

Has it ever occurred to you to wonder how on earth our valiant forebears made their way across America by covered wagon in the long ago? Just how did they know they were headed in the right direction? And did they always arrive where they expected to, or did they get lost on the way?

The Alexander Story

By MARGARET BELFORD

These wonderments in my mind were cleared up once and for all recently when I had the good fortune to make the acquaintance of Harold Alexander — a Victorian bred and born. Naturally then, Harold had never trekked across America, but from him I learned that his grandfather, Charles, had made that journey together with Harold's grandmother and two small children.

Alexander is a well-known name on Vancouver Island, and a most respected one, too. That respect has lasted since the day somewhere around 1858 when Charles Alexander came with his young family to Victoria.

Many people came to Victoria and the Island, along with Governor Douglas. The difference, however, is that the Alexanders came as escaped negro slaves seeking a new way of life in a new country.

The Saanichton Museum has the family history of Charles Alexander who was born in St. Louis in 1824. Besides his wife and children, when he made that long trek across the plains, it was in company with four friends and a guide. He travelled in a covered wagon with a four-yoke bullock team.

It is easy to imagine the hazards of that long trek which included a brush with Indians, and must also at many times have been fraught with anxieties and doubts.

However, Charles Alexander had several strong helps on this momentous trek. First, he had a great belief in a merciful God; second, he had a compass with which to guide the little group; and third, and quite the most interesting, he carried with him a very small calf-bound book in which were detailed all directions on how to travel across the plains and mountains.

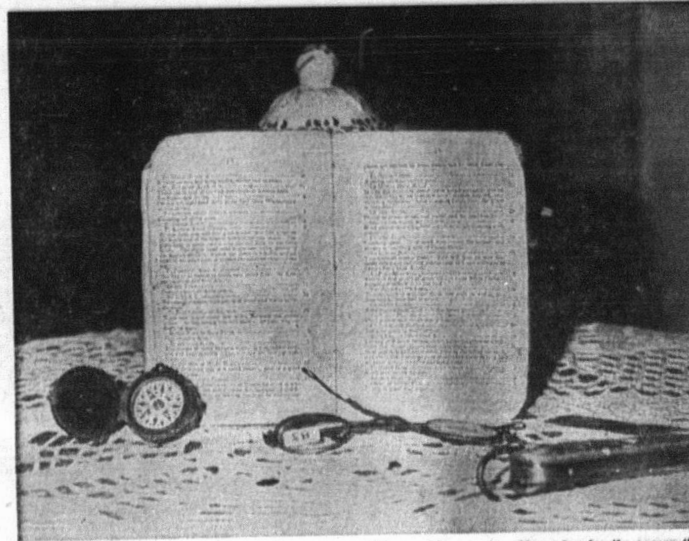
His compass, walking stick, eyeglasses, and the little book are now all treasured in the Saanichton Museum — together with an album of family photos. Incidentally, in that album is also a picture of Abe Lincoln!

The little book, which is of especial interest, ends: "You will reach in that time, the Wallah-wallah river down which you travel till you reach the main Columbus river, which is 624 miles from Fort Hill. This is a point of great interest to all weary travellers, as it ends their journey of toil over the mountains. The remainder of the road is good, and nearly always following the main stream to the settlements."

For such a small volume, this little book packs an enormous amount of information — even noting where the travellers would find good grazing for their animals, and wood for their camp fires.

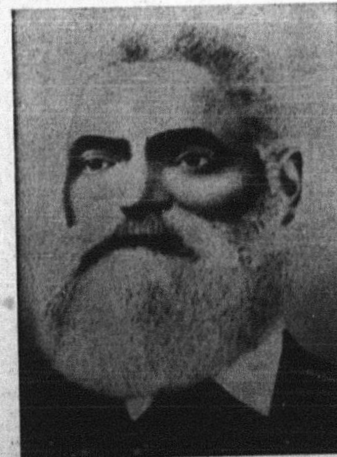
On reaching California, Charles Alexander worked in the gold mines for a time. However, this was not so successful as he had hoped, and when James Douglas sent out his call for new settlers on Salt Spring and Vancouver Islands, the Alexander family were among those who made the voyage up the coast from California in the ship Oregon. On arrival in B.C., Charles again tried his hand at gold seeking — this time on the banks of the Fraser river, and this time, also, with a greater degree of success.

With the money made from his gold panning, Charles returned to Victoria. Using this money



THIS LITTLE BOOK, together with the compass, helped guide Alexander family across the plains and mountains of America.

wisely, he moved out to Saanich the same year and bought a farm near Shady Creek. He and his family continued to farm in the district for the next 33 years, and it was during this time that Charles was one of the chief supporters and promoters of the old Shady Creek Methodist Church. Indeed, he actively worked in the building of it, and was one of its first preachers. The Shady



CHARLES ALEXANDER

... from a photo now in the Saanichton Museum.

Creek Church presently in use is the second of such name. The one which Charles helped to build was on the other side of the road, and all trace of it has now disappeared.

However, I believe it was the same Good Samaritan who gave land for both church and graveyard, and the existing church stands beside the old graveyard in which many of the early pioneers are buried. Among them, on the big family plot, is a plaque to the memory of Charles and his wife, Nancy, along with two of their sons.

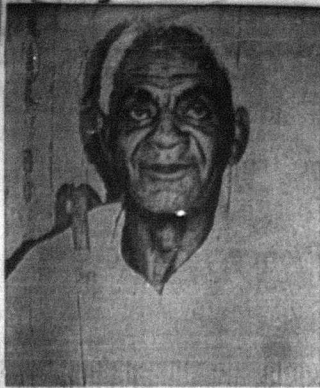
Wandering over that old graveyard in the spring sunshine, one got a strong feeling of the past, and this despite the spring song of the birds and the pheasant's call. Under my feet, the grass was a blazing mass of chionodoxa and violets, both purple and white. A halcyon spot. Quiet with the quiet of age and peace.

Among other good works of the late Charles Alexander was the active help given to the building of the first public school in South Saanich, of which he was also a school trustee for a number of years. He also assisted in the formation of a Temperance Society, and the Saanich Agricultural Society. In later years, he moved to the Swan Lake district, to a house named Rocabella, and there he and his wife celebrated their diamond wedding anniversary — the first negro couple to celebrate their 60th anniversary on the Island.

The Alexanders had a large family, 11 in all, and among them was Frederick, who in turn married, and of his family of one girl and five boys, one of those boys was named Harold. It was this boy — now long since turned man — whom I recently met in Victoria, and from him I learned the family story.

Harold's mother had been a Barnswell, another well-known name hereabouts. The Fred Alexanders lived out on Quadra Street next to a little red schoolhouse by the old pumping station. Harold remembers his childhood as a very happy time and yet a time when the young folk were made to toe the line and do their parent's bidding.

Fred Alexander, Harold's father, first worked



HAROLD ALEXANDER
... remembers past.

for Pooley's, the carpenters. Later, he went to work for Dick Bray when the latter had his livery stables on Johnson Street. Old street directories of the time — 1899 — give the Bray address as 109 Johnson Street. An address which was shared with Dr. Simon Fraser Tolmie, V.S.

Fred was one of the first tally-ho drivers around town. It would appear that Victoria Transfer first thought up the idea of the tally ho, to be closely followed by Dick Bray. Thus, when Bray went into the tally-ho business along with his livery stables, Fred Alexander was one of his regular drivers.

Another person around town who remembers those early tally-ho days is Fred W. Francis, of Francis' jewelry store on Douglas Street. Fred Francis used to be "bugle boy" on Fred Alexander's tally-ho, and well remembers those sunny days when they went spanking around Victoria, drawn by a team of four matched horses. Fred Francis recalls he made up his own tunes for use on the tally-ho, and though only a boy at the time, he greatly enjoyed his work.

But to return to Fred Alexander, not only did he drive the tally-hos, but he also worked as a hack driver a night, and his son, Harold, recalls that the hack stand was on Yates Street, just below Government. The jail at that time was no longer in Bastion Square, but was out on Hillside and Quadra where the S. J. Willis school now stands. It was Fred's unenviable duty, I gather, to meet the boat at night when an execution was scheduled, so that he could drive the executioner to the jail. Harold recalls that, as was the case in England, the hangman was always known as "Mr. Ellis."

Harold has another memory of that jail. After it had burned down, he tells me that he and his friends often used to play around the ruins, and on one occasion he got locked in and his friends either ran away or did not realize his plight. It was eerie up there in the old ruins, and Harold's young mind was anything but easy when he found he could not get out and seemed destined to spend the night there, or for as long a time as it took somebody to discover him. However, help was not too far away, for his father, noting his absence, came looking for him and got him out.

When Harold was a child, he recalls that he and his family used to attend the Metropolitan Church where his mother, Mary Louise, sang in the choir. Other times, they used to go out to the old Shady Creek church for important occasions.

Harold's family like all the Alexanders, were not only deeply religious, they were also quite musical. Harold recalls that of a Sunday, his father would play the fiddle while his mother played the piano, and the whole family would gather around to sing hymns.

The Alexander children were all brought up to take their share in family life and the chores of the home. Each child had a task for which he alone was responsible. For instance, he recalls that his sister used to make the beds and help with the housework, but never was particularly interested in cooking. The other boys in the family did their share working in the garden, cleaning the basement, and chopping and bringing in the wood. Harold, however, thinks he always had a yen for cooking, and under his mother's tuition, he learned how to cook for the family.

This knowledge of cooking stood Harold in good stead, for when he grew up he became cook for the CTR for five years, after which he worked as cook on the American passenger boats. In his working lifetime, he travelled to many parts of



PLAQUE IN MEMORY of the Alexander family in Shady Creek church-yard.

the world, and finally became a master chef with five cooks under him.

It was his duty to do all the ordering and buying of supplies, as well as to make out the menus. From the little boy whose first batch of cookies were so hard that they nearly broke a pole when they were thrown out, Harold Alexander had come a long way!

Looking back now, he recalls some of the favorite dishes he made in his time as chief chef. From him, I learned how he went about making stuffed frog's legs, using only bullfrogs from France.

Much of his work was, of course, delegated to his assistants, but certain items he always handled himself. Among these was the making of consomme soup, which he tells me, reached perfection after continuous slow boiling had rendered the stock a rich deep clear brown. After straining, the soup would be served with small squares of toast decorated with parsley floating on top.

Harold was also responsible for making all the fruit cake used on the ship. Another thing he never let his staff handle was a unique delicacy of his—the cooking of hams in a special sauce of red wine and brown sugar. To hear him describe this

culinary masterpiece is to make one's mouth water!

Although Harold gave up his roving life when his father fell sick with cancer, he never married. Indeed, he tells me that he and his sister were the only members of the family to remain single, and now they are the only two of his immediate family who are still alive.

Nineteen years ago, Harold Alexander suffered a cruel affliction with the loss of his sight. This, to a man, who has always loved nature was a hard blow. "I think," he says, "I would rather by far have lost hearing and speech than my sight. There is so much that is beautiful and now I can only remember it."

As Harold sits and remembers, he also recalls many events of childhood, such as the 10 cents pocket money each of the children got. Half of it used to go on candy, and the other half, he thinks, was usually spent on a visit to the old Bijou on Johnson Street, or the Columbia of the Romans on Government.

Wonderful childhood memories, with a backward look also to that grand old man—Charles Alexander, who steered his small family to safety and freedom well over 100 years ago.