

AMERICA'S NUMBER ONE FOOL

BY CLAY OSBORNE

ALL FOOL'S DAY should be nationally dedicated to the memories of certain men whose epic foolishness helped to make our country great. There should be solemn thanksgiving that Frémont was the kind of dunderhead who would dare raise the Bear Flag at Sonoma; and that Commodore Sloat was zany enough to commit the magnificent blunder of hoisting the Stars and Stripes at Monterey. Bells should be rung to Napoleon's folly in signing away his greatest empire, the Louisiana territory, for a paltry \$18,000,000; and to the Grand Duke Constantine and Minister Stoeckl, those Russian dizzards who threw at us Seward's icebox of frozen wealth for the pittance of \$7,200,000. Also a salute should be fired for the pirate Laffite, the simpleton who turned patriot and saved us New Orleans only to flee to an unknown grave; and to the English Admiral so goofy about his mistress as to defend her ship with his whole fleet while her child was a-bornin', thereby giving General Washing-

ton a heaven-sent opportunity to take New York.

But among the myriad dolts who contributed to the march of American empire, one man deserves special honor on this day dedicated to the breed. He may well be designated as the Number One Booby of American history.

This imbecile was the beetle-brained Englishman who handed us the Oregon Empire on a silver platter. And he did this only because of an idiotic outburst of petty peevishness.

The enormity of this gentleman's folly can be perceived only by remembering that the old Oregon country today comprises the states of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and a portion of Wyoming; that its wealth of natural resources and scenic wonders is immeasurable; and that its worth to Americans of this and of future generations is almost beyond estimate. The man who gave us this vast empire is Capt. John Gordon, commander of a British ship-of-war, and brother of the Earl of Aber-

deen, England's Prime Minister during the time of this story.

It will be recalled that the United States and Great Britain trembled at the brink of war when, in 1844, James K. Polk was elected President on the slogan: "Fifty-four-forty or fight!" While strong-tempered Britishers were demanding all of Oregon, hotheads in America were clamoring not only for the Oregon country but for all of the British Columbia coast up to Sitka! British conservatives had shown a willingness to compromise by accepting the north bank of the Columbia River as the international boundary. Cool heads in our own nation counseled proposing the forty-ninth parallel — our present boundary — as the international line.

However, in electing Polk the American electorate virtually declared, "We'll have all of Oregon if we must go to war to get it!" On the other hand, the Hudson Bay Company was frantically appealing to the mother country for ships-o'-war and marines to repel the invasion of the Far West by a tide of American pioneers.

England had learned that policies recommended by the world's greatest monopoly were not always the best. There was, palpably, only

one way to obtain reliable information about the Oregon country, and thus determine whether it was worth a war. England decided to send a spy to the Pacific — and who was better fitted for this delicate mission than the Prime Minister's own blood brother?

Summoned before England's statesmen of the 1840s, Captain Gordon was given the facts. He was told that if he found Oregon valuable, as claimed by the Hudson Bay Company, England would fight for it. If it were worthless, as so many were saying, the United States could have it, and welcome. His report, based upon personal inspection and observation, would determine Great Britain's policy for war or peace with America.

Aboard his flagship — named, peculiarly enough, *America* — Captain Gordon and his British marines arrived at Puget Sound harbor in 1844, maintaining loudly that they would "drive every last Yankee back over the mountains in short order." The Captain sent two lieutenant spies to Fort Vancouver on the Columbia while he himself proceeded to the Hudson Bay post at Victoria.

There the anxious inhabitants did their utmost to make the pompous Gordon at home. Fatted calves and swine and poultry were

killed. Hunters were sent out for game. Fishermen brought choice salmon and trout for his table.

But the high-born gentleman was pleased with none of it. Half-breed servants didn't attend his wants with the skill and servility of English butlers; he groaned with the discomfort of sleeping in rude, frontier bunks; he was disgusted when he learned that deer were "still hunted," instead of run with dogs, as in Merrie England; he was displeased by the frontier's lack of sportsmanship in fishing with grubs, worms, and other "bait," instead of dry flies. On the few occasions when he ventured into the wilderness he returned physically and mentally sore, bruised, and sodden, complaining endlessly of the "savage, inhospitable land" and of the barbarous inhabitants who lacked all the graces of civilized living. The last, brittle straw of his patience broke when he asked for a bath — and was courteously led to the shore of the Pacific and invited to walk in!

When, in time, the Captain's two spies returned from Vancouver reporting that the Americans there were only a scattering of buckskin-clad, barefooted, tobacco-spitting settlers living in a region of forbidding mountains, roaring rivers, and awful distances — then Captain

Gordon had learned enough. He stormed aboard his ship and set sail for England, away from this grim land fit only for savages and smelly trappers, and full of hardships too, too severe for gentlemen!

Called before England's leaders for his report, when he arrived home, Captain Gordon declared sulphurically that he "wouldn't give the bleakest knoll on the bleakest hill of Scotland for all of Oregon's mountains in a heap," and the word of this magnificent dim-wit was accepted without question. How much of Oregon he had actually examined; how much of the wilderness he had penetrated; how well he had inspected potential resources; how little he had considered the ultimate needs of England, and how much he was influenced by his personal discomfort in making his report — these questions remained unasked.

On the strength of Captain Gordon's misinformation, England abandoned all thought of war. The demand of the Hudson Bay Company for armed protection for English settlers in the Oregon Country went unheeded, and Great Britain accepted the forty-ninth parallel boundary compromise.

Captain Gordon had given us Oregon because he couldn't get a bath!

*Pressdom's ace muckraker, who tracked
down Judge Manton, analyzes the*

MUCKRAKER: MODEL 1939

By S. BURTON HEATH

AN ANONYMOUS POSTCARD made a muckraker out of me. Every day newspapers receive tips like that. Most of them prove worthless. Very occasionally the stone in the oyster turns out to be a pearl. I followed the suggestion penciled on that card, and it led to a journalistic pot of gold. It introduced me to an investigating technique which then was rather new in general and almost unknown in journalistic procedure. Because I carried on, two judges have left the bench by resignation under fire; three of the largest insurance companies stand condemned in the public conscience; cheap equitable insurance is available to more than 12,000,000 in New York state; the taxpayers of New York were saved more than \$3,000,000 on a few foul, sewage-swept acres of unused ocean bottom. . . . I could extend the list, but these items are enough to suggest what a muckraker rakes up when luck is running.

It was Theodore Roosevelt who originally applied the word "muckraker" to those who expose unfit-

ness and corruption in public affairs. "There is filth on the floor," he said, "and it must be scraped up with the muck-rake." But the job of raking up anti-social practices has changed vastly since the Steffens-Tarbell-Baker era that popularized the expression. It may be the dirt is so much more expertly concealed nowadays that new and sharper instruments are required to pry it loose. In any event, the fine courage of an enthusiastic exposé and the talents of a good observer no longer suffice. Those qualities are needed, but they must be supplemented by others.

The technique which I was to learn calls for the combined qualifications of analytical accountant, mathematician, chess master, crossword-puzzler, and jigsaw addict. It needs also a smattering, at least, of curbstone law. The process is one of calm analysis of cold records: the collection and tabulation of facts and figures, their meticulous sifting and evaluation, and eventually their organization into a syllogism in which both premises are indis-