

# THE LAST DAYS OF LINN CITY!

By HOWARD MCKINLEY CORNING

IN THE hazy light of late summer, in his great house overlooking the Willamette at Oregon City, John McLoughlin lay dying. He was 73.

In the old age of his stout-hearted career he had founded the town, sprawled half on the rising level and half on the narrow strip of hard earth and rock at the river's margin.

ACROSS the unquiet water stood the posping town of Linn City, founded by Robert Moore. Each town had known the guiding wisdom of a single hand. On September 2, 1857, half up the slope of the fir-clad hill behind Linn City, in the simple dwelling named by him "Robin's Nest," Robert Moore died.

John McLoughlin, ex-factor of the Hudson Bay's company in the Oregon country, died one day after.

Four years later came the "great flood." In New Years day, 1862, dawned cold with a clear, pale sun, a light mantling of snow overlay Oregon City. But Linn City had vanished.

Robert Moore came to Oregon in the fall of 1840, as a member of the Peoria Party. Pleased by the prospect of owning the green flat lying along the west bank of the Willamette river at the falls, he negotiated for its purchase from Chief Wanaxah, of the Clough-we-wallah, or Wallamut Indians.

In this act he differed from the majority of his fellow settlers, who took without payment the land they chose, sometimes finding their lives imperiled for doing so.

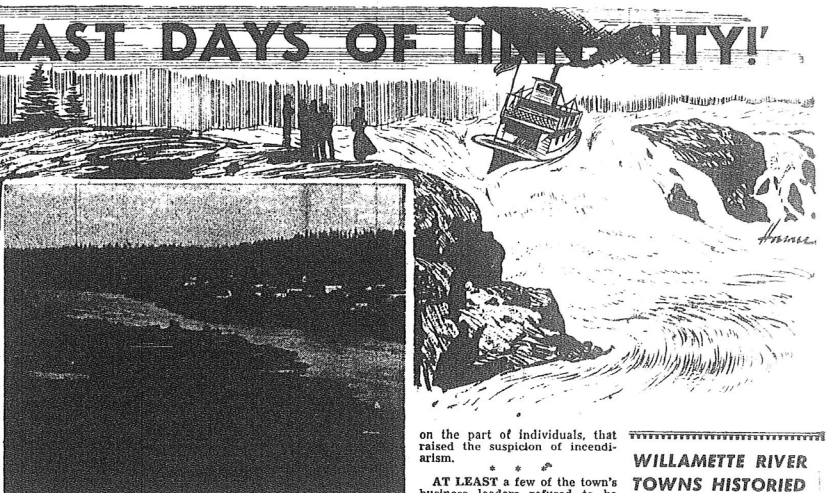
MAJOR MOORE was 59 years old when he came to Oregon. He was a heavy-set man, with rotund stomach, florid face and bald head. He was somewhat irascible, opinionated and domineering, and stubborn enough for others to find it difficult to get along with him.

Notwithstanding, he was honest and on occasion kindly.

The log cabin which Moore built for himself stood on the east slope of the hill overlooking the falls. Partly because of its situation among the trees and partly after his own name, he called his home "Robin's Nest."

Moore's donation land claim extended westward from the water 200 feet, and from the foot of a mile below the falls to one and three fourths miles above the falls. From the northeast corner of this property the owner carried his townsite, in 1843.

ORIGINALLY there were 25 blocks. Of that number, he reserved two; a block facing on the river and one directly behind it. These were omitted in the plat of the town, which was never recorded. All blocks were 320 by 220 feet, with 20-foot alleys running between them. The streets were 60 feet wide and were named by the presidents of the United States, and for local geographical points. The entire townsite occupied between 40 and 60 acres, and extended part way up the tree-topped slope where Moore's dwelling stood.



WHEN THE 1861 FLOOD was at its greatest, the daring Riverboat Captain George W. Taylor rode the small steamer St. Claire from Canemah over the Willamette falls. It was agreed that Captain Taylor, if still alive and his boat dry, should pull the whistle as he entered the lower river. As the triumphant toot-toot echoed over the river, a shout went up from the massed onlookers. Directly above is the Linn City site, Oregon City across river.

A limited immediate sale of lots apparently took place; concerted emigration from the East had begun, and some homeseekers preferred the amenities of settlement commerce to the hardships of land holding.

Major Moore, by an act of the provisional legislature, on December 22, 1845, changed the name of his town from Robin's Nest to Linn City in honor of his friend, Dr. Lewis F. Linn of Missouri.

The Spectator observed on February 19, 1846, that "On the west side of the river immediately opposite the falls . . . at Linn City . . . improvements are going ahead. . . . Linn City contains one tavern, one chair manufactory, one cabinet shop, one gunsmith shop and one wagon shop."

JAMES MARSHALL MOORE, a son of Robert Moore, arrived in Oregon in 1847. He took the claim next above his father's and situated at the mouth of the "Futurity" river. There in 1849 he built a lumber mill and a grist mill.

The Linn City Works, as they soon became known, were built by Major Moore in 1852 and 1853. A grist mill, a sawmill, a warehouse, wharves and a breakwater were constructed below the falls. The breakwater created a basin where river boats could tie in for loading and unloading at the mills and warehouse.

Freight had then to be carried around the falls, where at their head a similar basin was constructed with a protecting breakwater, with wharves extending to the works and mills owned by Major Moore's son. The entire cost of these developments was stated to be nearly \$100,000; and the combined enterprise was named the Willamette Falls Canal, Milling and Transportation company.

IN THE middle '50s, with his dreamed-of city still little more than a place of mills and a transfer point for river traffic, Moore's aggressive spirit flagged.

"Old Mr. Moore," Lieut. Wilkes had called him in 1841. Then with Moore's death in 1857, Linn City seemed to lag in importance.

On the night of Tuesday, April 23, 1861, fire—later said to be of incendiary origin—broke out in the lower warehouse and soon spread to the grist mill.

There William Overholzer, the caretaker, was asleep on an upper floor. Half choked by smoke, he fought his way to a window, from which he lowered himself to the ground by a rope tied to his bedstead. The rope burned off just as he reached firm earth.

ALREADY Linn City's residents were awake and aware of the destruction that threatened. The conflagration was soon out of hand and spreading from the grist mill to the sawmill.

Two river boats, that had come in only that afternoon, were docked in the upper Linn City basin; the steamer James Clinton, which was then supplying the Yamhill river trade, and the Relief, a smaller vessel.

Someone heroically chopped the mooring ropes of the Relief, and it was towed away by row-boats. The James Clinton, however, was larger and less manageable. Frantic efforts to cut it loose were thwarted by flame, which leaped from rail to cabin and swept along the decks. In a few hours it burned to the water's edge and sank. Earlier that day, the James Clinton had unloaded the warehouse about 25 tons of bacon from up-river farmers.

EACH parcel was wrapped in burlap and it was thought for a while that a spark from the chimney of one of the vessels, or from a laborer's pipe or cigar, had set the inflammable material afire, had smoldered and finally broken into flame.

But Linn City's industries had been destroyed. The books and papers of the Oregon Milling & Transportation company had been consumed.

It was the loss of these, the evidence of much indebtedness

on the part of individuals, that raised the suspicion of incendiarism.

AT LEAST a few of the town's business leaders refused to be discouraged. Robert Pentland, by the right of his equity in the Works, laid claim, with James K. Kelly, to the property. If the warehouse and freight handling facilities were restored, Linn City could regain its lost trade; and Pentland announced in the Argus of July 6 that he intended to reconstruct the partly burned warehouse.

As before, the building was largely of timbers, with very little stone. However, more modern apparatus was installed to facilitate the transportation of freight around the falls. There was a hoist of forty feet to the basin above. The entire cost was \$5000. Handling charges for freight around the falls were \$1 a ton.

The fall of 1861 opened with but little precipitation; late in October the customary rains began. During November, however, rain fell almost continuously over Northwestern Oregon.

It was a cold rain and in the still colder mountains a vast amount of snow accumulated. In the closing days of the month the temperature softened, but a humid downpour that melted the snow continued. The Willamette rose at a rapid rate and was soon lapping over its banks for its entire 190-mile length.

AS DARKNESS settled on Monday, December 2, water was rising over the lower Linn City streets. "The ceaseless roar of the stream made a fearful sort of elemental music, widely different from the ordinary monotone of the falls," a spectator reported.

In the early half-light of Tuesday morning, the wooden bridge from Abernethy island on the Oregon City side, where the Island Mills were situated, was carried away.

Strained faces peered through the drenched darkness at the rising river, now more thickly strewn with debris. Log rafts, splintered landings, an ungainly mill collapsed and their wreckage past. On a shaft of oats that turned precariously in the roly waters, a rooster stood and crowed.

The mills, the warehouse, and all of the stores and houses on the rocky flat of Linn City were deep in the mounting flood. All day long, as the people were removed through windows of their houses by boats courageously manœvered and precariously controlled in the driving current.

During that afternoon a large part of the breakwater protecting the Works gave way before the immense pressure of water.

## WILLAMETTE RIVER TOWNS HISTORIED

EDITOR'S NOTE: Howard McKinley Corning recently finished his book, Willamette Landings, a narrative of old Willamette river towns, for the Oregon Historical society, which published the book this month through Binford and Mort.

History research and writing was done as a WPA Oregon Writers' Project enterprise in 1938-41, and due acknowledgment is made to those individuals who participated.

PACIFIC PARADE is presenting on this page excerpts of an interesting chapter taken from Mr. Corning's book.

At intervals, great masses of timbers formed the crib-work broke up and were swept away.

Gradually the flood's force became too great to resist; walls of houses and stores were crushed or were picked up bodily and borne away. With the breakwater gone, the grist mill and the sawmill collapsed and their wreckage was sucked into the current.

Finally, with the gray break of Wednesday morning, the extent of the destruction was fully apparent. At Linn City only two dwellings and the warehouse at the Works remained standing.

The breakwater, above and below the falls, had been carried away at a loss of \$50,000. In the mill, quantities of wheat and flour had been gulped down by the waters. All of the houses of the mechanics were gone. Only the lower and upper mills remained standing.

OREGON CITY had suffered far less, about a third of the lower town being under water. A half dozen buildings, at the most, were demolished. At the flood's height, water coursed down Main street for half a mile and many buildings were temporarily abandoned.

The Clackamas bottoms north of the town, as well as the west shore levels below 1855-54, were under water, with houses deeply submerged or carried away. The Willamette's streaming level stood 35 feet higher than its lowest 12-foot stage reached in summer; it was 12 feet higher than the flood of 1853-54.

The falls were so deeply covered as to seem no more than a turbulent rapids. Only the Indians, when questioned, recalled a greater deluge, many, many months before.