

THE WHATCOM TRAILS TO THE FRASER RIVER  
MINES IN 1858

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At this announcement real estate in Whatcom and its sister city Sehome fell in price. People were losing heart. A correspondent says in the same issue:

"Whatcom is doomed—Sehome had exploded—and Bellingham City has flashed in the pan. The trail—the long talked of, long looked for, long, long never-ending trail—is emphatically gone in. A general stampede will take place from Bellingham Bay."

But better news arrived. Mr. Chas. C. Vail, *one of the town proprietors of Sehome*, after a trip to see DeLacy, brought back word on July 9 that the trail was through.<sup>9</sup> On the 12th word came from DeLacy. He had come in from Summit (now Chilliwack) Lake, a few days before, from a reconnaissance ahead of his men, his clothes in rags, tired, hungry and bleeding. He had been two days without food. Nevertheless, "he insisted that the route was entirely practicable and he was determined to put it through." The trail had reached the foot of the first pass beyond the Lake and would be at Summit that day. He was starting out again to continue exploration as far as a large river, evidently the Skagit. He complains that the Committee at Whatcom have not kept their promises to the men.<sup>10</sup>

"They say they were promised outfits, including mining boots and provisions on the conclusion of the road by the Com. They say if this is not done they will be worse off than if they had not worked at all. Owing to their perseverance this is nothing more than simple justice. Two of them go in today to see Com. Will be in open country in two or three days. Don't encourage any one to come out until road reported open as we have to feed them."

On July 17 he writes again:

"Dear Fitzhugh,

"I have to be brief. Mr. Quigley has returned before now, and you have heard his report. That route won't do. I was up the ravine yesterday, marked on the map 'to be examined'; and

<sup>9</sup> *Puget Sound Herald*, July 9, 1858.

<sup>10</sup> *Victoria Gazette*, July 17, 1858, from *Northern Light* of July 12.

though it leads straight through to the Brigade trail, it is impassable for the Trail. I have been to the summit of the highest mountain-peak in this range and I can see the open country right at my feet, and where the Brigade Trail is; but the difficulty is to pass the range. I am going to try the head of the large river [? Skagit]; and if I don't succeed there I will go to Fort Hope, come out on the Brigade Trail beyond Mount Manson, and strike this way.

"Dont despair! I don't; and if perseverance will find the road, it shall be done.

"I procured a copy of Anderson's map out here, which was the first time that I had any reliable information relative to the Brigade Trail, and from the mountains I have been enabled to trace out the streams.

"I am covered with bruises and sores, and have cramp in my limbs from so much climbing, and I shall need a long spell of rest when I come in; but never say die. DeLacy."<sup>11</sup>

But the sought for pass was not found by the gallant DeLacy by the end of July and as the *Herald* said on the 30th:

"The citizens of Whatcom and Sehome feel rather blue in consequence of the last news from Engineer Lacy to the effect that the trail was not yet through, and he knew not when it would be."

On July 24, DeLacy wrote that he had at last found a practicable pass by the head of the Simalloa (Sumallo) River, entirely through the mountains to open country. He could not reach the brigade trail on account of the lack of provisions, but from campfires seen on it, he supposed it to be ten or twelve miles distant and in the direct course for Thompson's River. The pass which he had discovered was treeless and of easy access. From the then end of the trail to open country would be from twenty to twenty-five miles. With a strong force and plenty of provisions it could be completed in two or three weeks.<sup>12</sup>

On August 19 the glad news came to Whatcom that the trail was completed. The *Northern Light* celebrated the event with an extra issue.<sup>13</sup> DeLacy wrote:

"Will you please announce in your paper that the Trail from Whatcom to Thompson's River is now finished. It strikes the Fort Hope trail in what is called on Anderson's Map 'Blackeye's Portage.' I will be in town tomorrow, and will then be able to

<sup>11</sup> *Victoria Gazette*, July 29, 1858, from *Northern Light*.

<sup>12</sup> *Victoria Gazette*, Aug. 3, 1858, from *Northern Light*.

<sup>13</sup> *Victoria Gazette*, Aug. 21, 1858, from *Northern Light* of Aug. 19.

give you the particulars. Col. Shaw, who went with me to the Brigade Trail, can tell you more about it.

W. W. DeLacy

Surveyor of the Trail."

Whatcom celebrated the great event in fitting style. A hundred guns "pealing" from the hilltop in the rear of the City announced the gratifying intelligence of the completion of the trail. A complimentary dinner was given by the happy Whatcomites to the persevering and successful Engineer who had completed his great task.<sup>14</sup> The first toast drunk was:

"Capt. W. W. DeLacy and the Bellingham Bay trail: The fame of the former shall be echoed over the Cascades to the Rocky Mountains, and from the Rocky Mountains to the farthest seas; while the latter shall stand as a monument to his triumph, so long as there are gold regions to explore, or immigrants to be enriched by the success of his labors."

An examination of a modern map will not disclose the location of "Blackeye's Portage." It was not that which the word "portage" ordinarily implies. Instead of a land journey along water too swift and broken to be safely navigated, it was a road across a range of mountains. It got its name in this way. In 1846, A. C. Anderson, above referred to, went east from a point near where Fort Hope was afterwards established, to ascertain if it was practicable to maintain communication with the interior in that direction, for the import of the annual supplies needed by the establishments of the company on the Fraser River. He reached the Tulameen River and followed a trail along its banks, northerly and easterly, roughly the arc of a circle. Having completed this part of his journey, he met Old Blackeye, the Similkameen Chief, and his son-in-law on their way to visit their deer snares, and went with them to their camp. The Chief supplied them with much needed provisions and gave them information as to a road across the hills which would greatly shorten the trip from Hope to Kamloops. To use Anderson's own words, extracted from his notes on file in the Provincial Archives at Victoria:

"Black-eye (who it appears was trusted implicitly in these points by the late Mr. Black) informs me that the horse road to the height of land strikes straight across the bend of the river, and falls beyond our encampment of the 3rd inst. He states that it is a wide and good road, with plenty of pasture at the proper

<sup>14</sup> *Victoria Gazette*, Sept. 3, 1858.

season; and that but for the depth of the snow, we could not have missed seeing it after crossing the height of land. It is of course very short as compared with the long and painful circuit made by us. He says that they never go with their horses in that direction beyond the spot where we fell in with their tracks this morning.

"The road mentioned by Black-eye is that by which all, or most of the Inds. of the neighborhood proceed every Summer (in July) to the height of land with their horses, to hunt Siffleurs [? Marmots] and . . . ther [word undecipherable] roots: a journey of two days with their loaded horses. He expresses his willingness to guide us through it at the propret season; but like the rest of the Country in that vicinity, it is impassable at present owing to the snow."

From that time onward the Brigade Trail followed the short cut pointed out by the Chief, thereafter called "Blackeyes Portage." It will be found so marked on a map made by Anderson for Governor Douglas and sent by the latter to Lord Stanley in England in June, 1858.<sup>15</sup>

The stations and distances on DeLacy's trail are given in the *Northern Light* as follows:

"Distances on the Whatcom trail. To Peterson's Prairie, grass, 6 miles; Blumenthal & Phillips' ranch, grass, 12 miles; Lummi River, grass scarce, 16 miles; Stott's Ranch, grass & Barley 26 miles; Hatch's ranch, grass, 29 miles; Daniel's Ranch, grass two miles off trail, 44 miles; Chilweok River, grass, 59 miles; Summit Lake Opposite Bank, 98 miles; first wet prairie, grass, 104 miles; to Summit, recruiting place, 111 miles; second wet prairie, grass, 131 miles; Divide of mountain, grass, 153 miles; Brigade trail, 173 miles; 100 miles from the intersection of Brigade Trail, with plenty of water and grass through to Fort Thompson, 100 miles. Total distance to Fort Thompson, 273 miles. General course of Trail North and South East from Whatcom."

On a map deposited in the Archives of British Columbia, by Mr. Anderson, DeLacy's trail is marked. The list of stations above set out shows that part of the trail from the head of the Nooksack River to the Skagit River could not have been either so direct nor so far south as Mr. Anderson places it. Probably he only intended to show its approximate location. It will be noted that the Trail touched the Chilliwack River and "Summit"

<sup>15</sup> B. C. Papers, Pt. 1, p. 17.

Lake. From enquiries made from people who know the terrain north and east of Mount Baker, including Sapass, the chief of the Indians at Skowkale in the Chilliwack Valley, a most intelligent man, who has hunted for years through that country, the writer can confidently assert that there is no "Summit Lake" on the line marked out by Anderson; that Chilliwack Lake, just north of the boundary line, was also known as "Summit Lake"; and that to obtain a practicable route from the head of the Nooksack River to the Skagit one would be compelled by the mountain masses to go north on one of the tributaries of the Chilliwack (probably the Tamihu or Tummahu) to that River, thence along it to the Lake and thence South on Dolly Varden Creek to the Summit and so to the Skagit. Sapass says that "Stott's Ranch" was on the Upper Nooksack, and that the "second wet prairie" was the swamp or marsh where Dolly Varden Creek empties into Chilliwack Lake.

After all the rejoicings which marked the "completion" of the trail, even the *Northern Light* seems to doubt whether it would be the success which had been hoped for. It attempted to make it a patriotic duty to avoid Victoria. The regulation requiring vessels going up the Fraser to take out their papers at Victoria,—

"Should be to induce every American miner who has the least spark of national pride, to avoid Victoria, and everything British."<sup>16</sup>

In the same issue from which the above is quoted the *Northern Light* gives, from personal inspection, an account of the condition of the first thirty-five miles of the trail. It will not say that it is a "good trail" for if it did, "We should subject ourselves to the charge of having uttered a falsehood from every one who has rode or driven a pack mule over it."

It did say, however, that the soil over which it passed was such as was "eminently adapted" not only for a trail, but with a moderate expenditure for a wagon road. "But little chopping of standing trees or grading would be required. Most of the labor to be done is in sawing and removing logs."

The *Northern Light* estimated that it would require \$1,000 to clear the trail to "Chiliwheok" Lake and insisted that the amount be raised without delay.<sup>17</sup> This was published on Wednesday and the amount required was subscribed by Friday. Whether this work was let, or if let was ever completed, is now impossible

<sup>16</sup> Victoria Gazette, Sept. 9, 1858.

<sup>17</sup> Victoria Gazette, Sept. 8, 1858.

to tell, for Whatcom faded away about that time, the *Northern Light* suspending publication shortly after the middle of September.<sup>18</sup>

Again Whatcom's hopes were doomed to disappointment. The new trail, hastily constructed through a most difficult and broken country must have been very difficult to travel. It is reported that immediately after the announcement of the completion of the trail, twenty-two men took this route to the Thompson River, and were *eight* weeks in making the trip. James Hood, one of DeLacy's men, went by the trail to what is now Lytton, the forks of the Fraser and Thompson, and returned by the Fraser. One trip over the new Trail seems to have been sufficient.<sup>19</sup>

One will ask why, after all the money and energy expended in locating this trail, it was not improved and used? Several reasons may be given. It was getting late in the season and the claims on the bars in the vicinity of Forts Hope and Yale were about worked out. The miners on the lower part of the river were convinced that the Fraser mines were a failure. People were coming down in numbers and none were going up. They had made up their minds to leave British Columbia and nothing could stop them. Traders were selling out their goods at ruinous prices. Whatcom quickly became a deserted village. River boats were plying on the Fraser. A new route to the mines above the Canyon was being opened via Harrison River and the Lake, and the chain of lakes to the north leading to what is now the town of Lilloet. Whatcom had failed; and its much vaunted position, its dear bought trail to the mines availed it nothing.

Some attempt seems to have been made in 1859 to open the trail, for in October of that year, some ten or twelve persons were being employed for that purpose.<sup>20</sup> This is the last word that has been found referring to the Trails from Bellingham Bay to the Fraser River mines.

R. L. REID.

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18 *Victoria Gazette*, Sept. 21, 1858.

19 Scholefield & Howay *History of British Columbia*, Vol. I, p. 30.

20 *Puget Sound Herald*, Oct. 28, 1859.