

37th Congress,) HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES. (Ex. Doc. 3d Session. J I No. 80.

EXPEDITION FROM FORT ABERCROMBIE TO FORT BENTON.

LETTEE

FROM

THE SECRETARY OF WAR,

IN ANSWER TO

Resolution of House of 19th instant, transmitting report of Captain J. L. Fish, of the expedition to escort emigrants from Fort Abercrombie to Fort Benton, &c.

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March 2, 1863. — Laid on the table and ordered to be printed.

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War Department,

Washington City, February 27, 1863.

Sir: In compliance with the resolution of the House of Representatives of the 19th instant, I have the honor to transmit the accompanying " copy of Captain James L. Fisk's report of the expedition to escort emigrants from Fort Abercrombie to Fort Benton, and to Fort Walla-Walla."

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

EDWIN M. STANTON,

Secretary of War.

Hon. Galtjsha A. Grow,

Speaker of the House of Representatives.

North overland expedition for protection of emigrants from Fort Abercrombie to Fort Benton, 1862. — Report of Captain James L. Fisk, A. Q. M. com'g. Sir: Under instructions of the Secretary of War, I was dispatched from this place, on the 3d day of June last, to proceed at once to organize, equip, and conduct an escort to emigrant train from Fort Abercrombie, across the plains of the north, to Fort Benton, Dakota Territory; thence across the mountains, via Captain Mullan's government wagon road, to Walla- Walla — there dispose of the expedition property, and return via Oregon and San Francisco.

The fact that most of the route designated for my trip was entirely new, (except as surveyed by the late lamented General Stevens, in 1853,) and that the season was so far advanced before orders reached me at my regiment in Central Tennessee, together with the limited means placed at my disposal, led me to doubt much whether I could accomplish the objects of this commission. Having entered upon the work, however, and done the best in my power under the circumstances, I am pleased to be able to report at this date the experience and general results of the expedition.

Samuel R. Bond, esq., who accompanied me as clerk and journalist, respectfully submits a summary of his notes, and which is a fair statement of principal incidents of trip, topography of country, &c.

In the proper place will be found the brief report of Dr. Dibb, physician and surgeon of party; and I likewise offer for your consideration, as supplementary to the general report required, an itinerary of each day's travel, with accompanying chart of route from Fort Abercrombie to Fort Benton.

I need hardly assure you, in this connection, of my personal regards and esteem for those gentlemen, one and all, who accompanied me as assistants — part of them the entire journey. Always true, and never found wanting in the discharge of duty, I can but commend them for those good qualities which fit men for public service.

The importance at present attached to this route, and which will very much increase as the new gold fields opened up by it come into note, constrains me to believe it justifiable in extending my report so as to cover all the chief points of interest, and to believe that the itinerary and map furnished will prove of great utility if published.

That our little expedition, being wholly an experiment, succeeded beyond the most sanguine expectations is attributable to several facts, viz : Nearly if not quite all of the men of the escort and emigrants had seen more or less of frontier life, were not afraid to encounter hardships, and knew how to surmount impediments in whatever shape occurring. The season was most wonderfully favorable, plenty of grazing and water for our purpose, and yet not sufficient rain at any time to swell the streams or soften the basins of the prairie country.

Our organization was complete, not only of the fifty (50) men of the escort, but of the emigrants also, in case of an emergency. No violation of rules occurred from first to last; every order was promptly and cheerfully obeyed. We moved, halted, camped and corralled on the march, rallied, mounted guard, &c, by bugle calls.

We had no serious difficulties with Indians, though we met numerous bands and tribes, and were not aware, until met in the mountains by an express from Walla-Walla, giving news how narrowly we had escaped the terrible raid of the Sioux on the border of Minnesota, even laying siege to the very post which we had shortly previous started from.

The Assineboines were "saucy," which with them is preliminary to mischief. Their conduct convinced me that they were knowing to the raid of the Sioux Indians, and that they themselves were becoming infected with a desire for plunder.

It required more nerve to refrain from punishing them for their insolence than to have done it. The traders along the Missouri besought me to urge upon the department the necessity of establishing one or more military posts along that river, between Ports Berthold and Benton. From what I could see and learn, I do not hesitate to say that the presence of troops is absolutely necessary to insure the safe occupancy and transit of that upper country by the whites.

The severe chastisement of the hostile Sioux the coming season would intimidate the Missouri river and mountain tribes; and the distribution of an infantry or cavalry regiment along the Missouri, from Fort Berthold to Benton, with headquarters in the mountain district at the head of that river, where there are most people scattered about, mining, would insure safety in travel, exploration and development of a rich mineral country.

Pierre Chouteau, jr., & Co. take occasion to inform me by letter that they "will most cheerfully give all the accommodations necessary for quartering troops and storing supplies in either or all of their trading posts on the Upper Missouri." These forts, as they are called, are not undeserving the name, for they are most admirably adapted as quarters for troops, militaire in appearance, and entirely defensible.

After emerging from the Coteau du Missouri on the west side, opposite to the nearest point to the river Des Lacs, I was desirous of heading straight for Fort Benton, coming down to Milk river at last crossing, instead of making that circuitous route by Fort Union. But not finding any of my party ready to try the experiment, I moved southward to a camp on the Missouri fifteen (15) miles above Fort Union. On our journey to Fort Benton we were joined by two French half-breed voyageurs, from whom I learned that the line of travel from the Coteau to Fort Benton, which I had proposed trying, was in every way practicable for a wagon road, and "ten days shorter."

My loss of stock between Abercrombie and Benton were two (2) oxen and one (1) mule. Between Benton and Walla-Walla, one (1) team-horse and one (1) saddle-horse. In the wilderness of St. Regis de Bojrgia, at the eastern base of the Coeur d'Alene mountains, I found Major Hutchins, Indian agent, in distress, from having lost part of his pack animals while on his journey to relieve Major Owen, agent of the Flathead Indians. In the emergency of his case I felt obliged to relieve him, so far as I could give him anything available for transporting his supplies, and fitted him out with a span of animals and good wagon.

From this point to Walla-Walla I hauled only the howitzer and flag-wagon, and every animal I had was unmarketable, because so very thin in flesh. If I could have had the usual allowance of extra work animals upon the start, such would have been the condition of the whole as to bring, at public sale, at the close of the journey, all they would cost in fitting out.

Captain Mullan's road, from Fort Benton to Walla-Walla, is passable, and there has been performed upon it an immense amount of labor, but it will have to be worked, materially improved in places, or it will very soon become useless as a wagon road.

On leaving St. Paul on the 16th (sixteenth) of June, I had unfurled, from a staff lashed to the front of the express wagon, which led the train, the national colors; and I am proud to say, that it every day floated to the breeze from the Mississippi to the Columbia, and no man insulted it.

At Portland, Oregon, I was glad to meet Captain Medorum Crawford, who had just closed his expedition on the central overland route. We spent a day together in comparing notes. Captain Crawford did not hesitate to congratulate me on having discovered a most desirable route, and one that must soon attract a large emigration over it. I am under obligations to this gentleman for courtesies which he extended to me while there, and for pecuniary favor in my need.

Under dates of December 14 and 27, I am in receipt of letters from very reliable men, who went out with me and are now mining at "Grasshopper diggins," (the Grasshopper being a small tributary of the Jefferson fork of the Missouri, and at which place there are now about one thousand (1,000) persons,) stating their general success beyond all expectations, and that "claims are yielding from fifty dollars ($50) to one hundred and fifty dollars ($150) per day to the man."

Reaching this city, on my return, about the 1st of the present month, I hastened to prepare this report, which I now have the honor to submit.

With very great respect, I am, sir, your most obedient servant,

JAMES L. FISK,   
Captain, A. Q. M., Commanding Expedition

General Thomas,  
Adjutant General United States Army, Washington, D. C.

*Journal of the expedition commanded by Captain James L. Fish, sent by the government to escort emigrants from Fort Abercrombie to Fort Benton, 1862.*

The recent and continued discoveries of gold in Oregon and Washington Territories having incited an extensive emigration to those regions, Congress, by act approved January 27, 1862, appropriated the sum of twenty-five thousand dollars for the purpose of affording, to such as should wish to make the overland trip, a safe escort through the various Indian tribes inhabiting the country along the route, as well as that efficient aid which an emigrant train cannot fail to derive from the organization and order which it becomes one of the chief duties of the commander of such an escort to secure and preserve.

The usual route of emigration westward, across the plains and mountains, has been the central one by way of Fort Laramie, Salt Lake, and the South Pass; at least the government had never sent an escort for the protection of emigrants by what may be called the extreme northern route, and it had never been tried by them. In 1853 Governor Stevens, of Washington Territory, who has so recently and gloriously fallen in his country's cause, made his explorations for a route for a Pacific railroad, near the forty -seventh and forty -ninth parallels of north latitude, from St. Paul to Puget sound, starting from Port Snelling, Minnesota, and passing over a country not before explored to Fort Union, on the Missouri river; thence to Fort Benton, and through the mountains into the valley of the Bitter Root, and onward to the Columbia. Since then a military road has been laid out and constructed, under the supervision of Lieutenant Mullan, between Fort Benton and Fort Walla-Walla, but that portion of the route pursued by Governor Stevens, lying between the western boundary of Minnesota and Fort Union, had not been travelled since 1853. Many persons on the Upper Mississippi, especially in Minnesota, in the spring of last year, were desirous of crossing the plains by this route to the new El Doradoes beyond, but were diffident about starting without an escort, on account of the difficulty and uncertainty of finding the best and most direct course over the trackless plain to Fort Benton, as well as on account of their fears lest the Indians, and especially the Sioux, should prove hostile and troublesome to a private party which they found travelling through their country, while they would feel comparatively safe if accompanied by a small protective force sent under the auspices of the government.

To afford guidance and protection to these emigrants, and at the same time test the practicability of this northern route for future emigration, the Secretary of War, under whose direction the above appropriation was to be expended, set apart five thousand dollars, and Captain James L. Fisk, assistant quartermaster United States volunteers, was appointed to command the expedition, with authority to employ assistants, who were at once to enlist " about fifty men as a protective corps, to be used as guards, sentries, scouting parties, and in such other ways as the best means of affording protection to emigrants might re quire." Competent persons were also to be engaged as physician, guide, and interpreter, whose services were to be freely rendered for the advantage of the whole party. His instructions required Captain Fisk to make Fort Abercrombie the point of rendezvous, and to disband the guard upon his arrival at Fort Benton. Immediately upon the receipt of his instructions, Captain Fisk proceeded to make his preliminary arrangements at St. Paul, and appointed the following assistants, namely: First assistant, E. H. Burritt; second assistant, N. P. Lang-ford; third assistant, (surveyor,) David Charlton; secretary or journalist, S. R. Bond; physician, William D. Dibb, M. D.; wagon master, R. C. Knox; guide and Chippewa interpreter, Pierre Bottineau; Sioux interpreter, George Gere.

PIEREE BOTTINEAU.

In former years our guide had been a Red river hunter, and he was one of Governor Stevens's guides in 1853, so that it was considered a stroke of good fortune to be able to secure his services, which the progress of our journey, over a country where there was no sign of trail either of Indian or white man, proved to be invaluable; and our Sioux interpreter had but recently come from a residence of many years among the Yanctons, Sissetons, and other tribes of that nation.

Having been appointed secretary of this humble expedition, I have kept a full daily record of the marches made, camping places, the leading incidents on the route, the character of the country passed over, &c, &c, from the departure of Captain Fisk from St. Paul to his arrival at Walla-Walla, and, indeed, until he reached New York on his homeward trip. Such a journal is necessarily voluminous, and as, from the nature of the expedition, it could not partake of the character of a scientific exploration, its daily marches and events in detail, although full of interest to those who participated in them, would be of little interest to others and irrelevant to the purpose of this report, namely: to indicate the general character of the route travelled, its advantages and disadvantages for emigration, and the degree of success which has attended this expedition. This will, I think, be as well accomplished by the following condensed summary of my journal as if the whole should be given *in extenso*.

DEPARTURE FROM ST. PAUL. — ARRIVAL AT FORT ABECROMBIE.

A few days in St. Paul sufficed to complete the necessary preparations for starting, and on the 16th of June Captain Fisk, having received his instructions from Washington, on or about the last day of May, our small supply and baggage train, consisting of three 4-ox teams, one 2-mule team, and one 2-horse team, set out from there for Fort Abercrombie, which is situated on the west bank of the Red River of the North, about two hundred and fifty-five (255) miles northwest from St. Paul. Meanwhile notice had been given for those wishing to join the train to rendezvous at that post by the first of July, and when we arrived there, on the third (3d) of that month, we found quite a party of emigrants awaiting us, while letters from others stated that they were on the way. We formed a camp near the fort, to wait for those who had started to join us, and to make the final preparations which the long journey before us rendered necessary; and for valuable assistance in this respect, as well as for every courtesy and kindness in their power to render, we were indebted to Captain Vanderhorck, commander of the post, Dr. E. E. Braun post surgeon, and Lieutenant Groetsch, quartermaster.

CELEBRATION OF THE FOURTH OF JULY.

We here had the pleasure of joining the officers and soldiers of the fort and the settlers of that neighborhood in an appropriate celebration of the anniversary of our national independence, before starting on our long journey, the greatest deprivation of which was to be the suspense under which we must remain for months as to the progress of our arms in crushing the rebellion that would undo the great act of ('76) seventy-six.

FEARS OF EMIGEANTS.

A day or two before we got ready to depart the emigrants expressed fears of the dangers which we might encounter in taking the most direct route from Fort Abercrombie to Fort Union, on account of the absence of any trail, through a country about which so little was known, and more especially on account of anticipated hostility on the part of the Sioux, who range over a large part of the country through which our route would take us. A party of about eighty emigrants had started from Minnesota about a month before (not knowing that an escort would be sent by the government) for the new gold regions, and to avoid these Indians they took a less direct route by way of Pembina and St. Josephs, which lie about two hundred and fifty (250) miles to the north of Fort Abercrombie. This route the emigrants of our party were desirous of taking, notwithstanding Captain Fisk's expressed determination not to make such a detour out of a direct course, and their apprehensions could not be allayed until he had obtained from the fort a 12lb. (twelve pound) mountain howitzer, with ammunition and equipment, and organized an artillery squad to take charge of it. The belief that the Indians would be more awed by this than by an increase of our escort to double its number, reconciled them to the route proposed, and it was announced that the train would start on Monday, July 7.

LEAVE ABERCROMBIE.

On the morning of that day a party of men was sent out to throw a bridge across Wild Rice River, a small stream flowing northeastwardly and emptying into Red river, below Fort Abercrombie. At the point selected for crossing it was some five (5) feet wide and four and a half (4J) feet deep, with soft muddy bottom. The timber on its banks afforded the, means of bridging it with ease, and before noon it was ready for our train to cross, when it should arrive, which it did in the afternoon, and camped near the opposite bank, with excellent wood, water, and grazing. The morning of the 8th opened with heavy rain showers, which lasted until near noon. Our train, however, started at an early hour, during a short intermission in the rain, and proceeded a distance of sixteen and a half (16½ ) miles, which brought us to a very fine camping place, on the right bank of the Shayenne river. The country between the Wild Rice and the Shayenne is a level prairie, with rich soil and tall grass, presenting a beautiful picture to the view, as it stretched out in every direction as far as the eye could reach, unbroken except by the dark green lines of timber which mark the course of these two streams. The only water between the Wild Rice and the Shayenne, along our course, is a lake over a mile in circumference, which we passed about three miles before reaching the latter stream, the waters of which are strongly alkaline. At this camp our stock luxuriated in the richest pasture, and had it not been for the mosquitoes, which were large, numerous, and persistent in their annoyances, there would have been no drawback to the pleasures of camp life, which are by no means few or inconsiderable. Some of our party opened a spring about half-way down the bank of the river, which affords almost ice-cold water. The Shayenne at this point, which was selected for crossing, is well-timbered with a thick growth of bass wood, poplar and oak, flows northwestwardly into the Red river, has a swift current, deep, steep banks, and is about seventy-five (75) feet wide and six (6) or eight (8) feet deep.

FIRST CROSSING OF SHAYENNE RIVER.

Wednesday, July 9. — Early this morning escorts and emigrants were at work felling and hauling trees for the construction of a bridge. Many of them were Minnesota lumbermen, and could not be more in their element than when it became necessary to swim the stream and float logs across. Some of them jumped in and stemmed the swift current with their clothes on, even to their hats, and with their pipes in their mouths, as though it were but a pastime for them. Considerable digging was necessary to render the descent and ascent practicable for loaded wagons, but this was soon accomplished, for the axe and the spade, are both handled like playthings by such pioneers as our train was principally composed of. The members of the escort were of the same class as the emigrants, and were, indeed, almost entirely enlisted from among them, but such of them only were taken as had no families or wagons requiring their attention, in case they were needed for other duties.

A bridge was constructed by two o'clock, by throwing across the stream three heavy stringers, and then making a road-bed of logs, and all our train was safely over by four. For a mile and a half on the other side our route was through thick timber, among which we wound our way with as little felling of trees as possible. Beyond this timber opens again a broad level prairie, on the edge of which we found a camping place equally as fine as that of last night, for the river bends so abruptly towards the west, just below our point of crossing, as to again flow close to our camp. Our train now consisted of one hundred and seventeen (117) men, and thirteen (13) women, one hundred and sixty-eight (168) oxen, eight (8) mules, fourteen (14) team horses, thirteen (13) saddle horses, seventeen (17) cows, with the inevitable camp accompaniment of dogs too numerous to mention. At night we shut our cattle in a corral formed of our wagons, picket our horses and mules close to camp, and have four men on guard, with two reliefs, the captain and his assistants acting in turn as sergeants of the guard. This precaution against surprise or horse-stealing on the part of the Indians, who are liable to be in the vicinity at any time, and who, though they may profess never so much friendship for the white man, will not allow an opportunity to steal our stock pass unimproved, cannot safely be relaxed until we reach Fort Benton, and will be increased should there be special reasons for it. The wagons of the emigrants as well as of the escort are all numbered, to regulate their proper places in the train, and have the letters U. S. conspicuously emblazoned on their sides; for the Indians well know their significance, and would hesitate to attack a government train, when they would feel much less fear or scruple to fall upon one of equal size belonging to private individuals.

TO MAPLE RIVER.

The next morning, July 10, was cool and foggy, and between four and five o'clock we could distinctly descry across the broad expanse of prairie to the westward a line of timber, which our guide informed us marked the course of Maple river about eighteen (18) miles distant, and through this mirage he even selected the point where we were to cross that stream. At six o'clock we broke camp and were soon on our way, making a course as straight as an arrow, over a fine, fertile, level prairie, but when the sun had dispelled the mists of the morning the timber ahead of us disappeared from sight, as if it had only been painted on the fog and disappeared with it.

We found neither wood nor water until we reached Maple river, which our odometer showed to be seventeen and a half (17½ ) miles from our last night's camp, but at our camp on the right bank of this stream we had excellent grazing, and wood and water in abundance. Maple River flows here in a northeastwardly course, is at this point about twenty-five (25) feet wide, two (2) feet deep, with sandy bottom and well-timbered banks. The water is evidently at its lowest stage, but must be of much greater volume in the spring, from the signs of extensive overflow. The next morning we took on wood enough for three days, and our course was over a level prairie for eight (8) miles, and then the country became rolling, with high bluffs on the banks of a branch of Maple River, which we crossed during the day. On July 12th we again crossed Maple River, but it has no timber on its banks, and its bottom is so muddy that we made a floating bridge of rushes to facilitate our crossing. After passing this point the land was marshy for a few miles, but not enough so to seriously impede our progress.

GAME

On two days previous we had caught sight of a few elk, so wild, however, as to prevent our getting a good shot at them, and we were now on the *qui vive* for some more approachable species of game wherewith to garnish our table, as fresh meat would be a most acceptable addition to our larder. We did not long look in vain, for Bottineau, keen-sighted as the wild denizens of this region themselves, espied four buffalo bulls about four miles from our train this afternoon, and he and Captain Fisk were soon in pursuit. The frightened kings of the prairie, when their hunters approached within half a mile, started off, as is their custom, against the wind, at a speed which required a good horse to overcome.

THE FIRST CHASE.

But their pursuers soon began to gain upon them, and they showed signs of flagging after a chase of three or four miles. Then Bottineau, mounted on a trained buffalo-hunter from Pembina, put spurs to his good Major, and a few minutes of his best speed brought him along the right side of the object of his pursuit, when he levelled his piece as quick as thought, and, having sent a ball into the region of the heart, wheeled off to a respectful distance to avoid the desperate lunge which a wounded buffalo bull seldom fails to make. So close was Bottineau when he shot, probably within a dozen feet, that he had not failed to send the ball to the fatal spot, just behind the shoulder. The huge and maddened monster, weighing about eighteen hundred (1,800) pounds, shook his shaggy head, crowned with horns of most formidable strength, stood at bay, his eyes darting savage and defiant looks at his human foe, but soon the blood began to spout from his mouth, and to choke him as it came.

Bottineau did not shoot again, but waited patiently until his victim grew weak from loss of blood, staggered, fell upon his knees, made one desperate effort to regain his feet and get at his slayer, then fell once more upon his knees, rolled over on his side and died. All this took but a few minutes, and then they started in pursuit of another buffalo which had become separated from the other three; and Captain Fisk, profiting by the example he had just witnessed, soon brought down his victim, which would probably weigh fourteen hundred (1,400) pounds, and was younger and tenderer than the first. Dr. Dibb meanwhile had started in pursuit of another of the four which had at first been together, and, after a chase of many miles, his horse being untrained and frightened whenever urged to approach near to his game, he returned to camp late at night with the bushy tail tip, which is the usual trophy shown as evidence of success in the buffalo chase. After our train had camped near a pond where good grass and water (but no wood) were at hand, fifteen and a half (15 ½) miles from last camp, two wagons were dispatched to bring in as much of the two buffaloes first killed as would feast our whole train for a couple of days at least. From this time, until our arrival at the last crossing of Milk river, within a few days of Fort Benton, we saw herds of buffalo along our route almost every day, and our table was scarcely a day without an abundance of fresh buffalo meat, which was preferred by nearly all of us even to the deer and antelope, which, especially the latter, were quite abundant along a considerable portion of our journey east of the mountains. Our cuisine along this part of our journey almost constantly included wild ducks, geese, and several other varieties of the feathered tribes, which inhabit the numerous small lakes, heretofore so undisturbed in their solitude by our aggressive race.

SABBATH

July 13 being Sunday, we remained in camp, Captain Fisk having decided not to travel on Sundays unless in case of extreme urgency, in which decision there appeared to be a unanimous concurrence on the part of the emigrants; and it was also generally desired and understood that on these days we should have religious services in camp. In accordance with this desire and understanding, the members of the train gathered at headquarters in the morning and joined in observing the day according to the Episcopal form of worship, Mr. Langford, though a layman, officiating in lieu of a clergyman. It was resolved to continue this becoming observance of the day during the whole of our journey, and the resolution was made good, except on one or two Sundays, when peculiar circumstances prevented.

A LANDMARK, BUFFALO, ETC.

July 14 we broke camp at half past six (6½) o'clock, the day being cool, cloudy, and favorable for travelling. Our route lay over rolling prairie, interspersed with extensive tracts of marsh, which, however, we easily avoided crossing. In five or six miles we came to a high, broken ridge, stretching nearly in a north and south direction, with a prominent peak just at the right of our course, which several of our party ascended, and which we called Bottineau Butte, or " Mount Bottineau," after our guide, who hailed it as a landmark which he well recollected. As we ascended this ridge we came in sight of large herds, of buffalo, quietly feeding upon the bunch or buffalo grass, which they prefer to all other kinds. These animals are short-sighted, and scent the approach of an enemy before they can see him, and then in their curiosity often start to meet him, until they approach near enough to ascertain to their satisfaction whether there be danger in a closer acquaintance. In our case they decided this question in the affirmative, and, when they had once fairly made us out, lost no time in increasing the distance between us, starting on a slow, clumsy trot, which was soon quickened to a gait that generally left most pursuers far in the rear. We probably saw as many as five thousand (5,000) to day, which was a small number according to our subsequent experience.

SECOND CEOSSING OF THE SHAYENNE.

From this ridge we descended to a low plain, abounding in saline and fresh water lakes and patches of marsh, and at twenty and a half (20½) miles from last night's camp arrived again at the Shayenne, which we crossed, and then made our camp upon its west bank. This river is here about seventy (70) feet wide and two (2) feet deep, with good, gravelly bottom, and is easily approached and forded. Its banks are well timbered, and a finer camping place could not be desired than that which we selected on the edge of the timber, with excellent wood, water, and grass in abundance. Back from our camp some half a mile the bluffs rose to the height of three hundred (300) or four hundred (400) feet, and looked a formidable barrier to our progress on the morrow, but we easily found a circuitous pathway to the high plateau above, which our wagons were able to pursue with only slight difficulty. We here took on wood for two days, as there is none between the Shayenne and Lake Jessie.

A WEDDING

At this camp occurred an incident which served to break the monotony of camp life, and to consecrate the spot in the memories of at least two of our party of emigrants. A young couple had been observed, early in our journey, to evince a strong and growing affection for each other, and, with the consent of the young lady's relatives, who were in the train, determined to celebrate their nuptials with all the forms and solemnities that the absence of municipal organization would permit. So after the evening meal, with the moon shedding a bright, chaste light over the scene, the young couple, in the presence of all the members of our train, pledged their troth to live together as husband and wife, "until death them should part," and the forms of the Episcopal marriage service, which were read by one of our party, were used upon the occasion. The congratulations and good wishes of friends followed, and then a dance upon the green sward to the music of violin, closed the ceremonies of this wedding on the plains.

LAKE JESSIE

From this point to Lake Jessie, a distance of thirty-three and a half (33½) miles, our route lay over a rolling, somewhat broken prairie, interspersed with small lakes and marshy tracts of land, the latter becoming more extensive as we approached the lake, rendering it necessary for our guide to ride ahead and select a passage for our wagons. Arriving at Lake Jessie, we camped between that lake and one half a mile to the south, about a mile in diameter, which Captain Fisk named Lake Lydia, in honor of his wife. Lake Jessie is a beautiful sheet of water, five or six miles in circumference, surrounded by a belt of timber. Its waters, as also those of Lake Lydia, are strongly impregnated with salt; but we discovered a spring a little less than a mile to the westward, which, after being improved by a few moments' digging, yielded us pure cold water for culinary purposes. We saw, on a high bluff, clear of timber, on the east shore of the lake, half a mile from our camp, some few traces of the camp of Governor Stevens, in 1853, the first which we have observed on our route. The grass is very abundant here, and is fresh in consequence of gentle showers, which we have recently had. We saw large herds of buffalo after leaving the Shayenne, and selected a fat cow for our larder, and our experience of the superiority of this meat over the buffalo bull will prove the death-warrant of many of the former and the further lease of life to many of the latter. At Lake Jessie we took on wood for several days and filled our casks with water from the spring, as we expected the water, for some distance ahead, to be brackish and unpalatable. We named our camp at Lake Jessie "Camp Aldrich," in honor of one of Minnesota's representatives in Congress. The next two days' travel of thirty-one and a half (31½) miles was over a rolling prairie, intersected by lakes and sloughs, the higher ground showing signs of drought, which compelled us to seek grass for our stock on the lowest land. At twenty-one and a half (211/2 ) miles from Lake Jessie we came to a very beautiful lake, almost perfectly round, and some mile and a half in diameter, with clear water, and low, white, sandy beach, and Captain Fisk named it "*Lake Townsend*," in honor of the assistant adjutant general of the United States. We tarried on the shore of this lake to lunch and graze our stock, and then made ten (10) miles more, before making camp, on the 18th July, at a spot which Bottineau says is five miles north of the route of Governor Stevens, on July 13, 1853.

HEAD OF RIVER JACQUES.

July 19. — Breaking camp at half past six, we pursued a course a few degrees north of west, over dry prairie, with occasional ponds, and at 10 ½ o'clock struck the James river, which pursues a general southeast course and empties into the Missouri, we having passed the divide between the headwaters of the tributaries of the Bed River of the North and those of the Missouri, so far as those tributaries have their rise east of the great Coteau du Missouri.

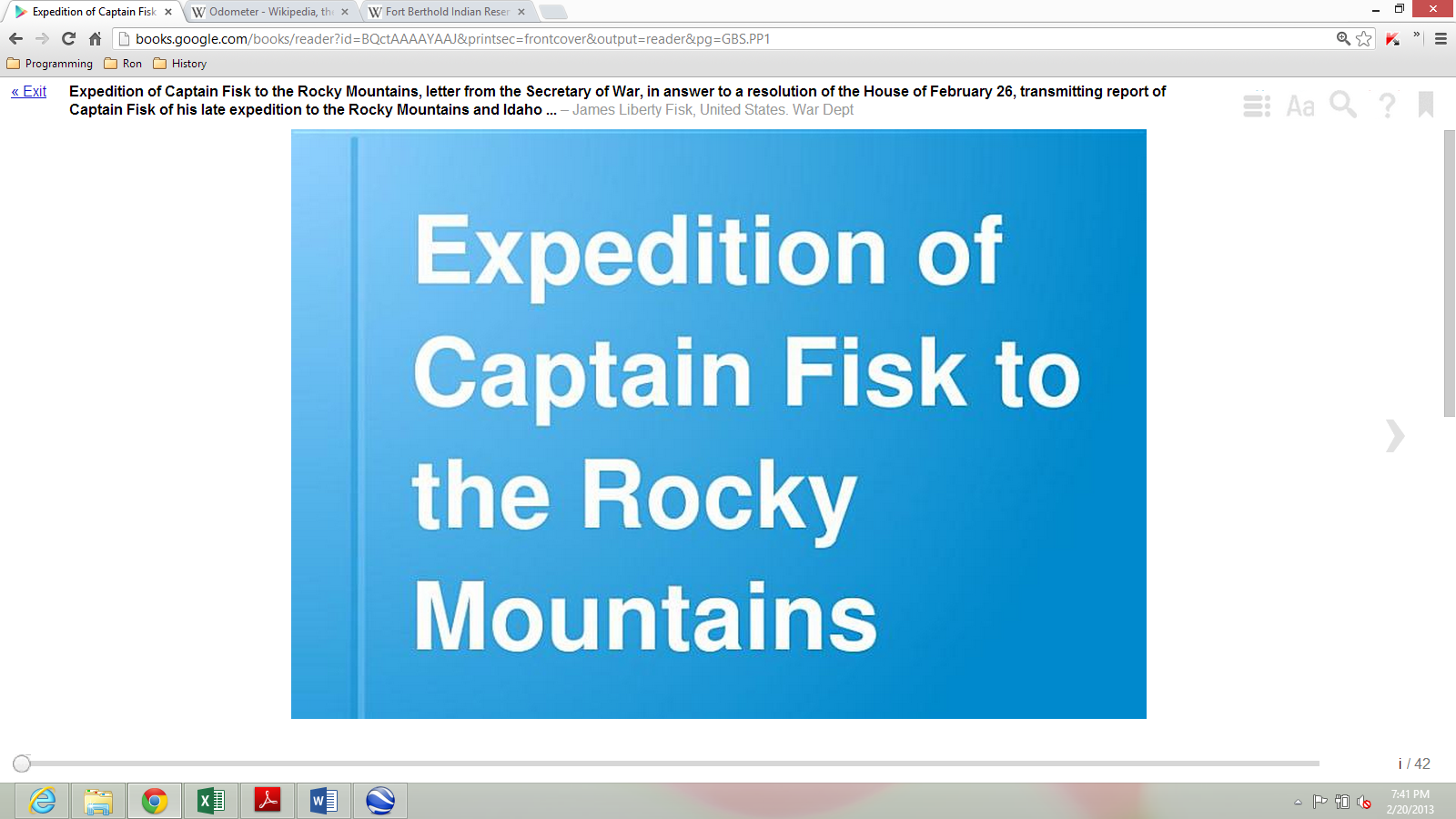
James River is devoid of timber or brush; has now very little current, and seems but a series of small, narrow ponds of water, communicating with each other. The neighboring country, except in the hollows, is considerably dry and parched by the drought. The day has been exceedingly hot, and we stopped an hour at this point to allow our stock to graze and refresh themselves with the waters of the James River. Our course during the rest of the day was over a dry and rolling country, and at night we camped by a lake, with good grass and passable water, having made nineteen (19) miles.

We did not take on wood enough at Lake Jessie to last us until we find timber again, which will be at "Bass Wood island," a high plateau, surrounded by level prairie — not water — which has small clumps of trees in the ravines which lead up to it, and which is about forty miles west of our camp to-night. But wood is not essential for camping purposes so long as the substitute in the form of buffalo chips (dried manure) remains as plentiful as at present. All along our route, for the last three or four days, this species of fuel has covered the ground in such abundance that more than five minutes time was never required to collect a sufficient quantity for the use of our whole train for camping purposes. It burns very much like peat; lights easily, and answers so well the purpose of wood that we used it for many days rather than load our wagons more heavily by carrying wood along with us.

*Itinerary of route from Fort Abercrombie to Fort Benton, as travelled by Captain James L. Fisk's overland expedition. By David Charlton, engineer.*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Date | No. of Camp | Remarks | Distance Odometer Measurement | Total Distance |
| 1862 |  |  | Miles | Miles |
| July 7 | 1 | Wild Rice river, four (4) feet deep, thirty-rive (35) feet wide; built bridge ; good grass and wood | 4 | 4 |
| 8 | 2 | Bend of Wild Rice river ; wood and grass plenty | 3½ |  |
| 8 | 3 | Small lake; no wood | 10 |  |
| 8 | 4 | Shayenne river, six (6) to ten (10) feet deep, seventy- five (75) feet wide ; built bridge ; plenty of timber and grass on both sides ; no wood between Nos. 2 and 4 | 2 | 15½ |
| 10 | 5 | Maple river, twenty-five (25) feet wide, two (2) to six (6) feet deep ; easily forded ; plenty of wood and grass ; no wood between Nos. 4 and 5 ; country level since leaving Fort Abercrombie |  | 18 |
| 11 | 6 | Small stream, branch of Maple river | 9 |  |
| 11 | 7 | Branch of same stream ; grass plenty ; no wood | ¾ | 9¾ |
| 12 | 8 | Maple river, second (2d) crossing ; several marshes between Numbers 7 and 8 ; no wood | 10 |  |
| 12 | 9 | Several small marshes ; good water and grass ; the country between Nos. 8 and 9 mostly low and marshy; no wood | 5½ | 15½ |
| 14 | 10 | Shayenne river, second (2d) crossing, sixty (60) feet wide and eighteen (18) inches deep ; good fording, good grass, and plenty of wood ; water plenty in ponds between Nos. 9 and 10 ; no wood since leaving Maple river at first (1st) crossing, and none between here and Lake Jessie country since leaving No. 5; rolling prairie |  | 20 |
| 15 | 11 | Lake ; good grass and water ; plenty of small lakes and marshes, with good water, between Nos. 10 and 11 ; first part of the day prairie very rolling; latter part, gently undulating |  | 15½ |
| 16 | 12 | Lydia and Jessie ; water slightly brackish ; spring one-quarter (J) mile southwest of camp, in ravine on shore of Lake Lydia ; plenty of wood and grass; numerous small ponds between Nos. 11 and 12 ; prairie rolling ; no wood between Lake Jessie and White Wood lakes at No. 24, but plenty of buffalo chips |  | 18 |
| 17 | 13 | Stevens's "Great Slough," three hundred (300) to four hundred (400) feet wide ; easily crossed in a dry season ; in a wet season probably wagons would have to be drawn across with long ropes ; 1 ' Bartlett's" spring, forty (40) rods west of crossing, on south side of slough | 4½ |  |
| 17 | 14 | Small lake ; good grass ; numerous ponds and marshes between Nos. 13 and 14; prairie rolling | 9 | 13½ss |

1863



EXPEDITION OF CAPTAIN FISK TO THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS.

LETTER

FROM THE SECRETARY OF WAR,

IN ANSWER TO

A resolution of the House of February 26, transmitting report of Captain Fisk of his late expedition to the Rocky mountains and Idaho.

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In the Senate op the United States, March 15, 1864. Resolved, That five thousand copies of the report of Captain James L. Fisk, of his Northern Overland Expedition from St. Paul, via Fort Abercronibie, to the gold fields of the Territory of Idaho, be printed for the use of the Senate

War Department,

Washington City, March 2, 1864.

Sir: In compliance with the resolution of the House of Representatives dated February 26, 1864, I have the honor to transmit herewith a copy of the report of Captain J. L. Fisk, assistant quartermaster, of his late expedition to the Rocky mountains and the gold fields of Idaho.

I am, sir, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

EDWIN M. STANTON,

Secretary of War.

Hon. Schuyler Colfax,

Speaker of the House of Representatives.

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St. Paul, Minnesota, January 28, 1864.

Dear General: Herewith you will find report of the second overland ex pedition placed under my charge, and which is respectfully submitted to your consideration. I shall in a few days report in person.

With respect, I have the honor to be yours, very truly,

JAMES L. FISK, "\*

Captain, Assistant Quartermaster, Commanding.

General L. Thomas, Adjutant General U. S. A., Washington, D, C.

Official copy.

W. A. NICHOLS,

Assistant Adjutant General.

NORTH OVERLAND EXPEDITION, FOR PROTECTION OF EMIGRANTS, FROM ST. CLOUD, MINNESOTA VIA FORTS ABERCROMBIE AND BENTON, TO THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS, IDAHO, &c. — 1863.

Report of Captain James L. Fisk, assistant quartermaster, commanding. S

Sir: In accordance with instructions from the Secretary of War, I proceeded in May last to St. Paul, to organize an escort for emigrants from Fort Abercrombie to Fort Benton, and the mountain country beyond.

I selected St. Cloud as the rendezvous for the emigrant train, considering that place, in view of the Sioux troubles, to be the most safe and convenient point for assembling. Appointed June 15 as the date of departure from St. Cloud, and accordingly on that day started the train, arriving at Fort Ripley on the evening of the 19th of June. Remained at Fort Ripley until the 25th June, waiting for emigrants that I had heard were on the road. From Colonel Rogers, commanding the post, I procured some additional transportation, commissary stores, &c, requisite, and also a 12-pound howitzer with ammunition.

We were joined at this place by Messrs. Major, Hesse and Hannay, of Washington. These gentlemen were commended to my protection by the Secretary of War, and were to form part of an expedition for the survey of a portion of the Oregon boundary.

While remaining in camp here I daily exercised the mounted guard in the simpler cavalry manoeuvres.

On June 25 we broke camp. Previous to starting, I crossed the river to the fort, with my assistants and the guard, to salute and take leave of Colonel Rogers and the garrison, after which the guard rejoined the train, which then moved on. Passed the Indian agency at Crow Wing on June 27, camping on Crow Wing river, and remained in camp Sunday, June 28. Mr. Morrill, Indian agent at Crow Wing, visited our camp this day, and I assembled the emigrants and guard and read to them the rules and regulations of the camp.

Reached Wadina crossing of Crow Wing river July 1, having been much delayed by repairing bridges and roads. Remained in camp at Wadina crossing until July 5, waiting for Major, jr., and Colonel Jones, of the Oregon surveying party. These gentlemen not arriving, I started the train July 6. The bridges on the road from Wadina crossing to Otter Tail lake were all broken, and the necessary repairs considerably retarded the progress of the train.

July 8. — We passed Otter Tail City at noon of July 8, and found the city entirely deserted on account of the Indian massacre of last year. A few Chip pewa Indians were prowling around. Our camp this evening was on Otter Tail .liftke. The country around the lake is very fine rolling land, covered with short >sweet grass, and sufficiently wooded, the trees growing in park-like clumps. This ^section seems admirably adapted for stock-raising, and is probably not surpassed in the State.

July 9. — Passed a chain of beautiful lakes — Wood lake, Battle lake, &c — camping at night on Long lake. The water of these lakes is excellent, and the scenery of their shores and surroundings is magnificent. The country, like that near Otter Tail lake, is in regular rolls or hills, with good grazing, and groves of noble trees.

July 10. — Our road lay through a thick wood of oak, elm, bass-wood, &c, some of the trees being very large. The latter part of the day this forest was on fire on either side of the narrow road, and the train had some difficulty in passing, on account of the fallen trees and excessive heat. On emerging into the open country we discovered that the prairie was on fire for many miles. All the grass was burned, and we had to push on until evening. Camping on Bass lake, we found good water and plenty of feed and wood.

July 11. — Travelled over a beautiful rolling prairie to Dayton, (Wausietta,) where we nooned. Here we saw farther results of the Sioux massacre. The ' place was deserted, and had been burned. The bodies of Mr. Smith and others, murdered by the Sioux, are buried here. The scene was most melancholy. A dismantled mill, broken wagons, farm implements, and scattered ashes, were all that remained of the once thriving little settlement. We camped at night on the old crossing of the Otter Tail river, where we met a mounted escort to bearers of despatches from General Sibley's expedition.

July 12. — When the cavalry escort on the other side of the river started, a stampede of our horses took place, delaying us about two hours. The road this day passed over an elevated, level prairie, and we camped in the evening on the Bed River of the North, four miles below Breckinridge, which place was also deserted.

July 13. — Travelled over a level prairie until noon, and halted one and a half mile from Fort Abercrombie. In the afternoon we passed the fort, and camped on the Wild Rice river, four miles out. The bed of the river was dry at the crossing, (where we built a bridge the year before,) and we were only able to get poor water from a small pool lower down the stream. The grass was also rather scanty, owing to the extreme dryness of the season. There was, however, plenty of wood.

FORT ABERCROMBIE — COMMANDANT — ORDER OF MARCH, ETC.

We observed to-day small pieces of shale on the prairie, before reaching Fort Abercrombie.

July 14. — Remained in camp all day. This camp we named in honor of Major Camp, commanding the post at Fort Abercrombie. Obtained to-day some necessary quartermaster and commissary stores, repaired wagons, and shod the horses and mules. In the evening I assembled the guard and emigrants, and addressed them as to the order of march. The wagons were to be kept closed up, the van and rear guards in their places, and the flankers out two to three miles on either side. The scouts were to ride ten to fifteen miles ahead of the train each day. I also cautioned them as to vigilance each night. We should form a "corral" in the evening on camping; the tents pitched outside the wagons; the cattle secured inside the corral, and the horses to be picketed outside, and near the tents. I also stated that there would be a password after dark, without which no one would be allowed to leave or enter the camp. The guards would have their arms loaded, and would fire on any person not answering the challenge. All lights and fires were to be put out at "taps," and every man was to sleep with leaded arms beside him. I advised the emigrants to help one another on the march, and abide by the rules for the safety and comfort of the whole party. The bugle, the drum, and the flag were our means of signals and calls, used in communicating with scouts, flankers, and train guards, for rallying, halting, marching, corralling, &c, &c

OFFICERS OF EXPEDITION.

We thus completed all arrangements for the journey. Both emigrants and guard showed the greatest readiness to comply with the regulations. My officers were : George Dart, first assistant; S. H. Johnston, second assistant and journalist; William D. Dibb, M. D , physician and surgeon ; George Northup, wagon- master ; Antoine Freniere, Sioux interpreter; and R. D. Campbell, Chippewa interpreter. The guard consisted of fifty men. Our wagons were marked "U.S.," and numbered.

CROSSING OF SHEYENNE.

July 15. — Broke camp, passed the bend of Wild Rice river and Mud lake, and forded the Sheyenne river without much difficulty, after grading its banks. The river was about forty feet wide, and the depth of water was from two to three feet. One stringer of last year's bridge still remained, the rest having been swept away by the winter flood. We camped at the edge of a small wood on the other side of the river. The feed was pretty good, and the wood and water plenty.

July 16. — Travelled over a level prairie without wood or water, to Maple river, where we camped. There was but little water in the river this summer, the stream being from ten to fifteen feet wide, and one to two feet deep. We found sufficient grass and wood here.

GAME.

July 17. — Before leaving camp this morning we loaded the wagons with three days' supply of wood, as there is none to be found between Maple river and the second crossing of the Sheyenne. We halted at noon on a small stream, a branch of Maple river, at about nine miles and three-quarters from our last camp. Near here the first buffalo was killed, by Antoine Freniere, our Sioux interpreter, from which we obtained a supply of fresh meat. In the afternoon we saw several small herds of buffaloes, and five bulls were killed by members of the train; we saw no cows in these herds. A herd of antelopes also passed us at some distance off. Beaching the second crossing of Maple river, we camped for the night. The country travelled over this day is a level prairie, very dry, but with pretty good grass.

July 18. — Broke camp at 6 J a. m. Bain falling; wind southwest. We passed over a low country of marshy pools, (all dry this season,) until noon. Antoine Freniere killed another buffalo near here, and we got the hump, tongue, liver, and other choice parts. We camped at night on a hill, near a small lake, about eight miles from the Sheyenne river, with water and grass, but no wood.

WOLVES.

The wolves at night kept up a most dismal howling, one ambitious lupine always coming in with a high alto, some octaves above the rest. One of our party, known by the soubriquet of "Big White Turtle," (so named by the Chippewas from his size and complexion as seen when bathing,) made a good long shot at one on a distant hill, causing him to hug the grass and stop his noise. The buffalo wolf is very large, of a greyish dun color, with a dark back; he follows the vast herds of buffaloes that roam the plains, and when one gets far separated from the rest, several wolves fasten on him, bring him down, and soon dispatch him.

SHEYENNE RIVER, SECOND CROSSING.

July 19. — The road today was over a rolling prairie to the second crossing of the Sheyenne river. The river here (this summer) is thirty to forty-five feet wide, with little water, and is easily forded. We passed some small lakes, of good water, and after fording the Sheyenne, camped on the other side. We struck General Sibley's trail to-day.

July 20. — Travelled over a rolling prairie, with small lakes and good feed, until noon. About five miles out we came upon one of General Sibley's in trenched camps, of earthworks for cannon and rifle-pits connecting them. This camp was extensive, and laid out and constructed on scientific principles. We picked up yesterday two dilapidated mules, and to-day a horse that the birds had evidently roosted on for some days. A " black snake" (whip) brought him on his legs, and a little water and grass kept him there for the time. We hope to save him. Halted at noon on a small lake, fifteen miles and a half from the second crossing of the Sheyenne river. The road this afternoon lay over an undulating prairie, and we camped in the evening at another of General Sibley's intrenched camps, which we found rather roomy for our small party. There was a small pool of water near, with grass, but no wood. We used water from wells dug by the general's men.

LAKES LYDIA AND JESSIE. — MILITARY CAMP, DINNER WITH THE SOLDIERS, ETC.

July 21. — Road over rolling prairie to Lakes Lydia and Jessie, where we camped at noon and remained to rest stock, &c The water of Lakes Lydia and Jessie (twin lakes) is slightly saline, soda and magnesia prevailing. There is, however, a good spring three-quarters of a mile southwest of our camp, in a ravine on the shore of Lake Lydia. Shale crops out at the edge of the lakes, and one of our party discovered coal on Lake Jessie. Both of these lakes are very beautiful; they are surrounded by bold bluffs, well timbered. Our camping place was between the two lakes on a small eminence. In the wood at the back of camp we heard an incessant noise of birds, and we found the trees full of nests; it was a perfect rookery; there were cranes, crows, gulls, storks, shite- pokes, &c, &c, with plenty of ducks and geese on the lakes beyond. Some of our boys were soon at work securing a meal. Our scouts reported that there was a large camp a mile or two to the south, which they supposed to be General Sibley's, and shortly afterwards several officers belonging to General Sibley's expedition visited our little camp. From them we learned that part of the general's forces were camped on Lake Atchison. We found abundance of wild cherries in the thickets round camp, and one of our party discovered an arrow, painted red, on the top of the highest hill near. It was laid on a large flat stone, pointing south. Antoine Freniere described it to be a "medicine arrow" — an offering to the God of the Rock. Some of the party had a very pleasant swim in Lake Lydia ; the water is delightful for bathing.

July 22. — Camp Lydia. — This camp we named in honor of Mrs. Fisk. We laid over to-day to recruit stock, &c. In the afternoon, by invitation, the officers and others of our expedition dined at General Sibley's camp. We received a most cordial welcome from the officers and men of the expedition. We learned here that the general had gone south to the Coteau du Missouri, with some 2,200 of his forces, leaving the remainder in this camp, which was strongly fortified. General Sibley was in pursuit of the Sissiton Sioux, who, it is said, wished to surrender to him.

July 23. — Broke camp at 6½ a. m. My little guard took their posts, and we started, the train. Some of General Sibley's officers and men accompanied us a short distance this morning, and bade us all a hearty farewell, at the same time expressing great fears for our safety. They said we "must be either heroes or madmen." We crossed Stevens's great slough and passed Bartlett's spring, which is on the south side of the slough about 40 rods west of the crossing. The water, of this spring is most delicious, and is almost as cold as ice- water. We filled our water casks here, as the water is slightly saline in most of the ponds between this place and James river. We halted at noon on a small almost circular lake, which we named Lake Dibb, in honor of our most excellent doctor. The water of the lake was a little salt. Grass good; no wood. In the afternoon we travelled over a rolling prairie, with many ponds and marshes, and camped in the evening near a small pool, with pretty good water and grass; still no wood.

July 24. — Road over a rolling prairie to Lake Townsend, (so named in honor of our worthy Assistant Adjutant General U. S.,) where we watered our animals. Grass good. We passed a small dry stream, a branch of James river, and halted to feed near a small pond with pretty good water. In the afternoon we travelled over an undulating prairie to the Riviere & Jaquess, or James river, where we camped.

*Itinerary of route from Fort Abercrombie to Fort Benton, as travelled by Captain James L. Fisk's overland expedition, 1863*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Date | No. of Camp | Remarks | Distance Odometer Measurement | Total Distance |
| 1863 |  |  | Miles | Miles |
| July 13 | 1 | Wild Rice river; bed dry at crossing; poor grass; plenty of wood; water in pools lower down | 4 | 4 |
| 15 | 2 | Bend of Wild Rice river; pools of brackish water in bed of river; grass scanty; wood |  |  |
| 15 | 3 | Small lake, (Mud lake;) very little water grass wood |  |  |
| 15 | 4 | Sheyenne river ; 2 to 3 feet deep ; about 20 feet wide ; river easily forded; camp on other side about half a mile; plenty of wood; grass pretty good. |  |  |
| 16 | 5 | Maple river; 1 to 2 feet deep; 10 to 15 feet wide; good ford; plenty of grass and wood; no wood or water between Sheyenne and Maple rivers; level prairie from Fort Abercrombie |  |  |
| 17 | 6 | Small stream, branch of Maple river; grass; no wood |  |  |
| 17 | 7 | Maple river, second crossing; pools of water in river bed; tolerable grass; no wood |  |  |
| 18 | 8 | Small lake, about 8 miles from second crossing of Sheyenne river ; water and grass; no wood; low country, with marshy pools, (all dry this year;) grass, but no water or wood since leaving Maple river |  |  |
| 19 | 9 | Sheyenne river, second crossing; 20 to 25 feet wide; very little water ; easily forded; pretty good water and grass; plenty of wood; passed some small lakes with good water; prairie rolling |  |  |
| 20 | 10 | Small lake; grass and water; no wood; numerous small lakes and marshes, with good feed since leaving Sheyenne river; rolling prairie |  |  |
| 20 | 11 | Small pond; poor water; grass; no wood; prairie undulating |  |  |
| 21 | 12 | Lakes Lydia and Jessie ; water slightly saline; spring quarter of a mile south west of camp in ravine on shore of Lake Lydia; good grass, and abundance of wood; rolling prairie |  |  |
| 23 | 13 | "Stevens's Great Slough;" 300 to 400 feet wide; easily crossed this year; in a wet season must be difficult to pass with wagons; " Bartlett's" spring on south side of slough about 40 rods west of crossing |  |  |
| 23 | 14 | Lake "Dibb;" small lake, almost circular; water slightly saline; good grass; no wood |  |  |
| 23 | 15 | Small lake; good water and grass; no wood; rolling prairie, with many ponds and marshes between this and Lake Dibb |  |  |
| 24 | 16 | Lake Townsend; water a little saline; good grass ; rolling prairie |  |  |