

Following Old Trails (First Column)

Arthur L. Stone

June 17 1911

I have been over an old trail this week—a trail which I used to traverse often, but which, for one reason and another, I have neglected for several years. It was a pleasant experience, I enjoyed it so much that I think I shall renew my old habit of visiting Stevensville frequently. For it was a visit to Stevensville that called me over the old trail and afforded me a mighty happy day and night.

The road to Stevensville runs along the identical route that it used to follow, but it is far from being the same old trail; there are some of the old landmarks left, a few of the old blazes are along the way, but there have been so many changes that it is a different sort of Journey from what it was when I began to write stories of the Bitter Boot, 18 years ago. There is not much waste land between Missoula and Stevensville now; there are many more orchards, there are many more grain fields and there are scores of new farm houses, comfortably placed along the road.

And the train—in 1893 it was the famous old Sun Cure train that took you from Missoula to Stevensville. You started on time and you reached your destination whenever the stress of unloading freight and switching cars made it possible for an overworked crew and a mighty uncertain locomotive to land you at the station. It was on one of those long Jaunts—long as to hours if not in the matter of miles—that it occurred to me that the Northern Pacific might make itself famous by equipping a sunbath car and attaching it to this train for the cure of tuberculosis and nervous prostration. I made the suggestion and named the train “Sun Cure.” The name stuck to the train for years, but the Northern Pacific never took kindly to the idea. The questions which a former general superintendent once asked me led me to believe that they thought I was making fun of them.

But the train today just hits the high places. It is comfortable and speedy and has got the Stevensville people into the habit of expecting quick time always. You have to keep looking all the time if you want to see the country. Formerly it was possible to read a few stories in a magazine and yet keep a close eye on the country through which we passed; now there’s no reading if you want to see what’s going on. The train moves some.

But changed as it is, the trail has not undergone so much of a transformation as has the good old town of Stevensville. The drive from the railway station to the town is just as beautiful as ever; no amount of farm improvement can destroy the marvelously beautiful scenery which environs Stevensville. The road skirts the river just as it used to do—but it crosses the stream over a steel and concrete bridge now. Instead of the old rickety structure which once struck terror to the heart of the tenderfoot. Between the bridge and the town there have been some changes. There is less of old Fort Owens than there was 10 years ago and there are more acres of hay land on the river meadows.

As soon as the stage—the stage was the only familiar thing about that ride—enters Stevensville, the fact becomes apparent that the old town has entered upon a new era. Right at the gateway stands the beautiful little home of John McLaughlin, the preacher blacksmith-booster, with its pretty lawn, its fine orchard. Its model garden and its concrete walks and curbing. It shifts the spirit which pervades the new Stevensville

and this spirit is manifest in a thousand different ways as the visitor wanders about the town.

I visited the old St. Mary's mission for the first time in at least 10 years when I was in Stevensville Tuesday. I walked back into the little cemetery where the simple white marble shaft marks the last resting place of the Reverend Ravalli. This place has always seemed sanctified to me. There is so much about it that is connected with the life of devotion which this holy man gave to Montana, that the decay of the buildings and the neglect of the tomb add emphasis to the campaign which is being carried on for the preservation of this old church and the burial place of its founder. This fund should assume proportions sufficient to make certain that the historic old church and the Ravalli tomb will be protected from threatened ruin.

There are scores of beautiful homes in Stevensville, homes that are well built and well kept; each has its garden and there are many fine little orchards; there are good walks about town and there is a general atmosphere of progress that is good. We had a good supper and walked out to watch a good baseball game and, after the game we walked back to town along streets which presented a complete picture of a good town.

It was just sunset when Breitenstein and I walked along these streets. It was worth the trip just to take that walk. The sun was lighting the sky above St. Mary's, turning it into brilliant evening hues. There was the fragrance of lilacs and roses in the air. The evening concert of larks and robins was in full swing; it was a riot of melody. That much of Stevensville remains unchanged. It is my hope that it will never be changed. It is wonderfully beautiful.

We returned to town just in time to join the Stevensville Chamber of Commerce in a meeting which was emphatically good. The Stevensville chamber has the same experience which similar organisations, wherever they are, pass through; it is difficult, the members any, to get all of the merchants and others to participate. But to the outsider and onlooker. It seemed last Tuesday night, that there were not many of the Stevensville folks who were not on the floor of the hall, actively taking part.

Dr. Reinhart, president of the chamber, has a lot of live wires connected with him and he makes a great transformer. He conducted a meeting that would be a credit to any organisation, and he made things work right whether they went that way naturally or not. He had to call for three different votes on one question before it was decided the way he knew it should be, but he finally got the decision, two falls out of three, and when it was all over the opposition discovered that it had been mistaken and was grateful to the president for having made things come right. That is the sort of spirit that makes the Stevensville Chamber of Commerce get results.

There was a lively discussion of live topics at the meeting: there were some talks by visitors to which gracious attention was given. The feature of the social session which made a big hit— bigger, even, than the delightful lunch which was served, later— was the music. The chamber of commerce has some fine musicians; there are three of them who sing trios which are catchy and clever. A. H. Perz, H. A. Perz, H. H. Hirsch and Charles Nelson furnished the vocal and instrumental numbers which livened the

program so effectively. The trio has promised to come down to the next pull-together luncheon to Missoula.

When the program was over, we had lunch. -It was a dandy. The coffee was real coffee and the sandwiches were plentiful and good. The pickles were great and the good cheer was splendid. The meeting was so interesting throughout that the crowd lingered until I wondered if some of the long-distance members would get home in time to milk the next morning—or, rather, that same morning. The meeting broke up into little groups which discussed the details of the work. There was a degree of enthusiasm which was good to see. It was surely genuine.

Stevensville is wide awake in the matter of good roads. There is lively interest there in the coming congress in Missoula and the town and its nearby country will be well represented. Tuesday night, President Reinhart named a delegation for the congress. J. J. Cameron. J. L. Carruthers. F. F. Powell. K. A. Sleemons and Dr. Reinhart will be the official representatives. Dr. Reinhart was placed on the list at the unanimous request of the members; the others of the delegation were selected as representing special districts of the Stevensville country. It will be a working delegation and it will be accompanied by an active band of rooters.

I came back over the old trail. Wednesday morning, delighted with the trip. I had met a lot of old friends and had made some new ones. All had extended the glad hand so cordially that I was ashamed that I had been so long away from Stevensville. I shall not stay away so long again. The old Stevensville possessed a powerful attraction for me, but the pull of the new Stevensville is even stronger.

The train leaves Stevensville so early in the morning that you have to get up in time to see the delightful sunrise which colors Ft. Mary's so gloriously and which compels your awed admiration. I was called at Dave Whaley's hotel early enough to have time for a walk about town before breakfast. If the sunset stroll, the night before, had been charming, that morning walk was so happy in its spell as to beggar description. All the week since I have been seeing that sunrise and hearing the bird songs.

I met a man loading a beautiful Jersey cow and had a morning chat with him. It was strange to think that anybody should take a sunrise chat as much as a matter of fact as that man did. It had been a long time since I had seen the sun rise, unless it was before I went to bed after a night at my office desk, that the novelty of it all impressed me. But that man said he led his cow every morning along that grassy walk. She was a fine cow, he said. She gave all the milk that a family of five could possibly use and they sold over so many pounds of butter besides. That was all matter-of-fact. But the spell of the morning was so strong that it compelled even the man with the cow to say "It's a fine day, ain't it?" And it surely was.

So Stevensville's farewell was as happy as had been its greeting. I came home over the old trail, filled with the happiness of a delightful visit and with the spell of that incomparable summer morning yet upon and about me.

A. L. S.

Missoula, Saturday, June 17.

The Ted K Archive

Arthur L. Stone
Following Old Trails (First Column)
June 17 1911

Daily Missoulian. <mthspublic.newspapers.com>

www.thetedkarchive.com