

THE TRAIL BLAZERS

As was true of the westward movement across America, the white man came to Shasta County in fairly discernible groups. The first of these groups consisted of explorers and fur hunters, traditionally known as the "mountain men." As they came in search of commercial gain in the form of furs and pelts, these men created the incentive and broke the trails, thus serving as the vanguard of the subsequent tide of American settlers.

The first of the trappers to traverse Shasta County was Jedediah Smith in 1828. Intelligent and strongly religious, Smith had established a reputation as a capable guide by 1820. However, up to 1826 he had not yet penetrated the Mexican dominated area between the Rockies and the Pacific. In November of that year, Smith, with a small following, entered the great valley of California and reached the San Gabriel Mission. After a daring journey from California across the Sierra Nevadas to Bear Lake and back in 1827, Smith turned northward. Traveling along the east bank of the Sacramento to a point near Red Bluff, the Smith party crossed the river on April 11, 1828, and struck out along Dibble Creek in a northwesternly trek to the coast. After crossing through the southwest corner of Shasta County and traversing what is now Trinity County, the party was attacked by Indians at the Umpqua River near Cape Arago. Only Smith and two companions escaped and reached Fort Vancouver, site of Hudson's Bay trading post.

Others continued the work begun by Smith. Later in 1828 Alexander McLeod, a Hudson's Bay trapper, was given the dual task of recovering the property stolen from Smith by the Indians and exploring the Sacramento River for fur trading possibilities. This expedition, which came down the Sacramento through what is now Shasta County in 1829, was significant for two reasons. It showed that northern California was a likely fur producing area, and proved that a passable route existed from the north into California. McLeod's mark on this area remained on the McCloud River which originally bore his name.

Peter Skene Ogden, better known for his exploration of Utah, was also one of the first white men to enter this region. Ogden, another Hudson's Bay trapper, who came in 1830, verified the findings of McLeod concerning the availability of furs and accessibility of routes to the north. Ogden has been credited with the naming of Mt. Shasta. In addition, Ogden's party explored the Sacramento River area thoroughly so that the Hudson's Bay Company might be ahead of any American trapping concerns which would have learned of the area's possibilities as a result of Smith's reports.

A fourth expedition through Shasta County was led by John Work in 1832. Originating from the Hudson's Bay Company's Vancouver post, this party camped on Cow Creek on November 18 where Work reported in his journal:

Fine weather—raised camp and proceeded 8 miles south down the creek (Canoe or Cow Creek) to near its junction with the big river (Sacramento). The road good. The hunters out and killed 7 deer. An old grizzle (grizzly) bear was killed, 7 beaver were taken and some more traps set.

On the return trip north in August, 1833, Work complained that:

There is a great deal of sickness in the party, seemingly an epidemic of some sort that afflicted the Indians to such a degree that many of them were sick and many dying. Very warm weather—continued our journey to Canoe (Cow) Creek.

The epidemic attacking the party has been subsequently diagnosed as malaria—a malady that plagued many of the early settlers, as well as the natives. Because Work was able to make this journey without mishap while escorting almost one hundred men, women and children, it has been inferred that the trail blazed by McLeod was a comparatively easy route.

Another among the first adventurers to reach this area was Ewing Young. Already quite famous as a guide on the Santa Fe trail, Young was the second American, (Smith being the first), to cross the entire distance from southern California to Oregon. Young was first in the area under study in 1832. He was here again in 1834 and in 1837 successfully accomplished the difficult task of driving 700 head of cattle from Monterey to Oregon.

Soon after these explorations the United States government showed an interest in surveying and mapping the Pacific west. In 1841 Lt. George Emmons of the navy was dispatched from Fort Vancouver to San Francisco to survey the area. A more careful government appraisal was made in 1846 by the explorer who has been described as the "Pathmarker" of the American west—John C. Fremont. In his notations on this trip, Fremont described the north valley area as "fertile bottom lands watered by many small streams, with a good range of grass and acorns." The culmination of this trip is a familiar story. It was on the hurried return to California from the Goose Lake region near the present Oregon-California boundary that Fremont would keep a date with destiny. His part in the perpetration of the Bear Flag revolt and the subsequent overthrow of the Mexican hierarchy in California is an oft told narrative in the annals of California history.

These men comprise the principal early explorers into the area under focus in this study. Although other exploratory efforts were made, the work of these "mountain men" did the most to pave the way for pioneer conquest. It was through their efforts that a number of the old trails which crossed the upper Sacramento region were opened. The earliest was the trail through Trinity County blazed by Jedediah Smith in the spring of 1828. Next came the east branch of the California-Oregon trail probably paved by McLeod later in 1828.

Hudson's Bay trappers, specifically Peter S. Ogden and Michael LaFramboise, were among the first to blaze the west branch of the California to Oregon road. This path wandered through the Sacramento River canyon and around the west side of Mount Shasta. It was used annually by Hudson's Bay parties during much of the 1830's and 40's. This was the route conquered by Ewing Young and his Oregon bound herd of cattle in 1837. This trail also served as the highway for gold seeking Argonauts in the late 1840's and early 50's.

Another important immigrant route to Shasta County was the Noble Trail or Immigrant Road, mapped by W. H. Nobles in 1851. Crossing present Lassen County, this route traversed the mountains through what became known as "Nobles' Pass." With the help of money conscripted from Shasta City merchants, this trail became a major artery into northern California. Some 300 miles distant from its origin on the Humboldt River near present day Lovelock, Nevada, the Noble Trail crossed Lassen County near the Honey Lake and Susanville area, and thence into the valley to Fort Reading on Cow Creek. Subsequent alterations were added to this path; however, it remained a basic route into Shasta County down through the years.

In 1852 the California legislature authorized the construction of a wagon or stage road from Sacramento to the Oregon line. By 1860 the California Stage Company had established a regular passenger and express line between Sacramento and Portland. At that time it cost a passenger \$45 to be carried the 710 miles between the two cities.

Today U. S. Highway 99 and the Shasta route of the Southern Pacific railroad follow the old California-Oregon trail quite closely and many of the railroad stations are on the exact line of the trail. Thus the path was cleared for the settlement of northern California.