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SOUTHERN INLAND EMPIRE NEWS AND HISTORY

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Trek of Whitmans Over Blue Mountains Is Retraced

Diary Found to Coincide to Satisfaction of Party of Men Who Spent Monday on Quest; Route From Grande Ronde Valley to Walla Walla Is Straight Line

Approximate route of the Marcus Whitman party across the Blue mountains 104 years ago has been established to the full satisfaction of a group of men who have studied all the facts and who last Monday undertook to settle an historical question concerning the course followed by the missionary expedition.

Notwithstanding the tardiness of the investigation, so much definite information written by Narcissa Whitman in her diary was reconciled to terrain with full consideration of all essential factors in such thorough fashion that guesswork about the controversial subject is virtually eliminated, in the opinion of these men.

Logical Route Found

Many students of the Whitman route lay the course from Summerville through the Tollgate region, with arrival in the Walla Walla valley somewhere close to Pine creek, but the unanimous verdict of last week's study is this:

The Whitmans went into the mountains over Fox hill at some point between Ora Dell and Island City near La Grande; came out on the Umatilla river near Squaw creek; left the canyon at or near Saddle hollow ridge above Thorn Hollow; crossed the Wild Horse in the Adams-Athena sector; hit straight for the breaks into Walla Walla valley on the east side of VanSycle grade; hit the Walla Walla river 8 miles above its mouth; followed that stream to the immediate destination.

Forest Service Helps

Last week's expedition was the result of collaboration between the national forest service and the Union-Bulletin. Men with the party were: Carl Ewing, Umatilla national forest supervisor; Gerald Tucker, Clearwater district ranger; M. M. Richardson, Walla Walla, representing the Wagon Wheelers; Henry Barrett, Athena student of this question and intimately familiar with the mountain and west side terrain; the roving reporter, representing the Union Bulletin.

Original Party Split

A day or so prior to the arrival of the Whitmans in the Grande Ronde valley the party had split to permit slower progress by the jaded and foot-sore horses and livestock. Mr. and Mrs. H. H. Spalding hung back with Chief Rottenbelly of the Nez Perces as their guide, and came on to Fort Walla Walla at a slow pace. The Whitmans hurried on with a Hudson's Bay company official named John McLeod, who served as guide for the Whitmans. He knew existing Indian trails well.

By noon of August 28, 1836, the Whitmans had come down the Ladd canyon ridge, and it is believed, skirted the south end of the Grande Ronde valley to avoid the tule swamps, reached the Grande Ronde river at noon naturally at Ora Dell or immediately below La Grande.

Key Points Selected

The whole Whitman route problem hinges on three factors: (1) Where did they enter the Blues? (2) where did they stop at noon the second day after leaving the Grande Ronde? (3) where did they come out of the mountains? With these points cleared up there can be no material doubt about the course.

The Whitmans had followed with rigid fidelity existing Indian trails up to that time, and these routes were the most direct, with uncanny certainty. The old trail and Whitman's route was almost a perfectly straight line running northwesterly (20 degrees west of north)

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from Ora Dell to the Walla Walla river.

Long before last week's trip Ranger Tucker had served as ranger in that vicinity; he knows every trail, every peak, every ridge and stream between the Umatilla watershed and Grande Ronde river from Kamela to Tollgate. He has talked with very old Indians who knew the trails Whitman obviously used. The party matched this information with the Whitman diary, cutting, fitting and comparing essential points with utmost care.

The conclusion about point No. 1 previously noted is that Fox hill was the avenue into the forest. Says the diary: 'After nooning on the Grande Ronde river (August 28) we left the plain and ascended the Blue mountains."

This precludes their going to Summerville behind which lie the mountains some students think the missionaries climbed. The Summerville ridge is more than 20 miles from Ora Dell, more than 10 miles from the river at any point, and they could not have reached the mountains with their jaded horses in the time alloted because the dairy says: "After leaving the valley and climbing the mountain (Fox hill) we rode through timber all afternoon." The Summerville route would have taken them over the open valley basin "all afternoon."

Searchers Climb Hill

Last week the party climbed that same Fox hill, going by the Stroeber mill, crossed the crown near Dixie flat 5 miles from La Grande, passed the McClure ranch and on to the crossing of Fivepoint creek where the Arnold mill once stood and where the Mount Emily Lumber company more recently had a logging camp. The party believes that the Whitmans camped there the first night in the Blues. This is about 8 miles from La Grande.

From that point the Whitman trail, to fit the facts had to lead the next day (August 29) northwesterly to the west of Sugar Loaf mountain but the checkers couldn't follow it further with car, and picked it up later on by backtracking to La Grande and going into the mountains out of Kamela a distance of 10 miles on the Skyline road toward Ruckles Ranger station. After leaving Kamela the men crossed the trail used by the immigrant trains of 1843, which came up the mountain from what is now Glover, and headed for Meacham. A little later they found the traces of the emigrant route used after 1843 and as a public road until the new Oregon trail highway was built. The two routes meet near Kamela.

Ten miles from Kamela, having traveled nearly straight east, the men again crossed the Indian trail doubtless used by the Whitmans between Fivepoint creek and the spot where the Whitmans presumably had nooned on August 29.

Turn Page

Vital Point Cleared

To find where the Whitmans camped that second day in the Blues is vital. To see it with their own eyes the men walked some 3 miles along the old trail to the breaks of Spring mountain, which drops very steeply to the point where Owsley creek meets East Meacham creek. Descriptive of that hill are these words from the Whitman diary:

"Before noon (August 29) we began to descend one of the most terrible mountains for steepness and length I have yet seen. It was like a winding stair in its descent and in some places was almost perpendicular. The horses appeared to dread the hill as much as we did. They would turn and wind in a zigzag manner all the way down."

When the missionaries reached the bottom of that hill they were about 8½ miles from Fivepoint creek. The point where they nooned that day is on East Meacham, a quarter mile above its confluence with the main Meacham creek.

Detour Unlikely

It is important at this point to clear up doubts about the Black mountain route which some students prefer. Had the Whitmans swung over to Black mountain and out of the hills on Ryan creek, they would have done one of two things: (1) crossed the fearfully steep and deep East Meacham and North Meacham canyons, or (2) skirted the heads of these canyons to the eastward. The first possibility would indubitably have been mentioned in the diary as the ordeal would have been terrible. She wrote of only one canyon. If the second possibility had been followed the distance is too great to be covered in one afternoon—as it was—would not have encountered the high, bare, waterless ridge hereinafter referred to.

The Black mountain-Ryan creek route is eliminated, in the opinion of the men in the party.

"Mt. Terrible" Climbed

After noon on Meacham creek that day, Mrs. Whitman says:

"We had no sooner gained the foot of the mountain (Spring mountain) than another more steep and dreadful one was before us. After dinner we ascended it. Mt. Pleasant in Plattsburg could not compare with these Mt. Terribles."

From where the men last week stood on the breaks of Spring mountain they could see the hill referred to in the foregoing sentence. It is easy to see that the trail swerved up main Meacham creek a quarter mile or so and then took up a long ridge that is far less terrible than others near it and leads to a long bare ridge now known as Horseshoe ridge.

After reaching the ridge Mrs. Whitman says:

"Our ride this afternoon exceeded anything we have yet had and what rendered it the more aggravating was the fact that the path all the way was very stony, resembling newly - macadamed road. Our horses were very tender and unshod, so that we could not make the progress we wished. The mountain in many places was covered with broken basalt.

"We were very late in making camp that night. We kept on the main divide until sunset, looking in vain for water and a camping place (while it was yet light). While on this elevation we could view the Columbia river valley. It was beautiful. Just as we gained the highest elevation (on the ridge) and began descending, the sun was dipping his disk behind the western horizon. Beyond the valley we could see two distinct mountains—Mt. Hood and Mt. Helens." (These were actually Mt. Hood and Mt. Adams).

Course Is Followed

All this riding was on Horseshoe ridge. To get the sentimental reactions of standing and walking on the Indian (Whitman) trail on that ridge, the five men last week retraced their course to Kamela, and went into the forest again at Meacham over the Horsehoe forest road a distance of 14 miles. This put them back on Meacham creek breaks opposite Spring mountain exactly where the Whitmans had climbed that hill. They drove their car along the "open, bare and waterless divide" several miles to where the ridge merges into Gibbon ridge and drops rather steeply down to Squaw creek where the Louis Bergevin home is, one mile from the Umatilla river. Everything was there last week that Mrs. Whitman mentioned, except that in reality two hidden springs, not visible from the divide, could have relieved their thirst. Nowhere else in the mountains is there a ridge that exactly fits the diary picture as Horseshoe ridge does.

Of the approach to Squaw creek from Horseshoe-Gibbon ridge, she says: "We had to descend a hill as long but not as steep or stony as the others." Those conditions fit the picture.

When the Whitmans camped late that night they had traveled about 14 miles in the afternoon, some 23 or 24 that day.

To see the region the Whitmans came down to the Umatilla river, the checkers last week returned to Meacham, and went up the Umatilla from Mission to Squaw creek. Several ridges in the vicinity of the lower end of Horseshoe-Gibbon ridge might have been followed but all ended up on Squaw creek. Up to this point there isn't a missing detail of consequence between diary and actual conditions found by the checkers.

Progress Delayed

The Whitmans tarried on Squaw creek and the Umatilla the next day, but they were then out of the mountains and had crossed them in 1½ days. They waited there for the tired stock to catch up and "ambled along the stream's course picking cherries in abundance." These cherries (really chokecherries) grow there in abundance today.

The diary is indefinite and vague about where and how long they "ambled" that day, but they were getting ready for the final dash to their destination. How they got out of Umatilla canyon is problematical, and rather immaterial. Had they used the Ryan grade, they would have had to go out of their way up stream a couple of miles. At the mouth of Squaw creek was an Indian trail that went up Saddle hollow ridge towards Wild Horse creek; so did one at Thorn Hollow, and another even farther down stream at Cayuse, but the Saddle hollow route was the most direct.

Cross Wild Horse

The next day (August 31) the Whitmans moved on in dead earnest. They got going at dawn, and regardless of which of three possible trails used to get out of the Umatilla canyon, crossed the Wild Horse in the Adams-Athena sector where the Indian trail lay. It was a long ride that day, probably 30 miles, but the country was open, sandy and easy going. Perusal of the certified diary in Whitman college reveals that they "galloped a great deal" that day.

They were sticking to the straightest route between Ora Dell and old Fort Walla Walla. They went over the breaks east of Van-Sycle grade (at least the old Indian trail did, and it is the natural route) until they hit the basin of the Walla Walla valley, coming to a halt very late that night on the Walla Walla river 8 miles from its mouth. McLeod went on that night and the Whitmans went down the river early the next day (September 1) to have breakfast at the fort.

Check Is Complete

This check of the route is the first ever made. As already noted the personnel knew the territory intimately and went to extremes in matching and fitting known facts with existing terrain, distances and situations. The five men traveled 114 miles over mountain roads that day in national forest service cars, not to mention highway driving from Walla Walla to La Grande and back again.

The conclusions reached should be convincing. They convinced the men who made the trip.

Whitmans Climbed 'Mt. Terrible'

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This view of Meacham creek canyon shows where the Whitman party crossed in 1836 while coming through the Blue mountains, as determined last week by a party of investigators.

Narcissa Whitman's diary paints a vivid description of the descent and ascent in crossing this very deep and steep gash in the Blues, calling the two hills "Mt. Terribles." Her description of this canyon and Horseshoe ridge which parallels the canyon, becomes the chief factor in selecting the route 104 years later.

Owsley creek, East Meacham creek and the main Meacham creek come together immediately under the point where this staff photo was taken. (See story this page for additional details.)

RELICS 1940

Mr. and Mrs. Hubert Anderson maintain a museum of rare relics in their home on the Grande Ronde river near La Grande. Some day soon this column hopes to describe this remarkable collection of antiques but just now it should be related that some priceless relics of Waiilatpu mission are included.

One day last week a group of Whitman trail hunters called on the Andersons and Mrs. Kate Hanley, next door neighbor, and were astonished at the variety and antiquity of the assortment. Several Indian arrows recovered immediately after the Whitman massacre are there. Several other objects taken from the mission wreckage following the disturbance, add lustre to the collection.

Whether these Waiilatpu objects will some day be permanently housed in the proposed fireproof museum to be built at Waiilatpu, remains to be determined, as considerable say in final disposition of several items rests with Louise Kelly, daughter of one of Oregon's foremost pioneers, the late "Uncle Dave" Kelly. She is now in the East and will be approached on the matter of some day storing these particular objects in Waiilatpu museum.

The ground itself on which the Anderson home stands is rich in history. The dense forest on the river at that point has been a favorite summer camp ground for Indians of many tribes over a period of many decades. Some of the most illustrious of Umatilla reservation chiefs used the camp habitually.

It is a safe guess to say that the Andersons and Mrs. Hanley know more present day Indians and their parents than any other Union county group.

The road in front of the Anderson and Hanley homes is known as Black Hawk trail, so named in honor of an illustrious Indian family that dates back with unbroken lines to very early times.

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Pieces have been written in several papers of this vicinity in recent weeks about the absorbing topic of Indians and horses. Did aborigines from which Indians of trapper and missionary days stemmed, have horses, or didn't they? That's the question that's been revived at several points of late.

During the past few days some very direct evidence on that subject came to light in the national forest service office at Pendleton, wherein George Stevenson, of the regional office at Portland, bore witness to the fact that women and dogs were the pack animals employed by warriors before the advent of horses. The travois attached to horses when that animal became common, in the Blue mountains in particular and the Northwest in general, had its beginning in a similar contraption adapted to fit a dog, and was known as a tuck-le-ka-tsa-tus.

This testimony has earmarks of authenticity, and substantiates Indian legend to the effect Indians one day roamed the Blue mountains without benefit of horses. Such legends say a Walla Walla medicine man went to Mexico on the urge of a persistent dream and brought back with him the first mare to come to the Northwest.

During the period of 1910-1915 Stevenson was a ranger in charge of the Walla Walla district of the Wenaha national forest, headquartered at Elgin. In summer months he spent a great deal of time at Fry meadows where he became acquainted with an old Indian subchief named Fishook Jim, who with numerous others spent the latter part of each late summer and early fall at Brock meadows.

Stevenson last week related to Forest Supervisor Carl Ewing that Fishook Jim was not a vociferous sort, but in the course of several years' contact Stevenson learned many things from him. At that time Jim appeared to be more than 100 years old and said that he and his people for many generations had annually visited Brock meadows where they dug camas and cured their many herbs for medicinal purposes. In dating his stories Jim would refer to things he had been told by his "papa" and by his "papa's papa".

Jim said in the course of these conversations that Shoshone, Nez Perce and Snake river Indians fought among themselves a great deal over that part of the country, partly by reason of its attractiveness and from a standpoint of fish, game and other goods, but principally, it seemed, by reason of a long established custom of stealing each other's wives.

Elk were as plentiful then as cattle are today.

Fishook Jim told Stevenson there had been a time when Indians had no horses, and camp gear was packed by women and dogs, the latter frequently equipped with a device now commonly called a travois.

The foregoing is certainly getting first-hand information about a subject that currently has been discussed freely without getting anywhere.

RIVER-RUNNER

The boat expedition down the Grande Ronde river from Minam foretold in this column two weeks ago, was a grand success, but thrills and hardships that come with that trip at lower water stages were slightly curtailed. However, Carl Ewing, a member of the party, got himself badly tangled with boat, rocks, deep water and rapids. Aside from being perilously near the undoing of the Umatilla forest supervisor, the trip served as inspiration for Harold Dobyns, biological survey representative at Pendleton, to speed up his plans for greater river-riding adventures. He is now more determined than ever to tackle Salmon river in Idaho—the River of No Return.

That stream is co-holder of the national reputation for being one of the three most dangerous rivers in the United States, parts of the Snake, and the Colorado, being contemporaries in this respect.

The roving reporter has not seen the Colorado, but can vouch for the Salmon being a terrible thing, the mere sight of which sends shudders through one's frame. It is mad, turbulent, crazy flow of water whipped to whiteness by its fury.

The boat Dobyns plans to use on the Salmon was built by Woodie Hindman, Eugene river guide and bad-water expert. It is 14 feet long, 5 feet 8 inches wide; has a special rope seat; weighs 200 pounds.

Sides and bottom are plywood and spruce with oak ribs. Patches will be carried for quick repairs in case of minor crackups. Dobyns plans to start from Bear valley and go down the middle fork to the Salmon and then to Riggins. The trip requires from 10 to 14 days. He may have company, and then again, may go solo.

More power to him on his encounter with the River of No Return. Having never learned to swim, the r. r. will stick to running down mountain trails where swimming is not so likely to be a convenient manner of dodging death.

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