

Mission Strives To Deserve Its Indian Name – Waiilatpu

By Dave Herrera, Superintendent
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When Marcus Whitman came to the Walla Walla Valley he planted, it is said, apple seeds at the site of his newly established mission among the Cayuse Indians. The Cayuse called the area "Waiilatpu," meaning "the place of the rye grass."

Whitman was perhaps the first to plant seeds at Waiilatpu thereby introducing the first non-native plants to the area. Later the Chinese immigrants who worked on the railroad introduced "cheat" grass (*bromus tectorum*) which produces an abundant seed crop and has a shallow root system ideally suited for this semi-arid climate. Farming of course had the most dramatic effect on the native vegetation and the appearance of the landscape. Thus today the rye grass is seldom seen and barely surviving the competition of the exotic weeds and man-made disturbances. The basin wild rye grass (*elymus cinereus*), a tall and beautiful plant with deep roots to tap the subsurface water; once disturbed, finds it extremely difficult to propagate among the hearty annual and perennial weeds. The soil is replete with years of accumulated seeds from the abundant weeds that grew on the mission site grounds.

The mission grounds except for the Whitman gravesite are relatively bare of any historic remnants. During the 50 years of the park's existence, the vegetation in the park was undisturbed and allowed to seek its natural course. Today, we have a sorted collection of some native plants and many non-native plants throughout the 98 acre site. It could remain this way forever. But for several good reasons, the Service has decided to reverse the established trend and attempt to return the native plants to recreate the appearance of the historic period. If we are successful, park visitors and the local populace will praise our agency for giving back this area a glimpse of its history. The park would certainly take on a more historic feeling, inspired by

the striking appearance of the tall native grasses. The few historic objects in the park would be richly enhanced by fields of native plants.

Though our goals are admirable and supported by many, the task ahead is a difficult one. This inhospitable climate, which turned for the worst in 1987 by recording a record drought in the Pacific Northwest – this soil, so formidable and the native plants so susceptible to competition – all decree that failure has a greater chance than success.

The risks are many and well known. Disturbing a 10-15 acre plot by removing all vegetation and replanting native species could result in unsightly barren ground and an ideal weed patch. The only chance of success hinges on sheer effort and luck. The techniques are relatively simple: eradicate all standing vegetation and their seeds through burning, apply herbicides, plow and disk, and manually remove the seedheads. The seedbank in the soil also must be irrigated to sprout seeds so that they can be killed, thus removing this source of competition for the native seeds during the coming growing season.

Finding the native plant seeds can be extremely difficult in some cases. Many of the native plants have no commercial value and are not commonly grown by seed farms. Whitman Mission rejected two deliveries before receiving the correct shipment of native seeds.

Assisting in the task of revegetating the mission grounds are the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) and the County Extension Service (CES). Informing the public and other local agencies can result in discovery of valuable sources of information and assistance. Whitman Mission was fortunate to find a highly educated agronomist at the SCS and an entomologist/plant biologist at the CES to work on our project. It seems everyone in this area is an amateur Whitman historian, and both these agency officials are well read

on the history of the park. Because of this, they are highly motivated and strongly committed to its success. Both have given valuable information and suggestions to the park staff and to Dr. Larry Larson from Oregon State University the CPSU (NPS Cooperative Park Studies Unit) project coordinator.

Successful completion of the project no doubt will be helped by the expert advice of our consultants who will guide our actions, but the day to day effort must be borne by the park staff. Forming a unity of purpose and action with all park employees directly and indirectly involved in the project is crucial.

It is that unity and resolve, once formed, that will deal effectively with adversity and setbacks that inevitably will occur. In our second year of the project, there have been difficult moments and arduous tasks. Our belief in the project, our vision of its value to future visitors, and the aesthetic value it will have for the park has helped to mobilize our team against the odds. This strong staff commitment to the project becomes the source of ingenuity, creativity, perseverance and excellence in our work.

Despite an initial failure, a record year's visitation, a major drought and other minor setbacks and difficulties and in addition to our normal work, the park staff and our technical advisors have planted approximately 30 acres of ground with a mixture of native plant seed.

Only time will tell the outcome. But if we are successful, our success will give hope and valuable information to other parks striving for the same goal. A field of basin wild rye and other native grasses and plants will stir the imagination of our visitors. People of the region will praise our agency for an outstanding achievement and will feel moved to visit the park more.

And above all, this historic place in Washington's Walla Walla Valley can once again be called – Waiilatpu.