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Book Review of, Obed Dickinson's War against Sin in Salem, 1853-1867

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Edward Gray is a Eugene resident whose attention first was directed to Mowich when he noticed its abandoned and decaying buildings while on fishing trips in the area. His curiosity has resulted in this small, self-published history of an Oregon community and some of its residents.

Robert W. Chandler
Bend *Bulletin*

OBED DICKINSON'S WAR AGAINST SIN IN SALEM, 1853–1867, by Egbert S. Oliver. Hapi Press, Portland, Oregon, 1987. Illustrations. xxiv + 200 pp. (softcover).

Obed Dickinson and his wife, Charlotte, arrived in Portland, Oregon, on March 3, 1853. They had been married only months before. Ahead of them lay the formidable assignment of establishing a pioneer Congregational church in the Salem area. In the coming years they were to do battle with the sins of mankind and the circumstances of the frontier.

Sent as a representative of the New England-based American Home Missionary Society for this work, Dickinson faithfully documented his church's progress in quarterly reports to the home office until he relinquished his commission in 1867. Those reports, now held in Tulane University's Amistad Research Center in New Orleans, provide the primary substance of this book. Egbert Oliver, through judicious selection and editorial amplification, has constructed a revealing portrait of pioneer Oregon life in the mid-Willamette Valley based on that record. The book also includes a useful introduction and an epilogue that place the personal thoughts and activities of Pastor Dickinson in a larger sociohistorical context. Interspersed within the collection of reports are commentaries by Oliver that clarify critical issues and controversies from the period.

The period covered (1853–1865) witnessed dramatic local and national developments as America solidified its hold on transcontinental nationhood in the mid-nineteenth century. Pastor Dickinson was both a participant in and chronicler of those events in Oregon life that contributed to that emergence. Oliver has succeeded in capturing both the essence of the man and his period in this short work.

Dickinson's reports on one level provide a peek into the more mundane details of frontier life on the daily scale. He meticulously provided his home office sponsors with the details of costs and conditions encountered in establishing and maintaining his mission. Such detail was welcome nourishment for the hungry curiosity that frontier life inspired in his eastern colleagues. Today it provides invaluable opportunity for those separated from him in time rather than distance to satisfy a similar curiosity. Not surprisingly these details are a revelation of physical and spiritual

trial and testing. Dickinson best captures the kernal of this experience in an admonition from the March 25, 1856, report (p. 61) in which he declared, "Let no one come to Oregon as a missionary to live easy."

Dickinson was neither deterred nor defeated by these struggles. The reports reveal a morally strenuous man of strong views and stern commitments. A contemporary, Rev. George Henry Atkinson of Oregon City, described him as a man who "will never yield a principle so long as God in his providence will sustain him" (p. 76). It was inevitable that Dickinson would be drawn into the social and political controversies of Oregon frontier life. He crossed swords and rubbed elbows with the dominant figures of his day, often carrying the field. He battled Asahel Bush, the powerful Democratic politician and newspaper editor, on temperance and free public school issues. But for Dickinson, as for his country in this era of Civil War and racial strife, the closest brush with disaster arose from what was then called the "negro issue."

As early as 1855 the Congregational Association in Oregon had declared it would oppose slavery "by all peaceful and legal ways." By 1859 they had barred from their pulpits proslavery practitioners or sympathizers. While this antislavery sentiment was pervasive in Congregational church circles, it was around Dickinson's head that the clouds of the Negro controversy settled. In Oregon it was a long step from being antislavery to a willingness to treat individual blacks with respect and equality. Members of Dickinson's church felt his unbending resolve to do so retarded the ability of their congregation to grow in membership and to acquire funds for a new building. They preferred that he focus on less controversial topics. Eventually this issue threatened to destroy both the Salem Congregational Church and Dickinson's own career.

The initial incident in this chain of controversy occurred in 1861. Dickinson had agreed to accept three blacks into his church's membership. All members agreed to the additions, but some wished to avoid "embarrassment" for several new white members who were to join at the same time by holding separate induction ceremonies. Dickinson refused. The blacks were accepted in the same ceremony. Dickinson had also in 1861 spoken out against the practice then current in Salem of requiring blacks to pay the school tax but refusing to allow black children to attend school. He further spoke out against a white mob action in which a black youth had been strung up and physically abused after wrongfully being accused of burglary. His sermons occasionally included references to the equality of the races before God. Although this was orthodox Congregational dogma, it was also a locally sensitive and divisive stance. Dickinson's enemies used his stand on gospel principle to label his congregation the "nigger church."

When Dickinson officiated at a black wedding (involving an ancestor of current black City Commissioner Richard Bogle) in a private home in January 1863, the controversy about the "nigger wedding" reverberated through Oregon social, political, and religious circles like Gideon's own trumpet call. By February a faction within his congregation had passed resolutions recommending to their pastor "that he abstain from these exciting topics, i.e. slavery, etc., in his future labors with the church" (p. 165). Dickinson's response as reported to the home office was "How then brethren could I have done less than this, and do my duty to God?" Dickinson's offer to resign was not accepted at that time, but internal church dynamics and finances remained strained until the conclusion of the Civil War released much of this local race-based tension. By 1867 Dickinson had resigned his pastorate to concentrate on developing his growing seed supply business. He left the Congregational fold altogether in 1877 over the controversy surrounding designation of the Sabbath day—a man motivated by principle to the end.

In general Mr. Oliver handles this complex chain of events skillfully. He provides the reader with the key documents and reports, and supplies additional commentary on the issues and individuals involved. There is one glaring exception, regarding the "nigger wedding." Mr. Oliver appears to have placed this event in January 1862 by his reference to a letter from Asahel Bush to Judge Matthew Deady of that date (p. 147). This wedding actually occurred in January 1863. It is possible that the author's error is typographical rather than substantive, since it does not recur in the narrative.

Beyond the prominence of the "negro issue" in both the career of Obed Dickinson and the society around him in the 1860s, there is much to recommend this book to the modern reader. The magnitude of early Methodist missionary activities in Oregon, because of their large number and attention-grabbing nature (such as the Whitman Massacre), have overshadowed the significant presence of other denominational influences in Oregon pioneer religious life. A strong point of this collection is its presentation of Oregon secular and religious life from another vantage point. For example, Pastor Dickinson had offered a surprisingly harsh pronouncement on the impact of the "land law" (Homestead Act) on religious life in Oregon in his report of October 7, 1856 (p. 69). He considered the homesteading provision one of the greater barriers to the formation of a strong religious community, since it kept the settlers so widely scattered and because it induced many individuals in the professions to abandon their careers in town to secure a free claim in the countryside. Such a position certainly contradicts the traditional reverence shown the homesteading concept in western history treatments.

By its nature (a collection of reports and letters) this book appeals more to the serious reader of Oregon pioneer history than to the casual browser. It is, however, a book with important contemporary connections. Dickinson's dilemma in trying to resolve the interplay of spiritual demands and practical reality is a fresh and current issue. Oliver's work makes a significant contribution to our understanding of a pivotal time in Oregon history from the vantage point of a previously neglected but nonetheless critical figure of that era.

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THE SOUTHERN PACIFIC IN OREGON, by Ed Austin and Tom Dill. Pacific Fast Mail, Edmonds, Washington, 1987. Maps. Illustrations. Appendix. Index. 321 pp. \$47.50 (hardcover).

When the first settlers arrived in the Oregon Country, this was the culmination of their arduous trip across the expanse of the West in wagons drawn by horses or oxen, or of their equally arduous trip around the southern tip of South America in sailing vessels. Almost from the beginning, farsighted people envisioned a railroad that would connect this new country with the established East. It would be some years before the rails would bind the two halves of the country, but a number of serious efforts were made almost from the arrival of the first settlers.

The authors cover the hopes, the failures, and the ultimate successes in bringing railroads to Oregon, from 1846 to the present. Over the years the Southern Pacific has made western Oregon its private preserve. The development of this rail system through construction and acquisition parallels the development of the region. The two go hand in hand, and a history of the railroads is almost a history of the state.

The authors have taken every mile of every branch and explored its history and development. Maps and illustrations cover every aspect of each area. In fact, there is a map to detail each mile of track. This is a work targeted toward the railroad buff, but it also offers the student of history a new and fascinating source. And for those who have made the state their home, it brings a sense of nostalgia. For there was a time not too long ago when the traveler was dependent on the steel rails to take him to his favorite vacation spots or to the wider reaches of the nation.

In addition to the coverage of many miles of main line and spurs, much attention has been paid to urban areas and the impact the railroad has made on their history. The accompanying maps detail miles of switching tracks and all the facilities requisite to rail operation.

Another point of nostalgia for many old-timers is the coverage of the "Red Electrics," the big red interurban cars that once bound the towns of