

## THE NORTHERN OVERLAND ROUTE TO MONTANA

The Northern Overland Route between Minnesota and Montana has received very little attention from historians. There are perhaps three reasons for this: first, it was developed and used at a time when the Civil War engaged the attention of the country; second, the people that used this route to the Montana gold fields did not make any settlement which became a "Little Minnesota" where kindred interests would keep alive the memory of their trip across the plains; third, the route was safe, and there was no large death list or story of disaster to bring it to public attention.

This route deserves notice for it was the most important means of emigration to Montana from the East in 1862 and the men who crossed the plains from Minnesota played an important part in saving the population from starvation during the winter that followed the discovery of gold on Grasshopper Creek. The only records of this route which the writer discovered were for the years 1862 and 1863, when the movement was subsidized by the government, and in 1866 and 1867 when emigration was made through private initiative. It is impossible to state, from the data available, the total number of emigrants that used the Northern Overland Route although the Government Documents and Montana newspapers show that at least 1392 people used this route in reaching the Northwest.

Conditions in Minnesota were ideal in 1862 to cause a movement to new lands. In the middle fifties, the State had passed through a wild period of speculation. This was followed by a natural reaction in 1857 and 1858 which caused many business failures. These failures were followed by plagues of grasshoppers which ruined the crops in the northern part of the State, and the economic fabric was further torn by the destructive floods on the Mississippi which carried off millions of feet of logs from the broken booms. The result was business stagnation and hard times. A section of the country in such an economic state would turn a willing ear to the report of new gold fields where gold could be taken from the ground in return for hard labor.

This was the situation in Minnesota, when the news of the gold discoveries in Washington and Idaho reached the East. Poverty made the long journey by the Platte River difficult for these people and they looked at the maps of the period and wondered why there should not be a more direct route to the land of gold. That such a route was possible had been proved by the expedition of

Governor Stevens of Washington Territory, who had made the trip from Minnesota to Washington in the course of the survey of a railroad route near the 47th and 49th parallels. The attention to the possibility of such a road was intensified by the construction of the Mullan Military road from Fort Benton to Fort Walla Walla where it connected with land and water routes to the Pacific.

As a result, when Congress on January 27th, 1862, made an appropriation of \$25,000 for the protection of emigrants who wished to make the overland journey to the new gold fields, and placed the distribution of the money in the hands of the Secretary of War,<sup>1</sup> Minnesota was able to exert enough influence to secure \$5000 of this fund to open a road from St. Paul to Fort Benton in Montana. The command of the project was given to Captain James L. Fisk, who was relieved from duty with the army in Central Tennessee for this purpose.<sup>2</sup>

The sum set aside for the expedition was very small, not being sufficient to pay an armed escort, but Captain Fisk was an able administrator; so he made the best possible use of the money at his command. His orders gave him authority to appoint assistants and to enlist corps of fifty men for the escort. He was also instructed to engage competent men to fill the following positions: physicians, guides and interpreters, who were to render service to the advantage of the whole party.

As soon as Captain Fisk arrived in St. Paul he began to prepare for the expedition. He sent word to all parts of the State that the expedition would make the journey so that the emigrants might meet at the appointed rendezvous at Fort Abercrombie on July 1st. His next move was to appoint the necessary assistants. The appointments were as follows: first assistant, E. H. Burrill; second assistant, N. P. Langford; third assistant and surveyor, Charlton; secretary, S. R. Bond; physician, W. D. Dibb; wagon-master, R. C. Knox; guide and Chippewa interpreter, Pierre Bottineau; Sioux interpreter, George Gere. Pierre Bottineau had been a Red River Hunter and had served as one of the guides for Governor Stevens in 1853.<sup>3</sup>

The equipment of the expedition, which left St. Paul on the 16th of June, 1862, consisted of three teams of four oxen each, a team of mules and a team of horses. Captain Fisk took this outfit

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<sup>1</sup> Fisk, Captain James L.—*Expedition from Fort Abercrombie to Fort Benton*. Executive Documents, 37th Congress, 3rd Sess., House of Representatives, Vol. VIII, Document 90, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Fisk, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Fisk, p. 4.

over the well established road to Fort Abercrombie. This fort was located on the west bank of the Red River of the North, two hundred and twenty-five miles northwest of St. Paul. The party did not reach the rendezvous until the 3rd of July, and then they found only a part of the emigrants waiting, but there were letters saying that others were on the way. The next few days were spent in organizing the expedition and waiting for the late comers. The question of escort was solved by selecting from the emigrants forty men who were not encumbered with either wagons or families. These men agreed to serve as escort in return for sustenance until they reached Fort Benton.<sup>4</sup>

The question of which route was to be followed brought out differences of opinion between Captain Fisk and the emigrants. Captain Fisk wished to follow the direct route. The emigrants wished to follow the northern route by way of Pembina, and thus reduce the chances of meeting hostile Indians. This latter route had been used by a party of emigrants who had started for Montana before it was known that the government had intended to organize a party for the trip.

It may be well at this time to tell what is known of this earlier party, for at some points they were pathfinders for the Fisk party, though at times not to the best advantage. This party consisting of about eighty men left Minnesota a month earlier than the Fisk expedition. Their route made a detour about one hundred and fifty miles north of Fort Abercrombie passing through Pembina and St. Joseph.<sup>5</sup> Among the members of the party were John Potter, Dr. Hoyt and brother, Charles Wyman and brother, Mr. Steel, Mr. Smith, M. D. Leadbeater, Mr. French and son, and W. F. Bartlet.<sup>6</sup>

The guide of the party, a French-Chippewa half breed, became frightened by what he thought was a Sioux camp while they were in the Coteau du Missouri and left the party without a guide by running away during the night. The party engaged an Indian to guide them as far as Fort Union. They mounted the redskin on a good horse, which proved to be too strong a temptation, for he suddenly disappeared and once more they were without a guide. After wandering sometime they managed to find their way to Fort Union twenty-three or twenty-four days ahead of the Fisk party.<sup>7</sup> Then they continued their way up Milk River and reached Montana some-

4 N. P. Langford, *Vigilante Days and Ways*, Vol. 1, p. 231.

5 Fisk, p. 6.

6 Article signed S.B.H., *Weekly Rocky Mountain Gazette*, Helena, Feb. 25, 1869.

7 Fisk, p. 20.

time in August four or five weeks in advance of the Fisk expedition.<sup>8</sup> These men on their arrival in Montana engaged in mining at Pike's Peak Gulch, but later they joined the rush to the mines at Bannack City.

Captain Fisk quieted the fears of his party in regard to Indian attacks by borrowing a twelve pound mountain howitzer with supplies and ammunition from Fort Abercrombie, and organizing an artillery squad among the escort. The emigrants now professed themselves ready to start, and an advance party was sent ahead to bridge Wild Rice River. The train did not start until early the next day, but in spite of a heavy rain they made a journey of sixteen and a half miles to the bank of the Sheyenne River, (the spellings used in the source material are followed throughout the article) was made. On July 7th, the whole party set to work to bridge this stream which at this point was seventy-five feet wide and from six to eight feet deep. This engineering feat was accomplished by throwing three heavy stringers across the river and making a roadbed of logs. This was accomplished by two o'clock.<sup>9</sup>

The party consisted of one hundred and seventeen men, thirteen women, one hundred and sixty-eight oxen, eight mules, fourteen team horses, thirteen saddle horses, seventeen cows, and dogs too numerous to mention. Every night the wagons were formed into a corral and the cattle placed inside, while the horses and mules were picketed near by. There was a guard of four men with two reliefs. The Captain and his assistants acted as sergeants of the guard. As a further protection, the wagons of the emigrants as well as those of the escort were numbered to regulate their proper place in the train, and the letters U.S. were painted on the sides of each wagon, because Captain Fisk thought that the Indians would be less likely to attack a government train than a private one of the same size.<sup>10</sup>

The route from the Sheyenne River lay for seventeen miles over the prairie to Maple River. They forded this stream and campd on the opposite bank with good wood and water. Here they loaded wood sufficient for three days, for their route lay across a treeless country for some distance as they traveled along the high bluffs that bordered Maple River. They had traveled but a short distance on their way when they saw their first buffalo, a group of four. The guide and Captain Fisk killed two of these buffalo by

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<sup>8</sup> S.B.H., *Weekly Rocky Mountain Gazette*, Feb. 25, 1869.

<sup>9</sup> Fisk, pp. 6 and 7.

<sup>10</sup> Fisk, p. 7.

riding alongside of the animals and shooting them from horseback. From this time until the party were within a few days' march of Fort Benton, they saw buffalo daily along the route, and there was hardly a day when they did not have buffalo meat for the whole party.<sup>11</sup>

July 13th was the first Sunday of the trip and it was set aside as a day of rest. Episcopal services were read by N. P. Langford. The party decided to rest Sundays and to hold religious services throughout the journey. The following day the party traveled twenty and a half miles, forded the Sheyenne River and camped on the opposite bank with good wood and water. While at this camp a couple decided to get married, the girl's relatives consented, and they were married by one of the party, who read the Episcopal service. The ceremony was followed by a dance on the grass land, the music furnished by a violin.<sup>12</sup>

From this camp to Lake Jessie, the road passed over a broken prairie, interspersed by lakes and swamps, which necessitated carrying wood for the crossing. The caravan continued to the head of Jaques River with good grass and water, but they had to resort to buffalo chips for fuel. This fuel had been plentiful for several days. Enough could be gathered in five minutes to supply the whole train with fuel for camping purposes. The buffalo chips burned much the same as peat, lighted easily, and answered all the purposes of wood so well that the party preferred to use them rather than load their wagons with the necessary wood.<sup>13</sup>

On July 24th a herd of buffalo crossed ahead of the party and at right angles of the trail, it being estimated that there were between three and four thousand in the herd. The next day, at the Butte de Moralle, a well known land-mark, the party crossed the trail of a Red River Train. These Red River Trains were made up of a large number of buffalo hunters, who with their wooden wheeled carts traveled together for protection against the Indians. These people made two hunts a year, one in the spring for meat and one in the fall for robes. They usually started from Pembina in June, with sometimes as many as 3000 carts, taking their wives and children. The families assisted in the preparation of pemmican, which was their most important item of food.<sup>14</sup> So this could hardly be considered an unknown country.

The route continued across the prairie to pass in the Coteau des

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11 Fisk, p. 8.

12 Fisk, p. 10.

13 Fisk, p. 11.

14 Fisk, p. 12.

Prairie, and by the 24th of July the party reached Wintering River, a tributary of the Mouse, which was seventy-five to two hundred feet wide and three to six feet deep, with a clay bottom supporting a growth of bull rushes. Not being able to find a better place to cross immediately, Captain Fisk decided to cross where he was. First, he had all hands cut bull rushes, and formed a causeway by laying the rushes along the bottom of the river. Then a line of men were placed along the causeway to hold the rushes in place and the cattle were driven across. Then long ropes were attached to each of the wagons which were drawn across the stream by the motive power of seventy to eighty men, until oxen could be hitched to them on the other side. The wagons would sink to the river bed and displace the rushes and these would have to be replaced and new ones added between each passage. The whole equipment was carried to the other side in this way with the loss of one mule, which drowned itself in spite of all efforts to save it.<sup>15</sup> Yet the party was able to make eleven miles that day before they camped. The following day brought them within one and a half miles of Milk River. Finding good water, wood, and grass in one of the larger tributaries, they decided to camp early Saturday and rest until Monday. This gave an opportunity to rest the tired and lame stock, to wash clothing, to bake bread and to perform similar activities which had been neglected on the trail. Services were held on Sunday, the 27th, and on July 28th the party continued their way over very difficult ground cut by many coulees. The following day one of the wagons turned over while crossing a coulee, but there was no serious damage to the wagon, though some of the contents were broken. The camp that night was parched from lack of rain, grass and water were poor, and there was no wood.

July 30th they traveled twenty and three quarters miles, the Riviere des Lacs on the right and the Coteau du Missouri on the left. The Coteau rose to a height of three or four hundred feet and served as a divide between the Missouri and the rivers that flow toward the north. Some of the men went hunting while the party was making this trip, and Dr. Dibb became separated from his companions and was lost over night in a rain storm. While the guide and some of the mounted men were searching for the Doctor, Captain Fisk undertook to direct the train. He crossed the trail of the party that had preceded them by way of Pembina without noticing it. When the guide returned with Dr. Dibb, he

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<sup>15</sup> Fisk, p. 14.

insisted that the train turn south to intercept the trail so that they could follow it. Thus the guide of the official party determined to follow the trail of a guideless party that were depending on their own resources.

The following day there were 100,000 buffalo along the trail. Of these three were killed and a buffalo calf brought in which after much trouble was adopted by one of the cows and it became a part of their herd. On August 1st, the party followed a northwest course and the estimate of the buffaloes was increased to 1,000,000 head, and all were anxious to kill a buffalo, there were twenty or thirty animals killed. After traveling eighteen and a half miles they camped with no wood and very poor grass and water. The next day they reached the western limits of the Coteau du Missouri, and dropped down a steep slope to a low prairie. That night the sentries reported that Indians were hanging around, and the guard was increased, but the Indians continued in the vicinity until a guard fired at them and aroused the camp. The next day was Sunday and they spent it in camp. It rained hard all day.

Monday was a day of interest for they came to petrified trees twelve to fifteen feet in circumference and about ten o'clock they met nine Indians of the Sheyenne band of the Assiniboines who fired their guns in the air as a sign of peace.<sup>16</sup> This peaceful gesture was returned by a volley of small arms and a discharge of the howitzer. The Indians joined the party and at noon dined with them. Their chief, Bras Casse, wanted to hold a council with Captain Fisk. This was granted and the chief voiced his complaint in regard to the train passing through the country and driving away the buffalo which were the Indians' only resource for clothing, food and shelter. The Captain explained that he was making the journey under the orders of the White Father at Washington. The rest of the Indians had grown insolent during the council and their numbers increased. Soon there were thirty or forty of them and the head warrior took the place of the civil chief as spokesman. He informed Captain Fisk that the party must not proceed farther and must return to their homes. He stated that there were one hundred of their lodges a few miles to the right, four hundred lodges of the Assiniboines ahead, and the Yanctonais a short distance to the left. He also informed Captain Fisk that the Indians did not intend to allow the party to proceed further un-

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16 Fisk, p. 18.

less they paid a heavy tribute, then he wished to know what Captain Fisk would do if the Indians attacked the train.

Fisk told him he would learn if he made an attack, and ordered the bugle sounded. The man in the party displayed their rifles and revolvers, and the train prepared to move. When the train was ready to start the Indians stood in the way and refused to move, but R. C. Knox, the wagonmaster, a six footer, thrust them aside and the train started. Now the Indians at once became friendly and begged the mounted men to kill some buffalo for them. When the horsemen had pushed the Indians a mile in advance of the train, they shot ten or eleven buffalo cows for the redmen, who stopped to dress the meat and that was the last of the Indian trouble.<sup>17</sup>

On August the 6th and 7th the party continued to move over the rolling prairie, with buffalo in large numbers on all sides. The guide thought they were near the Missouri, but had no certain knowledge of their position. On the night of August 7th, a baby was born, but the mother and child were able to travel the following morning. The next night the party camped on a stream that they later identified as the Little Muddy. The guide thought they were within five or six miles of the Missouri and eight miles up the river from Fort Union. It was decided to remain at this camp for several days to repair equipment and give time to locate Fort Union. This last measure was necessary to secure a supply of provisions.

The distance from Fort Abercrombie to this point was four hundred and sixty-seven miles by the odometer. The average time made by the party counting Sundays was a fraction over sixteen miles a day. The cattle had improved on the road, and only one mule had been lost.<sup>18</sup> On August 10th Captain Fisk and some mounted men located Fort Union fifteen miles below camp.

Early the following morning twenty men on horseback and four or five in the lightest wagon, visited Fort Union, a trading post belonging to Pierre Choteau, Jr., and Company, or as it was generally called, the American Fur Company. The fort was situated on the left bank of the Missouri about three miles above the mouth of the Yellowstone. This post was established in 1830 and since that time had been the principal supply depot for the Assiniboine tribe. The fort was square, surrounded by a palisade about sixteen feet high. At the north east and the south west corners two bas-

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<sup>17</sup> Fisk, pp. 18 and 19.

<sup>18</sup> Fisk, p. 20.



tions had been built to flank the walls. Inside the rectangular court extended a line of buildings used as quarters for the employees of the company, a workshop and a store. The post was about three hundred feet square and the palisades were broken by gates on the north and south sides.

At the fort the guide Bottineau, his son, and the Sioux interpreter, George Gere, left the party to return home by way of Pembina. Mr. Meldrum, the agent in charge of the fort, now volunteered to act as guide and interpreter for the party as far as Fort Benton.<sup>19</sup>

These arrangements made, the party proceeded up the valley of the Missouri which proved to be a good natural wagon road. The one difficulty was that the banks of the river were so steep that the cattle could not be driven down the banks to drink; so water had to be carried up to them in buckets. The water along the route for the next few days was poor, grass was dry and scant, but there was plenty of wood.

The evening of August 13th the party reached the Big Muddy River at a point about four miles from its mouth. The stream was at this point about seventy feet wide and four feet deep with a muddy bottom. It could not be forded without damaging the contents of the wagons. There was no timber with which to construct a bridge. The problem was met by unloading all the wagons and placing five of them one after another across the stream to make a bridge. There was a few inches of water in the wagon boxes, but this did no damage. The rest of the wagons were hauled across by man power, and the loads were carried over the bridge. The wagons were reloaded. This was accomplished before eleven o'clock, and the party traveled five miles to camp at the new trading post erected by the American Fur Company. This post was used for trade with the Gros Ventres, Crows and Assiniboines, who found it more convenient than either Fort Union or Fort Benton.<sup>20</sup>

The party continued along the Missouri and on August 19th reached the Milk River, where they saw many signs of Indians, whose ponies had closely pastured the grass over a wide area, but Fisk managed to find a camp, with fair grass, good wood and water. In the evening a half dozen Gros Ventres visited the camp and spent the night. The number of Indians increased to thirty or forty during the day while the party stayed in camp and shod oxen. That

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<sup>19</sup> Fisk, pp. 20-21.

<sup>20</sup> Fisk, p. 21.

night two hundred Crow Indians camped near by and accompanied the train on its march until noon the next day. These Indians had no sooner crossed the river and disappeared from sight, than the train came in sight of a camp of Gros Ventres, who broke camp at once and marched with the party. The country was covered with wild sage and there was very little grass. The Gros Ventres stayed with the party until they reached Milk River on August 23rd.

On this date the party broke camp at four o'clock and marched four and a half miles, then stopped to feed the stock. Old Dog Face, an Indian warrior, told them that they would have a long march without water; so they let the stock feed until five o'clock. Then they proceeded to ford Milk River and make a night march, but they were forced to camp at nine o'clock due to rain and darkness. This camp was without wood or water and there was very little grass. They took the trail at four o'clock the next morning, and that evening found a camp with good wood and water and fair grass. August 25th brought them to the second crossing of the Milk River with the Little Rocky Mountains in view to the south west. On August 26th during a journey of fifteen and a half miles, they met two horsemen leading three pack horses, the first white travelers they had met since leaving Fort Abercrombie. These men were returning from the Salmon River mines to the "States" via Fort Union and the Missouri River. They had left Florence City, Idaho, six weeks before and reported the Salmon River diggings very rich, but all the ground was taken up. They also reported that very little gold was being taken from the Deer Lodge and Bitter Root Valleys.<sup>21</sup>

On August 26th the party found good grass at their camp; so they rested a day to allow the cattle a chance to feed. The men took advantage of this rest to kill buffalo, and dry the meat for winter food. They secured an ample supply of meat and the next day traveled twenty-one and a half miles to camp again on Milk River. Before they broke camp at Milk River they were joined by a party of Crows, who as soon as the train moved off danced a war dance, probably in celebration of a successful horse stealing raid.<sup>22</sup> August 29th brought the party within fifteen or twenty miles of the Bear Paw Mountains and several men went off on horseback to prospect these mountains for gold. The route continued along the Milk River, and Sunday, August 31st, was spent in a beautiful camp where religious services were held. Monday the party crossed Milk

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<sup>21</sup> Fisk, pp. 23-24.

<sup>22</sup> Fisk, p. 24.

River for the last time and turned south. They crossed Beaver Creek on the 2nd of September and camped that night on Box Elder Creek with good wood and water.

September 3rd, a short march was made to the Big Sandy where the cattle were fed and watered in preparation for a dry march that night. They started at five P.M. and continued until twelve when they were fortunate enough to find a spring where they camped. The following day they made a steep descent from the rolling uplands over which they had been traveling and found themselves on the Maria River nine miles from Fort Benton. On September 5th, they made a short march to the valley of the Teton where they camped with good wood, water and grass, within three miles of Fort Benton. They had traveled three hundred and sixty-seven miles since leaving Fort Union, an average of seventeen and a half miles a day.<sup>23</sup>

Captain Fisk's instructions made it necessary for him to disband the escort here. During their stay on the Teton, the emigrants requested Captain Fisk and his assistants to remain in charge of the train. The Captain granted the request and the party started westward following the Mullan road. After they had traveled a short distance, they met four prospectors returning from the mountains. These men reported that gold had been discovered in small quantities in the Prickly Pear Valley. When the party reached Sun River on September 13th, six of the emigrants were sent ahead to visit the new discovery; so they could report on the situation.

The train reached a point on the Mullan road where the trail to Prickly Pear branched off on September 20th, the advance party met them and made their report. Gold had been discovered eighteen miles south of the camp. Game and grass was plentiful in the valley, and there was good pine timber close at hand. On the strength of this report the bulk of the emigrants decided to try their fortunes there, feeling that if they could not find gold in paying quantities at Prickly Pear, they could move to more promising regions.<sup>24</sup>

The group that decided to look farther consisted to Rockwest, Ault, Ells, Wright, Sturgis and Caldwell. These were the first of the Minnesota emigrants to go to the Bannack diggings.<sup>25</sup>

The officials of the Fisk party with the exception of Langford and Knox continued their journey to Walla Walla and returned to the East Coast by way of Panama. This ended the official ex-

<sup>23</sup> Fisk, p. 26.

<sup>24</sup> Fisk, p. 27.

<sup>25</sup> James Fergus, "A Leaf from the Diary of James Fergus," *Montana Historical Society Contributions*, Vol. II, p. 253.

pedition in which one hundred and thirty men and women traveled seventy-five days across the plains with no deaths, no serious sickness or accidents, and the loss of only one head of stock. It was truly a remarkable feat.

The emigrants who stopped at Prickly Pear engaged in prospecting and began to build houses for the winter, but when news of the discoveries of gold at Pike's Peak and Bannack reached them, they sent N. P. Langford, Cornelius Bray and Paterick Dougherty to investigate. These men found all the ground taken and continued their journey to Bannack.<sup>26</sup> Here they were joined by the remainder of the Fisk party.

James Fergus, who was one of the men who made the trip, says of the party: "it contained as many broken and reckless men as ever crossed the plains together."<sup>27</sup> The Fisk party was one of the few that arrived in Montana with wagons; so a number of them turned their attention to freighting, going to Salt Lake and returning with supplies. There was little snow on the divide; so the freighters crossed all winter without difficulty. This was very fortunate, for without the supplies hauled by these men many of the people at Bannack would have starved during the winter of 1862-63.<sup>28</sup>

This brings to a close the story of the Fisk expedition of 1862, for at this point its members became a part of the population of Montana and as a unit played no further part in her history.

In 1863, Captain Fisk piloted a second expedition across the plains. This time the rendezvous was St. Cloud. The expedition started from this point on June 25th, 1863. It stayed at Fort Ripley until June 25th waiting for emigrants who had written that they were on the way. The train was organized with George Dart, first assistant, S. H. Johnson, second assistant and journalist, W. D. Dibb, physician and surgeon, George Northup, wagonmaster; Antoine Frenier, Sioux interpreter, and R. D. Campbell, Chippewa interpreter. The guard consisted of fifty men.<sup>29</sup>

The second expedition followed the same general route as that of 1862, and after crossing the Sheyenne River on June 20th, came to one of General Sibley's intrenched camps. This was one of a number of camps which General Sibley had constructed during his advance upon the Sioux Indians and was composed of earthwork

<sup>26</sup> Langford, N. P., *Vigilante Days and Ways*, Vol. I, pp. 234 to 240.

<sup>27</sup> Fergus, M.H.S.C., Vol. II, p. 253.

<sup>28</sup> Stuart, Granville, *Forty Years on the Frontier*, Vol. I, pp. 231-32.

<sup>29</sup> *Expedition of Captain Fisk to the Rocky Mountains*, Executive Documents, 1 Sess., 38 Congress, Doc. No. 45, pp. 2 to 4.

batteries connected by rifle pits. That night the party camped in a second of these field fortifications, but found themselves lost in the great extent of the camp. The next day brought them in touch with General Sibley's force which was encamped near Lake Atchinson. Here they learned that the General had advanced with 2200 men to the Coteau du Missouri, where he hoped to overtake and secure the surrender of the Sediton Sioux.

The party broke camp on July 23rd and were accompanied on their way by a number of officers from the camp, who when they stopped to say goodby assured Captain Fisk that his party must either be heroes or madmen.

On July 26th three members of the expedition deserted, George Northup, wagonmaster, George Giers and Duncan Campbell of Pembina. These men were at the rear of the train and had so long a start before their absence was discovered that it was impossible to follow them. They carried considerable government property with them. On July 28th, the scouts riding in advance of the train reported a camp of Red River Hunters a few miles south of camp; so Captain Fisk and his assistants decided to visit them. They give the following description of their camp.

"The camp was large, and looked exceedingly picturesque. The carts were formed into a circular corral being placed side by side, with the hubs adjoining, forming an almost impassible barrier. Inside of the barrier was placed their skin tents, which were conical, with an opening in the top for smoke to escape. All around the outside of this circle was a framework of stakes which were covered with buffalo meat drying in the sun. The meat dries this way without salt, in about two days. These erections looked at a distance like a red wall around the camp. The hunters about 600, were almost all absent, hunting buffalo on the adjacent plains. We found old men, women and children in camp. The women were hard at work cutting up meat and chopping pemmican. In making pemmican they mince the meat and fat tolerably fine, put it in a buffalo hide, pour in boiling fat, and close it up; it eats well, if prepared with care. They were also drying little cakes of wild cherries and berries, to eat with dried buffalo meat and pemmican. We saw some of the young girls seated on buffalo hides which were stretched tight over frames, removing fat, etc., from the skins with a sort of a knife or scraper. These women, mostly halfbreeds, are many of them pretty, rosy cheeked, bright-eyed, decently dressed, and modest in their manners. Everything around the camp looked neat.

The people were polite, and evidently did not lack for anything. They had many oxen, cows and ponies feeding around. This party was from Pembina and vicinity. When they are at home they are farmers. They were now hunting for meat. In the fall they hunt for robes, as the buffalo hides are then thick and covered with hair or fur. Most of these people are Roman Catholics, and were under the command of their Captain, Edward Harman."<sup>30</sup>

A little later Captain Fisk met members of a second party of Red River Hunters and sent mail back to Pembina by one of their number, whom he describes as a typical Red River Hunter.

"He wore a felt hat with a gay wreath; a dark blue coat, with a hood, drab leggings, fringed with scarlet and black cloth, with bead work and gilt buttons on the outside; and moccasins embroidered with stained porcupine quills. To this add a crimson sash around his waist; cross belts (for his shot-pouch and powder-horn) covered with beautiful work in colored beads; a knife sheath and shot-pouch similarly ornamented; a powder-horn, with bright colored tassels and brass nails; a hunting knife and rifle. He rode a well trained hunting Rob. Roy pony, which had a buckskin saddle or pad, with elegant designs in colored beads, also a broadcloth saddle cover, with red fringes, and decorated in the same way as the saddle. This description will apply to most of these French-Canadian voyagers."<sup>31</sup>

On the afternoon of August 4th the train left the trail followed by the party of the previous year taking a westward course through the Coteau du Missouri. On August 6th they camped at the same point where the expedition of 1862 camped on August 3rd and 4th of that year. The following day the trail led north of west as it was planned to take a route further north than that of the previous year so as to avoid the rough country. Their route led across the prairie country until August 10th when they entered the Wood Mountains. They continued to travel through the mountains until they reached the Porcupine which they forded without difficulty and continued to follow along its valley until they reached Frenchman's Fork of Milk River. Sunday, August 23rd, Professor Hesse took an observation and found the latitude was forty-eight degrees and forty-six minutes and seven seconds west; while Captain Fisk rode ahead twenty miles, finding Milk River and seeing the Bear Paw and the Little Rocky Mountains in the distance.

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<sup>30</sup> Fisk, 2nd Ex., pp. 7 and 8.

<sup>31</sup> Fisk, 2nd Ex., pp. 9 and 10.

The party followed a route marked out by Captain Fisk and came in sight of these mountains on August 25th, and this was the same date they were seen by the party of the previous year. The following day the train struck the 1862 trail. This was a day of excitement for one of the men was lost without water and almost died of thirst before he was found.

At noon on August 31st the party met six teams and seventy-five or eighty oxen belonging to Colonel Hunkins of Bannack City, on their way to Fort St. Charles on the Missouri. This outfit was to bring back a steam engine and two quartz mills, which Colonel Hunkins was preparing to erect at Bannack City. Here the party heard the first news of the discovery of gold at Alder Gulch.

Three days later they met an American Fur Company train on the Box Elder and heard more about the new mines. The 6th of September found them camped on the Teton, four miles from Fort Benton. The escort was disbanded here. Before Captain Fisk left the emigrants, Rev. John Torbits presented him with a letter of appreciation signed by all who made the trip. After Captain Fisk had auctioned off all the heavy government equipment, he employed twenty of the escorts as drivers and herdsman and started for Bannack City.

The route now led along the Mullan Road, and after crossing Sun River, and while riding in the valley of the Dearborn River on September 13th, they saw a man riding near the trail toward the river. They were very anxious to receive the latest news from the gold fields and rode rapidly to intercept him. When they drew near the stranger recognized Lieut. Johnson and greeted him with great cordiality. Then he asked the party to help him find his purse, which he had thrown away in the grass, taking them for highwaymen. After some difficulty the bag of dust was found. It contained \$3,000 in gold dust. When the miner had gone happily on his way, Captain Fisk continued his journey to Prickly Pear, where he found the mines had not produced much gold. The past summer had been spent in constructing dams and ditches. With these improvements, the miners hoped for a large yield the following year. The expedition continued to follow the Mullan Road until they came to the Little Blackfoot Valley. They then crossed the mountains to Livingston Creek and followed it to the Deer Lodge Valley near Jonny Grants place. They went up the valley past Warm Springs and crossed the divide to the Big Hole. The Big Hole Valley was depopulated, everyone having gone to Virginia City.

While traveling in this valley they met wagons on their way back to Hell Gate from Virginia City. They had made the trip to dispose of their vegetables which were bringing very high prices in the camp. Potatoes and onions sold for from twenty-five to forty cents a pound.

Captain Fisk continued up the Big Hole and crossed over the hills to Bannack City on the 28th of September, 1863. Here he was met by N. P. Langford and many of the emigrants who were with him the previous year. He camped on Yankee Flat which owed its name to the Minnesota emigrants settling there in 1862.

Bannack City was located on a grassy plain across Grasshopper Creek at the entrance of the canyon. The town consisted of a long and several short irregular streets of log and frame shanties and stores. These were built along the creek. There were a large number of bakeries and restaurants to care for the large floating population. The town was not over a year old, but contained 1,000 inhabitants. The previous June there had been between 3,000 and 4,000 people there, but most of the population moved to Alder Gulch upon the discovery of gold there.

After passing through the town, the road followed the creek through the canyon. Here in the gulch diggings, the miners were busily at work on both sides of the stream. The claims fifty feet wide stretched from mountain base to mountain base and extended about four miles down the creek. They were known as "Poor Man's" mines for they required little capital to work them and yielded, Captain Fisk found, from \$5 to \$15 per day per man. There were some rich claims that yielded larger sums. Farther down the canyon was a small water power quartz mill with wooden stamps. This mill was operated by one man and crushed about \$1500 in gold per week. Buildings were being constructed to house two steam driven quartz mills which were to be run for the custom trade.

Captain Fisk left Lieut. Johnson at Bannack City and made a visit to Virginia City. He found the road fair but hilly between the two camps. Virginia City was divided into two towns Virginia and Nevada. The two towns consisted of one long street lined with stores and shorter streets branching off at right angles. The general appearance of the camps was much the same as Bannack City. The town had a population of about 4,000. The diggings or paying claims extended about fifteen miles. Most of the claims were very rich. The average yield for the whole extent of the gulch was probably



\$20 per man per day, although some of the claims yielded as high as \$100.

At some points in the gulch the bedrock lay twenty-five feet below the surface, and this made the opening of the claims expensive. The opening of such claims generally cost from \$200 to \$1500, but once they were opened they paid well. There were between seven and eight thousand men working in the gulch and the weekly yield has been estimated at \$500,000.

Returning to Bannack City, Captain Fisk sold the remaining equipment, and started his return journey by taking the Bannack City Express to Salt Lake City. This express was a rather primitive affair, a covered wagon which left Bannack City once a week. There were few stations along the line, and the Indian ponies that drew the wagon were forced to pick their living along the way.

At the Snake River ferry, he saw one hundred and fifty wagons from Denver bound for the mines. Later he passed four hundred teams from Colorado bound for the same destination. The men with these trains told him that if the emigration continued Colorado would be depopulated.

After reaching Salt Lake, Captain Fisk continued his Journey home by the Overland Trail in a stage coach. He reported that the arrangements for the feeding of passengers were very poor, and that the arrangements for handling baggage and mail were worse. As for the trail itself, he was positive that it was the worst possible and not to be compared with the northern route.<sup>32</sup>

In spite of the fact that the writer has found no references to the use of the trail from Minnesota to Montana during the years 1864 and 1865, it does not seem possible that the trail had fallen into disuse during these years. The movement of population in 1866 was heavier than any previous year, and so far as available information shows this emigration was without government support. Several parties made the trip. The first of these to arrive in Montana was under the command of Captain Fuller and consisted of thirteen wagons and twenty-seven persons. They left Faribault, Rice County, Minnesota on the 13th of May. Their route was to Fort Wadsworth and then to a point on the Jaques River a few miles above the mouth of Bone Hill River. The course from here was north of west to Fort Berthold, and from Fort Berthold the general direction of the Missouri River was followed. Just what route this party followed from Fort Union to Fort Benton is not indicated, but it is probable that they followed the Milk River

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<sup>32</sup> All the details of Fisk's 2nd Expedition come from the above Report.

route, which was used by the other Minnesota trains during the year. The Fuller party spent ninety-six days on the road, but they explained that they took twenty-six days longer than necessary. They had four head of stock stolen on the trip, but did not see any hostile Indians.<sup>33</sup>

Captain Fisk organized the largest Minnesota party of the year. The reporter for the *St. Cloud Democrat* wrote from Fort Abercrombie, that on June 23rd, 1866, Captain Fisk's expedition was fully organized. The train was divided into eight sections of twenty wagons each, the total number being one hundred and sixty wagons and three hundred and twenty-five emigrants. The Captain sold sustenance tickets for the trip to such men as desired the service. There were one hundred men who took advantage of this offer, fifty of whom were mounted. Captain Fisk had sixteen wagons of his own, and he also engaged eight wagons from W. H. Watson to haul freight for him. A part of this freight must have been supplies for his traveling boarding house. W. H. Watson had two wagons in addition loaded with his own freight, the three Sims brothers had twenty wagons, G. W. Tubbs and R. Leitch each had five, quite a number of the emigrants had from two to four wagons. There were a number traveling with only one wagon.

There were a number of women and children with the train belonging to thirty families. There were also four marriageable women. The party left their rendezvous at St. Cloud on June 6th, but did not succeed in getting away from Fort Abercrombie until June 25th.<sup>34</sup> The expedition traveled in three columns and they followed the general route used by Captain Fuller, but we know that Captain Fisk followed the Milk River route from Fort Union to Fort Benton. In speaking to reporters, Captain Fisk praised the new route very highly for it was direct, and well supplied with wood, water and grass. The grades were easy, as there was not a single hill where the teams had to double up or use blocks on the descent. The party was fortunate in that there were no accidents, no stock lost and they were not troubled by the Indians.

A train under the direction of Steele, consisting of forty wagons and seventy men preceded the Fisk party, and a second under Captain Tom Holmes with seventy-four wagons and one hundred and sixty men traveled along with Captain Fisk. Thus the combined strength of the three parties traveling within support-

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<sup>33</sup> *Tri-Weekly Republican*, Helena, Aug. 23, 1866.

<sup>34</sup> *Montana Post*, Helena, Aug. 4, 1866.

ing distance of each other was five hundred and fifty-five men.

Some of the emigrants from these trains stopped at the Bear Paw Mountains to prospect, but they came in soon after the other part of the group, reporting that the discoveries in those mountains were sadly exaggerated. The trains arrived in Fort Benton between the 15th of August and the 10th of September. Captain Fisk was accompanied by his family and intended to settle in Montana. He was soon busy with a plan to form a settlement on Sun River that was to combine mining and farming in that section.<sup>35</sup>

Phillip Beaupre, Captain Fisk's second in command on this journey, organized a party in September to return over the new trail to Montana. The party was to be mounted and carry their supplies on pack horses. The newspaper notice of the trip estimated that from fifty to seventy-five would make the trip. Later papers gave no further information on the subject.<sup>36</sup>

The Helena papers, refer to an emigration of over eight hundred by the Northern Overland Trail in 1866, but their pages only refer to parties that had a membership of five hundred and eighty-two. This difference in totals may be due to the fact that the arrivals of some parties were not noticed in the press.

The Northern Overland Route attracted some attention in 1866 as a possible route for stages between Helena and St. Cloud. The plan was to use the established stage lines between St. Cloud and Fort Abercrombie, and between Fort Benton and Helena. This would leave a gap of seven hundred miles between Fort Abercrombie and Fort Benton. The trail across this gap was well supplied with wood, water and grass; so it would only be necessary to place stage stations every ten miles along the route and it would be ready for traffic. Equipment could be supplied by the many stage lines that had been put out of business by the railroads in Minnesota. It was estimated that such a line of stages would bring passengers from Helena to St. Cloud in eleven days, and put Helena within two weeks of New York. The line which was to have been started in the spring of 1867 never materialized.<sup>37</sup>

The only later information concerning travel on the northern route was that Captain Davy had organized an expedition in 1867. This party consisting of six hundred left St. Paul June 20th and expected to arrive in Helena about the 20th of August.<sup>38</sup>

W. M. UNDERHILL.

<sup>38</sup> *Montana Weekly Post*, Aug. 17, 1867.

<sup>35</sup> *Tri-Weekly Republican*, Helena, Sept. 11, 1866.

<sup>36</sup> Clipping from an unknown Montana newspaper of 1866.

<sup>37</sup> *Montana Post*, Helena, Aug. 25, 1866.