

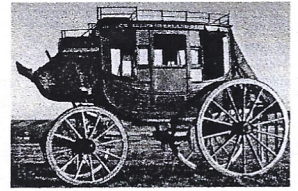
OVERLAND DESPATCH

SMOKY HILL TRAIL ASSOCIATION QUARTERLY

VOL. II No. 2

REMEMBER THE SMOKY HILL TRAIL

JUNE 2009



Editor's Note: This issue was delayed, waiting for completion of details for the annual conference. Conference information and registration forms will be sent later. This is a short issue, but we want to get publication onto a firm schedule as soon as possible. Material for the next issue is welcome anytime.

ANNUAL SMOKY HILL TRAIL CONFERENCE AT JUNCTION CITY, OCTOBER 30-NOVEMBER 1

THE third annual Smoky Hill Trail Association Conference will be held at Junction City, KS, October 30-November 1, 2009, with Ron Harris in charge of arrangements. The Geary County Historical Society and Museum will host this conference.

The SmHTA board will meet on Friday, October 30, and all members are welcome to attend. The late afternoon and evening of October 30 will offer tours at the Geary County Museum and historic sites in Junction City. Additional details will be sent with the conference brochure and registration form. The following is a tentative schedule.

Saturday morning, October 31, will feature three speakers: Ron Harris, "Davis County: On the Trails to Everywhere"; Sonie Brown Liebler, "Pikes Peak or Bust via Steamboat: Navigation on the Kaw"; and Bill McKale, "Fort Riley and the Smoky Hill Trail."

Saturday afternoon program will be a bus tour to Fort Riley (provided this active military base is not closed to the public that day) and trail-related sites in and near Manhattan. The banquet, annual membership meeting, and presentation of awards will be Saturday evening, with entertainment to follow.

Three more speakers are scheduled for Sunday morning, November 1: Lee Whiteley, "Monuments, Markers, Murals, and More along the Smoky Hill Trail"; Mike Olsen, "Fact or Fiction? The Literature of the Smoky Hill Trail"; and Serle Chapman, "Cheyennes and the Smoky Hill Trail, Part II."

The conference will conclude Sunday afternoon with a bus tour to trail sites west of Junction City.

Make plans now to be in Junction City and watch the mail for complete program details and registration form.

AWARDS NOMINATIONS NEEDED

Because this issue is late, the deadline for nominations for awards is extended to August 20. Please send nominations for the Award of Merit, Howard C. Raynseford Lifetime Achievement Award, or Heritage Preservation Award to Leo E. Oliva, SmHTA Awards Committee, PO Box 1, Woodston KS 67675 or via e-mail to <oliva@ruraltel.net>.

THE STARVATION TRAIL, 1859-1860

by Lee Whiteley

[Whiteley is a director on the SmHTA board, author of five books on wagon roads and automobile highways, and will be on the program at the 2009 conference in Junction City.]

"Three routes will be traveled next summer. The Arkansas by those from the South and Southwest, the Smoky Hill by the foolhardy and insane, and the Platte by the greatest mass of the emigration." This statement in the *Rocky Mountain News* on April 11, 1860, was concise and direct in its assessment of the Smoky Hill Trail. The west end of the 1859 Smoky Hill Trail, roughly from present-day Limon to Denver, followed what would become commonly known as the Middle or "Starvation" Branch of the trail. This trail followed closely present-day Smoky Hill Road in Centennial and Aurora.

Claims were made in 1859 that the Smoky Hill Trail was the best route to the Pikes Peak goldfields. It was the shortest, but it lacked the dependable water, grass, and game of either the South Platte or Arkansas River routes. Once the westbound traveler reached the head of either the north or south fork of the Smoky Hill River, he was on his own to find his way west to the Rocky Mountains. Dirt mounds were built by the early "surveyors," but they were quickly leveled by the buffalo.

From the headwaters of the Smoky Hill River, many emigrants turned northwest to the South Platte River. Albert D. Richardson, traveling on a stagecoach of the Leavenworth and Pikes Peak Express (L&PPX), noted on June 4, 1859: "After riding twenty-five miles without seeing a drop of water, at Station Twenty-two we crossed the Smoky Hill route which from a point far south of ours, abruptly turns northwest across the Republican to



Conditions on the Smoky Hill Trail were well-illustrated by the sketch published in *Harpers Weekly* on August 13, 1859.

(continued on page 2)

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

THE western Kansas portion of the Smoky Hill Trail has experienced rains like we haven't seen for several years. The buffalo grass is green and the yucca plants are in full bloom. A perfect time for travel on the old trail even though rattlesnakes are out in force.

I hope that everyone is anxiously awaiting our next Smoky Hill Trail Conference to be held in Junction City. Your Board will meet in July to continue planning and fine-tuning the agenda. Details and registration forms will be sent soon. I look forward to seeing everyone as we gather in Junction City to relate tales of the Smoky Hill.

Sharing the Smoky Hill story has filled part of my time this Spring as I have spoken to groups in Quinter, Sharon Springs, Russell Springs, Colby, and Brewster. I also enjoyed representing the Association at the Leavenworth and Pike's Peak Express 150th year celebration in Ludell, KS. I know that several other Board members have been busy promoting the Association and talking up the Smoky Hill Trail.

One project that I would like to organize through the Association is to initiate a gathering of those who have information on the September 11, 1874, killing of the German family by a group of Cheyenne led by Medicine Water and Buffalo Calf Woman. The site of the encounter has been debated for many years, as to whether it occurred on Six Mile Gulch or at the Forks of the Smoky Hill, both sites in Logan County. The family was traveling from Georgia to Colorado and utilized the Smoky Hill Trail from Ellis to their destiny in Logan County. With such a gathering, with everyone bringing all their research, we might be able to designate a definitive site for the encounter, or at least debate the reasons supporting one or the other.

I encourage every member to be a recruiter for the Association as the more active members we have, the more effective we become.

October is just around the corner, so I'll see you in Junction City in October.

Remember the Smoky Hill Trail!

—Mike Baughn

THE STARVATION TRAIL

(continued from page 1)

the Platte. Emigrants who have come by the Smoky Hill tell us they have suffered intensely, one traveling seventy-five miles without water. Some burned their wagons, killing their famished cattle and continuing on foot. We are still on the desert with its soil white with alkali, its stunted shrubs, withered grass, and brackish waters often poisonous to both cattle and men." Horace Greeley, on the same stage as Richardson, added: "And here the thirsty men and teams, which have been twenty-five miles without water on the Express Company's road, are met by those which have come up the longer and

more southerly route by the Smoky Hill, and which have traveled sixty miles since they last found water or shade. This is a sore trial for weary, gaunt, heavy-laden cattle, and doubtless proves fatal to many of them. The Pike's Peakers from the Smoky Hill whom I met here had driven their ox-teams through the sixty miles at one stretch." The L&PPX followed the South Fork of the Republican River into present-day Colorado, and Station 22 was west of the present-day town of Siebert, Colorado. The ill-defined and long-forgotten branch of the Smoky Hill Trail struck the South Platte River near present Brush, Colorado. The west end of the L&PPX used the infamous Starvation Branch.

B. D. Williams, employee of the L&PPX, also noted: "It is utterly impossible to imagine or conceive the amount of misery, privation, suffering, starvation, and death that has occurred upon the Smoky

OVERLAND DESPATCH is the official publication of the Smoky Hill Trail Association, Inc., a nonprofit, 501(c)(3), corporation chartered in the State of Kansas. Primary missions of the Association are to preserve, protect, promote, and interpret the Smoky Hill Trail for the benefit of present and future generations, and to promote awareness of the historical legacy associated with remnants and locations that represent the historic trail and Butterfield's Overland Despatch (BOD) and its successors as well as the railroad that replaced the overland trail. Letters and articles are welcome, and they become the property of SmHTA and may be edited or abridged at the editor's discretion. All rights reserved.

Membership in the Association is open to all individuals, families, institutions, and businesses. Annual dues are \$25.00 for individuals, \$30.00 for families, \$40.00 for nonprofit organizations, \$50.00 for businesses, and \$100.00 for patrons. Life membership, individual or family, is \$500.00. Membership fees should be sent to Smoky Hill Trail Association, PO Box 322, WaKeeney KS 67672. All memberships are for the calendar year and expire on December 31. Other donations are always welcome.

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Hill Route. . . I have seen a man named Thompson, who came the same route, and who lived twelve days upon prickly pears and wild onions. He, too, is a mere skeleton. There are others here, too, who, for three weeks, had nothing to sustain them but one hawk and the remains of a dead ox, whose bones the wolves had almost entirely cleaned."

John W. Fletcher followed the L&PPX route in May and June of 1859. He observed: "The Proprietors of this Express route are having their stations removed to the north, water and wood are so scarce, tis impossible to run a line of stages through this section of country." Fletcher had received word of the impending L&PPX route change which eliminated the only well-defined route across northwestern Kansas and east central Colorado.

Some emigrants turned southwest from the head of the Smoky Hill River and hit the Big Sandy Creek, an affluent of the Arkansas River. Others continued basically due west, finding their way the best they could, eventually using Pikes Peak as their primary landmark.

Leavenworth was one of the primary promoters of the Smoky Hill Trail. The *Rocky Mountain News* in Denver noted on October 26, 1860: "Leavenworth in her struggle to prevent her lamp of life from going out has discovered a panacea for her ills in the opening of the Smoky Hill route, which, to use the expression of one of the property holders of the city, 'runs plump into Leavenworth, and nowhere else.'"

O. M. Tennyson, a surveyor hired by the Leavenworth City Council, recorded in the *Western Mountaineer* (Golden, Colorado) on August 30, 1860: "We have crossed the highest land in Kansas, east of the Rocky Mountains; in the valleys we have found a luxuriant growth of green grass, interspersed with flowers of almost every species, giving, together with the bold front of the spring ridges, a lovely and picturesque appearance to the whole country. . . . Ours is one hundred miles shorter than either the Platte or the Arkansas route; we have found abundance of water and grass, and wood and fuel more than sufficient for camping purposes. We have found a first rate road."

E. L. Berthoud published in 1859 a map to the trail, but he showed the Smoky Hill River extending west almost to the base of Pikes Peak, a major exaggeration.

In response to glowing accounts of the Smoky Hill route in the *Leavenworth Daily Register*, the *Rocky Mountain News* of March 21, 1860, responded: "We cannot conceive how any respectable journal can have the effrontery to recommend a route which has so recently proved so universally fatal and disastrous to those who have been duped into venturing upon it. We think the past summer's experience is too indelibly fixed upon the minds of hundreds of unfortunates, to again permit any considerable number of emigrants to traverse a region of barren desert and waterless sand hills, at least until it is conclusively and indisputably demonstrated, that there is really a

practical route. . . . Let writers for the Register and other serious gentlemen try the Smoky Hill, when, if they get through without eating each other up, some adventurous individuals may be induced to follow."

The "eating each other up" statement referred to the documented cannibalism on the Smoky Hill Trail. The three Blue brothers, a cousin, and a friend left Whiteside County in Illinois for "Pike's Peak." Their journey started with a train ride to St. Louis, a steamboat ride to Kansas City, a walk to Lawrence where they bought a pony, and a walk to Topeka where they bought provisions and joined another party of 11. At Fort Riley, they debated which route to take, the "Republican" or the "Smoky Hill."

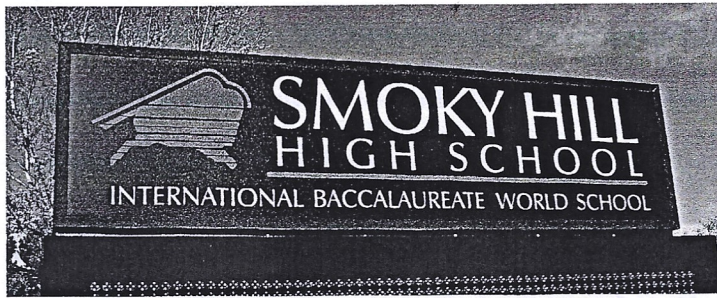
The latter was chosen and all went well for about ten days. The party then began to scatter, some staying to hunt buffalo, others trying to find their way west. In a few days without food the Blue brothers and a friend struck out alone. After eight days without food, except for boiled roots and grass, the friend, by the name of Solely, died. After resting three days without food, the three ate Soley's flesh. Two days later, Alexander, the oldest brother, could go no farther. He died and two days later, on the banks of Beaver Creek, Charles Blue died. After three days of guarding the body, Daniel ate his brother's flesh. Daniel was found by three Arapaho Indians and taken to their camp. An Arapaho took Daniel to Station 25 of the Leavenworth and Pikes Peak Express.

That very day the first coaches of the L&PPX arrived at the station, south of present-day Agate. Passenger Libeus Barney and Superintendent of the stage line, B. D. Williams, accompanied Daniel and the Indian to the spot where Charles died. The remains were buried. Daniel spent a few days recovering at the stage station, then was taken to Denver by the next L&PPX coach. Daniel returned east by the Platte River route. A year later, he published an account of his experiences on the Smoky Hill.

The Smoky Hill Trail was little used during the Civil War. In 1865, the Smoky Hill Trail would come alive again when David Butterfield established his Overland Despatch freighting and stagecoach operation. He studied maps of the 1860 Smoky Hill Trail and knew much of this rather indefinite route could be used. He also knew that because of inactivity on the trail during the Civil War, the route must again be surveyed.

This road survey was led by Lt. Julian Fitch who had helped survey the Smoky Hill Trail route of 1860. His report appeared in the *Junction City Union* on September 9, 1865. He noted: "The advantages of the Smoky Hill route over the Platte and Arkansas must be apparent to everyone. In the first place it is one hundred and sixteen miles shorter to Denver. . . . emigration, like a ray of light, will not go around unless there are insurmountable obstacles on the way. In this case, the obstructions are altogether on the Platte and Arkansas routes." The west end of the route selected was to be known as the South Branch

of the Smoky Hill Trail and eliminated most travel on the "Starvation" Branch.



Smoky Hill High School in Aurora, Colorado, stands precisely on the Middle or "Starvation" Branch of the Smoky Hill Trail.

NEW SmHTA MEMBERSHIPS

This list includes new memberships received since the last issue. If there is an error in this information, please send corrections to Secretary Jody Zeman, PO Box 322, WaKeeney KS 67672. We thank you for your support.

FAMILY MEMBERSHIPS

Mike & Rose Marie Wallen, 116 E Main, Lindsorg KS 67456

INDIVIDUAL MEMBERSHIPS

Loren C. Beougher, 9304 E 81st St, Raytown MO 64138
Kent Chapman, 1724 W 15th, Emporia KS 66801
Rosetta Graff, 918 Colony Ave, Kinsley KS 67547
Virginia Kennett, 6801 Larsen Lane, Shawnee KS 66203
Lethene Parks, 13020 NE 93rd St, Vancouver WA 98682

NOMINATIONS WELCOME

THE Nominating Committee welcomes suggestions for officers and board members. If you would like to recommend someone for the committee to consider or offer yourself to serve if elected, please send the information to Bonita M. Oliva, PO Box 1, Woodston KS 67675 by September 1. Those selected by the committee will be required to sign a statement that they will serve if elected. The committee would like to have two nominees for each position on the board so there is a contest. Every board needs new members to bring new ideas.

Smoky Hill Trail Association
PO Box 322
WaKeeney, KS 67672

Change Service Requested

AUSTRALIAN TRACTOR CARAVAN FOLLOWING THE SMOKY HILL TRAIL THIS SUMMER

TRANSWORLD Tractor Treks of Australia is taking "Tractors Across the USA" this summer. The caravan left Westminster, MD, June 27, and plans to be in Los Angeles, CA, in ten weeks. According to their route schedule, they will follow the "Smoky Hill Wagon Trail" from Kansas City to Castle Rock, CO, and then attend the Oregon-California Trails Association annual meeting at Loveland, CO, August 18. Folks along the Smoky Hill Trail are encouraged to watch for and meet with these travelers. Details are available at their web site <www.transworldtractortreks.com/index.html>.

TRAIL CALENDAR

Everyone is invited to send notices for this section; provide location, date, time, and activity. This is a quarterly. The next issue should appear in September, so send information for October and later to arrive by August 15, 2009. Thank you.

Aug. 18-22, 2009: Oregon California Trails Association's 27th Annual Convention, Loveland, Colorado. Seminars, tours, and workshops emphasizing the trails of Eastern Colorado, <www.octa-colorado.org>. The Smoky Hill Trail Association will be represented there.

Sept. 27-30, 2009: Santa Fe Trail Symposium, Arrow Rock, MO; for information, contact Santa Fe Trail Center at 620-285-2054.

Oct. 30-Nov. 1, 2009: Third Annual Smoky Hill Trail Conference, Junction City, KS. Program details and registration forms will be sent to all members soon.

TRAIL BOOK AVAILABLE

TRAILS of the Smoky Hill by Wayne C. Lee and Howard C. Raynesford is available through the Santa Fe Trail Last Chance Store for \$20 postpaid, with a percentage of all sales going to the Smoky Hill Trail Association. Check it out at <www.lastchancestore.org> and click on "Smoky Hill Trail."

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