



Death of a Deputy Surveyor

Many young men from the Eastern states began venturing to the newly-created Nebraska Territory in the mid 1800s hoping to prove themselves worthy of working on a government survey crew. The work was physical and demanding, and the conditions were often hostile, with many unexpected dangers ranging from Indian attacks to sickness in isolated areas. Many returned home disheartened but wiser from the experience. However, the deputy surveyors leading the crews were generally of a higher caliber than those working under them. They had to be if their ventures were to be successful.

During the summer of 1857, the government deputy surveyors doing work in Nebraska were marking the lines at a rapid pace. It was the third season in the new territory, and the framework of standard parallels and guide meridians in the eastern part of the territory were established and awaited those surveyors ready to do the townships and subdivision work. One crew under the direction of Deputy Surveyor William J. Osborn had just begun to subdivide the townships in the area north and east of the initial point for the 6th Principal Meridian near the Nebraska/Kansas border when disagree-

ments among the crew disbanded them after a couple days of work. Osborn was left without a crew and hired a deputy surveyor named Wallace Barnum to finish his contracts.

Accompanying Barnum was another deputy surveyor named A. Philo Drake, a physician from Michigan. Most referred to him as "Dr. Drake". Barnum's crew continued Osborn's contracts, which were in an area where the main government road (a trail by today's standards) led to Fort Kearney. This road was noted as the Ft. Leavenworth to Ft. Laramie Road in the survey notes, but it is better known today as the Oregon Trail.

In the spring of 1857, President James Buchanan appointed Alfred Cumming as governor of Utah Territory, replacing Brigham Young. This non-Mormon appointment greatly upset the Mormons, and tension between the Mormons and the government soon erupted. Seeing the potential for conflict, the government began sending troops westward along the Ft. Leavenworth to Ft. Laramie Road to bring order to the area.

By August of 1857, the Barnum and Drake crew began seeing an estimated 3,000 government troops in separate columns of 1,000 men each traveling along the government road. All travel along the road was by mule and ox trains, and as a natural result, some of the animals strayed away from the main

>> By Jerry Penry, LS

group. A few days after the main columns of troops had passed, the crew captured a stray ox along the Little Blue River near the mouth of Rock Creek. As the days passed by, and the crew continued with their work, the ox became quite tame and became a source of enjoyment for the crew.

On the first day of August, the crew stopped for a break in an area where a nearby trading post on the government road was being operated by the Glenn brothers. The afternoon was warm, and several of the men were standing next to their captured ox with Wallace Barnum standing next to its head. One of the crew members attempted to give the ox something to eat, which it seemed to immediately dislike. In its disgust it swung its head back in a shaking motion. Barnum never had time to react to this unforeseen reaction, and one of the horns of the ox caught him directly in the corner of one eye. The gash was very deep, and Barnum immediately fell unconscious while part of his brain became exposed, to the horror of his crew. In an unexpected instant, the peaceful break had turned tragic. Dr. Drake immediately came to Barnum's

assistance, but there was little he could do to help his friend.

That evening another group of soldiers passed by and made camp nearby by the crew. A lieutenant and a surgeon from the detachment came to examine Barnum, but after a close examination, the surgeon told the crew that regrettably there was slim hope of Barnum surviving. Deputy Surveyor Osborn had stayed in the area, and Barnum was taken to his camp, where he died on the evening of August 5th. Barnum's father was also a member of his son's crew. Wallace Barnum's body was taken across the open plains to Nebraska City, which was located along the banks of the Missouri River. On August 6, 1857, Deputy Surveyor Osborn wrote a letter to John Calhoun, who was the surveyor general of the Kansas and Nebraska territories. This letter was written to Calhoun to inform him of Barnum's death and to state the desire of Dr. Drake to finish Barnum's surveys, further stating that Drake would make arrangements to meet with Calhoun at the beginning of September.

Barnum was said to have been married for only two months when the incident occurred. Other than Deputy

Surveyor Nelson Buck, who was killed by Sioux Indians in 1869, Barnum is believed to have been the only other deputy surveyor in the Nebraska Territory who died in the line of duty, although many other crew members gave their lives here.

The area where Barnum was killed became a well-known stop known as Rock Creek Station on the Oregon Trail, Overland Stage, and the short-lived Pony Express. David McCandles took possession of the trading post in 1859 and established a toll bridge on the creek. In July of 1861 it gained fame as being the location where McCandles was shot and killed by James "Wild Bill" Hickok during an argument. Today it is a Nebraska state park, but the early history of the government survey crews and Barnum's tragic death have been mostly forgotten. 

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