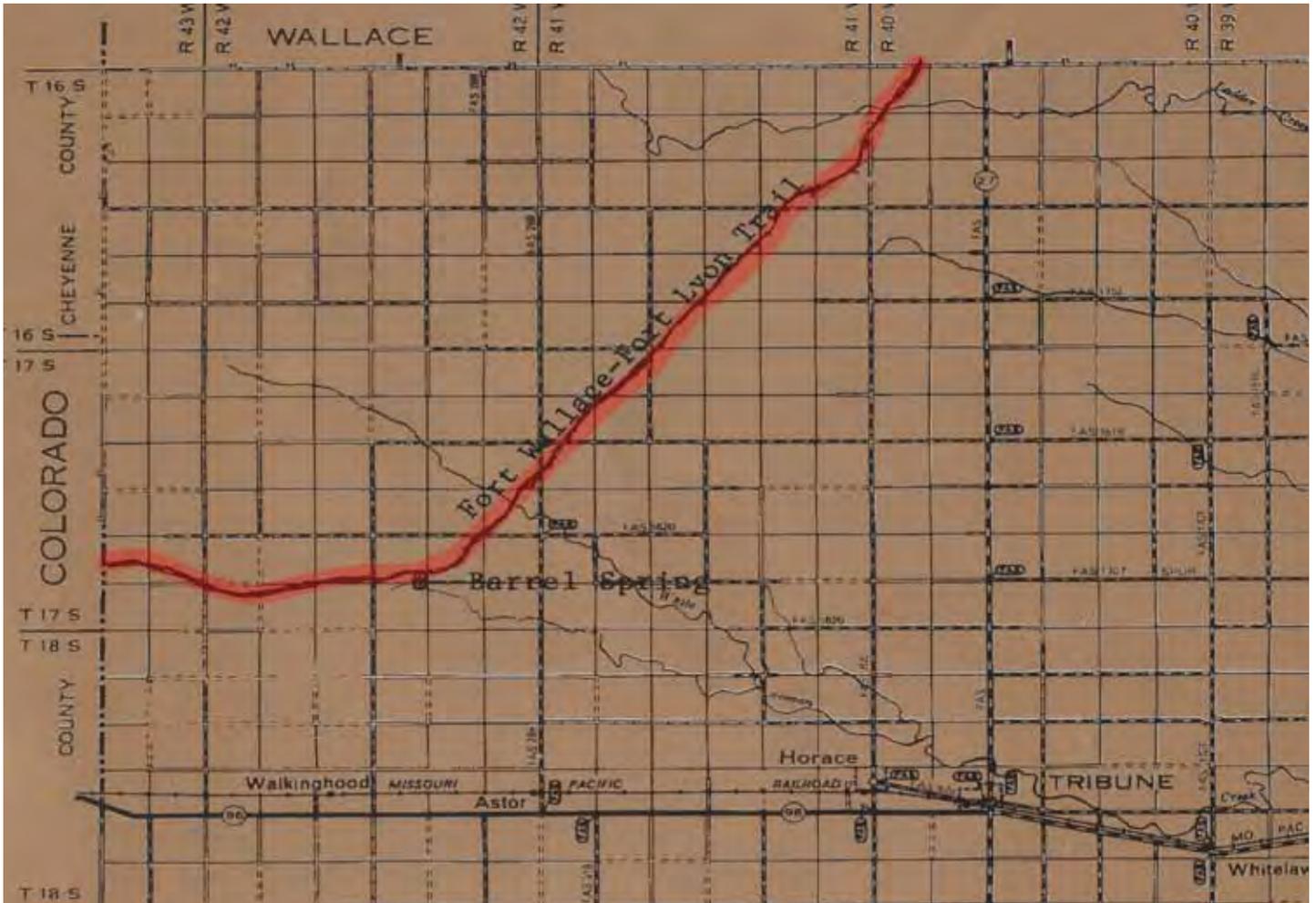


Down the Treasure Trail



The Forgotten Trail

This column is reprinted in loving memory of Clyde W. Blackburn, 1917-1999 – Barbara Oringerff, Editor.

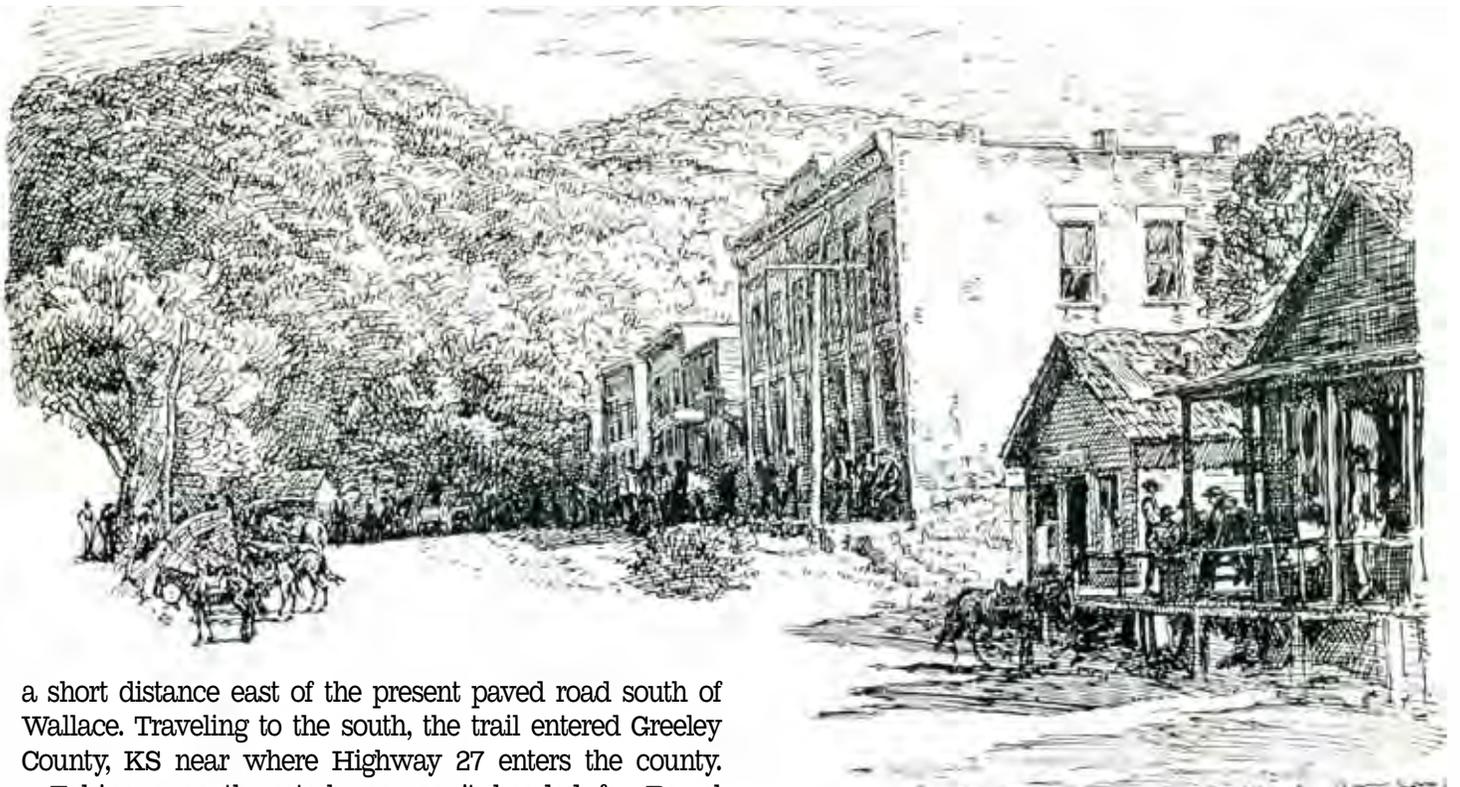
In the last few years there has been increasing interest in trails cut into the landscape by wagon trains in the 1800s. Used by both emigrants seeking a new life and for commercial use, only the most renowned have been recognized as changing the course of history. But there were other important trails, one in particular, which deserves a place in western history. This is what is known as the Fort Wallace-Fort Lyon Trail.

While the name implies this was a road between two forts, it was much more than that. It was in July of 1868 when the town of Sheridan, KS was founded along the Kansas Pacific railroad some 13 miles northeast of Fort Wallace, KS. This was also the point where free government land to the railroad ended for a time. While Sheridan soon achieved the reputation of being a lawless blight on the plains, it was

a city of commerce. In fact, at its zenith, it contained over 2,000 inhabitants. This was the furthest west and south a railroad existed at the time. Outfitters and supply merchants constructed large warehouses in order to supply the demands for goods needed by the forts of the southwest in New Mexico and Arizona, as well as cities in that region.

Soon freight wagons and their Mexican drivers were making their way to Sheridan. According to newspaper reports of the day as many as a thousand wagons would be camped on the flat below. Two Buttes in Colorado to the west, waiting to load. On their return trip they soon had a trail cut into the sod to the south of the Buttes heading for the Fort Wallace area. From that point the road turned south. After crossing the Smoky Hill River, the trail climbed to the flat above by use of a road chiseled out of a hill. The remains of this old road is yet visible





a short distance east of the present paved road south of Wallace. Traveling to the south, the trail entered Greeley County, KS near where Highway 27 enters the county.

Taking a southwesterly course it headed for Barrel Springs, on White Woman Creek, where water was plentiful, as well as at the second spring a short distance to the west. This would have been about five miles east of the Colorado border. Barrel Springs was not only an important spot on the trail, it was later used by gold seekers returning from Colorado, cattle rustlers, and wild horse hunters. As the trail continued west it crossed above what for many years was a noted hollow under a hill know in later years as Wild Horse Corral. For a time in the 1870s this cavern was home to about 20 horse and cattle rustlers known as the Wild Bunch., who raided ranches south and east 30 to 40 miles distant.

After the trail crossed into Colorado it continued on a westerly course, turning southwest to Fort Lyon and south of Eads. Many years ago an old friend who owned a farm southwest of Eads showed me the ruts of this trail as it cut across his pasture. After the supply wagons reached Fort Lyon their route followed the Santa Fe Trail to the southwest.

That this trail was an important one is evidenced by the volume of freight hauled from Sheridan. While it existed only about 15 months, thousands of wagons hauled freight to the southwest from the town. It was the laying of tracks to Kit Carson, Co, that spelled the end of Sheridan, and with it a new trail to Fort Lyon. From that point, the trail was used as a military road between Fort Wallace and Fort Lyon but only rarely. Evidence of the volume of traffic over the trail can be noted where it dropped from the plains down to Barrel Springs. I have visited the area many times, and when one looks to the northeast the depression made by thousands of wagons is visible even though the area has been farmed for years.

The trail was also a road of tragedy during the time it led

to Sheridan. the town had more than its share of miscreants who didn't hesitate to shoot anyone who crossed them.

Many had prostitutes as girl friends. On occasion one of them would run off with a new man and head for the Southeast. Eastern Kansas newspapers reported several instances of vengeance for someone taking off with another man's girlfriend, with the bodies of the ladies' new lovers found murdered along the trail. One of the the more tragic murders is that of a young girl and her boyfriend by the girl's guardian, a hunchback named Jesso. He was extremely protective of her. When she fell in love and ran off with a young man he became enraged and pursued then down the trail. Later, when a wagon train arrived in Sheridan, the drovers related a scene they had come across. There was a wagon box turned upside down and opposite each other sat a young girl and a young man. Both had been killed and sat with a dagger blade driven through their crossed hands, piercing a Bible. and into the wood below. ●

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