my right arm was shot off. We examined it and found that the artery was not injured so that I was in no danger of bleeding to death. Phelps then went to Oak Point for another Doctor. William having told the people at Rainier they began to come but of course could render no assistance. It was about ten o'clock in the morning the accident happened and the Doctor that William went for got here about four in the afternoon. He

29. Brother William had to get a boat and row across the Columbia River, then up the Cowlitz River to a little town to find the doctor. Then he had to row him back to Rainier. I think the doctor's name was Ostrander. (This is the way I remember my grandfather, William Wright Plimpton, telling it.) In spite of the damaged right arm, Silas' handwriting is good, except as he tired before finishing the letter.

probed the wound and got out some shot and cut out all of the burned flesh, said he could do no more as such things were out of his line of practice. Said he had no instruments to amputate if it was necessary to do it. So I sent to Portland for another Doctor; it was about one week before he got here although I did not send for him until three days after the accident. The Doctors consulted the matter, thought I was in a bad fix, but they would try and save the arm if possible. You may be sure that I put in my plea for the arm for I knew that this country was not exactly the place for a man without his right arm.

It was decided that I must lie on my back until the bone could knit, for it was impossible to set it with splints. We kept it wet with cold water all the time for the first three weeks. The wound was so large that we could put a handfull of lint into the cavity. I lie on my back six weeks without moving either to the right or left. This was anything but pleasant for me as I had been actively engaged in laborious occupation previous to the accident. I was not prepared to take to the bed so suddenly. I thought when I did get up once I could run about with ease, but such was not the case for I remained inactive so long that I came very near fainting when I sat up in bed the first time. I could not walk without support for nearly a week afterward. I enjoyed perfect health during the whole time although I suffered very much at times. Three pieces of bone have worked out. One was about an inch long and a quarter of an inch wide the others were smaller. I carried my arm in a sling about three months. I fell down once and hurt it so that it has not got along quite as well as it would have done. I can not do much yet, the wound has just healed or nearly so. I cannot touch my head yet with my hand. I have become left handed although I cant write left handed and no doubt you will think by this time that I can't with my right but I do the best I can now.

William and Lowell have been with us most of the time since the accident. Lydia has been my nurse and doctor and a better one never lived. She had a hard time of it but has enjoyed good health. We have just returned from a visit to a friend of ours who lives some thirty miles down the river we have been gone over a month. Lydia took a severe cold but she has quite recovered. Lelia too has been almost sick; cutting teeth was the trouble. She is a little bit of a thing and looks just like herself. She cannot



run alone yet. We have a baby jumper for her wich she is very fond of. Willie is quite a large boy, he can read and spell quite well, he is now studying arithmetic. He learns easy; for the last six months I have given my whole time to his instruction. He says he would like to see all the fine things I tell him about, but he does not want to go to Boston unless Mother goes with him. I think it will be a long time before we see home again for I think Oregon is our home for the future. We have had a delightful winter thus far, have had but little snow this winter, it is warm and the trees begin to put forth their leaves. Last season was the worst that we have ever had since I have been in the country. it was very wet and many farmers lost everything by the overflow of the Columbia river in the summer.

William & Lowell like [Oregon] very much. Lowell's health is much improved, he taught school last summer at Monticello W T, he can get as many schools as he wants but teaching does not agree with him. I expect they will both go to the Dall[e]s which is some two hundred miles from here in the Spring.

Times are very dull here money is scarce and rogues plenty. But flour potatoes Beef and all kinds of produce are as cheep as land which is one dollar twenty five cts per acre. I have over two hundred trees set out, sixty of which are pears the rest apples, peaches, cherries, quinces and other kinds. Phelps the man who shot me was a crazy sort of a fellow and was at work for me but I always thought him harmless. We were always on good terms and never had a word of difficulty in the world. He acted under the impulse of the moment; he is about here now, comes to see me often says he dont know why he should do such a thing. I have known him for years. Yours Truly, S B Plympton

. . . . We should be much pleased to hear from you all a little more frequently. We have not got but one letter from any of you for more than a year. . . . We take more than a dozen papers so we know what is going on all over the world. . . .

**Rainier April 16th 1860**

Dear Mother,

We received your most kind and welcome letter, on the 6th of this month, and I will improve the first opportunity to answer it, although it is sad news which I have to communicate first. That is that our dear little Lelia has been called away from us. She died the first of April, she had been unwell for some weeks

[279]

teething and had a bad cough which distressed her very much at times, but as she seemed lively and willing to amuse herself with her playthings we did not consider her dangerously sick untill about three days before she died, when her symptoms indicated inflammation of the lungs with high fever. On the day of her death she seemed a little better after having a quiet sleep I took her up and was holding her in my lap when Willie came up to her and asked her if she did not want to go out and see the chickens. She looked up to her bonnet (and when Willie got it), took it and put it in my hand for me to put it on for her, then pointed to the shawl that I put around her and asked for it, so pretty in her way. She seemed as anxious to go out as ever she did, she was just 14 months old, a good natured child and very intelligent too; each day we discovered some new trait to interest us and love her for. Oh how desolate the house seemed for a few days and even now I can hardly realize that she has gone never to return. When the house is still it seems as though she must be asleep up stairs; she used to take such long naps.

Kind friends came in to lend their sympathy in our deep affliction. I feel that we can receive consolation only from One who has promised to heal the broken spirit if we but go to him in prayer, with faith, believing. He knew what was best for our good and I hope that we may live in such a way that we may all meet in a better land where sickness and sorrow never comes.

It appears by your letter that you had not received Silas's letter giving you the full particulars of his accident last fall. I am happy to inform you that it was not as bad as you heard. Although he did not loose his arm it was a serious wound and laid him up for a long time. . . . He can now do most kinds of work most as well as ever. some of the cords being severed prevents him from raising his hand to his head handily. he is very busily engaged with his spring work. We have had a very mild pleasant winter but very few days of freezing weather and the spring has come on warm and pleasant with every prospect of a favorable season.

William and Lowel have been here most of the time. William is now at work about 20 miles down the river just commencing to put up a mill with Mr. West,<sup>30</sup> an acquaintance of ours. They

30. According to McArthur's *Oregon Geographic Names*, John West settled in the locality of Westport about 1850, and it was named for him. His wife was Margaret. Born in Scotland, John was a millwright and lumberman, running a



Other children of Silas and Lydia were Sarah, left, born 1863, and Ortle, born in 1872. (Plimpton Family Collection.)

are a kind family. the girls seem more like sisters than any one I have met with since I left home. . . . With love, ever your affectionate Lydia. . . .

Rainier Jan 28th 1861

Dear Father & Mother,

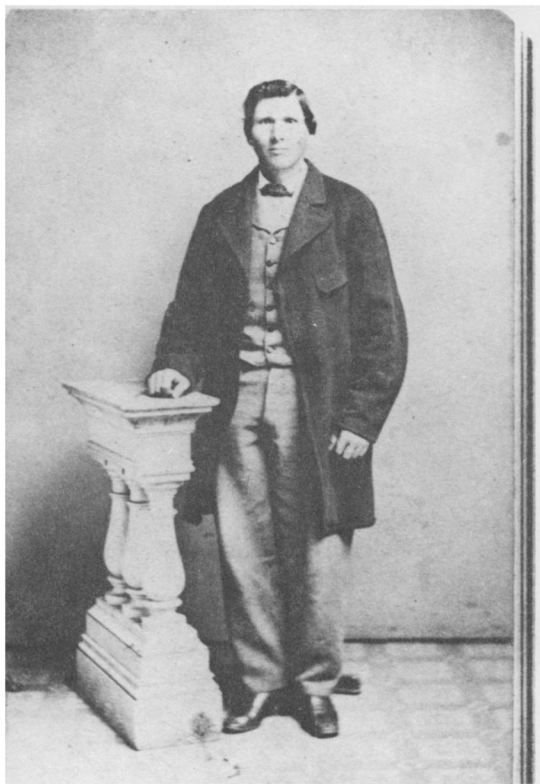
It is a long time since we have heard from home direct by way of a letter, and I think it is time for us to write to you and let you know that we are all well. . . . We have had a very mild and pleasant winter, no snow untill last week, when there was several days very disagreeable, snow fell to the depth of a foot, but it is all gone now. two or three nights ice formed half an inch thick and that is the coldest we have had. It is getting to late in the season for us to expect any colder weather this winter.

Brother Lowell went to San Francisco in Dec. We were sorry to have him leave us but he thought his health required a dryer climate than this is in winter. I fear he will never recover his health wholly. William remains at the Wests.<sup>31</sup> I spent a week there very pleasantly in November; they are fine people. We hope to have some more of our friends to live near us. Sister Lucy's husband talks very strong of coming to Oregon, and our

---

sawmill and salmon cannery at Westport, where the post office was established in 1863. Silas and his family moved to Westport early in 1861 (see his June 17, 1861, letter), and he was first postmaster there. (*Ibid.*, under Plympton Creek.)

31. William helped build the mill at Westport, and probably built some of the earliest houses there, too.



brothers in Wisconsin think they would be better satisfied in this country than where they now are.<sup>32</sup> I think a great many of the poor shoemakers in Mass. could do better if they could be transported to Ogn. . . .

Tuesday morn, Silas was intending to have finished this last evening. The States Mail came in and he had so many papers he could not refrain from reading them. they seem to be having very exciting times in the States, and all are anxious to know how they will terminate. We had a letter from Lowell last night. he had a rough passage down, took some cold on the water and

32. Lucy and her husband, Orson D. Young, did come to Oregon. There is a 1928 clipping from the *Morning Astorian* of the "50 Years Ago in Astoria" column: "News Note—October 1878—The schooner *Alpha*, recently built at Westport by Messrs. Young and [William] Plimpton came down the river yesterday, under full sail and is at present lying at Hustler's wharf. She will be placed in the Tillamook trade and will sail as soon as the weather permits. The principal part of her first cargo will consist of a large stock of goods for Larsen's branch store at Tillamook." Burnby Bell furnished the information from his mother's scrapbook in 1965 (she was a niece of Capt. J. G. Hustler). The Youngs later moved to the Astoria area. The "brothers in Wisconsin" included Francis Wales Plympton, who died in the Civil War. His widow came to Oregon in the 1870s with the family of Charles Frederic Plympton. They stayed in Westport for two years, then moved to Portland where C. F. Plympton was a house builder. He died in 1905. One other brother, Simon, also came to Oregon.

had more cough than when he left us, but was in good spirits, thought he should return to Oregon again sometime. I hope he may be permitted to. . . . Once more I say, love to all, Lydia

Westport Oregon June 17th 1861

Dear Father and Mother

Your welcome letters come duly to hand. . . . We moved from Rainier last February. I have just built a new house and we are now pleasantly situated, are 25 miles from Astoria. There are six or eight families within speaking distance. Brother William is with us. . . . Please direct all your letters to Cathlamet, Washington Territory, also have my Gazette sent to the same place. We are all well. War is the cry. We are all for the Union here. . . . We have applied for a Post Office here. Cant write any more now for we are 10 miles to a Post Office and this must go by a man who is waiting. . . . Remember me to all inquiring friends, Your Affct Son, S B Plympton

Oak Point May 1st 1865

Dear Father & Mother

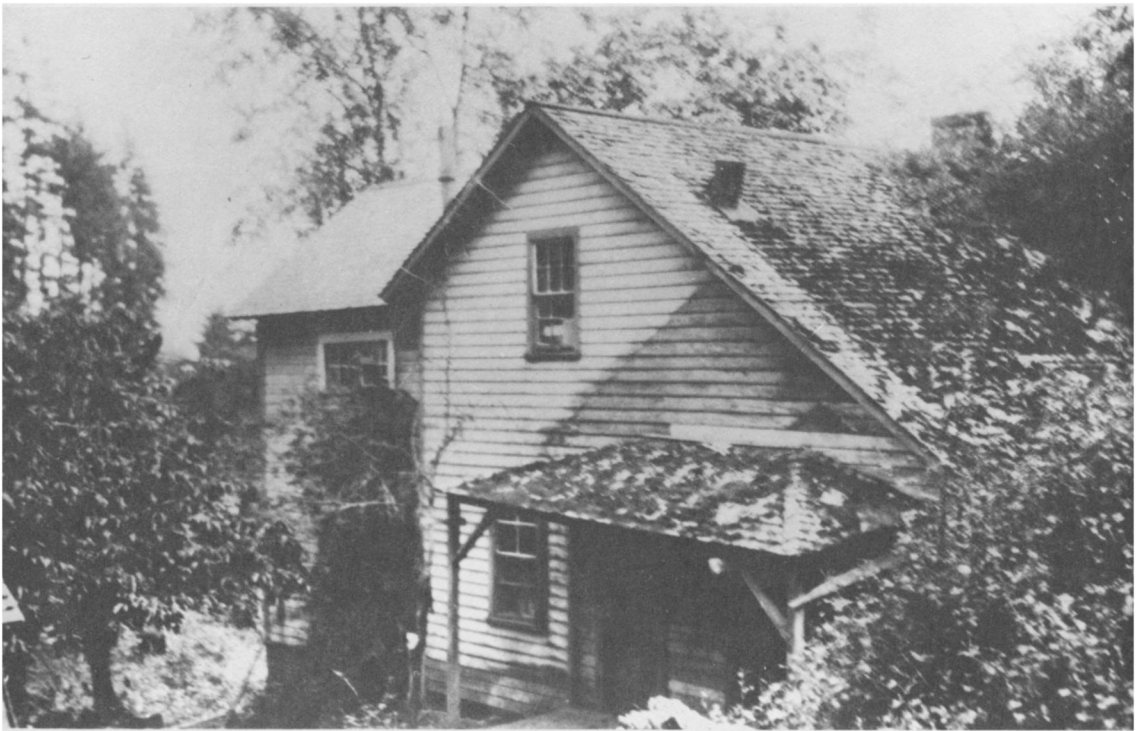
Perhaps you will be a little surprised that this letter should be handed to you by young men who have just left our house. Mr. Sullivan has boarded with us—have been acquainted for two years or more; he is on a visit to his sister in Boston, then to Ireland to see his Mother before she dies. Mr. [Arthur] McGrath owns a farm near here, has got a fine orchard and everything to make life comfortable excepting a wife which is the object of his pursuit. I have been acquainted with him six years and know him to be a worthy young man. He too is on his way to Scotland to see his people.

Lydia & I have been trying to think of something to send but nothing that is to be thought of but some little tokens to the little folks which will not trouble the young men to take with them. When we go to Portland we will send our pictures to you. I do not suppose you will know us for like every body else we have grown old. We are all well. . . . Yours Truly, S B Plimpton<sup>33</sup>

33. This is the first letter Silas signed his name S. B. Plimpton. He was working again at Oak Point for Abernethy & Clark. In Ortlely's recollections (he was the youngest child of Silas and Lydia) he states that his father sold the Westport place in October 1863 and moved to Oak Point again, where the family remained until they moved back to Westport in 1870 and farmed again. (Copy of recollections at OHS.)



**Above, Plimpton farm on Plympton Creek, Westport, where the family lived, 1870-1890. View to the north, and Columbia slough (with island beyond) is visible through center of photo. The house is behind the two larger barns in the central foreground. Beyond that is the lumber mill and the store. (J. W. Crow photo, Plimpton Family Col.)**



**House (no longer standing) where Plimpton family lived at Oak Point, Washington, 1865-1868. It may have been one made in sections and shipped around the Horn from New England. (1923 photo, Plimpton Family Col.)**

Dear Father & Mother . . . I wanted to send something to the little ones and I cannot think of anything with which they will be more pleased than a gold dollar. I have almost lost the run of the little folks. I will send *ten* and if that is not enough to go around you must let me know and I will make it all right. . . .  
Lydia

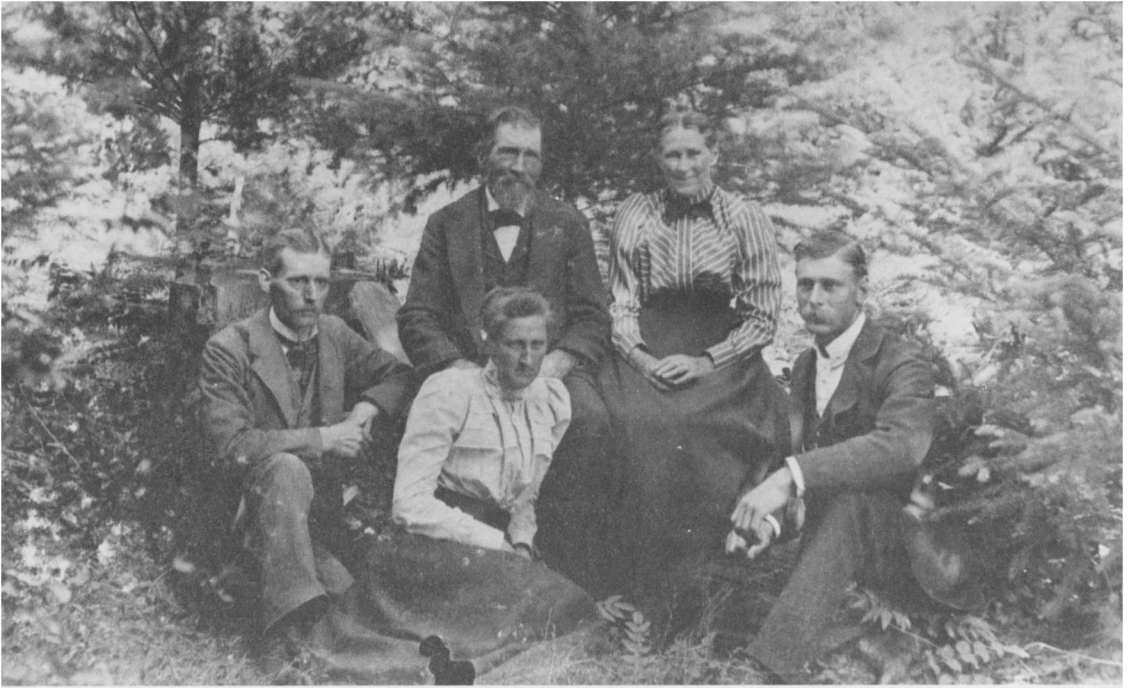
Oak Point July 5 1866

Dear Father & Mother

. . . When I last wrote I had just recovered from a severe rheumatic attack. I continued well through the winter and until the middle of March when I took cold and was confined to my bed with the rheumatic fever and in April I got about again, but in a short time suffered a relaps in which I nearly lost my life. I did not much expect to get over it. I could not move at all in bed and I suffered terribly. Lydia & Willie would turn me from side to side but all to no purpose I ached all over still. I lost about twenty five pounds in flesh. I have been unable to do anything for three months and a half but shall resume my old occupation in a few days. The doctors call it rheumatic gout for it is confined mostly to my feet. As yet I have had no doctor to visit me and was determined if I must die to do so without any of their assistance. I do not believe in haveing doctors try their experiments on me. If I had taken their poison stuff and recovered, my constitution would have been broken down. Now I feel myself again. One great trouble in being sick here is that every body thinks they must do something for you; it is hard to make them believe that their services are not required. The people are kind and generous to a fault.

This country is very wet, it has rained for the last six months & I will venture to say that we have had ten feet of water on the level. I have ever enjoyed good health in Oregon until last fall. I never cared whether it rained or not, but in the future I must be more carefull or else emigrate to some other country. I have been thinking of going to the Sandwich Islands, but I am afraid it will be too warm in that climate for me although Lydia likes the warm weather and when the sky is clear there is no climate like this under the sun. The atmosphere is clear; then we have Mt St Helen looming up 15000 feet like a sugar loaf. It being surrounded with low mountains we can never see below the snow line. It is a refreshing sight in a warm day like this. We are

[285]



Silas and Lydia with their children in 1899 at Willsburg. Front row, from left: William Wright Plimpton, Sarah (Mrs. Hammond J. Winterbotham), and Ortle. (Plimpton Family Col.)

about thirty miles from it but it does not look one half that distance.

The farmers on the Columbia River are suffering from high water. The overflow of the river covers most of the farms for more than a hundred miles consequently their crops are all lost, but all this loss will not affect the price of produce the coming fall one cent. The produce of this country will be greater than ever before known; this season Flour is now selling for four dollars per bbl. and the immense wheat fields are not yet ready for the reaper. The Willamette Valley which is nearly as large as all Massachusetts is a vast field of wheat, and we have but about 70,000 inhabitants to consume it. I don't know what will be done with it.

My brother [William] is still living at Albany Oregon and I suppose settled for life. He has bought into a large cabinet manufactory there. My brother Lowell is in San Francisco and he thinks there is no place on earth like it. His health is better than last season. I may go down on a visit this summer. The fare is only five dollars this season. There are three large Steamers now running between Portland and San Francisco. Lydia is enjoying excellent health as usual, and the children also. The school be-



gins again next week. Willie has not been idle, as I have been obliged to keep the house a large portion of the time I have him get his lessons evry day; he is a large boy now and I would like to keep him at school for a few years. Sarah is growing finely.<sup>34</sup> . . . Give our love to all our brothers & sisters and all inquiring friends. Ever Your Affectionate Children, Silas & Lydia



The letter of July 5, 1866, is the last that we know of. From Oak Point, the family returned to Westport on the Oregon side of the Columbia River about 1870. In 1872 the last of their children was born to Silas and Lydia—a son, Ortley. Silas farmed there and worked at Mr. West's store and mill.

About 1890 the railroad was built between Portland and Astoria, taking a section of the best land of the Westport farm. In February that year the Westport property of nearly 400 acres was sold to Robert McMath, and Silas and Lydia moved to a small farm at Willsburg, near Milwaukie. They lived there for the rest of their lives. For Silas, farming became the best way of life—partly because it was a natural choice, and also because he had begun to lose his hearing early in life and was totally deaf at the end of it. This made it difficult for him to deal with people in business relationships. The real light went out of his life when Lydia died in 1903. They had worked hard during their 50 years together. They were independent and their wants were simple. After Lydia was gone, their son, Ortley, and his family lived on the farm with Silas until his death in 1913. Their home on the property remained in the family until 1966.<sup>35</sup>

I can just barely remember Silas, having been just three and a half when he died. But it gives me a very close feeling about the early history of this state—and about the United States—to realize that I have memories of a great-grandfather who was born just a few months after that Fourth of July, 1826, when both Thomas Jefferson and John Adams died!

Silas and Lydia were a part of the westward migration from New England that contributed to Oregon's sturdy character as the country developed from a wilderness.

34. Sarah Plimpton was born Sept. 13, 1863. She married Hammond J. Winterbotham (born in Maine) in 1885, and died in Portland in 1933.

35. In 1966 the family of Ortley Plimpton gave some of Silas' old farm implements and Lydia's rag rugs to the Oregon Historical Society for the Bybee-Howell house.