

Cyrus Walker

1827-

Cyrus was a “State of Mainer” – born at Madison in 1827 – and, like many other ambitious young New Englanders of his era, he found his destiny on the Northwest frontier. He arrived on Puget Sound in 1853 and spent the remaining 54 years of his life within sight and sound and smell of tide and timber. Few men have done as much as Cyrus Walker to transform the Pacific Northwest from wilderness to industrial empire.

As a very young man, Walker tried his hand at school teaching and land surveying, but he soon determined that neither vocation held much promise of attaining his ambition to “accumulate a competence of \$50,000 as soon as possible.”

In 1852 he met E.S. Brown, a millwright who had been hired by A.J. Pope and Captain W.C. Talbot to build a sawmill for them on Puget Sound in the Oregon Territory. Brown was on his way to San Francisco and Cyrus Walker decided to accompany him.

When Captain Talbot met Walker in San Francisco, he promptly employed him for twelve months with Puget Mill Company. The name of Cyrus Walker was destined to be associated with the company and its mills for six decades.

In June of 1853, Walker boarded Captain Talbot’s little sailing vessel “Julius Pringle” in San Francisco and, with the rest of the pioneer mill-builders, headed for the last frontier. Less than a month later, the

“Pringle” had safely passed Cape Flattery and was sailing up the Strait of Juan de Fuca past unbroken miles of virgin timber.

The “Pringle” anchored in Discovery Bay, some 70 miles in from the Cape, while Talbot and Walker set out in small boats to explore the Sound and find the best possible location for a steam sawmill. After a thorough search, they agreed upon a sheltered area on the east side of Hood Canal, five miles from its juncture with Puget Sound. It was to be marked on the maps as Port Gamble.

The “Pringle” moved to the mill site and unloaded her cargo of New England supplies. Then Talbot took her to the brand new settlement of Seattle to load a cargo of piling from Henry Yesler’s steam sawmill for San Francisco, while Brown and Walker began building a town and laying a foundation for the Pope and Talbot mill.

The year 1853 was a year of new beginnings for America’s northwest corner. It had become Washington Territory. Yesler’s mill had gone into production at Seattle – the first steam-powered industry in the Territory. Seattle had gotten its first hotel and post office, and the first steamboat came up from San Francisco to connect Seattle with the territorial capital of Olympia. The arrival of Cyrus Walker and the Puget Mill Company ranks with those milestone events in Washington history. Walker himself became involved quickly in the historic beginnings of his adopted

region, as Indian fighter, timberman, shipbuilder and pioneer conservationist.

In 1862, the original partnership of W.C. Talbot & Company became Pope & Talbot. Cyrus Walker, considered by A.J. Pope to be “worth three common men,” having risen from timekeeper to mill superintendent, was offered the job of manager of the Port Gamble mill. Walker, who had always considered his stay on Puget Sound to be “temporary,” was reluctant to accept, until the San Francisco partners offered to sell him a one-tenth interest in the Puget Mill Company. Having seen the mill increase in value in ten years from \$30,000 to ten times that amount, he could see his \$50,000 goal on the near horizon, and accepted the job. By 1870 the company had three large mills in operation on Puget Sound, and Cyrus Walker was running them all.

In the meantime, in 1864, the side-wheel steamer “Cyrus Walker” had arrived at Port Gamble from San Francisco, where she was built from the choicest Douglas fir from the original mill. The “Cyrus Walker” was designed as a mill tug, but she was far more than a tug to the little pioneer settlements on Puget Sound. She carried mail, supplies, news and passengers, and in 1867 she mounted two howitzers and took an Army detachment to Neah Bay to settle an incipient Indian uprising.

The Pope & Talbot timber empire on Puget Sound, under the management of Cyrus Walker, set a unique example for the loggers of the nineteenth century. It has been recorded that Cyrus Walker “bitterly decried the logging practices of the times...only the best trees cut and only the best of each tree used.” Ten feet or so of

butt wood was left as stumpage, and all the tree from the first branches upward was left on the ground to be burned with the slashing and most of the remaining trees. If the slash fire got out of control, nobody worried much. The supply of timber seemed inexhaustible to all but a few far-sighted men like Cyrus Walker.

Walker was one of the first timbermen to insist that the Northwest forests were not inexhaustible, and to take practical steps toward their conservation. His timber cruisers served double duty as fire patrolmen in a time when forest fires were considered a natural result of logging.

Certainly Cyrus Walker embodied much that is good in management. Although he attained his youthful financial goal many times over, becoming one of the region’s wealthiest men, he lived and worked with his men and never lost the common touch. He believed in the virtue of hard work, and never spared himself. Tall, lean and wiry, he was possessed of tremendous energy. After a 12 to 14 hour day at the mill, he spent more long hours on accounts and correspondence.

The men who worked for Cyrus Walker admired and respected him. They knew he expected an honest day’s work from them, but when an emergency occurred, he was always there, “getting his hands dirty too.” He never asked his men to do a dangerous job that he wasn’t willing to undertake himself.

In his dealings with his men – with all men, for that matter – Cyrus Walker was just and kind. In all of his voluminous correspondence of over half a century, not a single unkind word has ever been found. In

an age when industrialists were likely to have union organizers run out of their bailiwicks, Walker listened to them, didn't entirely disagree with them, but respected their opinions and their points of view. One early union man recorded that when he went to Port Gamble, he found that "the old man was real nice about it" – and he added a rare accolade for that day and age in industrial relations -- There never was a better man in the country than Cy Walker."