

EARLY LIFE OF NARCISSA PRENTISS 1808–1835

Narcissa Prentiss, who became Mrs. Marcus Whitman, is one of the best-known and most-loved characters in the history of the Pacific Northwest. This is due in part to the fact that we know so much about her. Most of the 126 letters and diaries which she wrote, originals or copies of which have been located, have been published.¹ Since these writings were meant for her loved ones and not for the general public, they reveal for us her inner feelings, her hopes and fears, her joys and sorrows. Narcissa was a keen observer and has left us vivid accounts of her travels and her life at the Waiilatpu mission station in Old Oregon. Finally the fact that she suffered a martyr's death along with her husband at the hands of a small band of Cayuse Indians on November 29, 1847, has given her an added claim to fame.

In addition to Narcissa's writings, we have the reminiscences and writings of others who knew her. Fortunately for all interested in the history of the Oregon Mission of the American Board, the Board kept the correspondence received from its missionaries. These letters, estimated to contain about one million words, are now on deposit in Houghton Library, Harvard University. With but rare exceptions, all of the letters to the Board written from Oregon were by the male members of the Mission. As will be explained later, the wives of the Oregon missionaries

were not permitted to vote in their business meetings, hence it was not to be expected that they would be writing to the Board.

The reminiscences of those who knew Narcissa when she was a young woman at Prattsburg show her to have been vivacious, attractive, gregarious, idealistic, and sentimentally religious.

NARCISSA'S ANCESTRY AND EARLY LIFE

Narcissa was the eldest daughter and the third child of Stephen and Clarissa Prentiss, who settled in Prattsburg, Steuben County, New York, about 1805. Her descent can be traced to Henry Prentice,² who migrated from England and settled at Cambridge, Massachusetts, prior to 1640. The line of descent from Henry through two Solomons and three Stephens is as follows:

Solomon (1646–1719)

Solomon (1673–1758)

Stephen (1719–)

Stephen (1744–1831)

Stephen (1777–1862)

Born at Grafton, Massachusetts, Stephen Prentiss, the father of Narcissa, apparently moved with his family while still a small boy to Walpole, New Hampshire. This Stephen was there when the first and second Federal censuses were taken in 1790 and 1800. In his early twenties, Stephen migrated to Onondaga County in western New York where he married Clarissa Ward on January 3, 1803. Evidence indicates that the second Stephen Prentiss changed the spelling of the family name from Prentice to Prentiss.³ It appears that the change was also made in collateral branches of the family.

About two years after their marriage, Stephen and Clarissa settled in Prattsburg (originally spelled Prattsburgh), a village named after the Pratt family who were the first owners of the land and among the first settlers. Captain Joel Pratt⁴ secured title to the whole township in which the village of Prattsburg is located and, in order to obtain settlers, granted favorable terms to desirable people. The fact that Stephen and Clarissa named their second-born Harvey Pratt is indicative of their respect for the Captain.

Stephen Prentiss and his family were among the earliest settlers

in the whole county. The same primitive conditions existed here as at Rushville, about twenty-five miles by the road to the north. Roads were almost non-existent. There were no schools or churches. People lived in log cabins on small clearings. For a time Stephen farmed on West Hill near Prattsburg, but soon began operating a sawmill and a gristmill on the banks of the little stream which flows through Prattsburg. Stephen was a carpenter and joiner and, no doubt, used lumber from his mill to build houses for the growing community.

According to a local tradition, Stephen erected a house for his family which is still standing in Prattsburg, although not on its original site. The house measures 22 x 32 feet, is a story and a half high, thus providing bedrooms upstairs, with windows at the gable ends. The house was purchased in 1936 by interested Presbyterians when it was in danger of being razed because of its dilapidated condition. It has been restored and is now being maintained as an historic site.

It was in that unpretentious home that Narcissa was born on Monday, March 14, 1808. Narcissa is such an uncommon name that we wonder why it was chosen. Since some girls are named after flowers, as Violet and Rose, perhaps she was given the feminine form of Narcissus, i.e., Narcissa.

She had two older brothers, Stephen Turner, born in 1804, and Harvey Pratt, 1805. Six more children followed Narcissa—Jonas Galusha, 1810; Jane Abigail, 1811; Mary Ann, 1813; Clarissa, 1815; Harriet, 1818; and Edward Warren, 1820. How a family with so many children, ranging in ages from an infant to teen-agers, was able to live in such a small house without such modern conveniences as inside running water and an indoor toilet is hard to imagine. Without doubt, Narcissa, as the eldest of the girls, was obliged to accept many responsibilities in the home as soon as she was able to do so. As can be noted in her correspondence, Narcissa felt especially close to her two younger sisters, Jane and Harriet. Jane never married. Harriet married John Jackson and the couple made their home in Oberlin, Ohio; they became the parents of a daughter who was named Narcissa Whitman.⁵

NARCISSA'S FATHER, STEPHEN PRENTISS

The Rev. Joel Wakeman, to whom reference has already been made, has given us the following description of Narcissa's father in

his reminiscences: "In the early spring of 1832, I became a resident of Prattsburg. I very soon made the acquaintance of Judge Stephen Prentiss, the father of Narcissa, who was then engaged in erecting the Presbyterian parsonage... He was an architect, a master builder, and followed that occupation as he had calls... He was quite tall, finely proportioned, a little inclined to corpulency... He was remarkably reticent for a man of his intelligence and standing... and it was a rare thing for him to indulge in laughter."⁶

Courthouse records at Bath show that Stephen Prentiss bought eleven acres of land in 1810 for \$200.00 and a year later paid \$100.00 for another ten acres, both plots being in the vicinity of Prattsburg. Stephen served at least one term as County Supervisor beginning in 1824 and for a time was Probate Judge, thus meriting the title of Judge. Narcissa was proud of this position and when she addressed letters to her father, she usually included the title: "Hon. Stephen Prentiss."

Drunkenness was not a serious problem on the American frontier in the decades immediately following the Revolutionary War, hence the churches were slow to promote temperance. One of the results of the spiritual awakening which swept the country during the first two decades of the nineteenth century was the founding of a number of such interdenominational organizations as missionary societies, Bible societies, anti-slavery societies, and temperance societies. Until the church began to prick the consciences of its members on the evils of drinking, good church members and even ministers imbibed strong liquor without the disapproval of the community. Hence it was not thought unbecoming for Judge Prentiss to run a distillery along with his mills.

The Rev. Levi Fay Waldo, a descendant of an old Prattsburg family and a relative of the Prentiss family, wrote in his reminiscences: "From my earliest recollection he was always known as Judge Prentiss, having served one term as County or Probate Judge. He carried on his business about one-half mile southeast of the public square, where he had a saw-mill, a gristmill, and a distillery... My uncle, Prentiss Fay, a most excellent Christian man, worked for his uncle in the distillery, where I am told they kept the Bible depository and held mid-week prayer meetings."⁷

In 1825 or 1826 a temperance lecturer spoke in Prattsburg. Judge Prentiss attended the meeting and, according to Wakeman, left in anger "feeling that he had been personally abused and insulted." At a later

date, Prentiss gave up the distillery because he became fearful of the effects of drinking on his sons. "If I remember correctly," wrote Wakeman, "the good old parson [i.e. Hotchkin] embraced the reform at that time, and also the merchant that presented him occasionally with five gallons of rum."⁸

NARCISSA'S MOTHER, CLARISSA PRENTISS

Wakeman, who also knew Narcissa's mother, has given us the following description of her: "Mrs. Clarissa Prentiss, the wife and mother, was quite tall and fleshy and queenly in her deportment. She was intelligent, gifted in conversation, and possessed great weight of Christian character. Her influence was potent in her family and the community. She was remarkably sedate, never excited, always master of the occasion whatever occurred. She also, like unto her husband, seldom laughed. As familiar as I was in the family, I do not remember of ever seeing her laugh."⁹

In church circles of that generation, seriousness of mien was a sign of piety. Undue laughter was considered ungodly, especially on Sunday. This attitude was a part of the Puritan inheritance which both Stephen and Clarissa had received. Narcissa resembled her mother more than she did her father. She too was "queenly in her deportment" and "gifted in conversation," but in one respect she differed from both her parents: Narcissa had a sense of humor. Her large family of adopted children at the Whitman mission in Old Oregon remembered how often she sang and laughed.

THE CHURCH AT PRATTSBURG

Captain Joel Pratt's nephew, Jared Pratt, settled at what became Prattsburg with his family in 1800. The Captain and his family followed a few years later. The Pratts were devout Congregationalists as were most of the pioneer settlers of that community. In order that a church might be established with sufficient financial resources, Captain Pratt required every purchaser of one hundred acres of land to pay fifteen dollars annually to the church. A Congregational Church was organized on June 26, 1804, and like the Congregational Church of Rushville, came under the Congregational-Presbyterian Plan of Union. In 1809 the Rev. James H. Hotchkin, a Congregational minister,

became the church's second pastor. The church thrived under his ministry and had 240 members when he resigned in 1830. Both the pastor and the church joined the local presbytery, although the church, as did the one in Rushville, retained the Congregational form of government. In Narcissa's first letter to the American Board, dated February 23, 1835, she said: "I... united with the Congregational church in that place [i.e., Prattsburg]."

Because of complications arising out of the Plan of Union which had been adopted by the Congregational and Presbyterian Churches in 1801, some ministers and some congregations on the frontier were caught in a period of indecision, not knowing which way to go. The Rev. James H. Hotchkiss, who was pastor of the Prattsburg church when Narcissa Prentiss and Henry Spalding were members, was a New School Presbyterian. The church, however, followed Congregational polity in its local government and did not vote to be fully Presbyterian until 1839. In view of this final decision, this church will hereafter be referred to as being Presbyterian, although in fact it was "Presbygational."

CHURCH LIFE IN PRATTSBURG

A rectangular meeting house, 22 x 32 feet, was erected in Prattsburg in 1807. This was the same size as the Prentiss home, and, no doubt, Stephen Prentiss was the builder. Two years later, about the time that Hotchkiss became pastor, an eighteen-foot addition was built at one end. The church thrived under the ministry of the new pastor. In 1820 the building was enlarged again when the rectangular structure was sawn into two parts, from end to end, through the middle and the two sections separated by eleven feet. The intervening space was then built up anew, thus giving an auditorium 33 x 50 feet. This building satisfied the needs of the congregation for about seven years; then it was razed, and a more spacious structure was erected in 1828.

The reminiscences of two men who remembered the old Prattsburg church are extant. S. W. Pratt wrote: "This church was never, either in its exterior or interior appointments, much of a feast to the lover of fair architectural proportions. Painting never adorned it."¹⁰ Joel Wakeman commented: "The old church with its naked floor, box pews, tall candles, and the old oval pulpit, elevated eight feet above the floor and perched up against the wall like a robin's nest," was the center of

the community. The church had a “circular gallery.”¹¹ Since the church was unheated, the women in wintertime took with them small charcoal burning foot-warmers. The men bore the cold as best they could while the pastor preached wearing a heavy overcoat and mittens.

In that plain unpainted wooden building, lighted in the evenings by tallow candles, the Spirit of God moved the hearts of the people. The members of the church took their religion seriously. Sunday, or Sabbath, observance was one of the main outward signs of their faith. Since Sunday began at sundown on Saturday, the Prattsburg Church on October 11, 1808, voted: “That the members of the church will not attend raisings or other similar associations on Saturday in the afternoon.”¹² The reference to “raisings” was to gatherings of neighbors who met to help one of their number raise logs for a log cabin. These were popular social events on the raw frontier and, if liquor was available, sometimes degenerated into a raucous party. Hence the church forbade raisings on Saturday afternoon for fear that such might violate the decorum which was supposed to be observed with the coming of the Sabbath at sundown.

Narcissa’s mother took the lead in the religious interests of her home. She joined the Prattsburg Church in 1807 but her husband did not do so until 1817.¹³ Waldo recalled the interest the Prentiss family took in music. “Judge Prentiss and all his family were singers,” he wrote. “My earliest recollections of him are as choir leader, setting the tone with an old-fashioned pitch pipe, and now and then giving it a toot between the stanzas to make sure that they were keeping up to the pitch.”

However, the minutes of the church show that judge Prentiss was not always directing the choir for the Sunday services. According to an item dated April 14, 1828, Judge Prentiss was asked to explain why he had absented himself from the Presbyterian Church in order to worship with the Methodists. The record states: “His reasons were: he was best edified in attending with the Methodists, and was not wholly pleased with the administration in this church particularly with respect to discipline.”¹⁴

Possibly the reference to the “discipline” of the Presbyterian Church is to an action taken by the Presbytery of Bath on August 28, 1828, in regard to Freemasonry. The Presbytery, moved no doubt by the strong anti-Masonic agitation of that time in western New York,

declared that Freemasonry was “hostile” to the interests of the Church of Christ,” and called upon all members of churches within its jurisdiction to “abandon the institution.” Although we do not have positive proof that judge Prentiss was a Mason, circumstantial evidence supports the theory. The Methodists were more lenient and permitted their members to belong to the lodge. Therefore, on May 5, 1829, judge Prentiss joined the Methodist Church of Prattsburg and for more than eighteen months the church affiliations of the Prentiss family were divided. Then, according to the records of the Presbyterian Church, the judge on January 19, 1831, confessed his “fault” and was received back into the Presbyterian fold.

NARCISSA AND THE CHURCH

The very first entry in the record of baptisms of the Prattsburg Church is the following: “Lord’s Day, July 17th, 1808, Baptized by Rev. Solomon Allen Willis... Narcissa Prentiss, daughter of Stephen Prentiss.” Since the Prattsburg Church at that time had no resident minister, a Congregational pastor from a nearby town was asked to officiate. Two baby boys were baptized at the same time. Narcissa was then a little over four months old. She grew up under the ministry of the Rev. James H. Hotchkin who has been described as being: “An admirable specimen of the clergy of the olden time... was educated, correct, dignified, genial, orthodox; and when he fell a-preaching or a-praying, kept straight on to the end of his subject, without the slightest regard to the whims of his congregation, or the tokens of passing time.”¹⁵

Writing in his old age, Hotchkin gave the following account of a religious revival which was experienced in the Prattsburg church during the winter of 1818–19, and which reached a climax in February: “The first Sabbath in that month was a day of unusual solemnity. At an appointed weekly meeting, the house of worship was filled to overflowing... Individuals were seen trembling on their seats, and the silent tear trickling down their cheeks... Nothing was heard but the voice of the speaker imparting instructions, addressing exhortation to the assembly, or lifting up the prayer unto God. More than thirty, it is believed, were born again during that eventful week.”¹⁶ Hotchkin tells that all the converts won in this revival were received into the church on the first Sunday of the following June. On that June 6, 1819, “fifty-nine individuals

stood before a great congregation” and made their public confession of faith. People came from neighboring towns for the occasion. Since the attendance was too large for the seating capacity of the church, the meeting was held out-of-doors in a grove of trees, perhaps on the village commons. The weather was perfect. Hotchkinn took for his text, Isaiah 53:11: “He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied.” The text reveals the joy Hotchkinn felt upon that auspicious occasion.

Among the new members welcomed that day was golden-haired Narcissa Prentiss, then eleven years old. Her two older brothers, Stephen and Harvey, were with her. By an interesting coincidence a revival was held about the same time in Plainfield, Massachusetts, where Marcus Whitman also experienced a spiritual awakening. About five years later, when Narcissa was nearly sixteen, she had another religious experience which led her to give herself to the missionary cause. Of this she wrote in her first letter to the American Board: “I frequently desired to go to the heathen but only half-heartedly and it was not till the first Monday of Jan. 1824 that I felt to consecrate myself without reserve to the Missionary work waiting the leadings of Providence concerning me.” This must have been an impressive experience since Narcissa, eleven years later, was able to recall the exact day it had occurred.

Years later, Catherine Sager, one of the orphaned children raised by the Whitmans at their mission station, asked her foster mother what had led her to want to be a missionary. Narcissa replied by saying that she had been deeply moved by reading the life of Harriet Boardman, a pioneer American Board missionary to India.¹⁷ Once while writing to her sister Harriet from her mission station in Old Oregon, Narcissa asked: “What books do you read? Do you comfort Ma by reading to her such books as Dwight’s Theology, Dodridge’s Rise and Progress, Milner’s Church History, etc., as Narcissa used to do in her younger days?” [Letter 81]. The works here mentioned were then required reading by candidates for the ministry. No doubt Narcissa had borrowed the books from her pastor’s library. Any person who dips into such writings today finds them heavy reading. But those were serious-minded days.

Repeatedly in the reminiscences of those who knew Narcissa come references to her singing. Levi Fay Waldo, a Prattsburg boy who became a Congregational minister, wrote: “She seems to have been peculiarly gifted in speech, and especially in prayer and song. I well remember her

clear sweet voice, as a leading soprano, in the old church at home.”¹⁸ And Wakeman wrote: “Her voice was an important factor in the social prayer meeting and missionary concerts that were held monthly in those days.”¹⁹ The word “concert” was then commonly applied to a prayer meeting when people joined in concerted prayer.

Years later in distant Oregon, natives sometimes traveled many miles just to hear Narcissa Whitman sing. In a letter to her mother dated March 30, 1847, she wrote: “While I was at Vancouver, one Indian woman came a great distance with her daughter, as she said, to hear me sing with the children.” The Cayuse Indians at Waiilatpu felt the charm of that same voice, so much so that Narcissa wrote: “I was not aware that singing was a qualification of so much importance to a missionary” [Letter 40].

Wakeman tells of a revival which occurred in Prattsburg in the summer and fall of 1832 during the ministry of the Rev. George R. Rudd, who followed Hotchkin as pastor of the Prattsburg Church in 1830. During the summer months, sunrise prayer meetings were held in which the Prentiss family took an active part. Of Narcissa’s participation, Wakeman wrote: “No one devoted more time in personal efforts to win souls to Christ than Narcissa. There are some still living who can trace their first serious impressions to her charming singing and tender appeals to yield to the overtures of mercy... She had a clear, strong voice, and by cultivation it was under perfect control and as sweet and musical as a chime of bells.”

A good index of the vitality of the Prattsburg Church, which played so important a role in the life of Narcissa Prentiss, is the long list of sons and daughters of the church who entered full-time Christian service. Up to 1876 the church boasted of having sent twenty-six men into the ministry and “not far from a score of ministers’ wives have also gone out from this church.”²⁰ Most of this number belonged to Narcissa’s generation. As will be noted, Henry H. Spalding, who was born in Wheeler, November 26, 1803, spent his boyhood in a foster home near Prattsburg. He was a member of the Prattsburg Church and attended the same academy as did Narcissa. He is numbered among the twenty-six young men who entered the ministry.

With a growing family, Stephen Prentiss found that the house in which his older children, including Narcissa, had been born had

become too small. At some unknown date, he either bought or built “a large two story frame house” located on the west side of the village square. The Prentiss home became the center for many happy gatherings of young people. Narcissa was vivacious and popular. Sometimes her mother would say: “I wish Narcissa would not always have so much company.” Years later when Narcissa found her Oregon home crowded with guests, she felt moved to write: “It is well for me now that I have had so much experience in waiting upon company, and I can do it when necessary without considering it a great task” [Letter 78].

NARCISSA’S EDUCATION

Throughout the centuries the Christian church has been the mother of schools, and this has been especially true of Congregationalism and Presbyterianism. The pioneers of Prattsburg were as much concerned about having proper educational facilities as they were in having a church. As early as 1812 a school was built next to the church. Advanced pupils were taken into the home of the pastor, James H. Hotchkin. As the population of the town increased, a movement was launched in 1823 to raise money through voluntary gifts and taxes to build an academy. Stephen Prentiss was one of the most active promoters of the project and became a member of the first Board of Trustees. The school was called Franklin Academy in honor of Benjamin Franklin. A building 32 x 54 feet, two stories high, “surmounted with a cupola and belfry,” was opened in 1824. It stood next to the church. At first the academy was only for boys but when the building was enlarged in 1827 by adding rooms at either end of the original structure, a “female department” was opened.

The records of Franklin Academy and Collegiate Institute show that Narcissa was a student there for the term ending April 6, 1828, when thirty-four boys and twenty-eight girls were enrolled. The tuition fee was \$6.00 for a term of twenty-one weeks. Another tuition record for the term ending September 28, 1831, lists the names of fifty-four young men, including Henry H. Spalding, and forty-six young women, including Narcissa Prentiss. Thus for at least one term Henry and Narcissa were fellow students. He would have been twenty-eight and she, twenty-three.

NARCISSA REJECTS SPALDING'S PROPOSAL FOR MARRIAGE

In a letter to her father dated October 10, 1840, and written from her mission station at Waiilatpu, Narcissa said: "The man who came with us is one who never ought to have come. My dear husband has suffered more from him in consequence of his wicked jealousy, and his great pique towards me, than can be known in this world." The context of the remark clearly indicates that she was referring to Spalding. Light on the reason for this comment is found in a letter that Narcissa's sister, Harriet, wrote on January 11, 1893, to an Oregon author, Mrs. Eva Emery Dye. Regarding Spalding, Harriet wrote: "He was a student when a young man in Franklin Academy, Prattsburg, the place of our nativity, and he wished to make Narcissa his wife, and her refusal of him caused the wicked feeling he cherished towards them both."²¹ The consequences of Narcissa's rejection of Henry's proposal for marriage were far-reaching, as shall be noted later.

NARCISSA TEACHES SCHOOL

Extant records do not permit us to reconstruct with accuracy the events in Narcissa's life from April 1828, when she completed her work in Franklin Academy, and June 1834 when the Prentiss family moved to Amity in Allegany County which adjoins Steuben County on the west. Waldo stated that Narcissa studied in Mrs. Emma Willard's famous "Female Seminary" at Troy, New York, but did not indicate when nor for how long.²² Mrs. Willard, 1787-1870, had founded her school in 1821; it soon attracted students from all parts of the East. Within fifty years more than 13,000 young women had studied there.²³ The school specialized in the training of teachers; it was what we would now call a normal school. Mrs. Willard, a woman of commanding personality, left a deep impression upon the girls who studied under her direction. She wrote on many subjects, was interested in such reform movements as temperance, and was the author of "Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep."

After completing such training as was available, Narcissa, according to Wakeman, "taught district schools several years with marked success."²⁴ One of her former pupils, O. P. Fay, writing his reminiscences for a Prattsburg newspaper in 1898, stated: "I well remember Marcus Whitman's wife, Narcissa Prentiss; she taught our district school when I was quite a lad, and she seemed to me then as a woman

of rare abilities, with qualifications sufficient to teach in any academy instead of a common school... She had a class in natural philosophy [term then used to designate a science course] and wanted to start one in chemistry also, but that was more than we could venture to try until we had graduated in philosophy. She taught the best school of any teacher in our district.”²⁵ For a time Narcissa taught a kindergarten in Bath, and Marcus, in a letter to Jane Prentiss, refers to Narcissa teaching in Butler²⁶ [Letter 109].

This is all that is known of the background of Narcissa Prentiss who, on February 18, 1836, was married to Dr. Marcus Whitman. From the information available, we see her as an attractive light auburn-haired young woman, well educated for her generation, highly literate in her writings, one who loved to entertain company, an able school teacher, and above all one deeply religious who dreamed of being some day a missionary. If contemporary accounts show her to have been rather sentimental in her religious beliefs and activities, let us remember that this was characteristic of church life of her time. Narcissa’s later letters, written from her lonely mission station in Old Oregon, carry frequent nostalgic references to the “melting seasons” [i.e., when people would weep for their sins] which were characteristic of the revival meetings held in the Prattsburg church.

Although often dreaming of being a missionary, Narcissa had little opportunity to know what such a career entailed, especially among the American Indians. The foreign missionary work of the church was still too new for objective appraisals to have been made. Such books about missionary activities as were available often gave an unrealistic and idealized picture. No doubt Narcissa’s best source of information was the American Board’s official publication, the *Missionary Herald*. An examination of the file of this magazine for the years 1820–36 reveals the fact that very little information was given about work with the American Indians. Thus Narcissa, when she did offer to go as a missionary to the Indians of Old Oregon, was woefully uninformed.

ARE FEMALES WANTED?

Wakeman tells us that the residents of Prattsburg were troubled in the spring of 1834 when they learned that the Prentiss family was to move to Amity. The residence of twenty-eight or more years was to be

terminated. We are not told why judge Prentiss decided to move, but perhaps it was because Amity was a new community where a number of houses were to be erected. Prentiss, as a carpenter, may have been attracted by these business opportunities. Amity, now known as Belmont, lies about forty miles southwest of Prattsburg.

A Presbyterian Church had been organized at Amity on January 30, 1833. For nine years, the small congregation held its services in a log schoolhouse. During the years 1833–35, the Rev. Samuel May served as a part-time pastor. On April 27, 1834, the Prattsburg church granted letters of dismissal to Stephen and Clarissa Prentiss and to their children, Jonas G., Narcissa, Clarissa, Harriet, and Edward, “to join the Presbyterian Church in Amity, N.Y.” In the early spring of 1835, the Rev. Oliver S. Powell, a brother-in-law, became pastor of the Amity church. For a time both the Mays and the Powells seriously considered going to Old Oregon as missionaries.

In the latter part of November 1834, the Rev. Samuel Parker arrived in Amity to make his appeal for missionaries and money for his proposed Oregon mission. If Wheeler had been an unlikely place to find an associate to go with him to Oregon, Amity was even more so. At a meeting held in the log schoolhouse, Parker repeated the message he had given at Wheeler. He told about the long trip “the Wise Men from the West” had made to St. Louis to get the white man’s Bible. He told of his trip to St. Louis during the preceding summer and of his intention to go to the Rockies in the spring of 1835. He explained how the American Board had authorized him to find associates, and no doubt told of his visit to Wheeler where Dr. Whitman had volunteered.

Narcissa Prentiss was present that evening when Parker spoke. His appeal for missionaries found her in as receptive a mood as Marcus Whitman had been. For years she too had considered the possibility of going to some foreign land as a missionary and was, therefore, prepared to respond to the appeal that Parker made. After the meeting, Narcissa asked Parker: “Is there a place for an unmarried female in my Lord’s vineyard?”

Parker was not sure about the designs of Providence, and was doubtful about the readiness of the Board to appoint a single woman as a missionary. The foreign missionary program of all American Protestant denominations was still so new that their mission boards failed to

appreciate the value of unmarried women. Parker was looking for men and was unprepared to find a young woman responding to his appeal. In a letter to the American Board dated December 17, 1834, he asked: "Are females wanted? A Miss Narcissa Prentiss of Amity is very anxious to go to the heathen. Her education is good—piety conspicuous—her influence is good. She will offer herself if needed."

From Amity Parker drove a few miles to the west and repeated his message in the Presbyterian Church of Cuba where another single woman offered to go, a Miss McCoy. On January 1, 1835, Parker again wrote to the Board and explained why he had been cautious in giving either Miss Prentiss or Miss McCoy any hope of an appointment. He wrote: "I think I said nothing about their going among the Indians, or to any particular part of the world, but only that they would offer themselves if their services were needed. I recollect that I told them if they offered themselves, it must be to go anywhere the Board should choose."

Secretary Greene, replying to Parker's letter of December 17, wrote on the 24th: "I don't think we have missions among the Indians where unmarried females are valuable just now." Parker must have been rather discouraging in the advice he gave to the two young women, as Greene, in his letter to Parker of January 7, 1835, stated that neither had made application for an appointment. So the matter rested with Narcissa until Marcus Whitman spent the week-end of February 22 with the Powells at Amity—and then everything was changed.

MARCUS AND NARCISSA BECOME ENGAGED

As has been stated in the preceding chapter, when Whitman received Greene's letter of January 7, 1835, telling him of his appointment as an "Assistant Missionary" to accompany Samuel Parker on his exploring tour to the Rockies, he rode to Ithaca to consult with Parker regarding their plans. While visiting Parker, Whitman learned that Narcissa Prentiss of Amity had also volunteered to go to Oregon as a missionary. According to Samuel J. Parker, Jr., his father at that time suggested to Whitman that he call on Narcissa and propose marriage.²⁷ There seems to be no doubt but that by this time Marcus knew Narcissa. Their common interest in church activities could have brought them together after Whitman's first visit in the Prentiss home in Prattsburg.

Parker's suggestion struck a responsive chord in Whitman's heart

for he had long been thinking about getting married. In his letter of June 3, 1834, to the Board he had written: "I think I should wish to take a wife, if the service of the Board would admit." It is easy to imagine Whitman reasoning that if both he and Narcissa Prentiss were offering their services to the American Board to go as missionaries to the Indians of Oregon, then Providence might be intending that they go as husband and wife.

In all probability Marcus wrote to Narcissa telling her of his appointment and of his intention to start overland for St. Louis on February 9, and that it would not be out of his way to call on her should she welcome the visit. There is some evidence to indicate that Parker also wrote to Narcissa telling her of possible developments. If such suppositions be valid, then there would have been time for Narcissa to have replied. Whatever was the background, this we know—Whitman had made definite plans to visit Amity and call on Narcissa before he left Rushville on January 19.

After his return from Ithaca, Whitman closed out his business affairs at Wheeler and then went to Rushville to say farewell to his mother and other relatives and to await final instructions from Greene. The expected letter, dated February 9, was received on Thursday, the 19th. Whitman left that day for Amity where he arrived sometime on the following Saturday and was received as a guest in the Powell home.

Just why Narcissa was not married when she was approaching her twenty-seventh birthday is not known. By the standards of that generation, she was already considered to be an old maid. From the descriptions given by her contemporaries of her attractiveness and accomplishments, we may safely assume that she had had proposals for marriage but had rejected them, including that of Henry H. Spalding.

We do not have any account of Whitman's visit to Amity or just how or when he asked Narcissa to be his wife. After her marriage in February 1836, Narcissa explained to Mrs. Parker: "We had to make love somewhat abruptly and must do our courtship now we are married."²⁸ Undoubtedly their common desire to be missionaries to the Indians of Oregon was a bond which drew them together. To them, a kindly Providence had brought them together; God had called them to be husband and wife to serve in the same field.

After becoming engaged sometime during that week-end of February 22, Marcus and Narcissa had to make some quick and important deci-

sions. Marcus encouraged Narcissa to make immediate application to the Board for an appointment. The two discussed the question as to when they might be married. Since the Powells had received word of their appointment by the American Board to the Pawnee Mission and were planning to leave that spring for their field, Marcus and Narcissa discussed the possibility of her traveling to the Missouri frontier with them. Then as soon as Marcus returned from his exploring journey to the Rockies, they could be married. Everything, however, was indefinite. For the time being, it was enough to know that they loved each other and that someday they would be married.

NARCISSA PRENTISS APPOINTED BY THE AMERICAN BOARD

On Monday morning, February 23, Marcus mounted his horse and headed for St. Louis. On that same day Narcissa sent the following letter of application to the American Board:

Dear Brethren:

Permit an unworthy sister to address you. Having found favour of the Lord and desiring to live for the conversion of the world, I now offer myself to the American Board to be employed in their service among the heathen, if counted worthy. As it is requested of me to make some statements concerning myself, I shall endeavour to be as brief as possible, knowing the value of your time, especially now under the late *afflictive bereavement*.²⁹

My native place is Prattsburg, Steuben County. I was born March 14, A.D. 1808. In the beginning of the year 1819 a precious revival of religion was witnessed in Prattsburg. I became a subject of the work, united with the Congregational church in that place and remained a member of it fifteen years. My advantages for acquiring an education have been good, having been situated near Franklin Academy—and most of the time when not attending school have been engaged in teaching. My last effort in teaching was an Infant School in which I took great delight. My brothers and sisters, nine in number, with our parents, have all united with the same church. In June last we removed to Amity, Allegheny County, where we now reside.

In relation to my feelings upon the subject of mission, I will say but little. From my conversion I have felt a particular interest for the salvation of the heathen, and an increasing desire for information on the subject and have not neglected to gratify that desire: but from time to time, with peculiar feelings, greeted the arrival of the *Missionary Herald*.³⁰ I frequently desired to go to the heathen but only half-heartedly—and it was not till the first Monday of Jan. 1824 that I felt to consecrate myself without reserve to the Missionary work waiting the leadings of Providence concerning me.

Feeling it more my privilege than duty to labour for the conversion of the heathen, I respectfully submit myself to your direction and subscribe,

Your unworthy sister in the Lord,
Narcissa Prentiss.

This, the first of Narcissa's extant letters, was written in a clear hand on pale green paper. On the back of the letter are three short testimonials. The Rev. Samuel W. May, who signed himself, "Minister of Angelica," wrote: "Having been acquainted for some time with Miss Narcissa Prentiss—I therefore most cheerfully recommend her to your Board as well qualified for usefulness in instructing the heathen in the way to Heaven." The Rev. William Bridgman, pastor of the Cuba Presbyterian Church, wrote: "...from a personal acquaintance with Miss Prentiss, I do consider her well qualified for usefulness in that station." And the Rev. Oliver S. Powell stated: "I fully concur in the above recommendations... I am happy in the prospect of having so efficient a fellow labourer in the missionary service."

Powell then added the following illuminating footnotes: "As it is probable that Miss Prentiss will hereafter become the companion of Doct. Marcus Whitman (should he be established missionary beyond the Rocky Mts.) it may be proper to add that he expressed a desire that she might accompany us on our mission as it will be a field of usefulness & an opportunity for [her] becoming acquainted with the labors of a missionary." In other words, Powell was suggesting that Narcissa also be assigned to the Pawnee Mission until Whitman would be able to return from his exploring tour.

A few weeks after Whitman had left for St. Louis, Mrs. Powell discovered that she was pregnant. Under the circumstances, the Powells felt that for the time being it would not be wise for them to undertake missionary work. Narcissa hastened to inform Marcus of the new developments. On April 30, 1835, Marcus replied writing from Liberty, Missouri: "I had not given up the hope that you would have been able to come on with Mr. Powell until I received your letter. I regret very much that he did not come... Had I known one half as much of the trip as I now do, when I left you, I should have been entirely willing, if not anxious, that you should have accompanied me."

The original copy of this letter is not known to be extant. A copy appeared in Mowry's *Marcus Whitman*. Mowry stated that Narcissa had written on the margin of the letter: "Mr. Parker said I could go just as well as not. N. Prentiss."³¹ This is a puzzling statement. Did Narcissa, at the time she heard Parker speak in her church, then discuss with him the possibility of her going with the Powells to the Pawnees? Or could it be that Parker wrote to Narcissa from Ithaca, after talking with Whitman, and suggested the possibility of the two getting married and for her to go then with Marcus to the Missouri frontier. If so, then it was Marcus who prudently urged a delay. He wanted to see if it were wise to take a wife on such a long journey not only to the Missouri frontier but also across the plains to the Rockies.

Narcissa's letter of application with its several endorsements was sent to Parker, who, on March 5, forwarded it to the Board with a letter of his own. He wrote: "I enclose Miss Narcissa Prentiss' offer of herself to become a missionary. I have for some time been acquainted with Judge Prentiss' family. Their standing as intelligent Christians in public estimation is *good*. Narcissa's education, talents, person, disposition, conciliatory manners, and sound judgment promise well for usefulness in a mission field."

Acting upon Narcissa's letter of application together with the testimonials and the information that she and Marcus Whitman were engaged, the Prudential Committee of the Board approved her appointment on March 18, 1835. In the letter of notification sent to her, nothing was said about her destination. It seemed to have been understood that she was to wait until Marcus had returned.

CHAPTER 5 FOOTNOTES

- 1 See Appendix I for list of letters written by Narcissa Whitman.
- 2 *W.C.Q.*, I (1897):8:27 ff, contains an article on the Prentiss Family by the Rev. Levi Fay Waldo, who was once a resident of Prattsburg.
- 3 C. F. J. Binney, *History and Genealogy of the Prentice or Prentiss Family*, 2nd ed., Boston, 1883, p. 75, claims that Stephen was born at Walpole, N.H. Ross Woodbridge, drew my attention to *Vital Records of Grafton, Massachusetts*, p. 106, which states that this Stephen Prentiss was born at Grafton, Mass. He has also provided information from tombstones found in the old cemetery at Walpole regarding the change of the spelling of the family name. Warren Prentiss, a great-nephew of Narcissa Prentiss Whitman, of Palos Verdes Peninsula, Calif., has also supplied genealogical information about the Prentiss family.
- 4 Joel Pratt had a brother Jared, who was an ancestor of the Mormon Apostles, Orson and Parley P. Pratt.
- 5 Sometime before 1891, Harriet Prentiss Jackson gave a collection of letters written by her sister Narcissa to the Oregon Historical Society in Portland. Most of these were published in the 1891 and 1893 issues of the *Transactions of the Oregon Pioneer Association*. See Appendix I.
- 6 Wakeman ms., Coll. Wn. Copy in *Prattsburg News*, Jan. 20, 1898. See Drury, *Whitman*, p. 72 for picture of the manse built by Prentiss.
- 7 *W.C.Q.*, I(1897) 3:26.
- 8 Wakemanms., Coll. Wn.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 S. W. Pratt, *History of the Presbyterian Church of Prattsburg*, 1876, pp. 5–6.
- 11 Wakeman ms., Coll. Wn.
- 12 James A. Miller, *Presbyterianism in Steuben and Allegany*, Angelica, N.Y., 1897, p. 54.
- 13 From original Prattsburg Presbyterian Church records.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 69.
- 16 J H. Hotchkin published his *A History of the Purchase and Settlement of Western New York, and of the Rise, Progress, and present state of the Presbyterian Church in that Section*, in New York in 1848. The quotation here given is from p. 465.
- 17 See article by Catherine Sager Pringle in Mary Osborn Douthit (ed.) *Souvenir of Western Women*, Portland, 1905. No copy of a life of Harriet Boardman, either in book, pamphlet, or magazine article form, has been located.
- 18 *W.C.Q.*, II (1898):I:38. Waldo was a Congregational minister in Canon City, Cob., at the time he wrote his memories of Narcissa Whitman. He also stated: "She could offer up the finest petition to the Throne of Grace of any person I ever heard in my life."
- 19 Wakeman ms., Coll. Wn. *Prattsburg News*, August 10, 1893.
- 20 *Prattsburg News*, January 27, 1898. Among the members of the church who became a Presbyterian minister was David Maim, who served as pastor of a prominent church in Philadelphia. Later, out in Old Oregon, Narcissa was to give his name to a forlorn lad, half-Spanish and half-Indian, whom the Whitmans took into their home.

- 21 Original letter in Coll. O. While gathering material for my Spalding book, I consulted with Miss Charlotte Howe of Prattsburg, who was well informed on the town's history. She strongly rejected the idea that Spalding was a rejected suitor of Narcissa's and asked for proof. At that time I was unaware of Harriet's letter. Having discovered the letter before my *Marcus Whitman* was published, I made a correction in that book. See p. 84.
- 22 *W.C.Q.*, II (1898):1:39.
- 23 A. W. Fairbanks, *Emma Willard and her Pupils*, New York, 1898, makes no mention of her students before 1843, hence no record of Narcissa Prentiss.
- 24 *Prattsburg News*, January 27, 1898.
- 25 *Ibid.*, January 16, 1898.
- 26 See Drury, *Whitman*, p. 85, for details about Narcissa's "infant school" at Bath.
- 27 Parker ms., Cornell University Library.
- 28 *W.C.Q.*, II (1898):3:13.
- 29 Italics indicate words underlined in the original letter. The reference is to the death of Secretary B. B. Wisner which was mentioned in Greene's letter to Whitman of February 9, 1835, which Marcus showed to Narcissa.
- 30 The Board's official publication, the *Missionary Herald*, included in each of its monthly issues extracts from letters received from its missionaries. During the period of the Oregon Mission, 183–47, lengthy extracts from the Oregon missionaries were published.
- 31 *Op. cit.*, p. 56.