Railroad Survey Explored Klamath Area In 1855

By FLOYD L. WYNNE

A number of early day expeditions have touched on some areas of the Klamath Basin during their explorations.

One of the earliest, of course, was that of Peter Ogden Skeen in 1826. Then came John C. Fremont in 1843 and again in 1846. Lindsay and Jesse Applegate led an exploration through in 1846, shortly after Fremont's party had passed through.

The Applegates were looking for a wagon trail through the Klamath Lakes area that would shorten the trip from the East to the Willamette Valley. They established the Emigrant Trail.

Each of these has left history an account of their travels through this region.

We can now add another expedition that passed through this area, this time in the year 1855.

Purpose Of Trip

Purpose of this trip was to find the easiest, most economical route to construct a railroad line from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Coast.

The survey, authorized by Congress, was launched through all areas of the West, ranging from the Red River of the north area on the Canadian border to the Rio Grande on the south.

One portion of the survey was to be run from Benicia, Calif., to the Columbia River. It was this survey that we are discussing now.

Lt. R. S. Williamson, topographical engineer, had already explored portions of the Klamath Basin in 1851 and 1852 in short trips, and he was given the task of running the railroad survey.

Lt. Henry Abbot was his principal assistant. As it turned out, Williamson became ill and it was Abbot who had to write most of the report at the conclusion of the expedition.

The party also consisted of Dr. J. S. Newberry, geologist and botanist; H. C. Fillebrown, assistant engineer; Dr. E. Sterling, physician and naturalist; C. D. Anderson, computer, and John Young, draughtsman.

Young made the remarkably accurate charcoal sketches which accompany this article.

The party also included 18 men under the immediate supervision of Charles Coleman, packmaster.

An escort force of 100 soldiers was assigned to protect the party during portions of its journey through the Klamath country. The escort officers were Lt. H. G. Gibson, 3rd Artillery; Lt. George Crook, 4th Infantry, commissary and quartermaster of the expedition's escort force; Lt. J. B. Hood, 2nd Cavalry, and 100 men, 20 of whom were dragoons and the remainder artillery and infantry. J. Daniels was quartermaster's clerk, and J. B. Vinton, packmaster of the escort.

Lt. Phil Sheridan of Civil War fame, joined the party on Aug. 4, relieving Lieutenant Hood.

One other addition to the party was an old hunter named Bartee, usually called "Old Red" who joined the expedition when it reached Fort Reading.

Report Available

We are greatly indebted to Laurence L. Shaw, 805 Pacific Terrace, for permitting us to copy the notes of this expedition from the 1857 volume report which he has.

Shaw has donated all of the copies of the expedition reports with the exception of the one dealing with this area to the Klamath County Museum.

The report is entitled, "Reports of Explorations and Surveys to ascertain the most practicable and economical route for a railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean, made under the Secretary of War (Jefferson C. Davis) in 1854-55, according to acts of Congress of March 3, 1853; May 31, 1854, and Aug. 5, 1854.

The report was printed in Washington by A. O. P. Nicholson in 1857.

We are also indebted to Mrs. Robert Helms, Fort Klamath, for furnishing us with two sketches from this surveying expedition, alerting us to this historic episode which is not covered in either the 1940 history by Rachel Applegate Good or the 1905 history of Daniel French.

SURVEY STORY

The expedition left Benicia, Calif., on July 10, 1855, proceeding up the Sacramento Valley to Fort Reading, crossing the river at Fremont.

From Fort Reading the route led westward over the western chain of the Sierra Nevada, which was crossed by Noble's Pass. The valley of Canoe Creek was then followed to Pit River. Then up Pit River to the head of Round Valley and across to Wright Lake (Clear Lake).

Picking up Lieutenant Abbot's day-by-day account with Aug. 11, about the time the party arrived at Clear Lake, we continue:

Aug. 11 — The party was aroused at 3 o'clock this morning, by Lieutenant Williamson's order; as it was very uncertain how far we might be obliged to travel before reaching water. The head of the antelope killed yesterday had been baked by allowing it to remain all night buried among hot stones, and it furnished an excellent breakfast. We followed the wagon road through an open pine forest for about six miles, and then, finding that it inclined too much to the, west, left it, and endeavored to keep, by compass, a course north 20 degrees west. After traveling several miles on nearly level ground through the forest, we emerged from it, and found ourselves on a rocky plain covered with sage bushes.

This we crossed in about six miles, and, on reaching the summit of a line of low sandstone hills capped with trap, saw below us Wright Lake. It was a fine sheet of water, about 11 miles long and four miles wide, bordered by tule. The banks were so miry that we were compelled to travel more than a mile before reaching a place where the animals could drink. We encamped in the edge of the tule, near some green willow bushes which supplies us with our only fuel, as even sage bushes had disappeared after crossing the hills.

Aug. 12—Our course, at first, lay along the southwestern shore of the lake (Clear Lake), where the hills occasionally terminated very abruptly at the water's edge. The horn of a mountain sheep, weighing several pounds, was found near the trail. After crossing the low hills which border the lake, we travelled through a gently undulating region, dotted with sage bushes, for about seven miles. We then found ourselves on the edge of an abrupt descent of 200 feet, which conducted to the shores of Rhett Lake. (Tule Lake). This lake was about 14 miles long and eight miles broad. It was bordered by a wide belt of tule, the home of vast numbers of waterfowl, which rose in clouds at our approach.

On the bluff the trail joined an emigrant road, which followed down a narrow ravine to the level of the lake. This ravine was once the scene of a bloody massacre. A party of Indians lay in ambush, until an emigrant train reached the middle of the descent, and then attacked and killed nearly the whole party. Rhett Lake is a secure retreat, where the savages can escape among the tule, in their light canoes, and defy a greatly superior force.

The line of hills which borders the lake on the northeastern side is separated from the tule by a narrow strip of land, elevated but little above the water. This was covered with grass, the rich green of which presented a refreshing contrast to the sickly blue of the sage plain over which we had been travelling. The clouds of dust ceased, and we journeyed on through a much more pleasing region.

After riding a few miles from the bluff, we left the road, and encamped on Lost River near where it discharges itself into the lake by several mouths. It was a deep, unfordable stream, flowing with a very sluggish current. The banks were abrupt like the sides of a canal. A few sage bushes and "bois des vaches" supplied the only fuel.

We found, encamped near the stream, a party of men that had come from Yreka to meet and escort an expected emigrant train.

Aug. 13 — Lieutenant Williamson determined to pass around the westerniside of Lower Klamath Lake, with Lieutenant Sheridan and the dragoon detachment, to examine the route, and to ascertain whether Klamath River flowed through the lake or not. He gave me instructions to proceed with the main party to Upper Klamath Lake, and, after selecting a good camping place near its southern extremity, to await his arrival. Nine of the foot soldiers were sick, and they accompanied Lieutenant Williamson, to be sent, in charge of a non-commissioned officer, through the pass south of Mt. Pitt to Fort Lane.

My party left camp first. We followed up the eastern bank of Lost River, through a dusty sage plain almost destitute of grass, to the natural bridge. The river was here about 80 feet wide and very deep; but it was spanned by two natural bridges of conglomerate sandstone from 10 to 15 feet in width, parallel to each other, and not more than two rods apart. The water flowed over both of them. The top of the most northern one inclined down-stream, but it was only covered to a depth varying from six inches to two feet. The other was nearly horizontol, but the water, being unusually high, was too deep for fording. There are probably hollows under both arches through which the river flows. Emigrants cross here with their loaded wagons. There is no ford for a considerable distance above, and none below. We passed over without difficulty, and followed a well-marked Indian trail towards the north, through a level valley dotted with sage bushes and a few clumps of bunch grass. The river, which was full of short bends, was often sunk as much as 30 feet below the plain. There was apparently a good ford 4.5 miles above the natural bridge.

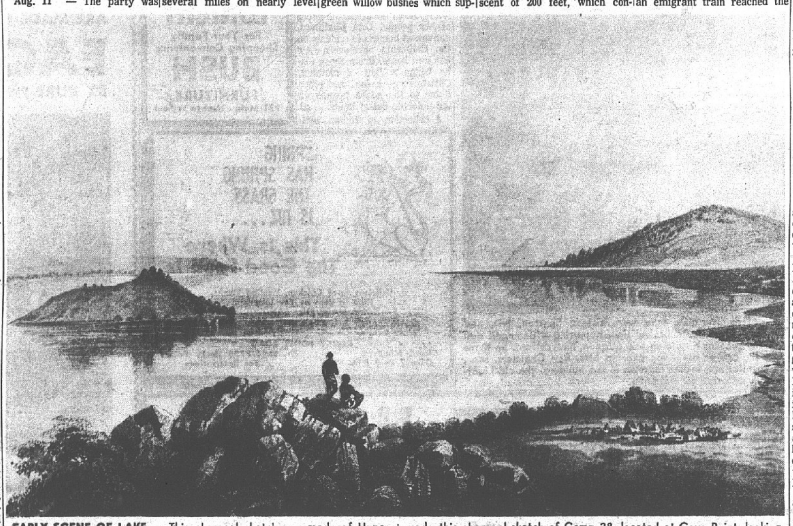
The valley was about three miles wide, and bordered by high hills, those on the east being well-timbered with pine, and those on the west nearly bare. The bunch grass became more abundant as we advanced, and the sage bushes fewer in number.

After traveling 12 miles from the natural bridge, we reached a place where the River issued through a canon from the hills to the eastward; and, although the valley continued towards the north, it was entirely destitute of water.

As the distance to Klamath Lake was unknown, we left the trail and encamped near the mouth of the canon. The general surface of the plain was here about 40 feet above the water, but it was connected by a bench, about 200 yards in width, of not more than half that height. This formed a good camping ground; being covered with fine bunch grass, while bushes and small trees for fuel were found in abundance near the edge of the stream.

Aut. 14 —This morning some excitement was created in camp by the discovery of a

(Continued on Page 13)



EARLY SCENE OF LAKE — This charcoal sketch was made of Upper Klamath Lake during a railroad survey which ran through the Klamath Basin in 1855. The survey was part of a comprehensive mapping of the entire west in a search for the best route for a railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Coast by the federal government. John Young was the member of the party, headed by Lieutenant R. Williamson, who made this charcoal sketch of Camp 28, located at Cove Point, looking out over the lake and Buck Island. At right is the camp of the party which included military support of about 100 soldiers. The survey party encamped here for several days before heading for Camp 29 on Barclay Springs.

BUSH FURNITURE CO.... WHERE

The living room of the Glenn Bowen home on Lakeshore Drive features these 3 mobile Sherman Bertrum chairs in decorative burnt orange nylon covers. The center table is by Drexel and the hanging lamp is by Lightehouse.

The newly built contemporary home of Mr. and Mrs. Tom Moore on Lowell Street was completely decorated by Bush Furniture this summer. The family room features an unusual party table and matching Danish walnut chairs made in Florida especially for Mrs. Moore. Buffet cabinets were made by B. P. Johns, Portland. Floor covering is Armstrong's Tessere.

Jerry Jennings

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