

LESSONS FROM AN OLD ROAD

Frederick Dent's Route from Fort Dalles to Fort Simcoe

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In my experience of three score years and ten, over half of which has been on the frontier of the Pacific Coast, it has been my fortune to encounter many hardships, and make many journeys involving hunger, fatigue, perils of travel, by snows in the mountains, by swollen streams, and days of weary travel over burning deserts, but I do not remember any journey involving more weariness of body, and anxiety of mind, than the one which, I am thankful to say, has just been successfully accomplished.

—United States Indian Agent James H. Wilbur from a letter to H. Price, commissioner of Indian Affairs, written July 18, 1881, after Wilbur's return to Fort Simcoe from Malheur, Oregon.

James Harvey Wilbur was lucky to be alive—and knew it. He also should have known better. Wilbur had lived some 20 years in the desert climate of the Yakima Valley and understood the importance of dependable water sources and good roads for traveling on the frontier—especially in summer. The above letter, dated July 18, 1881, describes an ill-fated trip on a horrible road from Umatilla, Oregon, to Fort Simcoe, Washington Territory, made in the blistering heat of July. The Malheur Indian Reservation in southeastern Oregon had been closed by the federal government, and Wilbur had been directed to proceed there and transfer all the government property (including a large cattle herd) back to Simcoe. Only able to carry two gallons of water for 40 men and 16 four-horse teams over a 50-mile trip across the dry sands of the Horseheaven Hills, Wilbur's journey nearly turned into unmitigated disaster. There was little grass for cattle or teams; the road was "heavy with sand," slowing their progress to a snail's pace; nobody in the party had ever taken the road with loaded teams; and the route was entirely without water.

The route that Wilbur chose from Umatilla would appear to the uninitiated like a simple shortcut from the Columbia River to the Yakima Valley, heading northwest across the lower Horseheaven Hills and meeting the Yakima River near Prosser. This was no easy shortcut, however, and warning signs abounded for the prudent traveler. Old atlases show this road only once, ironically for the very same year that Wilbur made his trip (1881), so the route was evidently neither popular nor long-lasting. The reasons for the road's unpopularity are not hard to decipher. On maps for the years 1878 and 1881, the region is labeled in simple yet prophetic terms: "Streams Dry in Summer," and an earlier map labels the area as "Sage Barrens, Destitute of Timber." In other words, "carry plenty of water, and cross at your own risk." The eastern and lower Horseheaven Hills not only had no summer streams, but dependable springs were few and far between.

Wilbur's choice of this road is even more incredible when one considers that he had a perfectly good and proven route to Fort Simcoe, and one with plenty of water: the road carved out by Frederick Dent 25 years earlier and employed routinely by freighters and travelers between The

Dalles, Fort Simcoe, and the Yakima Valley. Although there were extensive Native American trails in the area and wagon trains had passed through the central part of Washington heading over Naches Pass, Dent's military road represents the first graded road into the Yakima Valley and the longest-lasting wagon road in the region, being used even into the early 20th century.

Dent's road was certainly far superior to the Walla Walla to Steilacoom Road, which was begun in 1853 to aid emigrants coming to Puget Sound from the east. This road, which followed the Longmire Wagon Trail, suffered from a terrible route: some 68 crossings of the turbulent Naches River, and sheer cliffs near the summit of Naches Pass, making it necessary to lower the wagons by ropes. It also suffered a lack of commitment and leadership on the part of its chief engineer, Captain George McClellan. While on the job, McClellan wasted money and time, expended little effort on the project, and generally hindered rather than aided in the road's construction. It is little wonder that this road was obsolete well before the close of the 19th century, and the main east-west route was moved north to Snoqualmie Pass, the present-day route of Interstate 90.

Dent's route, on the other hand, usually called the Old Military Road, was a success from the beginning and became an essential lifeline to the fast-growing agricultural Meccas of both the Yakima and Kittitas valleys. As someone who grew up in the Yakima Valley and was familiar with the history of Fort Simcoe and the surrounding area, I became fascinated with this early road that had broken new ground into our valley. But I wanted a deeper knowledge of the road than books, old manuscripts, and letters alone could provide. I wanted to find the actual route blazed by Dent, to hike the roadbed and get a real sense of what he and his men faced nearly 150 years ago—and to get a feel for the rigors of early wagon travel into the Yakima Valley.

Although the road is indicated on many early maps and atlases of the region, their small scale makes it difficult to find the original route. In order to actually locate the road it was necessary to plot the route from old surveying maps of the General Land Office (now the Bureau of Land Management) onto modern topographical maps and then compare the route on paper with reality in the field. The roadbed's tenacity was both surprising and gratifying. Except where farming, development, or forests had obliterated the road, it was still often possible to discern the road's traces as it hugged canyon walls, traversed desert plateaus, or crossed streams.

When Colonel George Wright chose the location of what would be Fort Simcoe in 1856, construction of the military road began at almost the same time. The site of the fort was one of the traditional wintering grounds of the plateau peoples, named "Mool-Mool" for its many bubbling springs. The location also marks the intersection of Native American trails going south to Columbia River fisheries and west to the huckleberry fields at the base of Pah-to (Mount Adams).

Wright was well aware that relationships between Indians and settlers had deteriorated and were strained to the breaking point. Yakamas felt that their chiefs Kamiakin and Ow-hi had been forced to sign the Walla Walla Treaty in June of the previous year and were increasingly bitter toward white settlers and miners who were encroaching upon Reservation lands. Wright and his superior, General John Wool, envisioned the fort as a buffer between settlers and Indians as well as an outpost from which to conduct punitive military campaigns. The fort's proximity to Father Pandosy's Catholic Mission at Ahtanum Creek was also viewed as a plus, since the army had "profited" by the priest's information in the past.

Thus, the fort's isolation was viewed as an acceptable trade-off for its strategic location—but it was imperative that this new army outpost be linked to existing military commands as soon as

possible. The fort's location also fit perfectly with the army's strategic goal to carve out a road system that connected California with Washington Territory. A new fort east of the Cascades, north of Fort Dalles, and connected to all points south and east was the next logical step.

On August 8, 1856, Wright detailed Captain Frederick Dent and Company B to begin construction of a wagon road to connect the new fort with Fort Dalles, the nearest military post. Dent wasted no time and actual construction began five days later, on August 13, from Fort Dalles. It took Dent and his men just slightly more than one full month to rough out the 67-mile road, permitting full wagons to travel the distance, with his road crew averaging better than two miles per day. Considering the extremely rugged topography of the area and the necessity of locating the road near dependable water sources, Dent's men made excellent progress. In fact, the reported speed of the road's construction caused Jack Splawn, a contemporary of the events, to doubt that such a feat was even possible.

Dent's route shows an ingenious use of the extreme topography of the country, making the land work for the road, and not forcing the route over impossible grades. And the route also demonstrates a good understanding of where dependable water was to be found—hardly a luxury in the dry climate. The credit for the road's speedy construction and wise location cannot go to Dent alone, however. The route roughly parallels the ancient "Ah-soom," the famous Eel Trail utilized by Native Americans for centuries, and the best route from Central Washington to the traditional fishing areas of the mid Columbia River, including Celilo Falls. Thus, Company B was spared the onerous and time-consuming chore of groping entirely in the dark regarding the location of dependable springs and easy grades. Dent was not slow to capitalize on this advantage, and it was reported on August 30 that he was "pushing on the wagon road."

There had no doubt been an incredible amount of foot and horse traffic on the Eel Trail over the centuries, wearing down the soil and retarding vegetative growth for years afterwards. As late as 1906 a government surveyor noted the presence of an "Indian Trail" quite distinct and separate from the "Government Wagon Road," but just a decade later, L. V. McWhorter noted that "many sections" of the Eel Trail "[were] no longer an Indian thoroughfare, and choked with a growth of young pine."

Not surprisingly, road engineers have little desire to "reinvent the wheel" when scouting the best routes for road construction, and such progressive layering of routes simply makes good sense. As long as animals (whether horses, oxen, or mules) were necessary to pull freight or carry people, roads had to utilize regular and consistent water sources as well as reasonable grades. This combination is even more critical in dry areas; and although not as arid as the country to the east, nearly half of Dent's route is through semidesert, with springs serving as the only sources of water.

Dent's route was not perfect, however, and one drawback of the route was soon apparent: due to the rigors of the winters at the road's high elevations, all supplies had to reach Fort Simcoe by the end of October. Such a limitation is hardly surprising, considering that the road twice crosses mountain passes over 4,000 feet and spends at least half its distance near 3,000 feet on forested plateaus between Toppenish Ridge and the southern summit of the Simcoe Mountains. Yakamas avoided winter travel there for just this reason, and the area's reputation for fierce blizzards prompted the belief that a "Chil-wit," or bad spirit, lay in ambush for anybody so foolish as to try crossing the Simcoes in winter.

The man chosen to build the road to Fort Simcoe—Frederick Tracy Dent—was both good and lucky. Born near St. Louis, Missouri, in 1820, Dent compiled a solid and consistent record of service in the army. Although graduating near the bottom of his class at West Point, Dent nevertheless demonstrated bravery during the Mexican War, for which he was awarded two brevets, and received a serious wound at Molino Del Rey.

After his road-building days at Fort Simcoe, Dent became even more familiar with the Pacific Northwest, serving with the Ninth Infantry at various locations on the central Oregon coast. Despite being accused of involvement in a plot to turn over Fort Hoskins (near modern-day Newport, Oregon) to "secessionists" in November 1861, Dent's career continued its ascendancy. During the Civil War, Dent's rank rose from captain in 1861 to major in 1863 and finally to brigadier general of volunteers in 1865. In the particularly vicious and bloody campaign that culminated in the Battle of the Wilderness in 1864, Dent again displayed bravery, being promoted to lieutenant colonel for gallant and meritorious service. General Grant entrusted Dent with a sensitive and essential component in bringing up reinforcements at Cold Harbor, Virginia, and there can be little doubt that Dent earned his commendations.

Dent's bravery on behalf of the Union cause speaks strongly against the charge that he had been conspiring with secessionists in Oregon, but his personal connections didn't hurt his later career either. Dent's roommate during his last year at West Point was none other than Ulysses S. Grant, and the two men formed a bond that endured through the Civil War and beyond, with Grant even naming his eldest son Frederick Dent Grant. The builder of the Old Military Road became even more connected to Grant when the future president took a shine to Frederick's sister, Julia. As Grant puts it, "my visits [to the Dent home] became more frequent and enjoyable" and he and Julia were finally married in August 1848.

In hindsight, Wright's choice of Dent to oversee the road's construction was in all probability made on merit and not motivated by political considerations. Grant's own military career was anything but meteoric in 1856, and his connections to Dent were of little concern to Wright. Dent himself brought some excellent qualities to the table. Educated in engineering, tried and tested in combat, experienced in commanding men, Dent was the right man to push a wagon road through dangerous country with efficiency and dispatch. If George McClellan was a failure at road-building, Frederick Dent showed the way it should be done.

Due to its level topography, plethora of natural routes north and south, and strategic location on the Columbia River, The Dalles by the 1860s and 1870s had truly become an early transportation hub for the Pacific Northwest—military and wagon roads left the bustling town in nearly every direction. Merchandise was shipped upstream from Portland, then over the web of wagon roads heading for the interior. Such transportation did not come cheap, however. In 1883 the average freight charge from The Dalles southeast to Canyon City, a trip of around 200 miles, was \$100, or about three months wages for the average worker. Despite such high prices, and the desire of some central Washington merchants to utilize river barges to carry freight to Priest Rapids, The Dalles via the old wagon road remained the preferred source of commercial supply well into the 1880s.

A mostly dependable ferry connected this important town with an upstart settlement across the Columbia River in Washington Territory: the aptly named town of "Rockland" (now Dallesport, Washington). For a time it seemed as if this settlement's days were also full of promise. Rockland had been chosen as the initial county seat of Klickitat County, and the paper at The

Dalles went so far as to predict in 1867, "At no far distant day this little village is bound to become of considerable importance."

No such prophecies were fulfilled, however. Instead, Rockland became known for its land swindles and frauds, and most incoming settlers disdained the rocky, low-lying flats along the river and looked farther north for better soils with more rainfall. They found both in Goldendale, and the county seat was moved there in 1878, relegating Rockland to the perennial role of bridesmaid for The Dalles.

The Old Military Road begins right at the Rockland ferry landing, climbing northeast out of the river bank up a well-defined cut in the basalt cliffs. Here, it is apparent that the road required significant pick work and grading, and the ascent is rather steep. Amazingly, along this grade there are still remnants of old signs addressed to early travelers, faded white letters painted on the rocks, with one sign clearly addressed to "BUGGIES."

The road angles northeast across The Dalles Municipal Airport and crosses Highway 14 about half a mile east of its junction with Highway 197. Here, its ruts and traces are clearly visible as it climbs up the slope along the dry streambed of Three-Mile Creek, and for the next several miles the road roughly parallels the Dalles Mountain Road as it makes its way over the Columbia Hills.

From the time the road crosses Five-Mile Creek, approximately a mile to the east, until it crests the summit, the road employs a series of ingenious flanking maneuvers to gain elevation. The Columbia Hills at this point are steep and rocky but contain numerous grassy steppes, parallel to the river far below. Dent's strategy is obvious: by utilizing these steppes when going east and climbing natural draws when it was necessary to go north, Dent's crews took the road northeasterly, traversing the steep slopes without a direct frontal assault up the hills. This strategy also kept the backbreaking and time-consuming pick work to a minimum. As a testimony to Dent's good judgment, the Dalles Mountain Road today follows Dent's basic route, and one can see the Old Military Road from many places along the modern road. At this point, the old route inspires awe, both at the spectacular views and at the skill of the road crews in carving the road onto the nearly vertical hillsides.

In another confirmation of Dent's road-building skills, from Dallesport to the summit of the Columbia Hills, the Old Military Road passes an incredible 27 springs, most of which were running full when viewed in July 2001. In this area summer temperatures routinely exceed 100 degrees, and from May until October rainfall is virtually nonexistent. Even taking into account the fact that the flow and location of springs can change over time, it is certain that at least some of these springs would have been sure sources of water for both driver and team—an absolute necessity in this harsh desert environment.

From the summit (at approximately 2,300 feet), the road roughly parallels a gravel road as it descends into the Centerville Valley, proceeding generally north until it reaches the early settlement of Blockhouse. Now just a concentration of a few houses, Blockhouse was once an important station along the road, named for a two-story fort constructed there by soldiers. After Major Granville Haller's defeat along Toppenish Creek at the hands of Kamiakin in 1855, Haller's troops retreated back to The Dalles and constructed a log blockhouse on this site for protection against attack. Unfortunately, the blockhouse itself was never preserved, and after being moved to several sites in Goldendale over the years, it eventually found its way to nearby Brooks Memorial State Park, where it was destroyed in an inadvertent fire.

At Monument Road, about a mile north of the nearly deserted town of Firwood, the road meanders through the pines, up the grade toward the Simcoes, and in places the rutted roadbed is clearly visible amongst the growth of huckleberry and manzanita. As the road proceeds north, it generally parallels Monument Road, and the route passes just west of a small monument marking where A. J. Bolon, an early Indian agent, was killed by a small group of Yakamas in 1855. According to the only eyewitness account, related by a Yakama named Su-el-lil who was present but not a participant in the murder, Bolon was killed in retaliation for previous hangings of Indians in Idaho.

The killing was a regrettable tragedy, spawning Haller's ill-fated expedition to the Yakima Valley and putting the spark to the already smoldering situation between Indians and settlers. After Haller's debacle on Toppenish Creek, the army responded by sending an ever-increasing tide of soldiers into the Northwest interior, culminating in Wright's victory over Kamiakin's forces near Spokane in 1858. The Simcoes' beauty at this point is in stark contrast to the sadness of the Bolon killing of long ago. The road soon enters the Yakama Indian Reservation and crosses the summit of the Simcoe Mountains (just over 4,300 feet) in a beautiful forest dominated by fir and hemlock, dotted with meadows of wildflowers.

The road proceeds north just to the west of Potato Butte, taking advantage of several springs flowing west from its summit. The road continues mostly north, slowly descending the flanks of the Simcoes, then past Poker Spring, Sheep Butte, and Graham Spring before passing about a mile and a half east of Vessey Springs. In this area the original road's traces are difficult to find since modern logging and jeep roads utilize nearly the same route as the wagon road. After passing yet another spring, the old road parallels Camas Patch Road, just west of Camas Patch itself, the site of traditional Yakama root gatherings. When the road crosses the North Fork of Dry Creek, it passes by an old sheep camp, with several large stands of aspen, many of which are nearly two feet in diameter. On several of the aspens herders have carved initials and dates—some dating from the early 1900s.

At this point the road begins to ascend Toppenish Ridge, climbing to approximately 4,000 feet and providing panoramic views of the Cascade Mountains and the Yakima Valley before following a draw down to Mill Creek. At several places the road's traces are clearly visible in the forest, with six to seven-inch oak saplings growing in the ruts. The Mill Creek crossing is discernible at the head of a brushy draw of oaks and pines, and from here until it reaches the modern Mill Creek Road, south of White Swan, the Old Military Road's path is clear and distinct, with rocks piled on both sides of the roadbed.

After crossing Mill Creek Road, the old road leaves the timber behind, and heads north down a dry ridge toward Toppenish Creek. Its traces are again easily discernible, with ruts worn in the basalt rocks and the roadbed reflecting obvious evidence of grading. At this point the road forks, with the east branch heading toward White Swan, Yakima, and the Yakima Valley, and the west toward Fort Simcoe.

Here, with the oak groves of Fort Simcoe visible in the distance, standing on the road brings to mind the fort's lengthy tenure as agency headquarters for the Yakama Reservation (1859-1923), and the conspicuous presence there of James Wilbur as Indian agent from 1864 to 1882. At that time the wagon road served as the agency's main pipeline to the outside world, not only for supplies and access to the telegraph station at The Dalles but for much needed socializing. As a Methodist minister, Wilbur would frequently employ the old road to take wagon loads of Yakamas south to the Klickitat Valley for revival meetings, and on one of these trips he assisted

in the naming of Goldendale in 1872. It therefore isn't surprising that Wilbur developed more friendships in the Klickitat Valley than in the nearby town of Yakima, and he moved to Goldendale briefly upon his retirement as agent in 1882, before settling in Walla Walla.

About half a mile before the Toppenish Creek crossing, the wagon road descends the ridge along the east side of the Haller Battlefield of 1855. It is easy to follow the road here: the larger rocks have been thrown to the sides of the roadbed, wagon wheels have worn the basalt rocks smooth, and grading is apparent when the road climbs out of Toppenish Creek. It was here that Haller was extremely fortunate in getting his command out of its predicament and back on the Eel Trail toward Fort Dalles and safety. His men were trapped on a rocky promontory between two dry canyons, and, although Haller's men held the high ground, Kamiakin's forces controlled the only access to water at Toppenish Creek. The situation was so dire that Colonel James Nesmith, after viewing the battleground with Haller shortly afterwards, exclaimed his amazement that "Haller had escaped with a single man."

Survey maps show the old road skirting the base of the hills and curving toward the west, finally entering Fort Simcoe close to the southeast corner of the site. Although no clear traces can be found there today, there are discernible traces of a very old roadbed entering the fort grounds more directly from the east, with large rocks piled up on either side of the roadway. Considering that the old survey maps are ambiguous when depicting the exact boundaries of Fort Simcoe, this roadbed could well mark the entrance of Dent's road to the grounds of the fort.

Like all pioneer roads, the Old Military Road serves as a "living" history lesson, a very tangible link to our past. Hiking Dent's route, I found my appreciation for the road's engineering surpassed by a growing awareness of just how much history had taken place precisely where I was walking. Families anticipating a good season of fishing on the Columbia; nervous armies and cavalry on the move; caravans of people eager to see friends and fellow believers; freighters and teamsters in a hurry, bringing necessary supplies and returning with the goods of frontier ranches and farms—the old road had seen all this and more. While walking the route, I could sense these intense histories—written accounts had become internalized in a profound way.

Much has been written recently on the "power of place," the realization of this potent linkage between geography and history, and the very personal claims of place upon us. As I followed in the footsteps of Company B, I sensed this power, and understood better what historian James Ronda means when he writes, "The most compelling stories begin not with people but with places." The Old Military Road, laid out so carefully in 1856, is not just one compelling story but a series of stories, connecting the narratives of peoples and places. When given the assignment to build the road in 1856, Frederick Dent could not have known the impact his road would have on the lives of so many for so long. But the road's imprint remains today, not only in its physical traces through sagebrush and lava rock, but upon those of us who continue to explore the power of our common history.

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