

FORT BENTON'S PART IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE WEST

In many respects the position that Fort Benton held in the lives of the early settlers east of the Rockies is similar to that occupied by Fort Hall in the experience of pioneers who early crossed the Divide into the country that is now Washington and Oregon. Both were erected in the heart of a fur-trading country and both were strategic outposts in a long line of communication from the States to an unknown country. One marked a break in the Oregon Trail from the unoccupied land on the south to that of British influence on the Columbia, while the other stood at the head of navigation of the Missouri—to go beyond either meant new adventures and more complete dependence upon the ability and resources of the immigrant himself. Fort Hall was the last depot where those who were headed for the Willamette Valley could obtain supplies and for years prior to the event of the railroads, Fort Benton was the distributing point for a territory which extended from Wyoming far into the British possessions on the north and west beyond the summit of the Rockies, but while transportation over the River was slow and hazardous, it was infinitely to be preferred to the slower and more hazardous system of overland hauling.¹

The importance of the region where Fort Benton now stands was recognized by the first whites who came into contact with it. Near here Lewis and Clark lightened their load, cacheing a part of it before beginning their long and difficult portage over the great falls of the Missouri.² Here the American Fur Company waged successful competition for the Indian fur trade against their powerful rival on the north. In this region, also, began and ended most of our military campaigns against the hostile³ Sioux and Blackfeet and finally, Fort Benton made a safe source of supplies for the miners who at the close of the Civil War were washing millions out of the sands of Alder and Last Chance Gulch.⁴

"It is not too much to say that the Trans-Mississippi history during the past century was shaped if not controlled by the Missouri River,"⁵ and Fort Benton at the head of this mighty avenue of ap-

¹ Chittenden, H. M.: *Early Steamboat Navigation on the Missouri River*, Vol. 1, p. 238.

² Gass' *Journal of Lewis and Clark Expedition*, p. 97.

³ *The Bozeman Trail*, Hebard: Vol. I, p. 226.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 205.

⁵ *Nation*; Review of Chittenden's Work, Porter, Vol. 77:18-19.

proach to the West quickened and grew as the stream of immigration poured through it. Few towns, perhaps none the size of this one, have played so important a part in the development of the West.

There can be little doubt but that the region was early visited by the Verendrye, by the Spanish from New Mexico and by the adventurous fur traders of the Hudson's Bay Co.⁶ However to Lewis and Clark must be given the credit for the first authentic description of the country along the Upper Missouri, and their explorations open the initial point in its history. While we are concerned principally with later events, an incident⁷ occurred on the return trip of Captain Lewis in 1806 which colored the history of the region for years to come. In an encounter with a wandering band of Gros Ventres, an Indian was killed and Lewis' party was forced to make a run of it for the River. The bitter hostility of the tribe toward all white men afterwards made the name of Blackfeet a synonym of hate and revenge.

Nature had provided one great route across the continent by the way of the Great Lakes, Lake Winnipeg, the Saskatchewan and thence down to the Columbia—this was the course of the Hudson's Bay men. The Americans worked out a way of their own from St. Louis, up along the Platte, through South Pass and then by Fort Hall and Clark's Fork down to the Columbia and for a time after the trip of Lewis and Clark, the vast region in between these two routes was left to the Indians and a few adventurous fur traders. By treaty it had been set aside as a vast reservation and the people of the United States had little idea that it would ever be settled. Even Benton himself is reported to have said in the Senate in 1825, "The ridge of the Rocky Mountains may be named as a convenient and everlasting boundary. Along this ridge, the Western limit of the Republic should be drawn and a statue of the fabled God Terminus should be erected on the highest peak, never to be thrown down." Webster was emphatic in saying, "What do we want of this vast and worthless region, this area of savages and wild beasts, of shifting sands and whirlwinds of dust, of cactus and prairie dogs? Mr. President, I will never vote one cent to place the Pacific Coast one inch nearer to Boston than it is now."⁸ This notion was encouraged by

⁶ *American Fur Trade*, Chittenden, Vol. I, p. 150 note.

⁷ *Gass' Journal*, Under July 28, 1806, p. 267 (Hosmer, Ed.)

⁸ Both extracts quoted from Sparks: *Expansion of the American People*. I was unable to find the sentiment expressed by either one of these statesmen in any other place. It does not appear in Benton's *Thirty Years View*. The *St. Louis Enquirer* (1821) quotes him as saying at that time: "I had not been admitted to my seat in the Senate but was soon after and quickly came to the support of the bill (Floyd's bill for the occupation of Oregon) and at a subsequent session presented some views upon it." In 1827 he spoke in favor of the occupation of the whole territory. Webster's view

the fur traders and by the people of the South for the opening of more northern territory meant more free soil.

Following the failure of his experiment at Astoria, John Jacob Astor confined his efforts to the region along the Missouri and we have records of trading posts being pushed further and further up the River. This stream was the natural highway for the trappers who used "bull boats"⁹ to float their furs down to Fort Union at the junction of the Missouri and the Yellowstone. The boats were cranky crafts and were generally at the mercy of the current. They were later replaced by mackinaw boats which were built of rough planks with a broad shallow keel. Trading posts were built, were abandoned, were burned or destroyed by the Indians but each time that they were rebuilt they were pushed a little further into the wilderness until in 1846 we find a permanent post built of adobe to protect it from the firebrands of the Indians. It replaced an old stockade that had been known as Fort Brulé, a French name meaning "a place that had been burned."

This was just a few miles below the great falls of the River and was christened Fort Benton.¹⁰ It was an appropriate title. It was a fort in every sense of the word and more than once its gates had to be barred against the attacks of the Indians who had become excited over some real or imagined injury. It typified, too, the spirit of the great Benton, that vigorous advocate of American expansion in the West, in that it stood against the encroachments of the British interests from the north. Senator Benton, better informed than most of the American statesmen of the time, saw clearly the great possibilities of the region and never ceased to champion the American occupancy of it.¹¹ During all his thirty years in Congress, he could be depended upon to back any measure that would send men or money into the West. Standing one evening on the deck of a

regarding the western country in general was well known. He considered it of little interest to the slave holder on account of its arid climate and lack of industry in which negroes could be profitably employed and was therefore willing to open up the Missouri Compromise since he saw no gain for the south in the new land to be secured. Later: Found Benton's speech in *Congressional Debates* I, 712. He spoke as quoted. He planned to plant "the germ of a new and independent power" that should be a protection against the designs of the British. The Webster quotation is discussed and discredited by C. T. Johnson in *Washington Historical Quarterly* for July, 1913, p. 191.

⁹ Bull boats were made by stretching the hide of buffalo over saplings bent into circular form.

¹⁰ Lieut. James H. Bradley in his "Journal" recorded in the *Montana Annals*, Vol. III, p. 24—describes it as being on an arm of land that jutted into the river, 150 feet square, of peeled logs set upright with two 18 foot high bastions of adobe. As to the christening, several claim the honor. The *Montana Annals* allow Dawson to say, "On the completion of the new fort, it being Christmas Day, I suggested that the post be called Fort Benton in honor of Thos. H. Benton of Missouri who was a great friend of mine; and the suggestion meeting unanimity the event was celebrated with copious libations of the fire water used on such occasions." Vol. VIII, p. 65. Chittenden makes Major Culbertson the one to name it after his friend, the great Benton. Both accounts agree as to the celebration which followed.

¹¹ *Thirty Years View* and "Speech on the Occupancy of Oregon," 1846.

river steamer he turned to the pilot, La Barge, and said as he pointed to the setting sun, "That way is East,"¹² meaning that through the western expansion of this country we should reach the rich markets of China and the Indies. Connected with the fort in the old fur-trading days we find such characters as McKenzie, Dawson, Culbertson, La Barge, Custer, Miles, Stuart, Stevens and others. Prince Maxmillian spent several months there on his trip through America and Isaac I. Stevens made it his headquarters for his survey of the Pacific Railway.

But the history of Fort Benton does not stop with its fur-trading days—its greatest triumphs came in connection with the early navigation of the River. Former traffic as we have seen was carried on by keel boatmen who rowed, poled, or cordelled their crafts all the way from St. Louis to the furthest trading posts. The traffic was entirely in the hands of these traders. The Indians were hostile and often picked off the boatmen from the shore and if we may believe the accounts of the times¹³ "had every white man's grave along its course been plainly marked, the voyager would never have been out of sight of those pathetic reminders" of the hardships of the journey. The first steamboat entered the mouth of the River in 1819 but it was a full forty years later that a stern-wheeler, built especially for the purpose reached the little fort at the head of navigation.¹⁴ The shifting bars and the unruly current made navigation a matter of chance and demanded pilots equalled only by those on the lower Mississippi. The River was continually cutting into its banks, throwing large trees into the water to become the dreaded snags and sawyers. When the captain came to a channel two feet deep while his boat drew two and a half, he resorted to the slow and ingenious scheme of "walking her" over the bar.¹⁵ Spars were spread on either side, a "dead man" holding a cable was buried in the bank up ahead, and while the capstan groaned, the boat rocked and the captain swore, the steamer was slowly worked, foot by foot, over the sand. Passengers were often landed to lighten the boat. The paddle wheels were sometimes reversed so as to dam up the stream and raise the water four or five inches, for every inch under the hull meant that much of a lift. The only fuel was the cottonwoods along the bank and while as the boats became more established, the ranchers along the course cut wood and

12 Chittenden: *Early Steamboat Navigation*, Vol. II, p. 349.

13 *Nation*, magazine, Vol. 77, pp. 18-19, "Old Times on the Missouri."

14 *The Chippewa* was the first steamer to reach Benton in 1859.

15 *Early Steamboat Navigation of the Missouri*, Vol. I, p. 219.

thus had a supply waiting for the steamer, in the earlier days it was the business of the crew at every stop to rush on shore, armed with axes, to cut down trees and drag them on the boat before the Indians learned of their intentions. A good boat would make fifty miles a day against the stream and twice that going down and more if they ran all night. The ice shut off navigation in the winter and so the first days of spring and the last in the fall were times of feverish activity all along the River.

As soon as the practicability of navigating the Missouri as far as Fort Benton was demonstrated, the destined importance of the place as a distributing center was at once apparent. Overland routes were established from Benton in every direction. In 1862 the Mullan Road¹⁶ was run through to Walla Walla, Washington Territory, across the intervening Rockies. In any other direction, the open prairies around the Fort made roadwork unnecessary for the passage of wagon trains. The town was laid out in 1865 by a Captain DeLacy¹⁷ of the Engineering Corps of the Army. It was not, however, until after the Civil War that the town received its greatest impulse. It was then that the exploration and settlement of the region along the Rocky Mountains began to receive serious attention. Gold had been discovered there and the rush of the '49ers was repeated in the fabulously rich fields of Alder and Last Chance.¹⁸ A large immigration of Confederate soldiers, "the entire left wing of Price's Army" was settling in what was to be Western Montana. Military posts were established and trading points grew up all along the line. There was a sudden call for wagons, picks and shovels, plows and all the implements that go to make up frontier life. As yet the Missouri was the only line of communication with the States that could transport heavy freight and of all the depots that grew up along its course, the two terminals quickly became the most important, St. Louis at one end and Fort Benton at the other.

The only other way to get even mail to the miners at Bannock and Virginia City was by a long overland route. Granville Stuart tells us that a letter from his old home in Iowa came to him by the way of the Isthmus of Panama, by water to San Francisco, from there to Portland and up to The Dalles, overland to Walla Walla

16 By an Act of Congress, 1855, \$30,000 was recommended by Governor Stevens for the construction of a military wagon road from the great falls of the Missouri to Walla Walla, some 700 miles. John Mullan, a young Lieutenant, was given the commission and the road became known as the Mullan Road. Great things were expected of it as it eliminated the trouble with hostile Indians at South Pass, was shorter than the Oregon Trail and had the Missouri for a carrier part of the way. It was built but did little for people of the Puget Sound region. Bancroft, Vol. XXXI. p. 608.

17 Chittenden: *Early Navigation*, Vol. I, p. 237.

18 *Bozeman Trail*, Vol. I, p. 205.

and through Hellgate Pass and then "by some reliable person coming up to the camp." The express on a letter amounted to a dollar. He says in his diary of May 27, 1864, that he had just received a paper from the States that was two months old.¹⁹ Against such slow and dangerous service, the Missouri could offer a trip in 35 days from St. Louis to Fort Benton and while the fare for passengers was \$300 and while freight often rose to fifty cents a pound, every boat was crowded to capacity.²⁰ Owners paid as high as \$100,000 for freight charges on their stocks of merchandise. The first wagon load of gold dust,²¹ weighing two and a half tons and drawn by a four-mule team was freighted from Bannock to Benton and then sent down the River by Steamer. The cargo was worth a million and a quarter and while the bulkheads of the steamer had to be taken out to lighten it over the bar and while the banks were often the scenes of hostile Indian camps, it was a safer and a quicker route than south through the country infested by road agents and the equally hostile Mormons.²²

The steamboat arrivals, which had never exceeded four or five in a year, in 1866, jumped to 36 and June 11th of that year saw seven boats at one time tied up to the Benton wharf.²³ Some interesting statistics are available for 1865. The old registers of that year show that over 1000 persons, 6000 tons of freight and 20 quartz mills were unloaded at this thriving terminal.²⁴ When a boat sank or was burned, it meant the loss of a fortune for the owners but the profits of a safe trip were enormous. Captain La Barge, one of the most famous pilots of the River, cleared \$40,000 on one trip of the *Octavia* and others did as well.²⁵ The hours of the deckhand were long but the wages were high and many took the opportunity to desert the boat and head for the rich gold fields when they reached the Fort. Experienced pilots were cheap at \$1200 a month. The steamers themselves were large capable crafts. They were built for service, for tonnage was their aim, but many of them were fitted with cabins to accommodate the genteel and the newly rich. Strong

19 Stuart, Granville: *Forty Years on the Frontier*, Vol. I, p. 245—Mail brought papers from the States up to May 18. (Two months old.) He remarks that the papers seem to indicate that the South was getting the best of the argument in the war. Settlers and miners were rather indifferent to the struggle going on between the North and the South.

20 *Ibid*, Vol. II, p. 22, 1864. "A great number of steamships made regular trips from St. Louis to Ft. Benton and each was loaded to capacity with passengers and freight." *Annals of the American Academy of Science*, Vol. 31, Jan. '08, Passengers cost \$300 each.

21 Bancroft, Vol. XXXI, p. 611-17.

22 Bancroft, Vol. XXXI, p. 613.

23 Chittenden: *Early Steamboat Navigation*, Vol. I, p. 238.

24 *Ibid*, Vol. II, p. 275.

25 *Ibid*, Vol. II, p. 416.

liquor made up a generous part of each cargo and each boat carried its bar. Whiskey selling to the Indians had been strictly forbidden by the Government and was confiscated whenever it was found to be a part of the assignment to a trading post. Like all frontier enterprises, river traffic was accompanied by heavy drinking and many tragic events of steamboat days may be laid to its door. Social parasites, who dreaded the long tiresome journey overland, found here a field more to their liking and many a miner found himself relieved of his stake before he had been long on the boat.²⁶ The River and the wild country surrounding it became the favorite hang-out for horse thieves and those who sold whiskey to the Indians. So Fort Benton became the outpost of law and order and while the vigilantes were cleaning up the gold diggings of the road agent and other undesirables, a group of stockmen had organized at Benton to clear the River of rustlers and bootleggers. One hundred dollars was the standing offer for a whiskey runner and \$500 was paid for a live horse thief.

The War of the Rebellion had a depressing effect upon the river traffic as guerrilla bands were roaming the country and they looked upon all Government property on the boats as legitimate booty. It is said that all the pilots except two were in sympathy with the South. Many deserters²⁷ from the rebel army were found among the miners in the new fields as the names of their claims will show, the "Confederate" being one of the best paying mines. Virginia City was originally Varina, named for the wife of Jeff Davis. The upper stretches of the River, however, felt little of the effect of the conflict going on in the States and might easily have been an independent country as far as their participation in the struggle was concerned.

The Government's haphazard policy of Indian control during the twenty-five years that followed the war made it possible for many who were interested in large annuity supply contracts to rob both the Government and the Indian it was trying to serve. Continually pushed back from their best hunting grounds by the advancing whites, the Indians came to depend upon the supplies sent them annually for their living. If even the meager supply of blankets and food allotted to them had reached its proper destination, the Indian would have lived in a poor way indeed but with little or no supervision to check him, the Indian agent made his business one of

²⁶ Stuart: *Forty Years on the Frontier*, Vol. II, p. 156.
²⁷ *Bozeman Trail*, Vol. I, p. 208.

systematic boodle.²⁸ Government goods on the freight boats were mixed with those for the trading posts and since all the receipts that the Washington officials asked was the signature of the agent saying that the goods had been delivered, the simple Indian often paid in pelts for goods that rightfully belonged to him. Traders and agents connived to keep the Indian on the verge of starvation so as to get his furs and they are largely responsible for the outbreaks that continually occurred on the reservations. The American people followed the weak policy of pretending to give the Indian a fair living for the land that they were taking from him and then put the distribution of his pay into the hands of unscrupulous men who were too far removed from supervision to be concerned about any fear of detection. All this movement of Indian supplies called for huge contracts for the boat owners. Whole tribes of Indians also were moved by boat from one place to a poorer one. Following the Minnesota uprising in the '80s, the Winnebagoes were transported down the river from Mankato and then up the Missouri to Chamberlain, a distance of 1200 miles while the cross country route was 350 miles. And so a great system of graft grew up in which the steamboat was a vital factor. Those who read of the Sioux uprisings in 1876 and of the Custer Massacre on the Little Big Horn will not readily connect these events with river traffic on the Missouri but yet the steamboat played an important part in the final defeat of Sitting Bull and his men. There is a story that the fabled lone white survivor of the Custer command covered himself with a blanket, rode through the Indian lines and was finally rescued when he hailed a passing boat on the Yellowstone. We do know that the wounded from Major Reno's outfit were loaded upon the steamer *Far West* and were taken to Bismark for medical attention. The master of the boat carried a whole grip of dispatches which were to tell the startled world of the disaster to the whites. General Miles used river steamers in '77 to head off and thus round up Chief Joseph and the remnant of his Nez Perces after they had made their masterful retreat across Montana.²⁹

Those were great days for Fort Benton, as it was the supply station for all troops and transports on the Upper Missouri. Large buildings took the place of the river shacks built during the fur-trad-

28 Chittenden: *Early Steamboat Navigation on the Missouri*, Chap. XXX., Vol. II. Chittenden says that Lincoln knew of the Indian steals and he had said as soon as he got the Rebellion off his hands that he would see that justice was done the Indian.

29 *Lamp Magazine*: September 1902, p. 102. "Old Times on the Missouri."—"In 1877 General Miles' good fortune in finding a steamboat near the mouth of the Musselshell enable him to gain sufficiently on the Indians who were nearing the British soil to overtake them within fifty miles of the border line."

ing days. On every hand was activity and ready money to keep it so. Wagons shipped knocked down were set up on the river bank. Blacksmiths made \$20 to \$30 a day shoeing horses and mules. Equipped with team and wagon, the pioneer set out for the new gold fields to the southwest to meet those who had made their stake and were bound down the River. The Government was continually sending troops to protect the people who were swarming out to the new places. Many foresaw in Fort Benton a second St. Louis and staked their fortunes on their prophecy. Few realized that a little party of engineers headed by Isaac I. Stevens as far back as 1853 had spelt the doom of not only Fort Benton but of the entire river traffic. Sent out by a Congress that was divided in its own mind about the matter, Stevens was commissioned to find some way of linking up by rail the States with our new Territory of Oregon. The Civil War delayed the results of his survey but as the influence of that conflict was little felt by the people of the Upper Missouri, their period of prosperity continued unchecked until 1870 when the Union Pacific reached Ogden. A freight line was then established from this terminal to Helena and while this cut off some of Benton's trade, the check upon river transportation was not complete until 1883 when the Northern Pacific laid rails into the new territory. Even the most loyal of the river men than had to acknowledge their defeat. River trade dwindled and then went out of business entirely. Boats ran between Bismark and Benton for a few years but now the only thing to remind them of their former glory is the occasional visit of a Government snagboat, for Congress still maintains that the Missouri is a navigatable stream, up to the falls and compels every railroad that crosses it to put in draw bridges. These of course are never used unless it be in the vivid imagination of some old timer when he sees the ghost of a stately steamer moving up the River as they did in the old days. All the River down to the mouth of the Yellowstone has felt the baleful effects of the decay of river traffic. The settlers along the bottoms, deserted by the steamboats, have moved in closer to the railroads. The Government works of dredging the channel and protecting the banks against the hungry current have been abandoned. For a long time the taming of the river was a favorite project of ambitious congressmen. Millions have been spent on it to make it navigable. As late as 1890,³⁰ encouraged by a trip of a party of Government officials down the

³⁰ W. Williams: "The Rediscovery of the Missouri," in *The World Today*, Nov. '07, p. 1125.

River, a group of merchant enthusiasts attempted to restore river communication between St. Louis and Kansas City and thus force the railroad rates down but now the struggle has been given up, the Missouri River Commission has been abolished and Congress has had to make the confession that the "Big Muddy" is out of the race as a carrier of freight.

Today a little town supplies the ranchers of the surrounding country with their necessary stores and takes in return their produce of wheat and cattle. The sign on the railroad station still reads Fort Benton but business is gone, spirited away to the neighboring city of Great Falls by the trail of steel that does not have to reckon with sand bars and treacherous currents. The ruined wall of an old bastion of the former Fort remains to tell of the fur-trading days and the bleaching wreck of a steamer a few miles down the stream is mute evidence of a glory that is gone—otherwise Fort Benton is the same as dozens of other little stations along the right-of-way of the Great Northern.

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