

SAGAS OF OUR PIONEERS

Compiled by the office of the Flathead County Superintendent of Schools - 1956

GREAT NORTHERN LANDMARKS - pg 46

By Grace Hansen

...Likely the people who migrated to the Flathead were busy getting established in the new country and not too concerned with ways and means of getting in touch with the outside world. Quite a little settlement had grown up on the Flathead River at a point about three miles south and east of the present town of Kalispell. This little town of Demersville was at the head of navigation of [pg 47] Flathead Lake - - Flathead River route. Interested persons can still see the spot where the steamers tied up in the early days. One day a passenger embarked from one of the steamers and took up residence at Cliff House, the hostelry which was located on a slight knoll on the property presently owned by George Tvedten. The man was not the least bit sociable or communicative. After a couple of weeks elapsed, he approached the owner and asked if there was a man in the vicinity that could serve as a guide on a trip in search of a mountain pass to the east. Ed Boyle, who had proven himself a successful trapper and guide, was recommended.

Mr. Boyle and the stranger, who was none other than Charles F.B. Haskell, set out in the dead of winter in search of a pass that had long been rumored to be at the headwaters of the Marias. Lewis had looked for it on his westward trek and had been frightened off by Indians. Isaac Stevens had looked for it for a possible route for the Northern Pacific. And now Jim Hill, who had built his line as far west as Havre, sent John F. Stevens from the eastern side of the mountains and Haskell from the western side to seek the elusive pass.

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The job was only well started so far as the railroad for the Flathead Valley was concerned for Haskell had been commissioned to seek out the shortest route to the Pacific. So, once again in the dead of winter, they set out - - Haskell and Boyle accompanied by Harvey Fritizsimmons and a man named L. Thompson. They set out on foot carrying all their supplies which consisted of one blanket each, a frying pan, a coffee pot and several cups, flour, salt, baking powder, sugar, coffee and bacon. One rifle was carried by the party and entrusted to Fritizsimmons. This made it possible to supplement their menus with fresh meat.

The Northern Pacific used the two known passes north of Mullan Pass. Hill was anxious to have his route swing through the Kootenai Valley. This party was in search of a pass across the summit that was crossed by the old Kalispell Trail which, according to John Mullan, the famous trailblazer who traveled the route in 1854, was rugged. "Truly, I considered this one of the worst roads, if not the worst, ever traveled by Indians or white..." This old trail swung from the 69 Ranch near the Canadian border about three miles north of the present town of Eureka and currently owned by the Wilfred Johnson family, southeast past the present sites of Stryker and Trego, west of Dickey Lake, followed roughly the course of present Highway #93 past Olney down the Stillwater River to the junction of the Stillwater and Flathead and on down the Flathead to Demersville. Notice that this trail passed the site of the present town of

Whitefish. [pg48]

These surveyors were actually looking for the summit between the watersheds of the Stillwater and Tobacco Rivers. In the severe storms and deep snows they became confused and mistook one of the branches for the main stream of the Stillwater and followed it up to the headwaters of Wolf Creek. The summit on this route to the Flathead is Haskell Pass.

This trip was really difficult. The men wore no overcoats and packed only one blanket each for bedding. They encountered deep snows, biting winds and temperatures as low as 44 degrees below zero. Of this trip Haskell says, "There is a limit. Summer trips, with pack animals, are all right, but in winter, carrying the load for a mule, freezing and starving among the mountains, I shall never try again." The required fifty-two days and was concluded March 28, 1890.

In August 1890 two other strangers arrived incognito in Demersville. They inquired about jobs, were apparently unemployed and maybe a bit reluctant to accept offers that had been made. Perhaps the pioneers were dubious or suspicious. At any rate, curiosity was aroused because the insides of the men's residents caused the two to secure rooms with D.J. Plume at Ashley. These gentlemen, D.R. McGinnis and Joe Conner, Sr., were likewise employees of Jim Hill and were instructed to secure the land where the trains of the Great Northern were to run.

Very interesting records are on file in the office of the Flathead County Clerk and Recorder. These legal documents are the options between James Hill of St. Paul and a number of citizens of the Flathead Valley area. These options include one between Alex LeBeau, his wife and James Hill involving \$10,000 for the SW 1/4 of the NW 1/4 of Section 7 in Township 28, Range 21W, which was filed December 28, 1890 at 4:35 p.m. in Missoula County; another to William Sears, his wife Helen and James Hill involving the sum of \$3,000 with Sears being given the free use of the cultivated portion of the land until November 1, 1891 providing they did not interfere with or obstruct any operation of the Great Northern Railroad Co. for town site operations which was recorded January 9, 1891 at 4:20 p.m.; two options between Albert Talbot and James Hill involving an amount totaling \$9,000. These were recorded and filed the 27th of December 1890 at 4:25 and 4:30 respectively by D.D. Bogart who was County Recorder. The one group that interested me most was one between Nicholas P. Moon and James Hill. Mr. Moon is credited with being one of the first farmers in the valley and had water rights on Spring Creek to make his land more productive; lawsuits in recent years involved these early rights. Mr. Moon was also one of two people chosen to drive the silver spike when the railroad became a reality. Never having seen a railway train before and being perhaps an individualist by nature, he soon became convinced that too much civilization has come to the little valley and subsequently took his departure.

Naturally, rumors, and then more rumors, began to circulate around the peaceful valley. A railroad was coming. Would it usher in a new era? What were the prospects of cashing in on the new venture? The people of Columbia Falls were sure that they would be favored with the mainline. Weren't they at the mouth of Badrock Canyon? Surely the tracks the tracks must emerge along the river and into their town. Demersville as the head of navigation was sure that the growing town there must

certainly be the choice of Mr. Hill. Also Ashley was certain that their little village would be the choice. Mr. Hill, who was used to doing things in a big way - - his way - - felt the residents of Columbia Falls were trying to hold him up for right of way and so, when the road was completed, it bypassed that village by a mile. He bought the land he wanted and left the speculators in the village holding the sack. [pg 49]

One enterprising young man was sent out in 1890 by E.F. Greenough to seek timber suitable for ties for the new railroad. This young man was Eugene McCarthy who was allotted a section of country included in the eastern opening of Marias Pass. He was to go into the country from the eastern approach. He rode a horse and had a pack animal to carry supplies. He rode over a jumble of timber-covered mountains cut by rapid running streams and bearing marks of both ancient and recent widespread snow slides. He rode over the rough terrain between Summit and the canyon for a month. His food supply became so low and during the last half of the time he relied on game for replenishing. During his journey he found a tract of land of about two hundred acres almost level. McCarthy was keen and enterprising although he had lived only twenty years.

McCarthy knew that this level land was the only area suitable as a campsite for the railroad graders for miles around; also the survey for the tracks had been run about two hundred feet above it. There were two things that posed a problem. The land had not been surveyed and McCarthy's age prevented his filing a claim. He showed shrewdness by filing a Declaration of Occupancy. Sheppard and Seims, who had the contract for grading, wanted the site for headquarters and threatened to contest McCarthy's rights. In order to keep the disagreement from being thrown into courts, a compromise was effected. The graders were to occupy one side of the creek and McCarthy the other. [This is close to the present hunting resort known as the Bear Creek Ranch located near Summit]

McCarthy plotted the town site, would-be settlers and speculators were clamoring for lots, and soon a town of 1,000 residents sprang into being - - the only town from Cut Bank west for many miles. A post office was established and operated by a merchant by the name of Jacobs. This little town of McCarthyville reached its height of notoriety in midsummer and fall of 1891.

Laborers were not to plentiful and many recruits migrated from the east. They were not dressed for the rugged winters of the mountains and many of the laborers came to Cut Bank, hiked the sixty miles over the prairies and mountains to McCarthyville. There was an improvised hospital in McCarthyville where many of the men who became victims of pneumonia were taken to die. Buryings were numerous in the little village. McCarthy said, "On one side of the ledger is a death list, which, while never kept account of, is estimated to have been several hundred, and on the other side one birth. A boy was born to a family named Cady."

It is interesting to note that the town was platted and plat filed, the city elected a mayor, McCarthy, who was only twenty and probably the youngest mayor to ever hold office in Montana. The town was incorporated because state law prohibited the sale of liquor within two miles of a construction camp except in the limits of an incorporated city.

For eighteen months the city flourished and then the rails moved on. For over sixty years the old town has been rarely recalled to the public mind, its location is nearly forgotten; but sometimes travelers who know their early history when riding the Great Northern look down into the gulch that was once the home of the roughest proposition in the Flathead. Thus passed one of the landmarks along the Great Northern.

Long before the railroad came to Montana, a man named William H. Morrison held a squatter's rights to a small piece of land at the summit. When he heard that the Great Northern was extending its tracks through the Marias Pass, he installed a rosewood bar in his shack and was soon doing a flourishing business. The construction crews moved; but Slippery Bill, as he was known, remained.