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THE BUILDING OF THE WALLA WALLA & COLUMBIA RIVER RAILROAD*

Recording at this time accurately the happenings of fifty years ago would ordinarily be a difficult task. The man, however, who built the Walla Walla and Columbia River Railroad left unmistakable footprints to mark his career. His personal books of account taken in connection with his daily diary provide undisputable records of the early history and development of the Inland Empire, so far as his personal effort had to do with them. Tracing his ancestry, it is found that Alexander Baker came to Boston from England in 1635. Among his descendants was Ezra Baker, the grandfather of Dorsey Syng Baker and a cousin of Ethan Allen. Doubtless these sturdy ancestors endowed Dorsey Syng Baker with the courage and strength to build, with but little assistance in the face of seemingly unsurmountable difficulties, the first railroad in the Northwest east of the Cascade Range.

Dorsey Syng Baker, generally known as Doctor Baker, was born in Illinois October 18th, 1823. He graduated from the Jefferson Medical College at Philadelphia in 1845, and for the next three years he practiced his profession in the Middle West. Early in the spring of 1848 he took Horace Greeley's advice and reached Oregon late in the fall of the same year. He attended the sick of the emigrant train with which he traveled, and in consideration of his services, he was provided with board and bed—he, himself, riding horseback. During the gold excitement he made two trips to California, but finally returned to Douglas County, Oregon, where he erected the first flour mill in the southern part of that state. In 1858 he engaged in a general mercantile business in Portland. An advertisement in the *Oregonian* of March 15, 1859, shows that he was advocating profit sharing at that time as we

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know it today, but on a more extended scale, embracing the sharing of one half his net profits to all his cash customers. "Quick sales for cash and no losses" was his motto. Later he became interested in navigation on the Columbia River, controlling the steamers *E. D. Baker* and the *Spray*, and finally he purchased the steamer *Northwest*, plying on the upper Columbia and Snake Rivers. All of these boats were sold to the Oregon Steam Navigation Company. In 1859 he engaged in general merchandising at Walla Walla, to which place he moved in 1861 and permanently resided thereafter. Out of his mercantile enterprise, in 1869, grew the first bank in the Territory of Washington, now the Baker-Boyer National Bank of Walla Walla. Briefly these are the records covering the life of Doctor Baker up to the time he became seriously interested in connecting by rail the little town of Walla Walla with navigation on the Columbia River.

As early as the year 1862 the question of building a railroad from Walla Walla to Wallula was considered. A charter with this in view was secured. According to Lyman's history thirty of the prominent citizens of Walla Walla were included as incorporators. Doctor Baker was among this number. Various propositions were presented and considered whereby money might be obtained for the purpose of financing the construction of the road. However, nothing tangible resulted.

March 23rd, 1868, marked another era of popular discussion of this same question which resulted in the incorporation of the Walla Walla & Columbia River Railroad Company with Doctor Baker, A. H. Reynolds, I. T. Reese, A. Kyger, J. A. Lasater, J. D. Mix, B. Scheideman and W. H. Newell as incorporators, but as in the former instance nothing materialized from the effort.

Following this, however, in 1869 authority was granted to the County of Walla Walla to issue bonds in the sum of \$300,000.00 to aid in building this road conditioned upon its confirmation by a two-thirds vote of the legal voters of the county. The election for this purpose was delayed and did not occur until Spetember 18th, 1871, and it then failed to carry by eighteen votes. The reason for the failure can rightfully be attributed to no greater nor less an influence than that a tiny insect commonly known as the bed bug. This fact was not given to the press nor was it generally known, but the writer well remembers the incident. Doctor Baker was deeply interested in the success of the election in question and made a personal house-to-house canvass in the rural districts

of the county in the interest of carrying the necessary vote. At that time Walla Walla County covered a large area and was an empire within itself. A well known and influential resident in a section of the county, which is now in Columbia County, owned a stage station, store, hotel and saloon. It was on one of these canvassing trips that Doctor Baker and the writer accepted the hospitality of this man for the night. This was purposely arranged in order that his influence might be had in favor of carrying the bonds at the coming election. But little argument was necessary to convince him of the merit of the cause, and he agreed to join in the effort to carry the election. All went well until the following morning when our host learned that a change to the hay loft had been made by his guests during the night, in their sleeping quarters, due to the presence of insects in the room assigned to them. The landlord became greatly incensed and declared that his house was not so infested. He thereupon bent his best efforts to defeat the carrying of the bonds at the election, which without doubt was the cause of its failure. This illustrates how some trivial incident often changes the whole course of history.

Doctor Baker doubtless had some misgivings as to what the result of the election would be, for he had, several months previous to this date, made preparation to build the road himself. This is evidenced by his check, still in existence, drawn in payment of stock subscribed by him, and the calling of a meeting of the board of directors of the company which had already been organized, the record of which is duly preserved.

Early in the summer of 1871 Doctor Baker sent scouting expeditions to the headwaters of the Yakima river in Washington and the Clearwater in Idaho, with a view of determining the best source of supply of timber for construction purposes. He also had preliminary surveys of the road made and filed as early as May of the same year.

Thus the real date of the beginning of the enterprise is established as 1871 instead of 1872 as recorded by some historians. On the fourth of December of that year he and his wife and baby left for New York by stage, taking the train on the Union Pacific at Kelton, Utah. In the latter part of December he was in Pittsburg where he made purchase of his first locomotive. This weighed only seven and one-half tons and cost \$4,400.00. It arrived at Wallula June 3rd, 1872, via steamer around the Horn. On the 11th day of March, 1872, Doctor Baker was again at home for-

ulating plans to construct the road. He realized that he did not have sufficient capital to do this work unaided, and therefore he associated with himself several of his friends in the enterprise. These men were of limited means and as it afterwards appears, they were not of great assistance in a financial way. Stock was subscribed and issued, the first assessment being 15%. Other assessments followed, but the stockholders did not respond uniformly, some paying and others not. In one of the president's reports a statement of these facts appears, and he calls attention of the stockholders to the unfairness of this condition, at the same time urging each one to fulfill the agreements contained in their subscription or otherwise to surrender enough of their stock for resale to others, so as to make the portion retained fully paid up to 100%. He reminded them, however, that when the road was completed, it would be a very profitable investment, and urged each and every one to retain his holdings in the company. Nevertheless most all of them ultimately sold their stock to him. Thus it appears that practically the whole burden of financing the building of the road fell upon one man.

As president of the road he received a salary of \$2,400.00 per year payable in stock of the company. He gave every detail his personal attention, going over the line at least twice each week during the construction period in the interest of the greatest possible economical administration.

At the date of the beginning of construction, it must be remembered Walla Walla was but slightly developed. Agricultural interest had been overlooked up to that time. Indeed in the year 1874 there were only 134,000 bushels of grain exported—a fair production now for only 5,000 acres. This data is taken from the records of the Walla Walla & Columbia River Railroad Company, and may be slightly incorrect in view of the fact that some grain may have been transported to Wallula in that year by wagons. On January 1st, 1870, the total deposits in banks of the Territory were \$17,223.57. The banking house of Baker & Boyer was the only bank then in Washington. Its capital and surplus on that date was \$120,008.46. This was the state of the country's development when Doctor Baker undertook to build thirty-two miles of railroad. The supplying of necessary funds to meet expenditures soon began to assume a serious aspect as one stockholder after another, losing faith, sold his stock. Bonds secured by a mortgage failed to be negotiated. Even as late as 1874 and 1875, when the

road was nearing completion, treasury stock was offered for sale but failed to find purchasers.

In January of the latter year the company had a cargo of steel en route from England for twenty miles of road. The cost of this delivered at Wallula was \$65,000.00, which sum had to be met upon its arrival there or within five months from date of shipment. At this time the company also had a large floating indebtedness, in fact larger than was permitted under its by-laws. It was then that the president of the road had to resort to his private resources to tide over this emergency.

All these were the conditions when Walla Walla was anxiously awaiting and urging the prompt completion of the road. The company in January, 1875, responded to this urgent request by proposing to make the necessary additional purchases of steel rail and complete the entire system within sixty days after its arrival on condition that the citizens of Walla Walla subscribe and pay for \$75,000.00 of the stock of the company then in the treasury, at the same cost to them that the old owners had paid. This offer was rejected on January 19th by a communication signed by five leading citizens, they having been appointed a committee in charge of the conference. Certainly this showed a lack of confidence in the success of the enterprise, or the stock was not considered good from an investment point of view. One bright ray of hope appeared in the horizon, however, in an offer coming voluntarily from the committee providing a "subsidy subscription" to the company of \$20,000.00.

The communication, which was dated January 19th, 1875, was answered on January 21st by the railroad company in the form of a counter proposition increasing the amount to be paid to \$25,000.00 and a deed to three acres of land for depot purposes within a half mile of the intersection of Main and Third Streets in Walla Walla, together with some other minor changes. This proposition was finally accepted, the extra steel purchased and the road completed before the expiration of that year. It has frequently been stated that this subsidy was exacted by the company as a condition precedent to the final completion of the road to Walla Walla. This is not true, as shown by the communications which are still preserved and are very clear on the question. Doubtless without this contribution the road would not have been completed for another year as the company's financial condition at that time was already strained to the utmost.

Doctor Baker's vision into the future probably foresaw these financial difficulties that were encountered, and caused him to decide in favor of the building of a "strap iron road" in the first instance instead of the usual steel rail. Necessity and not preference thus actuated him, for in 1871 he examined a wooden constructed road in the state of New York which did not meet with his approval, and he sought to improve this by putting strap iron on the wooden rails. While many people have made light of this, still it served the purpose for which it was built. It extended the day when the purchase and payment of steel rail had to be finally made. In the meantime the owner by realizing profits on his other investments together with the profits derived from the traffic on the road, was enabled to purchase and pay for this steel rail. It is a fact that when the road was finally completed and paid for, thirty-five per cent. of the cost was paid from the earnings of the road itself, and only 65% was represented by invested capital.

The entire cost of the road completed up to the date of its sale, which came in 1878, was \$356,134.85. In this amount is included practically all the cost of locomotives and other rolling stock. This equipment consisted of enough cars to handle all freight expeditiously. There were two passenger cars. One was built locally and the other purchased in the East and shipped "knocked down" and assembled in Walla Walla. The road owned five locomotives, two of which were light weight, but three were up to date construction passenger and freight engines for that period. Thus it will be seen that the cost per mile including equipment was about \$11,000. This is remarkably small considering the conditions under which the road was built. It is to be noted that there never was a mortgage on the property, which is rare in railroad construction.

Early in 1872 logging outfits were sent into the woods at the headwaters of the Yakima River. Timber was cut and hauled to the river's edge. By this time it was so late in the season that a drive was impossible due to the low water stage. Some logs, nevertheless, were run in October and November. They were boomed at the mouth of the Yakima and from there rafted to the mill which had been built on the banks of the Columbia one and one-half miles north of the old town of Wallula, a big eddy at this point making it possible to land and hold logs for milling

purposes. Here a small town was built. The necessary living quarters, store, blacksmith shop and engine houses formed the nucleus of the new town. The name "Slabtown" attached for the reason that the building material used was principally slabs. The first ties were milled on November 11th, 1872. From that time until the road was finished expeditions were dispatched each season for additional logs, with varied success. In 1873 but few logs were secured owing to the lack of flood waters. The following year, however, the drive was successful. From Slabtown the road was projected eastward toward Walla Walla. As soon as it became a factor in the shipping of freight a branch line was built in 1874 from a point which is now Wallula Junction to the old town of Wallula on the banks of the Columbia, to which place the Oregon Steam Navigation Company's boats ran regularly in seasonable weather enroute to and from Portland. Now there is scarcely a vestige to mark where either Slabtown or old Wallula were once prosperous villages. One might say as Goldsmith did in his *Deserted Village*, "And the long grass o'ertops the mouldering wall," but for a fact that no walls remain, and man knows that no grass grows in those beds of gravel or dunes of shifting sand.

The road was constructed in the first instance by laying on the road bed, ties that were gained to fit the wooden stringers, 4x6 inches forming the rails. As soon as iron could be secured the wooden rails were surmounted by a strap of iron one-half inch thick by two inches wide, forming the bearing surface on which the trains ran. This was spiked to the wooden rails and bent down over each end and securely fastened, to prevent the iron from curling up at the ends due to the friction exerted by the driving wheels of the locomotives. Nevertheless this precaution was not always effective, with the result that the ends of the iron would sometimes be forced up through the floor of the cars. These were termed snake heads and they had no respect for either freight or passengers. However, nothing serious ever resulted from them, and it might be added here that during the years of construction and operation of the road by Doctor Baker no lives were lost as the result of accidents. Sixteen miles of this strap iron road were completed by 1874. This brought the road to Touchet station, from which point it began to take wheat shipments. On this character of road it was not possible to make

fast time, and it also often happened that the train became derailed. On one of these occasions a pedestrian came along and generously lent his assistance in getting the train back on the track. When Doctor Baker cordially extended the stranger an invitation to ride, the reply came back: "No thank you, Doctor, I am in a hurry." During that year 5,167 tons of freight were carried. This lent encouragement towards being able to purchase and pay for steel rail, and before the season had passed an order for twenty miles of steel had been placed abroad. As soon as it arrived the old strap iron stringers were abandoned and regular steel rail replaced them.

The fact that a portion of the road was constructed of strap iron, and strap being thought of in connection with rawhide, probably gave rise to the name "Rawhide Railroad," according to a story in the Saturday Evening Post on May 6th, 1922, entitled "The Rawhide Railroad," and credited by many of its readers as being true. This, of course, is purely fiction and existed only in the wild imagination of the author of the story.

The story is told that the engineers in laying out this line of railroad did not have any surveying instruments, and that if they had they would not have known how to use them. In their stead a whiskey bottle half filled and held horizontally was used as a level. By sighting along the surface of the liquid the proper levels were obtained. Of course this is amusing, and granting the truth of it for that reason, still let it be known that the Union Pacific System has owned and operated this road for many years with the grades unchanged as laid out originally by these pioneer engineers.

The following is a schedule of the freight shipped over the road during the time Doctor Baker operated it:

	Grain and Flour		Merchandise	
1874.....	4,021	tons	1,126	tons
1875.....	9,155	tons	2,192	1-10 tons
1876.....	15,266½	tons	4,034	tons
1877.....	28,807	1-20 tons	8,368	tons
1878.....	27,365	1-20 tons	10,454	1-3 tons
Totals.....	83,614	tons	26,174	tons

Making a total of exports of 83,614 tons and imports of 26,174 tons, or a total of practically 110,000 tons. The average

tariff covering these years was \$5.50 per ton. Reports of passenger traffic for these years seem to be misplaced except for one year, 1877. Paid fares for that year amounted to \$14,824.38, covering 4,941 tickets sold, or an average of $6\frac{3}{4}$ passengers each way per day.

During the year following the completion of the road a peculiar condition arose, for although freight rates had been reduced one-half of what they formerly were by wagon, still a great clamor arose for a further reduction. The farmers and merchants combined against the road, and the movement of freight again began by team even at a higher rate. This created a serious problem for the owner. He could not afford to lose the freight on the year's crop and it required quick and decisive action to outgeneral this unexpected movement. Accordingly he made an arrangement with the Oregon Steam Navigation Company to the effect that that company would receive and transport to Portland all freight offered by the Walla Walla and Columbia River Railroad billed as fast freight over its line, giving preference in point of time of shipment, to any other freight by whomsoever offered. Wheat at this time was commanding a good figure, but proceeds could not be had for it until the wheat reached Portland. As soon as it became known that preference was being given to fast freight shipments, wheat began to move again by rail, and the backbone of the opposition was broken, notwithstanding that the railroad established a rate of \$1.00 per ton more for wheat shipped by fast freight than the regular tariff rates. The story that the road carried fast freight on the front cars and slow freight on the last cars of the train is interesting but, of course, is not true. This class of freight originated in opposition to express companies, and as a result the latter only carried valuables. Fast freight was transported over the different portages and arrived in Portland on passenger schedules and was handled more cheaply than at express rates. It is recorded that a Lewiston firm even expressed a keg of silver billed as a keg of nails by fast freight. For some days this keg was lost somewhere enroute which gave the consignees considerable anxiety. It thus became a very valuable keg of nails. It will be understood that wheat shipped as fast freight did not take the passenger schedule, for just as soon as this movement became general, the schedule was necessarily unchanged from the slow schedule, as it existed previously.

During the period following the completion of the road the owner, with his usual keen perception, drew the following conclusions: That within a reasonably short time a transcontinental road would be constructed down the Columbia, paralleling and rendering valueless his short road. He argued that water transportation with several portages could not compete with a through line of railroad. He considered the advisability of extending the line to Portland himself, but failing health caused him to decide against this plan, and he finally concluded that the best policy would be to sell the line to the Oregon Steam Navigation Company. The owners of this company were not favorably inclined to this purchase, but when they were reminded of an axiom that he had formulated, to-wit: that he who controls the freight to the approaches to the river owns the river, they altered their views. Wallula at this date was the gateway to the Northwest east of the mountains, including Idaho and Montana. Realizing the force of these facts, the result of this interview was that the Oregon Steam Navigation Company purchased the property from Doctor Baker at a figure which, taken in connection with the dividends he had already received, gave him a very handsome profit.

On February 18th, 1878, Dr. Baker entered into an agreement whereby 6-7th of the capital stock of the Walla Walla & Columbia River Railroad was to be sold and transferred to S. G. Reed and C. E. Tilton on or before the 19th day of January, 1879. These men represented the Oregon Steam Navigation Company in this purchase. The contract covering this transaction is quite long, containing fourteen pages of closely written matter, and among other things secures each of the contracting parties one-half of the net profits arising from the operation of the road during this interim. In order to make the contract absolutely binding each party required of the other a bond in the sum of \$200,000.00 as liquidated damages for failure to comply with the terms of the contract. These were performed on the day specified as shown by written acknowledgments signed by all parties and attached to the contract. Subsequently on the 4th day of May, 1879, Dr. Baker sold to Henry Villard the balance of the capital stock of the road, which deal was consummated finally on October 1st, 1879. Thus the ownership of the stock of the Walla Walla & Columbia River Railroad by Doctor Baker became a closed chapter. The property is now a part of the Union Pacific System. Thereafter Doctor Baker built two additional lines of rail-

road connecting Walla Walla with Dixie and Dudley (now Tracy), Washington, of a total length of fifteen miles. These properties are now owned by the Northern Pacific Railway Company.

The next annual meeting of the Walla Walla & Columbia River Railway Company was held in April, 1879. The new owners with expressions of "continued confidence" elected Doctor Baker president for the coming year with an increased salary. His memorandum book shows that he at once took up the locating for the new owners a branch line to Weston, Oregon, but as a matter of fact this line was not extended further than Blue Mountain Station, a distance of about twelve miles from Old Whitman Station, the point of divergence from the main line. When this year had expired Doctor Baker retired from active transportation problems.

Governor Miles C. Moore once said: "Few men living in pioneer surroundings ever had the opportunity of seeing the happy fruition of their early efforts such as Doctor Baker witnessed, for he beheld the transformation of a crude pioneer section—a wilderness of opportunities—into a thriving center of civilization. His railroad enterprise contributed greatly to the settlement and upbuilding of the Inland Empire. It was his foresight more than any other human agency which made Walla Walla the early commercial metropolis for eastern Washington and for Montana and Idaho as well.

"It has been sixty years since Doctor Baker located in Walla Walla. Looking back over the vista of years it is impossible for the two generations which have come upon the scene since his arrival to realize just what foresight, genius and determination were necessary to enable him and his associates to brave the dangers and surmount the difficulties which confronted them among the hardships of early frontier days. Doctor Baker had the keenness of vision, the constructive genius and the tenacity and courage to build for the future. His insight and practical grasp enabled him to do heroic work in the pioneer field of development of one of the richest and most beautiful areas on the American continent. In consequence of his remarkable career his monument lives in the comforts and conveniences of life and is seen in the fertile fields and happy homes which his foresight and energy made possible in the beautiful Walla Walla Valley."

W. W. BAKER