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SAMUEL GAUTIER FRENCH: 1838 - 1882

By Louis L. Perkins*

HIS portrait (done about 1875) hangs in the assembly room of the present day Ascension Summer School in Cove, Oregon, which stands on the eastern edge of the original 100 acres of land that SAMUEL GAUTIER FRENCH willed in December, 1881, "for an Episcopal Church School for girls." In this painted picture French looks very much like General "Stonewall" Jackson, in civilian dress. It shows him as a man with a long, full, black beard, but with a reddish tinge to the hair on the side of his head. It portrays a man with a striking high forehead, clear set blue eyes, and dressed in a formal coat with a vest over a neat white shirt, with a wide, black, string tie. A close friend of his, writing about fifty years after his death (at 46 in February of 1882) tells us "he was a man of wealth and culture, rather grave and quiet, but otherwise very socially inclined, and an ardent Episcopal Churchman!"

French's face in this portrait gives the air of a man who was more than a typical adventurer in these parts of the old west. Instead, there is the look of benevolent leadership, with a sense of concern for the deeper things of life in the rough environment of those early days. French looks like a man who had something stable and lasting to give to those who might turn to him.

Similar to the untimely death of "Stonewall" Jackson at the battle of Chancellorsville (Va.) in May, 1862, Samuel French also died suddenly in the prime of his life, at 46. French, however, must have been aware of his physical impediments, for less than two months before he died (in East Orange, N. J.), he drew up his will in such a way that his western property at Cove might carry on his deepest interests and larger purposes.

Samuel Gautier French was one among the very first permanent settlers who came to this Grande Ronde Valley, where Cove is located.

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French came here in the summer of 1862, into the eastern edge of this valley to a spot which was first called "Forest Cove." The bronze plaque in his memory in Ascension Episcopal Church, just across the road from his pioneer farm property, tells us that he came here from Baltimore, Md., where he had been born on December 12, 1835.

What brought him West to these parts? Many people said that it was his health. But French had been strong enough to come clear across this country by rail to Omaha, and thence by a rumbling covered wagon for the last 1,000 miles to Cove.

Was it to escape service in the American Civil War, which was then raging in considerable success for the cause of the South during most of 1862? But ill health would have made it impossible for him to serve on either side.

As to a question of sides in that tragic struggle, evidence seems to indicate that French was a southern sympathizer. For two of his immediate business partners in the Mt. Fanny Grist Mill in Cove were young men from Missouri, one of whom brought with him "two aged Negro women slaves." And when the first one-room public school was erected in Cove in 1862 it was called the "Dixie School," in one corner of which Samuel French had his office as the first postmaster to that whole community, for 18 years! Besides, Baltimore, where French was born, was largely considered a southern city in that "border" State of Maryland.

My immediate guess is that French and his Missouri friends and many others were moved to come all these many miles to this beautiful valley because of another reason, that of the news of the discovery of gold in a place called Auburn, Ore., in October 19, 1861, which is about 45 miles south of Cove, in Baker County. For when news of this "strike" reached west to Ft. Vancouver (across the Columbia River from Portland, Ore.) "two thirds of the adult male populace left immediately for the wilds of eastern Oregon."

Why though did French and his pioneer friends come to Cove in the Grande Ronde Valley and not to Auburn in Baker Valley? Because those men who settled here were interested in something more than just the "hit and run" life of the miners. French, in particular, would have found little chance with his impaired health if he had plunged directly into gold mining.

John C. Fremont, a real pioneer explorer, who came through this Grande Ronde Valley in 1843 (on the eastern edge of which Cove is located) says in his diary, "This valley is a place, one of the few I have seen in our journey so far, where a farmer would delight to estab-

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lish himself. Some day all of it will be a rich agricultural country!" In the same overview, when French came here in the summer of 1862, he said to one of his travelling companions, "Here is plenty of water. It is a good land. Let's stay here!" And so they did.

With his wealth from the east, French purchased a virgin tract of 100 acres; stocked it with some cattle; raised vegetables and wheat; and planted an orchard of fruit trees (35 acres of them). On the south side of this land he built a large house (though French was single, and never married), which he made the center of his many interests and an ample place for hospitality for his many friends. As such French "became one of the wealthiest cattlemen and fruit growers and prominent citizens of this part of Oregon."

In partnership with those two friends from Missouri—David Henry and Thomas Bailey—he built a grist mill (1866) to process the wheat and the other grains that his neighbors were raising. French, however, made a specialty of fruit culture. Some other friends of his built a fruit-drying plant nearby. From Cove, then, the dried fruit and the flour and corn meal were sent to the mining camps and the other little pioneer settlements around the valley. In fact, French's raising of fruit (mostly cherries) became famous enough for him to ship samples of them to the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876, where he got a prize and a citation for their "rich taste and flavor."

As an agricultural backup for the gold mining and the stage routes which ran through this country, the settlements in the Grande Ronde Valley proceeded rapidly from an estimated population of 500 in 1860, to an actual census count of 2544 in 1870. As a result, the Oregon State Legislature set apart this area around the Grande Ronde Valley on October 24, 1860, as "Union County," with La Grande (16 miles west across the valley from Cove) as its temporary county seat.

Now if Cove had its southern sympathizers, the rest of the valley and its vicinity had its northern sympathizers—especially in the gold mining camps, who supplied so much critical gold for the cause of the North. All this was just enough to tip the scales in a close voting contest in the fall of 1864 to give this new county the name of "Union County."

But there was something much deeper in Samuel G. French than just a concern for western adventure, or ranching, or fruit farming, or politics, or active community life. It was such as one of his close friends wrote of him in those early times that "French was an ardent Christian, and a sincere Episcopal Churchman from a strong Episcopal family from Baltimore, Maryland."

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But there were no Churches in Cove in those pioneer days and only a few of such people in Cove who "professed and called themselves Christians"—least of all in those "roaring" mining camps nearby. Nevertheless, two years after French settled in Cove, Thomas Fielding Scott, the first Episcopal Bishop to the Pacific Northwest (1853-1867), came east from Portland, Oregon, for the first time in the fall of 1864 and spent several days in La Grande and met this aspiring young Churchman living in Cove nearby.

Bishop Scott, formerly a rector from the deep south (Columbus, Ga.) was elected Bishop for these parts in 1853, and was consecrated on January 8, 1854 in Savannah, Ga. Coming by way of the Isthmus of Panama, Bishop Scott didn't arrive in Portland, Ore., until April 22nd, 1854—"because he had been busy before he left in setting up a committee for the establishment of an Episcopal Church School in Portland."

With all this in hand for his beginning years in Portland, Scott opened an "Episcopal High School" in 1856, and a "Trinity Parish School for boys" in 1858. Besides, even before all this, in December, 1858, at a gathering of various denominational church leaders in Portland, Bishop Scott was elected the first President of the "Oregon Educational Association."

This was the kind of a man, with a deep sense of the Church's mission in terms of education in those days, who met up with Samuel French in La Grande, in August of 1864. Bishop Scott was said to be a man "who held that the prevalent system of public schools is insufficient to the greater work of moral training, without which any course of education can be a fatal delusion."

As regards any "public schools" an early act (1862) of Congress had designated every section 16 and 36 in all federally owned townships of public land (in the year that Oregon entered the Union, 1859, the federal government owned about 96% of the land) to be sold and the income used as a federal subsidy for state public schools. Then the State of Oregon in 1863 allowed every county to levy two mills in property taxes for public education in all designated school districts, on a pro-rated basis. And on top of this every family was required to pay a "rate bill" for each scholar enrolled in these so-called "public schools."

Even so these public schools in those early days only ran for three months! Not until 1908 were they lengthened (throughout the State) to run for six months—and in 1910 were they extended to the present nine months. Besides, this schooling was purely voluntary. There was no com-

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pulsory school law in Oregon until 1889 (seven years after French died)—and then only for those boys and girls between the ages of 8 and 14 years.

On a trip east, via the Isthmus of Panama, Bishop Scott died suddenly on January 3rd, 1867, in New York City. In 1868 the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, meeting in Philadelphia, elected the Rev. Benjamin Wister Morris from New Jersey in Scott's place. Morris, a cleric of 50, was equally concerned with the Church's mission in terms of education. And like Scott fifteen years before him, Benjamin Morris was delayed in getting to his field in Oregon (and Washington) because "he was spending as much time as possible among friends in the east raising money for the development of Episcopal Church schools in Oregon."

Once in Oregon Bishop Morris founded the "Bishop Scott Grammar and Divinity School" in Portland in 1869, and the "St. Helen's Hall" for girls in Portland in 1870 (which recently celebrated its centennial!). But Bishop Morris was too busy to come east of the mountains to La Grande (Oregon), Cove, Baker, and other pioneer towns until the summer of 1872. When he did, Bishop Morris was the house guest of Samuel French in Cove on several of his trips.

On his extended journey Morris brought with him "for the eastern Oregon mission" the Rev. Reuben Nevius, a southerner, recently from Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Morris together with Nevius "sparked" French and his friends in Cove to make the first visible beginnings of the Episcopal Church in those parts.

For on November 19, 1873, Henry MacDaniel, a close friend of French, gave two acres of land (just east of French's 100 acres) on which might be built an Episcopal Church for Cove. But though MacDaniel gave the land, Samuel French gave most of the money and a good deal of the labor, while Reuben Nevius contributed his architectural skill, that this beautiful Ascension Church might be erected. This original church is still standing, almost 100 years later.

The cornerstone of Ascension Church was laid with great ceremony by Bishop Morris himself in July of 1874. The Church was completed in 1876. On July 25, 1877, the formal service of consecration was held (signifying that it was completely paid for) in the course of a great community celebration in Cove.

Besides the church building, the generosity and devotion of Samuel French soon led to the erection of a modest rectory just north of the church; and a personal guarantee of \$500.00 a year for a cleric's living

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in their midst. French made all these generous initiatives, and "personally persuaded his friends in the east to assist him in the building costs."

But as Samuel French once put it in a letter to a friend back east, "We are building the Church, but only as the heart of a religious education center" and beyond this local establishment Samuel French also "gave generously of his estate for the promotion of other educational institutions in the State under the auspices of Bishop Morris."

It was said of French that he first came west "on account of failing health." Whatever his physical impediments were, they seem to have overtaken him critically just four years after Ascension Church was completed. For on December 16, 1881, as French left on his first return trip back east since he had come to Cove in the summer of 1862, he drew up his will and final testament. Two months later, in East Orange, N. J., he died, on February 20, 1882, at the age of 46..

In this testament one can see where French's ultimate interests lay. For beyond immediate family bequests of some property he owned in New York City, French left all his western property in Cove to Bishop Morris in trust for the establishment of an Episcopal School for girls, and for the support of the same; and \$5,000.00 for the endowment of the minister's salary at Ascension Church, Cove, to supervise the school; and a carriage and two of "my best horses for his pastoral work thereabouts."

His property in Cove amounted to 100 acres, 35 acres of which was a flourishing commercial cherry orchard. On this land to the east was a large substantial house (which had been French's home), and several other service buildings.

To some men death is the end of their road. But to others, like Samuel Gautier French, death is really the beginning of those larger things that they had earnestly hoped for on their earthly pilgrimage.

For immediately after the news of French's death and the particulars of his will, many of his friends in Cove raised among themselves "over \$6,000"—quite a tidy sum for a small pioneer community—to help build and begin the Church School that French had so splendidly provided for in his last testament. With all these resources they built two large wings on French's commodious house, to make it into a school to "accommodate 40 boarders, 6 teachers, and class rooms for 75 day and boarding pupils."

Within a year and half after French's death the Ascension Church School for girls formally opened on September 4, 1884, with 4 teachers (recruited mostly from the East), and 40 pupils—20 of whom were

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boarders. A copy of the school prospectus for the year 1887 speaks of "Ascension School, under the Samuel G. French Foundation, giving a broad education, especially in sacred studies, and adequate preparation for university examinations."

Some of the rest of the townspeople of Cove and others in the Grande Ronde Valley were so impressed with what had been accomplished thus far that they banded together the next year to start a parallel Church School for boys, which was labelled Leighton Academy. First they bought about six acres of land from MacDaniel, just east of the land on which the church had been built, and deeded it to Bishop Morris in trust. Besides, they handed over to him some substantial pledges for the erection of such a boys school.

But there was a restrictive clause in that deed and those pledges, which said that this boys church school must be built and operated by Bishop Morris for at least ten years, or else all this land would revert to the original donors!

Unfortunately this Leighton Academy never "got off the ground." A considerable start was made in 1885, using temporary buildings already there on the MacDaniel property. But in less than four years the whole scheme fell apart. In 1889 Leighton Academy closed for good; and the pledges and property reverted to the original givers.

But the French property of the 100 acres in French's will had no reversion clause in its title. It was a perpetual trust. Besides, this Church School for girls flourished and grew for almost a decade. Then a disastrous fire overtook the school on a cold July morning—when someone put too much dry wood on the main hearth fire—and the whole enlarged French building went up in flames. Nothing was saved but a barn or carriage-house which stood some distance apart.

Even so the faith and determination of *some* of the people moved them to press on in spite of this calamity. Using some of the \$2500 insurance money that was soon paid them in respect to the fire they moved that carriage-house nearby over into the center of the French land and made it into a truncated semblance of a school—but mainly for day pupils. This makeshift setup was about as far as those earnest people ever got. Maybe they lacked that "Stonewall" Jackson grit and faith and skill of such a man as Samuel French to bring them through to larger things! For by 1900 even this limited substitute for a Church School for girls on the Samuel French Foundation was abandoned. Thus the land and the endowment and the stop-gap buildings lay fallow and forlorn for 25 years!

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Then came a resurrection of the whole idea, but in a modern form, when Bishop William P. Remington arrived in Eastern Oregon as its third missionary Bishop in the fall of 1922. (He was chosen as such by the General Convention of the Episcopal Church meeting in September, 1922, not too far away in Portland, Oregon.)

Like Bishop Scott and Bishop Morris before him Remington had a keen sense of the Church's mission in terms of Christian education. Going before the Union County Court in 1924 Bishop Remington obtained permission to reconstruct the original idea of Samuel French in terms of a Church *summer* school. Using tents to sleep in, and that old converted carriage-house as a dining place, and Ascension Church itself as a teaching place for classes, the first session of Ascension Summer School began the middle of June in 1924. And thus it has been for 47 summers since!

During Bishop Remington's episcopate (1922-45) temporary dormitories were erected; and a large shed, used by the local Cherry Harvest Festival, was made over into an assembly and recreation hall (now named French Hall). Under Bishop Barton's Episcopate (1946-68) permanent, winterized dormitories were erected; and a large dining room, kitchen and assembly hall (in one composite building called Founders Hall) was constructed. With the coming of Bishop Spofford (January 1969) Ascension Summer School is being further reconstructed into an almost year round conference and ecumenical seminar center.

Today that original portrait of Samuel Gautier French, in the Remington Room of Founders Hall, looks down on this modern, comprehensive school—the educational mission of the Church to the youth (and their elders, too) in *this* generation. Today almost a century has passed since Samuel French, Benjamin Wister Morris, and Reuben Nevius first met in La Grande, Oregon, in the summer of 1872. But today "Stonewall Jackson" French looks down from the wall of the Remington Room in Founders Hall on a comprehensive, modern day development of his original hopes and plans and dreams!