

Pierce



Ana Maria Spagna

Pierce

Picture him with a notebook, astride a horse, the morning light cloud-streaked and pink above the rolling terrain. It's August 1882, and Lieutenant Henry H. Pierce is set to begin an expedition from Fort Colville, Washington in search of an elusive railroad route across

the not-yet-state, over the mountains and to the sea. He's under orders of Brigadier General Nelson A. Miles, commander of the Department of the Columbia, who is, in turn, under the orders of General William Tecumseh Sherman. His guide is Joe La Fleur, "a half breed ... with shrewdness as a pathfinder and perfect familiarity with all the Indian dialects from Colville to the Sound" who shows "remarkable endurance and cheerful energy." His illustrator is one Alfred Downing. Most of the rest of the names are lost to history.

Not far from where they begin, at Kettle Falls, they halt for a moment "to watch the lusty salmon make their persistent and stupendous leaps" and pass several lodges of Colville Indians drying fish. Soon they cross the Okanogan River, so clear, Pierce notes, that every pebble can be seen, and discover a broad swath of valley that Pierce says would be good for growing wheat, oats, potatoes, rye, and corn. Would be good because, actually, it already is:

In plain view upon the opposite bank are eight comfortable ranches belonging to the Columbia Lake Indians, who raise grain and vegetables in considerable quantities—no less than 4,000 bushels of wheat, said to be the best in the Colville country, having been harvested by them last year.

That night they find an Indian ranch, forty acres or so, and since no one seems to be around, they take the liberty of herding their animals for the night inside an enclosure. This is not pure happenstance. Part of their mission, besides finding the elusive route, is to show federal presence, flaunt it maybe, and to gauge the resistance or acceptance of the Indians. No one balks at them using the pen. Chalk one up for acceptance.

I read this section and reread it, trying to gauge my own resistance or acceptance. This is, after all, why I picked up the report: to search for clues about the Indians who lived in this place, in these mountains, in this very valley—Stehekin, my home for the past 25 or so years—not long before us, but who've been wiped clean from the record of history, a record so recent it starts more or less with Pierce. At the start I had no interest in Pierce himself, another faceless white man, if not quite Captain Cook or Cortez, certainly not someone of interest to me. I would much rather read the journals of Indians, but they don't

exist, or I should say, they don't exist in words on the page. Pictographs in red pigment

on a granite face high above Lake Chelan, directly across from where the passenger ferry docks, show human figures and animals—mountain goats, perhaps, or deer—alongside handprints and tick marks, and archeological sites show, according to carbon-dating, that humans have inhabited the place for at least 8,000 years. Then there's the forest itself, with a long living history that ethno-botanists will someday parse to learn which plants were used when and how. But there are no stories in words, and since words are my currency, I sit in my hard-backed desk chair with Henry H. Pierce.

From the Okanogan, the expedition climbs a series of terraces to a high pass, and Pierce's observations grow more precise, his prose more agile and lively. "Each terrace, free from underbrush, was in itself a charming picture, with its park-like area of scattered pines whose branches spread a grateful coolness athwart the trail, and cast symmetrical shadows over the fresh, bright grass that glowed in the morning sun," he writes, and he follows this with full paragraph on the "peculiar loveliness of the Methow," the valley directly east of Stehekin. If his nature-love feels slightly over-wrought and dated, his reactions to the mountains, especially, seem distinctly familiar:

*Two grand and friendly peaks, one shaped like the point
of an egg, the other like a pyramid—lifted their snow-clad
summits to the clouds.... So grand and sudden was the vision
that I named them the Wonder Mountains on the spot.*

The description is over-the-top, yes, but it's unmistakably earnest, the work, I presume, of a still-young man, naïve and wowed. Not unlike the new arrivals each summer in Stehekin. If I'd had the power to name mountains on the day I first spied the North Cascades, not astride a horse but behind the wheel of a Corolla, racing through fog, when the clouds lifted and a vast snowy jumble intruded on the winter blue, well, I could've done worse than to choose, simply: "Wonder."

But more than majesty rings true. As the expedition moves west, closer to Stehekin, up steep switchbacks, then steeper ones, irritation creeps in. The mosquitoes in particular are crazy-making.

*The startling whirr of the rattlesnake that accompanied
us along the trail had less of terror than the well-known*

hum of this troublesome insect's wings, and a camp comparatively free from the unwelcome sound was ever after hailed with rejoicing.

Yes, yes, that's right, too. I'm chuckling now as I read. I can't count the number of days I've spent clothed neck to toe, head net draped over a ball cap, armored against mosquitoes or black flies. The idea of rugged explorers "rejoicing" over a bug-free camp sounds as true as it is, undeniably, entertaining.

The route gets rougher. Their local guide, Captain Jim of the Chelan tribe, stops to have a few words with another Indian, in their native tongue, about the trail ahead, and in the morning he warns Pierce about conditions and begs him not to be upset if one of the mules were to die that day. Still, they continue up, covering 1500 vertical feet on a trail that grows fainter by the foot with "the last 200 yards, over loose, yielding rocks, ready to slip at the slightest pressure." When at last they reach a high pass and get their first glimpse of the Stehekin Valley, Pierce waxes poetic again:

As I gazed westward from a height of 6850 feet above the sea, a scene of remarkable grandeur was presented. To the south and west were the rugged peaks of the Cascade Mountains covered with everlasting snow. At our feet reposed Chelan, in color like an artificial lake of thick plate glass, while Pierce River brought its clay-tinted waters with many a winding down the narrow canyon that opened to the north. No painter could place the view on canvas and be believed.

There's no mistaking where they stand: Purple Pass. The elevation number gives it away, and the view, too, which splits the space between rolling dry hills to the east and glacier-white peaks to the south and west that stagger along the lake in formation like a chess set reversed: larger peaks in front, getting smaller in the distance, shrinking toward the gold light over the Columbia. I stood there alone at 22 with a frame pack and pup tent, and later as I grew stronger, I returned regularly, climbing steadily, 6,000 feet in seven miles, to stand there again. Once in early summer, I hauled two pairs of skis, Laurie's and mine, since her neck was out of whack, so we could ski by day and camp on snow and wake

at night to coyotes circling the tent, crying like babies. Once on the Fourth of July we

made snow-cooled drinks and sunbathed at sunset atop a nearby ridge. Later we mistakenly loaned our topographic map to firefighters who blushed at the crayon label commemorating the day: "nudie bar is open." But the stories are not the point. Or maybe they are. What I'm saying is that every single time I've stood there I've felt moved, grateful, blessed—you could even say "pierced"—and reading the report I feel it all over again, along with unexpected affection, grudging admiration, and troubled ambivalence.

Because right then, right there, at the scene of "remarkable grandeur" while he stands in humble awe, Henry H. Pierce makes a remarkably un-humble gesture: he names a river after himself. The name won't last. The Pierce River, it turns out, has already been named the Stehekin River. (He's mistaken another tributary for the Stehekin, and the confusion allows him to confer the new name, if briefly.) And there's no reason for me to hold this against him: naming and claiming were the practice of the day; he was leading a federal expedition, after all. He was a white man in the right place at the right time. But I'm bothered anyway.

I'm tired of white man names, tired of white man books and white man bosses. It hasn't always been this way. I was raised to love Kit Carson and the rugged pioneers, to read little kid biographies of Nathan Hale and John Paul Jones, to read Chaucer and Shakespeare, Emerson and Thoreau, Kerouac, Snyder, Stegner, and all the rest, and by default, I grew to be an expert in and admirer of the great canon(s) of white men, who were, after all, the only ones with the license to explore or, for that matter, to write. When I began to write, I wrote like a man, and when I began to work, I worked like a man. I am not upset about any of this, exactly, but I am weary. I'm glad the river is not named Pierce. And I'm eager to read on.

They descend from Purple Pass "knee deep in dust like ashes filled with sharp fragments of rock, and constantly threatened by boulders tumbling from above." I can remember this, too, nearly giddy with recognition: that's right, that's right! The switchbacks drop most steeply at the top, where an old sheep gate once stood, a testament to Basque shepherders who came after Pierce, and where the risk of rolling rocks onto hikers below runs high. In the aftermath of a large wildfire a decade ago, the soil has once again burned to dust-like-ash, ash-like-dust, which fills a boot through the seams, and from the cuff, sometimes with fragments too sharp to be "pebbles." No round word works, but

"fragment" does. One long trail loop takes you twenty miles in a day, up Boulder Creek

and over Purple Pass and down, and in the years when I worked on trail crew, we walked this loop annually, clearing logs, and if there was glory in it, by the time you hit the bottom switchbacks near the lake, any glory has passed, leaving only wincing, sore soles and sweat, a kind of delirious exhaustion, familiar, obviously, to Pierce.

Who, at this point, has it worse than we ever did. The men drop to the mouth of the Pierce/Stehekin only to find “a dense jungle of cottonwoods, willows, firs and underbrush... the matted windfall of ages, an impenetrable barrier against any approach to this head of the lake except by water.” No paved road. No convenience store with ice cream bars in a chest freezer. No cold beer in a cooler on the floorboards, left as a gift, a reward, by friends. No chainsaws, even, to clear “the matted windfall of ages.” Still, the prose remains lively. There’s a hint of Indiana Jones to it, even as irritation gives way to annoyance. Anyone who has tried to bushwhack through the “green hell” of the North Cascades knows how they must feel. “The matted windfall of ages”? How does he come up with this stuff, so spot-on, so original, while trail-beat at night in a tent in the brush? By now, I’m convinced there must be more to the story. I dig for clues, but there’s no biography with the report. A few historical articles reference the expedition, but not Pierce’s backstory. One claims outright there’s little known about him. I dig search engine deep to no avail. His name is not unique enough; so many other Henry Pierces. At last one lone obituary appears—from the *New York Times* no less—housed, oddly enough, among his wife’s papers.

Turns out, in 1882, the summer of the expedition, Henry H. Pierce is not young at all. He’s 48, and he’s a civil war veteran—not unscarred, though the scars don’t yet show. He joined the army as a private and worked his way to captain and before that—here comes the clincher—he was “known for translations of the Classics (Virgil, Homer, Horace.)”

Ah, so. The report is no fluke. The guy is a scholar, a linguist, who’s lived a life steeped in language. Now I hear it: the rhythms of Latin under the surface, the vocabulary, the agility, the precision. At a school where I’ve been teaching, a translation course is required. Students who know nothing of the original languages move bland context-free definitions around like puzzle pieces to try to make meaning and music. Lately, I’ve been attending their post-course readings, mesmerized. Several students read translations of the same piece, and if some are dry and clunky, some are downright startling. I weep every

time. Why? It’s not singular genius that gets to me. I don’t even think it’s the mystery of

language. There's something more. Usually a student or audience member fluent in (or able to stumble through) the original reads the poem aloud in Hebrew or Portuguese, Japanese or Swedish, then the students stand behind a podium to read their translations, and by the time two or three of them have hit the last line with varying emphases and wildly varied meanings, I'm floored. They're getting close, some closer than others, but they've got the same goal: to peel back words and expose the bare heart. Maybe that's why I begin to feel connected to Pierce. Not what he accomplished, not the clever turn of phrase, but the palpable desire to get it right. I've tried too, and gotten it wrong often enough. Now here he is, a voice from way-back, with an unmistakable flair.

Which isn't to say I'm letting him off the hook.

He's still under orders of Nelson A. Miles—the man responsible for avenging Custer's death, herding Lakota onto reservations, and chasing Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce to surrender in Canada—and William "Scorched Earth" Sherman who advocated and implemented total war against the Indians of the West. How do we reconcile that? Pierce himself acknowledges the sheer necessity of Indian guides, not just La Fluer, but local guides with local knowledge at every step of the way, and when he describes his encounters with Indians he has the air of a benevolent slave owner or an Atticus Finch, a fair man and a gentleman. Of the ranchers in the Okanogan, for example, he says, "The tribe under Edward, their chief, are friendly and disposed to be sober and industrious." When he has a chance meeting with the well-known chief Lap-a-Loop, whose arm is in a sling from a rattlesnake bite suffered while reaping oats, Pierce is clearly impressed at the chief's toughness, how casually he shrugs it off, and he uses the opportunity to discuss philosophy with the man.

*I had a long talk with Lap-a-loop concerning his plans
and hopes for life, and he expressed himself as well
pleased to till the ground in peace; indeed, evinced
an intense desire to be in all regards like his white brother,
and no longer like a "coyote."*

It's easy to judge the gross condescension, but he's obviously not Custer, not Andrew Jackson. Judged by the standards of his time and his position, he's more than generous.

Maybe, I think, it wouldn't be so bad to live beside a river named for him after all.

Naming has been in the news here for months. The focus is an unglamorous lake, low elevation, nearly swampy by these cold-mountain standards, a mile from the road, tucked in trees, and covered with lily pads. It's called Coon. In any other place, the origin of that name would be obvious: raccoons. Except that we have none. Or few. Some people say there used to be more. Some claim "coon" was a verb, as in people might say they'd "cooned" across a log, walking like a raccoon. Some say an early prospector had a brother named "Coon," who may or may not be the same Charles Edward Coon who served as Lieutenant Governor of Washington State from 1905-1909 and later as Assistant Secretary to U.S. Treasury. But, as of 2016, in response to hard lobbying by activists with family ties to the valley, the State of Washington decided once and for all that the name referred to Wilson Howard, a black prospector, and was therefore a racist slur.

So now the lake's name is Howard.

Coon. The word itself—the "oo" as in "hoot" or "loon" or "gloom," not "noon," nothing that bright—conjures memories: shivering in the rain watching ducks cavort on the mossy log that nearly bisects the shallow end like a trail, the water lilies in bloom, sitting in snow by the shore with hot tea in a thermos cup, too scared to venture out on the frozen surface, watching flakes melt into a blue heeler's fur, or sitting in August drinking warm beers from my pack, the warmest beers for which I've ever been thanked. Once friends visited with their kids and we went to Coon Lake. There's a single rock mid-lake, large enough to lounge on or leap off, covered in goose shit and tufts of grass, a decent short swim destination, so we swam to the rock and back to shore a few times, and we did not tell the kids there were leeches in the lake, though the kids discovered them anyway. "Is that a bleech?" cried the six year old boy, while his older sister held one impossibly long leech between her thumb and finger and squealed with glee.

What changes with the name?

Howard Lake was never my favorite destination, so why do I bristle and resist, especially when doing so puts me firmly in the camp with of football zealots defending a team called Redskins, a perspective I despise? On one map, the C and H converge to make

Coward and maybe that's what I am, what we are, unwilling to pull ourselves from the

muck of name-borne oppression. Cowards.

Why? Maybe it's stubbornness, mundane everyday annoyance, the way you sometimes feel when a friend gets married and changes her name. (She'll return to the maiden name on Facebook, decades later, trying to reconnect.) Or maybe it's because there's some kinship, a brotherhood, a sisterhood, with everyone else who's known Coon Lake—modest, leechy, frozen and not—and the re-naming somehow cleaves that bond, cedes it to more distant stakeholders, do-gooders with an agenda. Even if I share the agenda in principle, it makes me sad. I'm willing to let it go, but it makes me sad.

They say Wilson Howard lived on the shores of the lake in 1891-1892, a short decade after Pierce. He sold his claims for a profit. The question that lurks is: How do we know he's black? Documents nod to one Erwin Thompson as the source, and here in town people point to locals, well-known characters, some reliable, some not so much. The last rung of skepticism, for a while, was the idea that even if it meant "black dude" maybe "coon" wasn't so bad way back then. But in legal terms, that's not how it works. The state naming board is clear on this point: we don't judge by the standards of their time, but by the standards of our own. It's not their name anymore, it's ours, and "coon" nowadays is plainly a slur.

While the debate still held life—"raged" was never exactly the right word—nearly everyone agreed the best solution would be to use an Indian word, but what word would that be? We have no idea. As for the Indians themselves, the naming board dutifully forwarded a copy of each of the proposals to all federally recognized tribes in the region: the Colville, Skagit, Stillaguamish, Sauk-Suiattle. No responses were received. Apparently, they didn't much care.

To be honest, I haven't cared much either. I duck controversy by nature and in a very small community, I choose my battles wisely, and this one has seemed worth skipping. Aren't there better uses for activists' passion and bureaucrats' time? God knows there are. But sitting reading Pierce's journals, I begin to think it would be nice to read Wilson Howard's story, to know how he'd describe mosquitoes or the lilies on the lake, the endless rain, the people he encountered, or the pebbles in the river. But we have nothing to go on.

We only have Pierce.

Who is, on the page, still trying to bushwhack up the valley, and at some point must pass the exact place where my cabin sits today.

Through almost impenetrable underbrush and swampy areas, the pack train toiled and floundered, the trail growing worse and worse as the day advanced. Often, by reason of fallen logs and other obstructions, progress was alone made by taking the actual bed of the creek.

I'm admiring the words again—"toiled" and "floundered"—and I'm thinking of how Pierce is both on a hero's quest and likely aware of creating one. You can't translate Virgil and Homer and not know the form by rote. Mostly, I'm watching how the river widens across the road and knowing how in August it would run too shallow to travel by boat, how even now, if not for regular maintenance, fallen logs obscure the land route along the banks, and vine maple bends and re-roots and tangles through the logs, and anyway, if you want to get anywhere, you're in for a struggle. I'm delighted by reading Pierce's account, perversely, like watching a sibling suffer. You know how this story goes; you've been there, but this time it's not you.

When I was a kid, you could send away for a picture book that changed the setting and characters to match your little kid life: your brothers' and sisters' names, your hometown, your elementary school. Even though the typeset didn't even match—it wasn't much more than a shoddy cut-and-paste game for a high price—I wanted one desperately. I wonder if that's the attraction of Pierce's journals all these years later. I'm fascinated by his descriptions of familiar places, even ones that might be boring as hell to someone else, the way genealogy almost always bores anyone unrelated to the family.

The expedition, at any rate, is almost over.

At the end of twelve laborious miles, the party sets up at "an indifferent camp." (Even this phrase resonates; I've camped in less-than-ideal places, boggy or buggy, far from water or sunlight, crowded by trees or brush.) They need to rest before their final ascent.

The animals are unshod and footsore, and the men are disheartened. After they've set up

camp, Pierce leaves his companions and walks ahead on the trail where he runs into a miner who advises him to turn back. Historians will later make a big deal of this miner, who claimed to have lived in the area for thirty years. Thirty. Which proves Pierce wasn't the first white man to cross the mountains. Not by a long shot. Just the first to write about it. Or the first to be paid to write about it. The first to have his words preserved.

Back in camp, he finds his men in an impenetrable sleet storm—"impenetrable" has become the most repeated word in the manuscript—and eats a scanty meal of "bread and snow water." Morning brings no solace. They take a vote on whether to advance or retreat, and all but one vote for retreat. But Pierce, with Downing and LaFleur, forge on.

The sky clears and illuminates the peaks as they crest Cascade Pass, more dramatic than Purple Pass any day. But we get no descriptions of grandeur, only the relief of descending, at last, down through groves of cedars forty feet in circumference. The men must borrow a dull axe to fell a tall pine and it takes a half day to cross a stream, but they make it down the Cascade River to the Skagit River, where they trade three horses for a canoe, and float to Puget Sound. Pierce's report concludes with Sherman's endorsement, dated Dec. 11, 1882.

I'm left with the guilty pleasure of having succumbed to a predictable plot and a satisfying end.

But it's not, of course, the end.

In 1889, Alfred Downing, the illustrator, will return to Stehekin. He'll arrive during a massive wildfire that sends him out on the lake in a dory to avoid the flames, and he'll live to tell the tale. The same year, Washington Territory will achieve statehood, a development for which some recent histories give partial credit to George Washington Bush, a black pioneer married to a white woman, whose bi-racial son William Owen Bush will serve in the legislature in 1890. By 1891, Stehekin will be a bustling tourist destination, attracting more people than it does today. Wilson Howard will sell his plot and move from the shores of Howard/Coon Lake, making a killing. By 1893, a party of 35 tourists, men and women both, will travel from the mouth of the river to a place just shy

of Cascade Pass in 7 hours 35 minutes. The same trip that took Pierce two treacherous

days would be more or less a joyride.

And, by 1883, just one year after the expedition, Henry H. Pierce will be dead.

So picture her in a desk chair under an oil lamp, ink well beside her, an ink well that will run dry over years—decades—while she writes the same damned letter over and over: Henry H. Pierce served honorably. I have three children, and one of them is very ill. My husband—certified here as required, married, yes, yes, never divorced—may not have died on the battlefield but he died serving his country. Please grant me a widow's pension. Signed, dated, and notarized: Margaret Pierce. Again and again.

She's relentless. Her correspondence consists of an odd assortment of handwritten notes in the loopy script of the time, and typed responses from government officials on letterhead commending her husband's service, denying benefits. Margaret Pierce is undeterred. She explains the situation: her husband had suffered from "tubercular lungs" since digging the Dutch Gap Canal on the James River in 1864, and his nervous system had been damaged by use of quinine. Now, nearly two decades later, the affliction had taken its toll.

The replies take a subtly different tack, recounting how, after his Stehekin expedition, Pierce returned to work as professor of mathematics until "family afflictions" compelled him to resign and return to his regiment. He was immediately sent on a second expedition through the Cascades. There he grew weak and died.

In 1916, Margaret writes one last time demanding a widow's pension—she is nothing if not tenacious. The response claims she's already getting \$25 a month, and \$20 is the most allowed a widow. Not long after, the courts find her of unsound mind, more specifically, "a lunatic," and sign over all legal authority to her daughter. She will live as a dependent until 1939.

She's buried with her husband, their names on the same grave marker, in a Washington D.C. cemetery. Her fate could've been due to grief or mental illness, passed down through genes, or it could've been a label convenient for those in power weary of her nagging. We'll never know. Or maybe we will. Stories can be resurrected. How else

does George Washington Bush, a black man, pop up on Google when you search for

history of Washington State? One person carries another through the years.

We'd know less of Henry if not for Margaret.

Pierce like fierce. A high screechy sound, a hawk's cry, a fast wound, a bright morning, a not-young man with a youthful flair for words, a war survivor on the brink of a tragic end. I didn't want to like him. I like him anyway. Maybe because his words conjure a mythical unspoiled world, teetering on the brink of progress, just before the miners arrived and the settlers and road builders and orchardists. Maybe because his words remind me of my youth: hiking with a flimsy frame pack and a second-hand tent, boots too-heavy, eyes wide open to this place, every bit of it new. That's not the whole of it either. We've known the same place.

Still. These days, I'm less interested in what I've known than I used to be. This place may have pierced me, but it's not mine, and it's not his either, though I'm glad to have walked awhile beside him, to have made this connection, a connection that would, of course, be impossible without words. Which lands me back where I started: mourning the wordless stories, like Wilson Howard's or Margaret Pierce's or Lap-a-Loop's, the world teeming with them, like shapes on the hazy horizon you have to squint to see. If re-naming makes them even a smidge more visible, even if they're partial or unfinished, based on hearsay or myth, maybe even a tad unreal, well, I have to believe that's a good thing. To make new connections, sometimes you have to immerse in the old ones, ponder and indulge. Then cleave and move on.

Last week, on a very cold day, we skied with friends toward the lake. The slog from the end of the plowed road took two long hours. A thick overnight inversion had lifted and views of the distant peaks opened and closed as swaths of storm clouds brushed across the sky. When we reached the frozen lake, the sun was not hitting there, and you cannot abide shade when you're sweaty in ten degree weather, so we backtracked to a nameless snowy knob, right at the place where the trail turns to face north, up Agnes Creek where a brine of frost coated the tree tops at the elevation where the inversion had been, now lifted, it left a clear white stripe, like the side of a chilled glass. We sat on a space blanket, cold while sitting still, so cold you had to keep gloves on while passing around crackers and cream cheese spread. We turned our faces to the sun, hoping for warmth, and Goode Ridge showed to the west, a peek-a-view clear through the tops of

firs, their limbs weighty with cones, and a lone flicker worked the trunks, the busy stutter echoing in silence, and there's no reason to write this, truly, except for the hope that someday, someone will read it and think: that's right, that's right. I've been there, too.

Ana Maria Spagna is the author, most recently, of *The Luckiest Scar on Earth*, a novel featuring a 14 year-old girl snowboarder, as well as several nonfiction books including *Reclaimers*, stories people reclaiming sacred land and water, the memoir/history *Test Ride on the Sunnyland Bus*, winner of the River Teeth literary nonfiction prize, and three collections of essays: *Potluck*, *Now Go Home*, and *Uplake*, forthcoming in 2018 from University of Washington Press, from which "Pierce" is excerpted. She lives and writes in the North Cascades and teaches in the low residency MFA program at Antioch University, Los Angeles www.anamariaspagna.com



