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Astorian Adventure: The Journal of Alfred Seton, 1811-15

Robert F. Jones

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This is the journal of a young New Yorker of good family who signed on as a clerk with John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company, incorporated in 1808, at a time when the Pacific Northwest was still disputed among the United States, Great Britain, Spain, and Russia. The company was to tap the fur resources of the Northwest as well as to establish trade with both Russian Alaska and Canton in China. The difficulties for the Pacific Fur Company, American-owned but largely Canadian-staffed, brought on by the War of 1812, are described, including the forced sale of Astoria and the company's furs and trade goods to the North West Company, a Canadian rival. The young clerk recounts life and manners in the areas where he lived and worked: the Pacific Northwest, Hawaii, Russian Alaska, and Spanish dominions in California and Mexico. He describes the tensions and violence between whites and Indians. His descriptions often reveal that he took a superior attitude toward the French Canadians and Indians with whom he had to deal and, on at least one occasion, he frets that his contact with these rough characters will cause him to lose his gentlemanly ways. By contrast, the beauty and refined manners of young Spanish women in California nearly lead him to "a foolish act" (i.e., to a marriage proposal that would have distressed his parents). In 1947 the notebook was discovered during the renovation of Washington Irving's home in Tarrytown, New York. It is theorized that Seton himself lent the notebook to Irving who used it as a source of his history of the Pacific Fur Company, Astoria, Or Anecdotes of an Enterprise Beyond the Rocky Mountains.

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