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STEPTOE BUTTE AND STEPTOE BATTLE-FIELD

Travelers southward from Spokane over what is known as the Inland Empire Highway, the Great Northern (Electric) Railway to Colfax, or the Northern Pacific Railway to Lewiston, (or vice versa) pass through the scene of a real event in the history of the "Inland Empire" of the State of Washington; real because it marked the beginning of the transition of the country from the home of the Indian to that of the white man. The ease, luxury, and speed of present day living do not lend themselves to much interest in deeds of the past or the beauties of the passing landscape, and reminders are needed to direct attention to both. Curiously enough here nature and tradition supply this need in the form of a beautiful and sightly elevation known as Steptoe Butte, which rises out of the gracefully rolling wheat fields of Whitman County, Washington, a few miles east of the highway. This cone-shaped hill stands thirty-six hundred feet above sea level, according to the geological survey, and about twelve hundred feet above the surrounding country, and affords, to those who climb to its top, a wonderful view in every direction. At one time an observatory was maintained at the summit for the use of visitors. The association of the name of Colonel Edward J. Steptoe, of the United States Army, with this landmark, and the identification of other historic names and places within its range have suggested a need for this study and brief discussion.

Incidental to the theme is the history of the highway itself. Settlement of all the rich farming and stock country lying north of Snake River came from the south, from Walla Walla as a commercial center. The Palouse Country (referring to the turf or prairie country as compared with the timbered mountains and valleys, and commonly understood to have been so named by the French and mixed-blood trappers who first traversed it),¹ as

¹ Plausible, but not correct. The Indian name for the Palouse River at its mouth is given by the Nez Perces as Pah-loots (some say Pee-lus) meaning gooseberry. Lewis and Clark, in 1805-6, wrote the name Pal-laces on their map (No. 40 of the Thwaites' series of maps). The fur traders did not use the name in their literature. Mr. Roy Lane, of Lapwai, has assisted in interviewing the Indians, for the above.

now applied to Whitman County came prominently into the public eye during the very late sixties and early seventies. Colfax, as a business center, existed earlier than Spokane. The first news printing press of Spokane was removed from Colfax by a heroic struggle of seven days with the mud between the two cities during the spring of 1879. That item of early freight was hauled over the route of this highway, formerly an Indian trail and next a stage road for passengers and mail. The first stage station south of Spokane was at Spangle, and the next at the "Cash-up" Davis ranch, identified with the present wheat shipping station of Cash-up. This spot on both highway and railway affords one of the finest views of Steptoe Butte. The story of pioneer travel over this road, and of the hospitality of "Cash-up" Davis, is for another to tell, and may be made a vivid one.

With the coming of settlers to the country, inquiries naturally began to be made as to the name of this most important feature of the landscape and large tales began to be told of a certain fight on its summit between the Indians and an army of soldiers from Fort Walla Walla twelve or fifteen years earlier.² Thus the name Steptoe was gradually attached to the landmark. The first publication of the name has not been positively traced, but "Steptoe Butte" appears in the *Spokan Times* of May 15th, 1879, in an item taken from the *Columbia Chronicle* of Dayton; and the *Palouse Gazette* of Colfax printed it on November 21st, 1879.³ Fifty years' continuous use has probably made it permanent.

Scientifically this name is not correct. Maps in the Pacific Railway Reports, issued by Gov. Isaac I. Stevens who passed through the country in the Fall of 1853, show the name "Pyramid Peak"; clearly an artificial designation. Lieutenant (later Captain) John Mullan, the pioneer road engineer of this region, accepted this for his maps, which were published in the early sixties, but also left a record of Indian names for the landmark. He found that the Spokane and Coeur d'Alene Indians, belonging to the Salishan family, called it Se-emp-tee-ta, while the Nez Perces and Palouses, of the Sahaptin family, called it E-o-mosh-toss. Officers of the fur trading companies, and early Protestant and Catholic missionaries, had been traveling through the country for forty years prior to the advent of Governor Stevens, and

² Even an army officer assisted in these tales. See *Journal of Military Service*

³ Prof. J. Orin Oliphant, of Cheney Normal School, has kindly supplied these dates. *Institution*, Vol. 42, p. 449 *et seq.*

possibly some name used by them will be found after more minute research, but further inquiry here into the sources and etymology involved would only add monotony to this discussion.

Historically, also, this name is not correct. The fight between the Indians and Colonel Steptoe's command actually occurred some twenty miles northward of Steptoe Butte, as the road runs. Between Spangle and Cash-up on the highway, and two-miles south of the boundary line between Spokane and Whitman counties, stands the lively little city of Rosalia. On the hill adjoining, the city maintains its park, called Steptoe Memorial Park, which contains a dignified shaft of granite, visible from passing automobiles and trains. This park, and monument, mark the scene of the close of the battle of May 17th, 1858. The park was dedicated on Flag Day in June, 1908, with appropriate ceremonies.⁴ Its location had been determined by local tradition, by the evidence of certain relics, and by such documents as were then available, particularly the journal of Lieutenant Kip, of the United States Army, who had visited the scene four months after the battle. To assist in identification certain surviving members of the ill-fated party had been invited to Rosalia, and one of those doughty troopers remarked to the writer, after returning home, that he had agreed with the decision, "but knew d— well they were not within three miles of the right spot." In this classic remark, Mike⁵ did not mean all that was implied, but merely to emphasize the frailties of memory so long after the event. Since then attention has been called to a rare government document which positively identifies the location of the battle, to which particular reference will be made as this discussion progresses.

The narrative of the Steptoe Expedition northward from Fort Walla Walla in the spring of 1858 has been ably and clearly told by Mr. Benjamin Manring, of Colfax, in his book entitled *The Conquest of the Coeur d'Alenes, Spokanes and Palouses* (1912). It is not necessary to repeat the story here.

Mention has been made of Lieut. John Mullan, who constructed the well-known Mullan Road across Eastern Washington and Northern Idaho. Lieutenant Mullan, had he been able to carry out his orders promptly, would have been in the Palouse Country early in the spring of 1858, and would probably have fallen a victim to the excited state of mind of the Indians and

⁴ See *Washington Historical Quarterly*, Vol. II, for account of this celebration, and address by Hon. Stephen J. Chadwick on this subject.

⁵ The late Michael Kenney, of Walla Walla.

not lived to do any road building. Fate ruled otherwise, and he came to Fort Walla Walla that summer under assignment as topographical engineer under Col. George Wright, who proceeded northward in August with a much larger force, quickly and completely whipped the Indians in two pitched battles west of Spokane, and made the country safe for travel and settlement by white people ever after.

This campaign under Colonel Wright was marked by several very summary decisions and acts, one of which took place at their camp about ten miles northeast of the Steptoe battle-field. In his official report Colonel Wright mentions it very briefly, as follows: "At sunset last evening the Yakima Chief Ow-hi presented himself before me. He came from the lower Spokane River, and told me that he had left his son, Qual-chian, at that place. * * * I seized Ow-hi and put him in irons. I then sent a messenger for Qual-chian, desiring his presence forthwith, with notice that if he did not come I would hang Ow-hi. Qual-chian came to me at 9 o'clock this morning, and at 9¼ a.m. he was hung."

Hence the name Hangman Creek in Spokane County instead of the beautiful and euphonious Lahtoo (or Latah) Creek of the Nez Percés. The Spokanes called it Nedwhauld Creek. This stern execution took place at a ford of the stream a short distance below the town of Waverly, Washington, where now a bridge on the regularly traveled highway between Waverly and Spangle spans the creek.⁶

Soon after arriving at this camp on the 22nd day of September, Col. Wright sent his topographical engineers with a detachment of officers and men to the battle-field of Colonel Steptoe to gather up such equipment as might be found there. Lieutenant Mullan's report of the performance of that duty is contained in his *Topographical Memoir of Col. Wright's Campaign*, compiled in Washington the following winter, and filed with the Secretary of War in February, 1859. This *Memoir* included a map of the battle-field. With these two reports, the map, and the Oakesdale Quadrangle map of the U.S. Geological Survey, it is possible to confirm the location already agreed upon as the battle-field of May 17th, 1858.

Briefly stated, these documents show that, proceeding northward on his way to the Colville Country, Col. Steptoe made use of a regular Indian trail across the Palouse Country, and that, broadly speaking, this trail followed what is now the line of the

⁶ Formerly known as Smythe's Ford.

Northern Pacific Railway between Pullman and Rosalia, Washington. His camp on the night of May 15th was just south of the site of Rosalia, on the creek near the park already mentioned. The next morning he had proceeded only eight or ten miles when stopped by the Indians and forced into camp for the afternoon and night near a small stream west or southwest of Plaza, Washington.⁷ Pine Creek, coming from the south and east, flows north through Rosalia, and then at a distance of three miles bends to the west at a point where North Pine Creek joins it. One mile up North Pine Creek a water course called Spring Valley comes in from the east, and here the Palouse Highway leaves the Inland Empire Highway, while the latter crosses North Pine Creek on a bridge. At the junction of these two roads, the battle of May 17th, 1858, began. The troops at once took to the hills on the east, but fighting occurred on the slopes and in the valley also, and Captain Taylor was killed directly on the highway, about a mile north of Rosalia. The final position on the hill at Rosalia was reached early in the afternoon and held until about ten o'clock that night. The days were long in May, and the early dawn of the morning after revealed to the hurrying officers and men the top of the beautiful E-o-mosh-toss as a guide in their anxious retreat.

In the positive identification of the locality the map⁸ furnishes the real evidence. This map was prepared by Mr. Kolecki and Mr. Sohon, engineers and assistants to Lieutenant Mullan. The water courses and hills and various positions of the troops are clearly shown. Pine Creek was then Ingossomen Creek, whether a Spokane or a Nez Perce name the writer does not know. The latitude of the battle-field ($47^{\circ} 14' 24''$) agrees very exactly with the present site of Rosalia, but the longitude ($117^{\circ} 11' 53''$) runs some three miles east of the city. The same error occurs with other observations during the campaign, and was due to faulty chronometers, to which fact Lieut. Mullan calls attention in his *Memoir*.

The retreat to the crossing of Snake River seems to have followed the trail of their advance, and not a shorter route by the present highway through Colfax. The story that Timothy, a chief of the Nez Percés, was with Colonel Steptoe as guide, and

⁷ The exact location of this camping place is a subject for conjecture. One account says it was at a "sheet of water." The Mullan-Kolecki map indicates that it was seven miles north and seven miles west of Rosalia, which would be in the neighborhood of the Buckeye School west of Plaza. This map, however, is defective as to the course of Pine Creek northwest of Rosalia.

⁸ An enlarged photostat copy of this map will be deposited with the Eastern Washington Historical Society at Spokane.

led the way for him in the darkness, is not confirmed. Those survivors with whom the writer has talked, with one exception, had no recollection of the presence of Timothy, and Colonel Steptoe and other officers, in reports and letters, are entirely silent as to Timothy. This tale must be rejected as an extravagance of mind not unusual with its author.

Where the private soldiers, killed in action, were finally buried, is not known. The military cemetery at Fort Walla Walla contains no markers to indicate burial there. The remains of the officers were sent to their relatives in the East.

The foregoing is only an introduction to the tragic story, which is told in the following excerpt from Lieut. Mullan's *Memoir*, being Senate Exec. Document No. 32 of the 35th Congress, 2nd Session, page 59 *et seq.*:

"This detached command, starting early on the morning of the 24th, passed over a series of rolling prairie hills, and in two miles reached a narrow strip of cotton-wood, with a broad belt of pine timber to our right. This same character continued for a distance of eight miles, when we reached a prairie bottom some 300 yards wide, lined on either side by walls of basaltic rock 100 feet high, in which was the dry bed of a lake, from which flows, in the spring season, a small creek that flows into the Ingossomen creek. At this point the pine timber had become more sparse and much scattered, save a few detached clumps where it was more dense. At eight and a half miles from the Lahtoo, this prairie bottom, which runs north and south, is intersected by a cañon running at right angles to it and fifty yards wide. It was at the southwest corner of this intersection that the rear guard of Colonel Steptoe's command, under Lieutenant Gaston, was fired upon in the retreat of May 17, 1858. The trail that Steptoe followed, which, at the intersection spoken of, was to the west of a small dry willow creek, in a mile to the south crosses it to the east and ascended a hill some 250 feet high where a first position of the howitzers was taken.

"Gaining the summit of this hill we had a fine view of a large portion of the ground upon which Colonel Steptoe's command operated.

"Lieutenant Gregg commanding in advance, with Lieutenant Gaston on the hills to the left, Captain Taylor on the right, with Sergeant Williams in the rear, the retreat was made along the southern portion of the hill where they entered the valley of the Ingossomen creek. This last stream rises in a range of low

prairie hills and flows in a northerly direction until, reaching the base of the hills, it makes a sharp bend to the south and west. This stream at this season has no current, is two feet deep, fifteen yards wide, and water lying in long canal shaped basaltic basins. From this hill westwards the pines continued in its valley and near its border; while to the south nothing save a few clumps of scattered cotton-wood along the banks of the Ingosso-men were to be seen.

"The valley of this creek is about 300 yards wide, and lined on either side by ranges of prairie hills 200 feet high; and following the general direction of the stream for two miles, when, bending more to the east, we reach the point where the final and decisive stand of Steptoe was made, and from which he commenced his retreat. The hill upon which the final position was taken was 150 feet high. The howitzers were placed near the summit—one to defend the hills beyond, and one near the crest to guard the communication with the water.

"It is not my province or intention to here give any detailed account regarding the position and affairs of that memorable contest, but simply to relate the part we took in our present mission to the battlefield.

"But for the information of those who never knew all the particulars, and as it is somewhat germane to our own duties, I herewith append Colonel Steptoe's own official reports regarding the matter, extracted from the published official communication of the Secretary of War to the present Congress:

"Fort Walla-Walla, May 23, 1858.

"Major: On the 2d instant I informed you of my intention to move northward with a part of my command. Accordingly, on the 6th I left here with companies C, E, and H, 1st dragoons, and E, 9th infantry; in all, five company officers, and one hundred and fifty-two enlisted men. Hearing that the hostile Pelouses were near Al-pon-on-we, in the Nez Perces land, I moved to that point, and was ferried across Snake river by Timothy, a Nez Perce chief. The enemy fled towards the north, and I followed leisurely on the road to Colville. On Sunday morning, the 16th, when near the To-hoto-nim-me, in the Spokane country, we found ourselves suddenly in presence of ten or twelve hundred Indians of various tribes—Spokanes, Pelouses, Coeur d'Alenes, Yakimas, and some others—all armed, painted, and defiant. I moved slowly on until just about to enter a ravine that wound along the bases of several hills, which were all crowned by the excited savages.

Perceiving that it was their purpose to attack us in this dangerous place, I turned aside and encamped, the whole wild, frenzied mass moving parallel to us, and, by yells, taunts, and menaces, apparently trying to drive us to some initiatory act of violence. Towards night a number of chiefs rode up to talk with me, and inquired what were our motives to this intrusion upon them? I answered, that we were passing on to Colville, and had no hostile intentions towards the Spokanes, who had always been our friends, nor towards any other tribes who were friendly; that my chief aim in coming so far was to see the Indians and the white people at Colville, and, by friendly discussion with both, endeavor to strengthen their good feelings for each other. They expressed themselves satisfied, but would not consent to let me have canoes, without which it would be impossible to cross the Spokane river. I concluded, for this reason, to retrace my steps at once, and the next morning (17th) turned back towards this post. We had not marched three miles when the Indians, who had gathered on the hills adjoining the line of march, began an attack upon the rear guard, and immediately the fight became general. We labored under the great disadvantage of having to defend the pack train while in motion and in a rolling country peculiarly favorable to the Indian mode of warfare. We had only a small quantity of ammunition, but, in their excitement, the soldiers could not be restrained from firing it in the wildest manner. They did, however, under the leading of their respective commanders, sustain well the reputation of the army for some hours, charging the enemy repeatedly with gallantry and success. The difficult and dangerous duty of flanking the column was assigned to Brevet Captain Taylor and Lieutenant Gaston, to both of whom it proved fatal. The latter fell about twelve o'clock, and the enemy soon after charging formally upon his company, it fell back in confusion and could not be rallied. About a half hour after this Captain Taylor was brought in mortally wounded; upon which I immediately took possession of a convenient height and halted. The fight continued here with unabated activity; the Indians occupying neighboring heights and working themselves along to pick off our men. The wounded increased in number continually. Twice the enemy gave unmistakable evidence of a design to carry our position by assault, and their number and desperate courage caused me to fear the most serious consequences to us from such an attempt on their part. It was manifest that the loss of their officers and comrades began to tell upon the spirit of the soldiers;

that they were becoming discouraged, and not to be relied upon with confidence. Some of them were recruits but recently joined; two of the companies had musketoons, which were utterly worthless in our present condition; and, what was most alarming, only two or three rounds of cartridges remained to some of the men, and but few to any of them. It was plain that the enemy would give the troops no rest during the night, and they would be still further disqualified for stout resistance on the morrow, while the number of enemies would certainly be increased. I determined, for these reasons, to make a forced march to Snake river, about eight-five miles distant, and secure the canoes in advance of the Indians, who had already threatened to do the same in regard to us. After consulting with the officers, all of whom urged me to the step as the only means, in their opinion, of securing the safety of the command, I concluded to abandon everything that might impede our march. Accordingly, we set out about 10 o'clock in perfectly good order, leaving the disabled animals and such as were not in condition to travel so far and so fast, and, with deep pain I have to add, the two howitzers. The necessity for this last measure will give you, as well as many words, a conception of the strait to which we believed ourselves to be reduced. Not an officer of the command doubted that we would be overwhelmed with the first rush of the enemy upon our position in the morning; to retreat further by day, with our wounded men and property, was out of the question; to retreat slowly by night equally so, as we could not then be in condition to fight all next day; it was therefore necessary to relieve ourselves of all incumbrances and to fly. We had no horses able to carry the guns over 80 miles without resting, and if the enemy should attack us en route, as, from their ferocity, we certainly expected they would, not a soldier could be spared for any other duty than skirmishing. For these reasons, which I own candidly seemed to be more cogent at the time than they do now, I resolved to bury the howitzers. What distresses me is, that no attempt was made to bring them off; and all I can add is, that if this was an error of judgment it was committed after the calmest discussion of the matter, in which, I believe, every officer agreed with me.

“Enclosed is a list of the killed and wounded. The enemy acknowledge a loss of nine killed and forty or fifty wounded, many of them mortally. It is known to us that this is an under estimate, for one of the officers informs me that on a single spot

where Lieutenants Gregg and Gaston met in a joint charge twelve dead Indians were counted. Many others were seen to fall.

"I cannot do justice in this communication to the conduct of the officers throughout the affair. The gallant bearing of each and all was accompanied by an admirable coolness and sound judgment. To the skill and promptness of Assistant Surgeon Randolph the wounded are deeply indebted.

"Be pleased to excuse the hasty appearance of this letter; I am anxious to get it off, and have not time to have it transcribed.

"I have the honor to be, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

"E. J. Steptoe,

"Brevet Lieutenant Colonel United States Army.

"Major W. W. Mackall,

"Assistant Adjutant General U. S. A., San Francisco.'

* * * * *

(Resuming) "Having arrived near the battle field, we came upon the bones of many of our men that had laid bleaching on the prairie hills for four months, and that had, in this interval, been scattered and dragged in every direction by the bands of wolves that had infested the place.

"Having with us the Coeur d'Alene Indian who, after the battle, finding the body of Lieutenant Gaston, had himself covered it with leaves and bushes, and left it upon the field, we were directed to the spot of his rude burial, and there found the bones of that gallant officer, who fell bravely leading his men in a forlorn charge. On reaching the battle field proper we halted and encamped, and, picketing our animals in good grass, began to search for the remains of the men there so inhumanly butchered, and the guns lost in that desperate encounter.

"The guns, having been well buried, were found as they had been left, undisturbed. Passing along the slope of the hill, we came upon a small ravine, in which lay the graves of four men: Captain Taylor, a half-breed, and two of the dragoons. Silently and mournfully we disinterred their remains, and securely packing them bore them from the field to our camp, in order to transport them to Walla-Walla, there to give them proper burial with military honors.

"Silently surveying the ground from the top of this hill, a scene of desolation and sadness met the eye at every point. Broken and burnt fragments of all that had once constituted the

equipage of this command lay scattered to the right and left, and everywhere were to be seen the unmistakable signs of a relentless savage who had determined on the utter annihilation of this small command.

"But one thing remained not totally destroyed, viz: a pair of shafts of one of the buried guns. Why this had escaped the general conflagration of such things as the Indians could not usefully appropriate was a wonder to us all.

"This, with our rude means at hand, we framed and fashioned into a cross, which we erected upon the battle field as a Christian token to the honored dead, and to point the stranger to the spot where brave men bravely met their fate; and as each officer and soldier lingered near the spot, and heard rehearsed the sad recital of that memorable defeat, the silent tear stole down many a bronzed cheek that had confronted death and braved danger upon many a tented field, and all praying in their hearts "*Requiescat in pace,*" left behind them this hill of death, and moving to our camp we found everything quiet, as if the feelings of all were in sad unison with the place, and thus, too, our camp merits the name of the Camp of Death. The subjoined plans and sketches were made by Mr. Kolecki and Mr. Sohon, who accompanied the command.

"Colonel Wright having presented us a bottle of fine brandy on the eve of our starting for the battle field, we had occasion to remember our friends present and absent. Having accomplished the object of our mission, we resumed our march on the morning of the 25th over the same trail, reaching our former camp on the Ned-whauld at 12 m., where we learned the fate of Qual-chian and his confreres in crime."

T. C. ELLIOTT.