

Dangers of Early-Day Freighting Recalled by Montana Pioneer

Drove Mole Teams in 1877

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A motor boat race from St. Louis, Mo., up the Missouri river to Fort Benton during the summer of 1937, probably the last navigation of the river that will ever be made along the full course of the old steamboat route, brought back to me many memories of the old days when the steamers disgorged their cargoes at Benton and the other river ports, to be sent all over Montana by freight wagons.

While Fort Benton was called the head of navigation on the Missouri river, it was not always true. Light snows in the mountains during the winter of times resulted in low water in the late summer, and the boats would have to put off freight at points further down the river. The year 1877 was one of low water, and after the boats could no longer get up to Benton, they dropped freight first at the Coal Banks, 60 miles downstream. The next point was at Cow island, which will be near the head of the lake to be created when the great Fort Peck dam is closed to impound the waters of the Missouri.

Low Water in 1877

For only about two months during the summer of 1877 the boats were able to reach Fort Benton. When the water got too low for the boats, the big string teams of bulls and mules went to work, bringing the cargoes to Fort Benton, or striking off on the trails to faraway camps. The lower river region was infested with war parties of the plains tribes, and freighters always faced danger, many of them losing their lives along the road.

During the summer of 1877 I rode for the Tingley brothers, who had located a ranch on the splendid range of the Shonkin creek country 20 miles south of Benton, at the foothills of the Highwood mountains. About the first of August the steamers began unloading freight at Cow island, 90 miles down the river. A call went out for teams.

On a trip to Benton for supplies I met my father, then in the freighting business, and he said he was joining the freighters on a trip to Cow island for a load. Father and I were always pals, and I wanted to be along when he was exposed to danger. So I quit my job and joined him. Among those who were with us on the trip I can recall Bill Bloom, with four nine-yoke bull teams; he was a typical bullwhacker, a large, well developed fellow, three inches over six feet and weighing 240 pounds. His lead driver, Matt Flint, was a close second in size. Bill had three other drivers, whose names I have forgotten. And there was Matt Groves, also with four nine-yoke teams with four drivers. There was my father with two 10-mule teams, and one driver. Scott Wilson had a six-mule team. Myself and a night herder completed the party of 15 men.

The night herder was the most essential man in the train when the day's travel was done. My old friend Charles Jackson, was night herder for the cattle, and I took the night end for the mules. The 15 of us felt equal to any ordinary emergency.

The first night we camped at Marias crossing, our old trading post, then owned by the late Mose Solomon. Here we met some of our old Gros Ventre friends of 1874, who

told us to be careful, that there were plenty of Sioux where we were going. The second night we camped at the Twenty-four Mile spring on the old Milk river trail.

Entered Dangerous Country

Now we were entering dangerous country, and we used a great deal of caution in camp to arrange the wagons in corral formation so, if necessary, the herders could rush the stock inside for safety. Here we had supper early and all fires were extinguished. Groves added himself to the night herd, making three men on the job. The luxuriant buffalo grass kept the stock close to camp. Our best guard was a faithful dog we had brought across the plains. He hated Indians, but was trained not to bark; if he smelled Indians at night he would stand in front of us, his hackles up, facing the danger and growling low and savagely. His warning had saved us several times.

Coyotes Were Indians

At nightfall, with a clear, starlit sky, we turned the stock to graze back toward camp. During the night we kept the herd close about the wagons. The coyotes howled at times, but the dog gave no heed. But just at break of day two coyotes howled very close. The dog, started growling. Those last two howls were Indians, sneaking toward camp. Soon we saw two objects, low in the grass; we fired. After the black powder smoke cleared the objects had disappeared. The shots brought out the whole camp, ready for battle, but there was no more excitement.

After daylight we permitted the stock to spread for better feed. In rounding them up for the day we saw where four Indians had crawled through the grass.

Our trail now was around the south-west end of the Bear's Paw mountains, a dim natural trail, downgrade to Cow creek where there was an abrupt dip down to the bottoms, which were badly-cut up. The road followed the creek 12 miles down to Cow island on the river, where a little trading post was used for a freight depot. It was a weird looking place. A dozen or 15 men lived here, and the place was filled with furs and pelts—deer hides, buffalo skins, bear pelts and beaver furs were stretched on the cabins to dry. In the living rooms there were but few blankets, most of the bedding being buffalo robes and tanned elk hides. Nearly all the residents were squaw men and the squaws, according to Indian tradition, did all the tanning in addition to running their homes. Few people today can believe a squaw could tan a buffalo hide in a single day, but they always did the job from dawn to dusk, in addition to their other duties, despite the fact that the robes were very heavy and each one meant a lot of hard labor. The robes were as pliable as any modern fabric when the squaw finished.

After a busy period loading the wagons, adjusting covers and tying down cargoes for a troublesome return trip, it started to rain, and after three days and nights of

downpour we had to wait a day or so for the mud to dry up. A herd of buffalo, the largest I had seen since 1874 out on the plains, started to cross the river. The mud was still bad, so we waited another day and watched the big herd cross the river. Some of the buffalo came up the river bank within 100 yards of the wagons. It required all day for the herd to pass. That evening our men and some of those at the post killed some buffalo calves for meat for the post and for our train.

Next morning we started on the trail for Fort Benton. We were two days traversing the 12 miles of the Cow creek bottom. The trail was all washed out. We had to double trip it, pulling one wagon at a time. The mud was over the wagon hubs in places. Then there was a two-mile climb from the creek bottom to the top of the bluffs, another double-trip job. There were three wagons to each string team; that meant three trips to get each team's load back together. The bluffs required another day.

Buffalo Numerous

Our camp at the top of the bluffs was virtually within the great buffalo herd we had watched crossing the Missouri. During the night, at times, it was hard to tell whether we were herding our stock or the buffalo. The herd was scattered around the west end of the Bear's Paw, traveling north. A year before the herd had gone south. Now hunters were driving it north as they killed huge numbers for the hides.

Meet Friendly Indians

It was easy going on the higher ground and we made good time. One camp was made on Birch creek, where we saw plenty of Indian signs. We expected trouble and made every preparation to meet it. At nightfall the stock was all corralled between the wagons, and allowed to graze for two hours after daybreak next morning. While we ate breakfast two Indians rode upon a ridge 400 yards away and told us by sign talk they wanted to talk to us. The men decided to let them come into camp and talk. Father answered them by signs that they could come, but if any more Indians appeared they would be shot. We were relieved to find they were Gros Ventres we had known three years before. One, Little Wolf, said they were looking for Sioux ponies. We gave them a big feed of sourdough bread, buffalo meat and sowbelly, and sent them on their way.

At the Twenty-four Mile spring we met the Cooper & Barker bull train headed for Cow island, sent to bring up the remainder of the freight. Arrived at Fort Benton we learned the Nez Perce tribe under Chief Joseph, after passing through Yellowstone park and southeastern Montana, would cross the Missouri near Cow island, with Gen. Nelson A. Miles closely pursuing them.

The Cooper & Barker train, loaded and enroute back to Benton, had gone six miles up Cow creek and were overtaken by the tribe. Six men were killed and the wagons

ransacked of everything valuable to the Indians. Cooper, who was riding a fast horse, was the only one of the party who escaped.

For many years a huge pile of wagon Iron marked the scene of the massacre and the resting place of six brave men who gave their lives in the conquest of the Montana wilderness. They are gone, but their memory will live as long as the history of the old west is preserved.

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