

THE WHATCOM TRAILS TO THE FRASER RIVER MINES IN 1858

The discovery of gold on "Fraser's River," as it was then called, drew thither in 1858 a multitude of adventurers seeking riches in the new Eldorado. If the mines proved to be a success, the trade arising therefrom would be a valuable asset to that seaport which could attract it, and various settlements on the coast of Puget Sound vied with each other for its control. The chief rivals were Victoria on Vancouver Island, and Whatcom on Bellingham Bay, although little Steilacoom to the South never ceased to believe that the only available route was via the Naches Pass and thence north along the Eastern side of the Cascade Mountains. Victoria claimed the preference as the only settlement North of the boundary line, and as such the guardian of British rights on the Fraser; Whatcom, the Northern out-post of the United States and the nearest point by land to the new discoveries.

In the end, Victoria won, for dominating the situation was Governor Douglas, wise with the experience of years. He had seen Oregon over-run with settlers from the East, and British authority overwhelmed thereby. Forced to the North, he stood, the protector of the last lands left to England on the Pacific Coast, and without legal authority, but strong in his indomitable will, stepped into the breach and took command. He maintained peace and order along the Fraser River until an authorized Government could be established, and he kept the trade of the mines, so far as was humanly possible, for his country.

In vain Whatcom struggled against the restrictions imposed by him, keeping from her what she was convinced was her inalienable right. In vain her people lavishly expended both energy and money in order that she might profit by her geographical position and splendid harbor. Twice in 1858 her people tried to evade Victoria and the perils of the Fraser by constructing a trail from Bellingham Bay direct to the mines, and twice her efforts were futile. Whatcom became desolate; her people left beautiful Bellingham Bay to peace and solitude, until in later years, the present prosperous city arose on its shores.

In speaking of these trails, care must be taken to distinguish

between the earlier trail from Watcom which was intended to go direct to Hope and followed the Nooksack River northerly and easterly. It got as far as Summit (now Chilliwack) Lake, but the promoters, failing to find a pass through the mountains turned off to a point on the Fraser River, probably that now known as Miller's Landing; and the later trail which continued southerly and easterly from the end of the first trail at Summit Lake, over the divide into the Skagit Valley, and thence north easterly along the Skagit to its headquarters and via the upper waters of the Sumallo River to a junction with the Hudson's Bay Company's Brigade Trail from Fort Hope, and so northerly to the Thompson River. These two trails are often confused; but they were two distinct undertakings, with different aims, and ceased to function from entirely different causes. It is proposed to relate, as fully as existing authorities permit, the story of these trails, the difficulties encountered by those who hewed them through the forests, and the reasons why both failed to be of lasting importance either to Whatcom or the mines.

But first let us look for a moment at the condition of things on the Fraser in the Spring of 1858. Word had gone abroad that gold had been found in the vicinity of Forts Hope and Yale, and thither flocked a motley horde of gold seekers. The greater part came to Victoria and thence to the Fraser, but many came direct to Whatcom as being the nearest point by land to the mines. No steamers were then navigating the Fraser; indeed many at that time questioned whether vessels of considerable draught could pass the sand bars at its mouth. The only practicable means of access to the river was by small sailing craft and canoes. The residents of Whatcom naturally desired to lead the stream of traffic through their city, and this was favored by many of the miners, who, being citizens of the United States, had no love either for the British Government or for the Hudson's Bay Company, and bitterly resented what they considered the harsh policy and illegal exactions of the latter. If, therefore, easy access to the mines could be found from a point in the United States, (and Whatcom seemed to be the one most favorably located), it would enable travellers by that route to avoid Victoria, the headquarters of the Company, and the Fraser River, and so give the profits arising from the development of the gold fields to their own country.

But Governor Douglas did not see matters from their point of view. The gold discoveries were within British territory, and,

so far as possible, he intended that any profit arising therefrom should accrue to the country in which the auriferous territory lay. Moreover, owing to his long connection with the Hudson's Bay Company, he was anxious to see what he considered its rights protected and upheld. Being the only British authority on the Pacific Coast, notwithstanding his commission as Governor at that time only referred to Vancouver's Island, he took upon himself the right to make regulations as to commerce on the Fraser. On May 8, 1858, he issued a proclamation ordering that after fourteen days from that date, "all ships, boats and vessels, together with the goods laden on board, found in Fraser's River, or in any of the bays, rivers, or creeks of the said British Possessions on the north west coast of America, *not having a license from the Hudson's Bay Company, and a sufferance from the proper officer of the Customs of Victoria*, shall be liable to forfeiture, and will be seized and condemned according to law."¹ (Italics ours.)

This order, backed as it was by British gunboats, compelled all persons going to the mines by water, to touch first at Victoria to get that authorization which would prevent their property being forfeited by the Hudson's Bay Company's officials on the Fraser River. To enforce strict obedience to this decree, Douglas directed H.M.S. *Satellite*, Capt. J. C. Prevost, and later other vessels, to be stationed at the mouth of the Fraser.²

If, however, the miners could reach the mines by a land route, these annoyances could be evaded, at least in part, and Whatcom would thereby profit. To this end all energies were directed. A road from Whatcom to Fort Hope would, it was estimated, be about thirty or thirty-five miles in length, and save a trip to Victoria, the crossing of the Gulf of Georgia, and the difficult navigation of the Fraser. Money was required to carry out this plan, and to raise this a mass meeting of the residents of Whatcom was called early in April, 1858, a treasurer appointed, and arrangements made for obtaining subscriptions from the thousands encamped on the shores of the Bay awaiting means of access to the mines.

Work was immediately commenced on the trail from the Bay to Fort Hope, for no one at any time had any idea of making a trail to any point further up the River. Wages for men working on construction were fixed at \$3 per day without

¹ B.C. Papers Pt. I, p. 12.

² B. C. Papers, Pt. I, p. 13.

board, or \$2 per day and board. The nucleus of such a route was in existence, for a trail had been opened for some miles along the Nooksack River and an Indian trail extended to the Fraser. What the people of that City thought of the scheme is set out in a letter written by a resident of Whatcom to a friend in Steilacoom, the then capital of the Territory, was published in the *Puget Sound Herald* of that City, on April 16, 1858. He says:

"As regards the distances, country, &c., through which it passes, it starts from the town of Whatcom, leads through a timbered country a distance of 12 to 14 miles, half of which is already cut. Here we strike the Nootsack [Nooksack] prairies. One of these prairies are rich and well adapted for agricultural purposes; as yet no settlement has been made upon them on account of having no road to them. Proceeding on about 10 miles on a well beaten Indian trail, we reach the Sematz [Sumas] Prairies. These prairies extend to Frazer's River, a distance of 8 miles, and distant from the mouth of the river about 70 miles. At this point the road intersects with the Hudson Bay Company's Brigade road leading to Fort Hope, a distance of 15 or 20 miles. The intention is to construct a good practicable road for pack trains. This road can be travelled in three days from Whatcom to Fort Hope."

The writer adds that,

"Mr. Gibson of the firm of Tillon & Gibson, came down a day or two ago from Fort Hope and gives encouraging news &c."

He is very careful *not* to say that Mr. Gibson came by the trail.

It is evident that the writer had not personal knowledge of the route which he so complacently described. It is also to be noted that while it was apparently so free from difficulties, only six to seven miles had been opened, and no settlement had been made on the Nooksack prairies on account of the lack of access thereto.

However, the construction of the trail was pressed with all possible speed. Unless the miners congregated on the shores of the Bay could be convinced that the completion of the trail was only a matter of a short time, they would leave, and take the route by the Fraser. So certain were the people on Puget Sound that it would be completed "in a few days" that on the 16th of April a party left Steilacoom, headed by one Samuel

McCaw, "for the purpose of establishing pack trains from Bellingham Bay to the mines."³

The efforts of the Hudson's Bay Company to control the trade, and keep it centered at Victoria, was ridiculed by the editor of the *Puget Sound Herald*, who doubtless expressed the general opinion of the people to the south of the boundary. He says (April 16):

"It is rumored that it is the intention of the Hudson's Bay Co., to dispatch the Steamer 'Otter' to the mouth of Frazer's River, in order to prevent the trade with the mines, of which they claim exclusive control, from being carried on by others. We opine that the Hudson's Bay Co. will have a fine time in monopolizing this trade; a few Yankees have gone in that direction, and unless they have become extremely dull witted, we think will have a hand in the 'swapping'."

The next week (April 23) the *Herald* gave glowing accounts of the "fabulous" riches to be gained on the Fraser and Thompson Rivers and pointed out that

"So soon as the road from Whatcom is completed, which will be in about one week, the most difficult part of the journey is avoided."

But even the McCaw party who had left Steilacoom with such high hopes for making money by using the new means of access to the mines, did not wait for the completion of the trail, but pressed on by the Fraser River route to Fort Langley and thence to Forts Hope and Yale.⁴

During all this time many people remained at Whatcom, awaiting the opening of the trail. Large numbers of men and pack animals landed there to travel overland to Fort Hope as soon as it was completed. But by May 14 the river was rising rapidly, report said at the rate of two feet per day. This was bound to upset the calculations of the good people of the Bay, who were up to that time ignorant of the antics of Father Fraser in Spring. On May 21 the *Herald* says:

"As yet it remains a matter of doubt whether the trail from Bellingham Bay will be practicable."

The trail was evidently planned to go from the head of the Nooksack River via Summit (now Chilliwack) Lake, for in the same issue the *Herald* says:

"The Trail . . . is being pushed through with great

³ *Puget Sound Herald*, Apr. 16, 1858.

⁴ *Puget Sound Herald*, Apr. 16, 1858.

rapidity opening at the rate of five miles per day." "A party had left the Bay for the purpose of building a horse ferry-boat on Summit Lake, which lies in the route to the Mines."

On May 28 the *Herald* says:

"Mr. Fitzhugh reports that the trail from Bellingham Bay towards the mines is cut out about the distance of 70 miles, and that hopes are entertained of completing it the entire distance in a few days."

They evidently thought that by an extension of this trail it would be an easy matter to get through the Cascades to open country, and so to the Thompson River and thus avoid the Fraser Canyon. They were sure that in this way they would be able to get to the upper diggings on the Fraser in seven days.⁵

On June 4, work was reported as "progressing." Although men were quitting and pushing ahead, they were being replaced from those in the rear. On June 11, it was reported as "nearly through." On June 25 they were still in hopes of success, but on July 2 the condition of affairs was so bad that the *Herald* became pessimistic and said that a trail from Bellingham Bay to the mines was "about as practicable as a railroad to the moon."

However, a trail was opened. Evidently the promoters gave up the idea of completing it as originally contemplated and made a diversion to the Lower Fraser at a point some distance below Hope. On July 7, miners were coming in to the mines by that route. Its condition is described in a communication from Fort Hope to the *Victoria Gazette* of that date:

"Miners are coming in almost every day from the Bellingham Bay Trail; they curse the trail and the men who influenced them to go on it. The Trail strikes the river about thirty miles below Fort Hope, and then they have to get Indians to bring them up here in canoes. When they get here they have neither provisions nor blankets, and their clothing all torn to shreds."

The *Herald* confirms this, for in a letter from Fort Hope, published on July 2, the writer says "The Trail from Bellingham is a d—d humbug."

Roth's "History of Whatcom County" gives some interesting details on the use of the trail. He says:

"As soon as a trail was established as far as Fort Hope [really to a point a considerable distance below it] pack trains were organized with horses and mules brought from California. The rate was forty cents per pound for merchandise, but the

⁵ *Puget Sound Herald*, May 28, 1858.

difficulties were so great and the rush so shortlived that both Captn. Roeder and Mortimer Cook, who undertook the business, lost heavily."

In the meantime Governor Douglas had made another move. By June he had made arrangements with various American Steamers, the *Surprise*, *Sea Bird*, *Umatilla*, *Maria*, *Enterprise*, and others, to navigate the Fraser, and to carry out the requirements of the proclamation of May 8. This gave regular steamship communication between Victoria and the mines and made traffic easy and comparatively cheap; and, coupled with the difficulties arising on the northerly part of the Whatcom trail, and the low and marshy character of the soil over which it passed, it speedily put an end to travel by this much-talked-of means of communication.⁶

Early in September, another attempt was made to improve this trail. A contract was let for its improvement as far as Sumas Lake, as well as to cut another from the opposite bank of that body of water to intersect the Hudson's Bay Company's Brigade Trail at a point fifteen miles distant from Fort Hope, making the distance between them between forty and fifty miles.

It was soon apparent that the trail to the Fraser as completed was a hopeless proposition. Besides the natural difficulties inherent in its location, and the competition which it met from steamers plying on the Fraser, it would only take the traveller to a point a considerable distance below the Fraser Canyon. What was needed was a roadway which could be easily and speedily travelled and which would follow a route through the mountains to the open lands of the interior over which it would be easy to reach the Thompson River, where it was reported that there was more gold than was to be found on the bars between Hope and Yale. Moreover, such a trail would afford access to the mines at all times, whether the river was in flood or not.

A meeting was called in Whatcom to consider this new project and it was resolved to carry it out. The promoters knew it would be a costly and difficult undertaking; but they also knew that if they could not open such a trail, Whatcom was doomed. Should they fail, the trade of the Fraser Mines would be monopolized by the towns north of the boundary, and nothing would be left for Bellingham Bay. So a supreme effort was made. Subscriptions were obtained from other cities to the South. The services of Capt. W. W. DeLacy, a United States

⁶ Howay & Scholefield's *History of British Columbia*, Vol. II, p. 29.

Engineer, were obtained to head an expedition fitted out for the purpose.

If ever a man was given a difficult task to carry out it was DeLacy. It was no short cut across country, such as the completed trail to the Fraser below Fort Hope. He must first find a route through the cascades, and then through the unknown wilderness to the Hudson's Bay Company's trails in the north. Time and again he made sure that he had a practicable route, and time and again he was disappointed. Never discouraged, he kept at his task till at last he broke through the last chain of mountains and saw the open country, and the smoke of campfires on the Brigade Trail to the North. No man in those trying days deserves greater credit than this tireless explorer. Even if his endeavors proved to be useless, one must admire the indomitable spirit of the man.

He was at his work by the early part of June. He had to pierce the rugged masses of mountains north and east of Mount Baker and find a way over the divide down to the Skagit River. Following this stream up northerly he encountered many difficulties, but at last turning up the Sumallo, he reached the destination at which he aimed,—the Brigade trail of the Hudson's Bay Company from Hope to Kamloops.

Our chief source of information on this point is the *Victoria Gazette*, which, besides the news communicated to it direct, copies largely from the *Northern Light*, that shortlived paper which was published in Whatcom in the summer of 1858. This is fortunate, for so far as can be ascertained, no copies of the latter are in existence.

By June 11, DeLacy was on the Chilliwack River, looking over the ground.⁷ On the 14th of June he writes to Whatcom saying:

"Don't send anybody out on the trail until I report it through. I have made two unsuccessful attempts to get through, but the snow prevents. What I supposed was Summit Lake is not within forty miles of the Summit. I have not been supplied according to agreement. I shall make another effort."⁸

(To Be Continued)

⁷ *Puget Sound Herald*, June 11, 1858.

⁸ *Puget Sound Herald*, June 18, 1858.