

Mt. Tabor—From Forest to Families

by Grant Nelson

Today, Mt. Tabor is a neighborhood of single family homes clustered around the slopes of Mt. Tabor, a six-hundred foot hill containing the remnants of an extinct volcano. At one time, the Mt. Tabor area included all of the area east of 20th Avenue as far as Russellville (S.E. 102nd & Stark) and between Sullivan's Gulch (Banfield Freeway) and Section Line Road (S.E. Division Street) on the south. When the residents of the area organized themselves into a neighborhood association in 1974, their conception of what constituted Mt. Tabor had shrunk from the nineteenth century conception of the neighborhood. The boundaries of the neighborhood set in 1974 ran from Division Street on the south to East Burnside on the north, and from S.E. 50th Avenue on the west to S.E. 76th Avenue on the east. It is my intention to examine the early stages of development of the area known as Mt. Tabor with an emphasis on the process by which it changed from a wooded, game-filled wilderness to a rural community of farmers and orchardists and eventually to a residential neighborhood. Perhaps the greatest influence on the development of Mt. Tabor has been the proximity of the area to the City of Portland. Mt. Tabor developed rapidly once it was linked with that burgeoning west-side metropolis.

Portland had begun to be settled by 1842 when William Johnson of Captain Couch's brig Maryland staked his claim on the west side of the Willamette River and built a small cabin. Johnson, realizing the benefits of having neighbors, moved to French Prairie near Salem. Next, a man named Overton set up a shingle mill. Within a year, he sold out to Pettygrove and Lovejoy. In 1844, they started Portland by laying

out a town site on the west side of the river. Meanwhile, on the other side of the river, the only habitation was the cabin of a man known as Peria or Poria, probably a Hudson's Bay Company voyageur. In 1845, James B. Stephens purchased Peria's cabin from Dr. John McLoughlin for \$200. He proceeded to lay out the townsite that became known as East Portland. A crude ferry service connected the two germinal towns almost immediately. It provided for light freight and passengers only since a canoe was all that was then available.

Sometime during 1846, an event occurred which was to have a profound effect on the settlement of the east-side. Up until that year, much of the land east of the river was heavily wooded. However, 1846 was the year of the so-called "big burn", a forest fire that began on the slopes of Mt. Scott, south and east of Mt. Tabor. It burned off most of the timber as far north as the wetlands near the Columbia River to the north. The trees were soon replaced with coarse grasses. The area was so thoroughly cleared that the setting up of farms was a simple matter not requiring the time consuming and back-breaking job of clearing.

The Reverend Clinton Kelly was one of the next to settle on the east side of the river though his claim was somewhat southwest of Mt. Tabor, both he and his sons figured in the later history of the area. After purchasing claim rights from an unknown early settler for \$50, paid out of his first year's turnip crop, he settled on his claim, began farming and continued his circuit riding and preaching on the side. Kelly settled in 1848 when game was still plentiful on the east side. One of Kelly's sons is reported to have killed a bear near what is today S.E.

Division and 12th Streets. Kelly's son, Hampton, whose claim was east of his father's, built a house of sawed logs measuring 2'x 9'. Hampton's cabin was probably typical of many of the early dwellings on the east side in terms of both style and materials.

Reverend Kelly's circuit riding duties took him throughout the lower Willamete Valley. His circuit included Portland, Milwaukie, Mt. Tabor, Oregon City, Columbia Slough, Lents, St. Johns, Sandy, Fairview, and Foster. In addition to his Methodist-Episcopal sermons Kelly must have extolled the virtues and advantages of farming across the river from Portland.

Kelly, on one of his circuit rides to Oregon City, might have come into contact with a fellow Methodist who had come to Oregon with his family from Missouri in 1847, Dr. Perry Prettyman. After nearly two years in Oregon City, Prettyman and his family moved to Mt. Tabor and staked out their claim. The Perry Prettyman claim ran from Base Line Road (Stark Street) on the north to Section Line Road (Division Street) on the south, and from 39th Avenue on the west to 60th Avenue on the east.

Dr. Prettyman was 54 years old when he arrived at Mt. Tabor. He and his wife, Elizabeth, had come to Oregon from Newcastle County, Delaware, by way of Missouri. He was a naturopath rather than an M.D. Dr. Prettyman studied medicine at the botanic medical school in Baltimore during the late 1820's and had moved to Missouri in 1839. We have Dr. Prettyman to thank for that nemesis of the green lawn, the dandelion, for it was he who introduced the plant to the Northwest. He brought dandelions here from Missouri for medicinal purposes. Dr. Prettyman practiced his brand of medicine from the back of a horse up until his death in 1872.

Other early arrivals in the Mt.



Reverend Clinton Kelly, early settler of Southeast Portland. Photo courtesy Oregon Historical Society.

Tabor area included David Prettyman who, at nineteen, settled on lands east of his father's claim in 1851 and Samuel Nelson, a physician, who arrived in 1852 and settled to the east of Dr. Prettyman and north of D.D. Prettyman. Newton D. Gilham, who had brought a wagon train to Oregon in 1852, settled on the north slope of Mt. Tabor the following year.

Most of the early settlers in the Mt. Tabor area were Methodists. In 1853, they founded the Mt. Tabor Methodist-Episcopal Church. About this time, Mt. Tabor received its name as well. A likely scenario is that the Methodist families in the area (there were about ten at that time) organized a church and needed to signify its location in the name. Whether in 1853 or a few years earlier, it was the Reverend Clinton Kelly's son,

Plympton, who proposed the name Mt. Tabor. As the story goes, most of the area residents at the naming meeting favored the name Mount Zion, but Plympton, who arrived late, had been reading Joel T. Headley's book, Napoleon and His Marshall, "...and was most impressed among other things, by the battle fought by the French against the Moslems on the Plain of Esdraelon not far from the base of Mount Tabor in Palestine"². His enthusiasm for the name, coupled with the fact that Mt. Tabor has traditionally been held to be the site of Christ's transfiguration, must have impressed the devout Methodist residents of the area sufficiently to convince them that Mt. Tabor was a better name than Mt. Zion. The hill has been known ever since that time as Mt. Tabor.

The Mt. Tabor Methodist-Episcopal Church was built on a spot near the corners of four land claims on land donated for the purpose by N.D. Gilham. The Mt. Tabor Methodist-Episcopal congregation that formed in 1853 is still active today, more than 120 years later.

Other land claimants arrived during the early 1850's including Elijah B. Davidson, Benjamin F. Starr, Joshua Witten, Hilary Casson, and George and Robert Gray. By 1855 all of the lands in the vicinity of Mt. Tabor had been claimed by these early settlers.

The farmers and orchardists of suburban Mt. Tabor in the early 1850's did not commute to downtown Portland. The horseback or wagon ride to one of the crude ferries to Portland was not a journey lightly undertaken and must have involved hours rather than the few minutes required today.

There was a gold rush on in California at this time and there was an insatiable demand for fruit and huge profits to be made supplying it. The first orchardist in the Willamette

Valley was Seth Lewelling. In 1852 he was growing fruit near the present town of Milwaukie, Oregon. The farmers near Mt. Tabor were not far behind. Portland had been linked with Astoria and California by steamer since 1850 and the docks on the Willamette were accessible via the Stark Street Ferry. J.B. Stephens began operating the ferry sometime around 1853. This ferry was not a canoe but a skiff for passengers with a flatboat for teams and wagons. The Tualatin Plains farmers, having been joined to Portland by road in 1849, and the east side farmers, supplied fruit and other produce for the California market. According to Joseph Gaston, apples, prior to 1854, were bringing as high a \$2 per pound, which is high even at today's inflated prices. Maddux, in his book City on the Willamette, relates a story of an early Portlander who absentmindedly ate three peaches while gossiping in a grocery store and upon inquiring as to how much he owed for the peaches was told that they were \$5 each. In 1854, 500 bushels of apples were shipped south and returned a profit of between \$1.50 and \$2 per pound. In 1855, probably spurred on by earlier successes, 6,000 bushels were shipped returning \$20-\$30 per bushel. By 1856, exports of apples alone totalled 20,000 boxes which were selling for nearly \$2 per pound. The picture is fairly clear, Mt. Tabor, which accounted for much of the fruit shipped out of Portland, was a gigantic fruit orchard during the 1850's. In California gold had to be sluiced from rivers and dug out of mines; in Mt. Tabor it grew on trees!

Mt. Tabor had its own school as early as 1852. Urban East Hicks is reported to have taught school there during 1852. Hicks must have been a fairly knowledgeable man for he informed his students that Mt. Tabor had once been a volcano. This assertion was not confirmed for nearly 50 years. However during excavation for gravel with which to pave roads, the remains of a vol-

canic vent were indeed unearthed. Hicks left the area shortly after he had come in order to fight in the Indian Wars in Washington. Later, (1863-64), Plympton Kelly's wife, the former Elizabeth Clark, also taught at Mt. Tabor, "...in a log cabin on Mt. Tabor with but 16 pupils..."

From 1853 to 1860, the number of families in the vicinity of Mt. Tabor more than doubled. Some of the donation land claimants had begun selling off small parcels which provided for a modest population increase. This also provided them with some of the labor needed to tend their large orchards. Of the nineteen heads of households, eleven were engaged in farming, one in backsmithing, one in medicine, one in carpentry, one in mechanics, two were laborers, and one was a clerk. There was a labor force of fourteen farmhands spread out among eight farms and there was a young Methodist-Episcopal clergyman named John T. Wolfe living in the home of Samuel Nelson, one of the local physicians. White, Anglo-Saxon Protestants predominated in the community and the only foreign household head was from England. There were 40 children living in the neighborhood, an average of only 2.5 children per household with children.

Perry Prettyman's farm was the most valuable property in the Mt. Tabor area in 1860. In that year, it was valued at \$3,800 and required the services of three farm laborers. Prettyman was well aware of the prospective worth of his property, and told his sons: "I shall live to see this land worth \$100 an acre; you will live to see it worth more"³. Before his death in 1872, it was worth over \$300 an acre. The original settlers in the area were not quick to sell off parts of their claims but by 1870 there were an estimated 36 households in the area, almost twice as many as in 1860.

At the time of the 1870 census,

farms still accounted for most of the activity in the Mt. Tabor area. Farming occupied 28 of 36 household heads; two were engaged in gardening, two were machinists, one a physician, one a laborer, one a County Assessor, and one a hotel keeper. The non-family labor force consisted of 14 laborers spread among six farms and the hotel. Two of the laborers were Chinese.

Although the majority of the farmers in the area were born in the United States, some who had immigrated to this country began to settle in Mt. Tabor. Six heads of households were English, four were Irish, one was from South Wales, one from Prussia and one from Sweden.

New residents like Richard Price, who came to Mt. Tabor in 1869, did much to shape the rural fruit-growing community into today's residential neighborhood. Price purchased 45 acres on the west side of Prettyman's donation land claim in 1869. Price had been in charge of the farm which supplied produce for the State Insane Asylum which was located in East Portland. Hawthorne Boulevard was then known as Asylum Road and extended only as far as today's 39th Avenue, then a county road along the west edge of Prettyman's claim. Price immediately extended Asylum Road (Hawthorne) to the east and sold off



State Insane Asylum, East Portland, was located near S.E. 12th & Hawthorne.

all but 6½ acres to others. Price continued to farm on his acreage and grew hay and potatoes. He and other subdividing farmers began the process of piecemeal development that characterized much of what was to ultimately become rural Mt. Tabor.

The 1870's must have been a period of steady growth in the Mt. Tabor area. By 1880 the number of households had again more than doubled. In 1880, 408 persons lived in 83 separate households. Farmers still represented a majority of household heads, but those engaged in other occupations now made up nearly 40% of those listed. Included in occupations given were physician, stone-cutter, carpenter, real estate agent (one of the Prettymans), joiner, shoemaker, merchant, dairyman, dealer in boots and shoes, gardener, wheelwright, boarding house operator, teacher, and retired brewer. The population was beginning to diversify and many of the newcomers were engaged in building the homes for future residents. Many more immigrant families had come during the 1870's. Household heads listing their birthplaces in foreign countries now accounted for more than 40% of the family heads. These immigrant families came, almost exclusively from northern European countries with one notable exception, the Chinese.

At the time of the 1870 census there had been but two Chinese laborers residing at Mt. Tabor, but in 1880 there were fifteen. The Chinese on Mt. Tabor were not well assimilated into the community; some of them lived singly at the farms in the area and are listed as cooks and farmhands, but there were also two households of young Chinese men who listed themselves as farmhands and woodcutters. Anti-Chinese feeling in the community increased as their numbers grew. These racist feelings were fanned by the polemics of politicians such as Sylvester Pennoyer who ran for, and in 1886, won, the governorship of the state on an Anti-

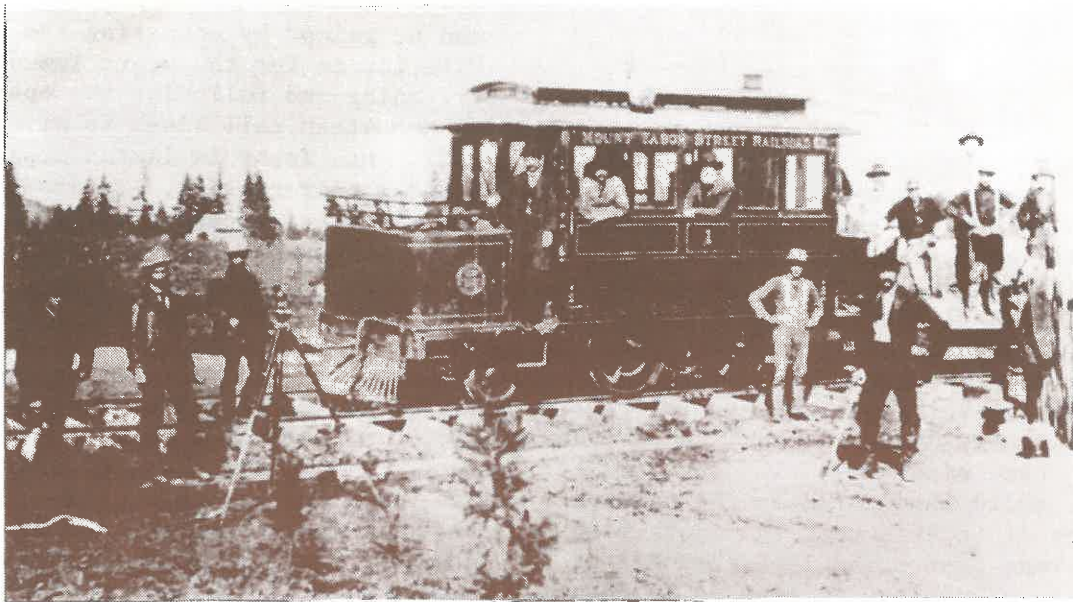
Chinese platform. Many in the Mt. Tabor area must have shared the Governor's racism, for in 1886 a group of Chinese cutting wood on Mt. Tabor were attacked and forced to board a ferry for the west side.

Most of the roads of the 1870's and 1880's ran along the edges of major land claims. These thoroughfares correspond to today's 39th Avenue, 60th Avenue, 82nd Avenue, Stark Street and Division Street.

The major junction of these roads was at what is today S.E. 60th and Stark (then Mt. Tabor Avenue and Base Line Road). This was the point at which the land claims of Perry Prettyman, Elijah Davidson, Newton Gilham, and Samuel Nelson met. It has already been mentioned that the Mt. Tabor Methodist-Episcopal Church was located near this intersection, but during the '70's and '80's a store, a school, a post office, a fire station, and in 1883, another church were all clustered at this important intersection.

Most changes transforming Mt. Tabor into a residential community occurred during the 1880's when Mt. Tabor was linked to the City of Portland. There had been talk of a Willamette bridge since the late 1850's, but most, like farmer William Beck, thought that the Stark Street Ferry was good enough. Beck commented in 1858 that he kind of liked the ferry because it gave him a chance to rest the horses on the way to town.

Ironically, Beck played an active role in the effort to bridge the Willamette, and in 1875 worked with some other east side residents in presenting a construction petition to the county. There was little opposition to the idea, but the County Court held that since the City owned no property on the west side on which to land the bridge, it would have to deny the petition. Beck and other bridge backers shifted



*Steam powered "dummy" designed to avoid frightening horses.
Photo courtesy of The Oregon Historical Society.*

from their original idea of a free public bridge to a private toll bridge. In 1880 work commenced on a bridge by the Garrill Brothers of San Francisco with backing from Beck, Dr. J.C. Hawthorne and C.M. Wiberg. This attempt was opposed by some west siders, riverboat owners, and town lot interests. At the urging of these interests, Judge Deady issued an injunction against the bridge on the basis that it would constitute an obstruction to navigation. Finally, the injunction was dissolved and building began. The Morrison Street Bridge opened in April of 1887 and it was Mt. Taborite William Beck who led the procession across. The bridge was a toll bridge until it was purchased by the City in 1895 for its original cost of \$150,000.

Beck and the other bridge backers didn't stop their development schemes with the opening of a bridge, but went right on to form a company known as the Willamette Bridge Railway Company.

Their idea was to build a steam railway to serve the hinterlands on the east side of the river. On September 21, 1887, only a few months after the bridge opening, ground was broken for the railway. The first trip was made on July 9, 1888, to Sunnyside, a newly subdivided area to the west of Mt. Tabor. The following year, service was extended to Mt. Tabor the first trip taking place in June of 1889. Two weeks later, the Mt. Tabor Railway Company opened a steam powered line out Hawthorne Blvd. to 54th Avenue. The steam powered units which pulled the passenger cars along at a brisk 20 mph clip were known as "dummies". Their designers subtly tried to disguise them as regular, horse-drawn streetcars, so that they would not frighten horses. These units continued to be used until the lines were electrified around the turn of the century.

The business of subdividing now began in earnest. Much of the area

was accessible to persons willing to walk the few blocks to one of the two steam railway lines. Many of the subdivision names are linked with Mt. Tabor must have been names that are associated in the minds of many with the pastoral orchards of the area. Developers capitalized on this association and the name of the area was preserved in Mt. Tabor Villa (later shortened to Montavilla), North Mt. Tabor, East Tabor Villa, Tabor Heights, Tabordale, Tabor-side, Mt. Tabor Place and Mt. Tabor Park. Other subdivisions played on the rural theme with names like Orchard Homes, while some followed the pattern of many of today's housing tracts with names that just sound like they belong to a pleasing place to live as in Edendale, Melrose, Belwood, Crystal Springs, Edgewood, Auburn Park, and Belmont Park. The names of the farmers and orchardists were also perpetuated in names like Rumsey's Addition, Kinzel Park, Brainard's Addition, Christensen's Addition and W.D. Prettyman's Subdivision. Some of the names like Second Electric Addition and Tabasco Addition defy classification. Some idea of the rate of growth in the area during the late 1880's when transportation facilities began serving the neighborhood,

can be gained by comparing the R.L. Polk Directories for the years immediately preceding and following the opening of the steam rail lines to Mt. Tabor in 1889. Mt. Tabor is listed separately in these directories. In 1888 there were 142 residences in the area and by 1890, the number of residences had risen to 201, an increase of about 41% in only two years.

Another bridge to the west side, the Madison Street Bridge, opened in 1891, the year East Portland and Portland consolidated. Yet another bridge, the Burnside, opened in 1894. The three bridges connected the heart of downtown Portland with the Mt. Tabor area and provided early settlers and their descendants with tidy fortunes. Today these bridges provide the neighborhood with traffic that flows through it on the way to other former farm and orchard areas further to the east.

Today, many remnants of old Mt. Tabor exist. Homes dating back to the late nineteenth century, isolated fruit trees in the yards of some residences, and the memories of many long-time residents, remind us of early Mt. Tabor. In 1977, a neighborhood history group



*Mt. Tabor business district, c. 1890, near 60th and Stark Street.
Photo courtesy of The Oregon Historical Society.*



An example of an early home in Mt. Tabor. Photo by Susan Doran, Neighborhood History Project.

was formed to pull together those memories and hopefully these pages will provide part of the introduction to that on-going work.



Notes:*

1. Joseph Gaston, Portland, Its History and Builders, Portland, 1911, vol.II, p.223.
2. Lewis A. McArthur, "Oregon Geographic Names", Oregon Historical Society Quarterly, vol. XXVII, p.359.
3. Portrait and Biographical Record, Portland and Vicinity, Portland, 1903. (See entry on Plympton Kelly).
4. H.K. Hines, An Illustrated History of the State of Oregon, Chicago, 1893, vol.ii, p.966.

* A complete footnoted version of this paper is available at the Neighborhood History Project office.