

Reverend Asa White's Blue tent

Editors' note: This article is an excerpt from a story written by Effa White Roberts and Mattie White Hutchinson, granddaughters of Asa White. The material for this article comes to us through Caroline Weed, curator of the Fortuna Depot Museum, who is the great-grand-niece of Asa White.

by Evelyn McCormick

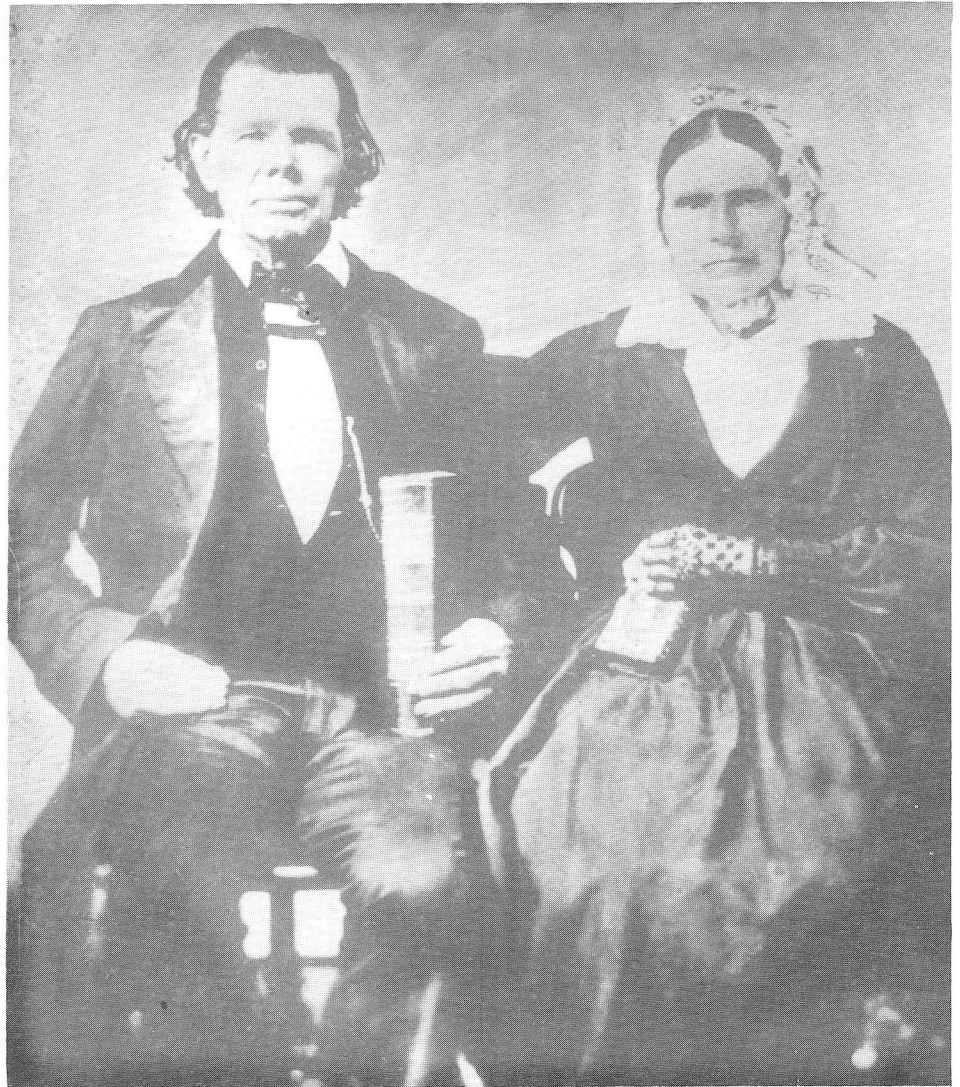
Asa White, who became a Methodist minister, was born in Middleton, Vermont, in 1797. He traveled West over the Oregon Trail in 1847 with his wife, the former Catherine Brown, and several members of his family. There were three unmarried daughters, two young sons, and six married daughters with their husbands and children. Other immigrants asked to join them until there were 120 wagons, the largest wagon train up to that time.

A special tent had been made of blue canvas to shelter the White family on their journey and to furnish housing in Oregon until they could build their own homes. Their abode became widely known as "Father White's blue tent."

The trip was not without incident. Indians occasionally stopped them to inquire their destination, and sometimes an arrow would appear in their midst. Only one of the party was lost—an arrow hit a man at a water hole.

When the train reached Oregon City, the blue tent was set up for shelter as well as for church services. After gold was discovered in California, they sailed south to San Francisco. There the blue tent was set up in the woods on the corner of Jackson and Mason streets, but later moved to Powell. Church meetings were started immediately. Soon they were given this property to build a church. Redwood shingles for the church roof were hauled into San Francisco by Asa White's son Henry, who was earning \$18 a day hauling shingles to the city from the mill. This was the first Methodist Church in California.

In 1850, ill health forced the minister to move north. The family sailed to the very new Humboldt Bay area, settling in Uniontown (now Arcata). Here they erected the blue tent, and Asa preached one of the first Protestant sermons in Northwestern California. Besides stock raising and farming, he took advantage



Reverend Asa White and his wife, Catherine, and their large family sailed into Humboldt Bay in the summer of 1850. Reverend White preached his first sermon on the North Coast on July 3, 1850, southeast of what is now the Arcata plaza. Reverend White established the Arcata Methodist Church, which will commemorate its 140th anniversary this year, and served as its pastor from 1850 until 1853.—*photo courtesy of Arcata United Methodist Church*

of mining opportunities in the surrounding territory with considerable success.

The Humboldt Indian tribes were unfriendly toward the white settlers. Many of their homes and barns were burned and their stock run off or slaughtered. There were exceptions. Settlers such as Asa White treated them well. Reverend White went among the Indians talking to them in their own tongue, preaching the ways and blessings of Christianity. He taught them hymns in their own tongue as well. He showed them how to plant crops and how to cultivate them, thus relieving their monotonous diet of fish, fresh or dried.

Some of the Indians loved him. Many came to trust him and to bring him their troubles and problems, which often in-

involved the white settlers who had cheated or robbed them.

Often the White family was warned by a friendly Indian of coming trouble from either his own tribe or from a neighboring one. No building belonging to Reverend White, his family, or his close friends was ever burned by Indians, nor was their stock run off or killed.

One day there came to Reverend White, chiefs from surrounding tribes, all their differences forgotten in the common tragedy confronting them. The fish supply had dwindled alarmingly. For a people dependent upon this all-important food, they were facing catastrophe. Their gods had not heeded their prayers. They wanted the white father

(continued on page 16)

Blue tent

(continued from page 15)

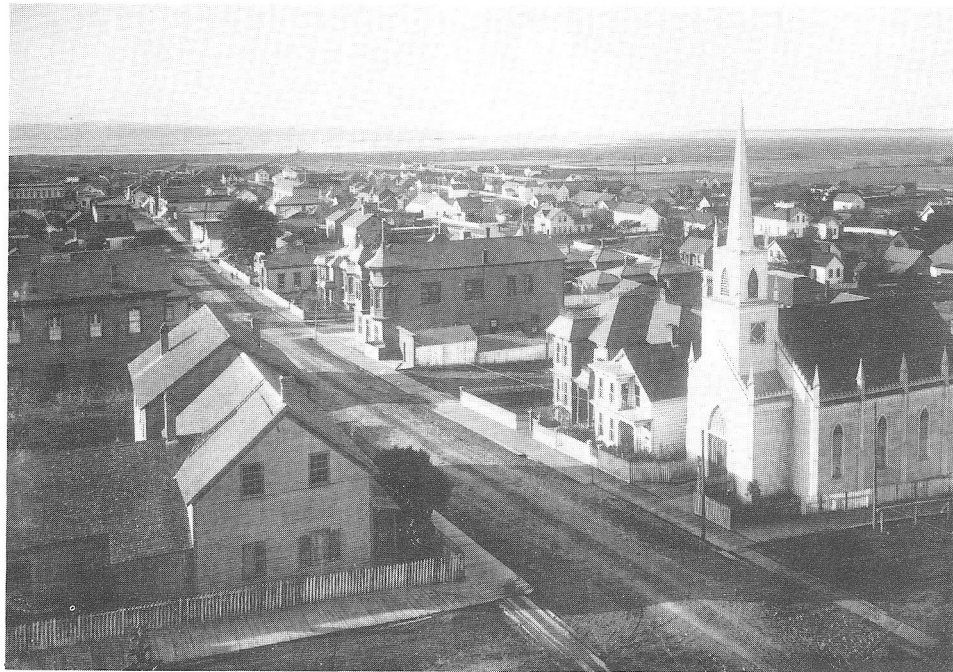
to go down to the water's edge with them and pray to his God to send fish to the Indians. This, the white father did.

On the third day after this prayer time, one of the largest whales the Indians had ever seen, floated into the bay. This great news was rushed to the minister, and to him they gave the honor of dividing the meat up among the several tribes, which heretofore had fought among themselves for their share. With the charred end of a stick, Asa White marked off the portion each tribe was to receive, and all were satisfied.

might lose his eyesight. A drop of camphor was put between the swollen eyelids; and the boy, hands pressing against his throbbing eyes, jumped to his feet and ran away as fast as his long muscular legs could carry him.

However, a day or so later he returned, the eyes still inflamed but the swelling in the lids almost gone. Kneeling before Reverend White, he tipped back his head and said, "Kill 'em again. Kill 'em again." The eyes were cured.

Arcata grew rapidly. Reverend White donated a plot of land upon which to build a church for the congregation he had established. In 1853, the church was completed and dedicated. He also was



The Methodist church community that Reverend Asa White established in 1850 in Arcata thrived with the new city and in 1866 built the Arcata Methodist Church at 12 and H streets that was a landmark for more than a century. The Gothic church was the second of two houses of worship that were built on the plot of land that White had donated.—*photo by A. W. Ericson, courtesy of Peter Palmquist*

Following the miracle of the whale, Asa White became to the Indians almost divine. They began coming to him to cure their illnesses of body as well as of spirit.

One young Indian came to him with inflamed eyes, the lids swollen almost closed. "The burning and pain," he said, "is driving me crazy." He wanted help from the white father. The only remedy the minister had available was camphor. Although certain this would relieve the soreness, Asa White knew well the cost in pain and told his young patient, "This heap kill." But to the boy nothing could be as bad as the pain he was enduring and the added fear he

connected with Dows Prairie near McKinleyville. He was remembered as being in Eureka and several other places throughout this pioneer area.

Again ill health forced him to leave his home. He joined his son Henry in San Jose, then moved to Healdsburg. He preached in settlements in Sonoma County and went as far north as Ukiah in Mendocino County. Schoolhouses and courthouses were used for his classes and services. He also took advantage of several mining opportunities in adjacent counties. He founded churches in St. Helena and Kelseyville. He died in the Napa Valley in 1873 and was buried beneath a pine tree. **HH**