

Kimball Webster, Early United States Deputy Surveyor of the Oregon Territory.

By Denny DeMeyer, Surveyor Historian

My particular interest in surveying history is deputy surveyors of the General Land Office (GLO). Kimball Webster is one such individual. He wrote a brief biography of his life between 1849 and 1854 in a book titled "The Gold Seekers of '49". In the book, he describes his adventures in California as a gold miner and then in Oregon, first as axe man, then compass man and finally as a deputy surveyor for the GLO.

While in California, he had met a "Mr. Elder" who was heading to Portland to serve as chief clerk to the surveyor general for Oregon Territory. After spending two winters and one summer (1849 to 1851) in California, he decided to accompany Mr. Elder and left on June 4th 1851 for Portland, Oregon Territory. Arriving in Portland on June 9th he comments "At the time we arrived in Oregon the surveys had been commencing by two parties. The meridian and base lines had to be established and run for greater or lesser distances before any other surveys could be made". Indeed, William Ives (a very experienced deputy surveyor from Michigan and a personal friend of William Burt and the surveyor general for the Oregon Territory, John Preston) had just begun to run the Willamette Meridian north from the initial point on June 3rd, only six days before Webster's arrival.

Mr. Webster soon found work on the survey crew of James Freeman. Besides having the contract to run the Willamette Meridian south to the Kumquat Valley, Mr. Freeman also had contracts for about 11 townships in the Willamette Valley. His crew consisted of men that came out west with surveyor general Preston and included George Hyde, a brother in law to Preston as compass man and Zenas F. Moody as chainman (Mr. Moody would go on to serve four years as governor of Oregon). Webster started as an axe man and "since Mr. Freeman was not an expert mathematician" he began to perform the necessary calculations for the many triangulations required over the rivers and bayous. Progressing from axe man to chainman to compass man he relates many interesting stories.

"KEEPING FOLKS".

The winter of 1851-52 was a rainy one and Freeman decided to dispense with a survey camp and rely instead on the settlers for food and shelter. At the end of a day, wet and hungry, the survey crew were sometimes required to walk two to four miles before reaching a house. When asked if they could stay the night the reply almost invariably would be "We have no accommodations to keep folks." At the next house they probably could "get to stay" as they "kept folks". This would sometimes repeat itself two or three times before they were successful in finding food and lodging. Then they got to walk all the way back to the job to do it all over again the next night! He soon learned that if he took "No" as a final refusal, that they would find very few places to eat and sleep.

"FINDING CAMP".

As a survey crew could run about 3 miles of line a day, their camp had to be moved constantly. Sometimes it was not so easy to find the camp at the end of the day. Webster talks about walking miles through the woods and fallen timber and then into the night, wading through water up to his waist (in January) and then walking some more before finding camp. When Webster received his first GLO contract and became a United States deputy surveyor his trials continued. One time he told his cook to move

camp about 6 miles away. The cook became lost and Kimball and his survey crew went four days before the cook found them. Because of the roughness of the country, sometimes they had to be away from camp from three to four days at a time, each man carrying all provisions necessary on their backs.

“A FAINT CONCEPTION OF THE MANY VICISSITUDES OF THE SURVEYORS EMPLOYED IN MAKING THE SURVEYS UPON THE PUBLIC LANDS ... IN SPARSELY SETTLED REGIONS”

When reading of Kimball’s “vicissitudes” one can not help but marvel at his attitude toward hardship while performing his responsibilities as a deputy surveyor of the General Land Office. He speaks of the times he wakes up “to find myself completely covered with snow two or three inches in depth, with the exception of my face” and spending long rainy nights with a single blanket as his only cover. After working all day from daybreak he tells matter of factly of walking five miles or more over rough (or no) trails looking for food and shelter. During the fall and winter months they “had very much wading to do in crossing streams, sloughs and swamps, quite often having to wade places where the water was not less than three to four feet deep. The water was necessarily cold but after a few days . . . we become accustomed to it. When a pair of new boots were purchased, before they were worn, a slit would be made in each one . . . to give drainage for the water to pass out.” (I wonder what he would of thought of Gore-Tex?)

He tells of single contracts involving surveying between 700 and 800 miles of line. Imagine surveying a line between Seattle and Sacramento; at between \$12 and \$17 per mile; in one contract; 33 feet at a time.

Kimball Webster left Oregon Territory near the end of July, 1854 and returned to his boyhood home in New Hampshire. He died in 1916, aged 87 years.

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