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Report on a Mail Route from Missouri to the Mouth of the Columbia River

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IN SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES.

MARCH 2, 1846.—Submitted, and ordered to be printed.

MARCH 4, 1846.—Ordered, that 3,000 copies, in addition to the usual number, be printed for the use of the Senate.

Mr. SEMPLE made the following

REPORT :

[To accompany bill S. No. 103]

The Committee on the Post Office and Post Roads, to whom was referred the resolution of the Senate of the 27th December last, have had the same under consideration, and ask leave to report :

That they have given to the subject that mature consideration which its importance demands, and have determined that the immediate establishment of a mail route from the western line of the State of Missouri to the mouth of the Columbia river is a measure required by the growing interests of the government and people of the United States on the shores of the Pacific ocean.

The present American population in Oregon is estimated at about ten thousand, independent of those attached to the Hudson's Bay Company. These people feel great anxiety to have a regular communication through which they can correspond with their friends in the United States. While the federal government possesses the exclusive power to establish post offices and post roads, it is expected that the facilities afforded by this means of communication will be equally extended to every part of the United States. While ten thousand people in Oregon are without a single post office or a post road, it is believed that there is not the same number of people in any other part of the United States, that have not several post offices, and the mails carried to them at short periods, and at an expense falling not far short of that which would be required to carry the mail from the western limits of Missouri to the mouth of the Columbia river. Many of the post routes at present established do not pay the expenses of transportation ; yet this has never been urged as an objection to the establishment of a mail route, if the advantage in the accommodation of the public was thought to be an equivalent to the expense incurred in the transportation. Indeed, but few new post routes pay the expenses ; but the establishment of a mail route has the tendency to increase the business on the route, and in process of time that which was at first an expense becomes a source of profit to the department. Your committee have no means of ascertaining whether the correspondence between the States and the Oregon territory would, at present, pay the expenses of transportation or not ; but supposing it would not, yet there

is every reason to believe that in a few years after the safe and regular establishment of a mail route on the road referred to, the same would more than pay all the expenses, and justify its being carried once a week, or even daily, instead of once a month, as now proposed. Independent, therefore, of any other consideration than that of affording accommodation to the people of Oregon, your committee are of opinion that the mail route should be established.

The trade of the people of the United States in the Pacific constitutes a very strong argument why the government should establish an overland mail for the accommodation of that trade. Every one knows that it is of the utmost importance to merchants to have a speedy and safe communication with their distant factories, and places with which they carry on a trade. At present no merchant of New York or Boston can correspond with a whaling ship in the Pacific, or with his agent at the Sandwich islands, or on the northwest coast of America, except by the slow medium of a ship going round Cape Horn, or the uncertain chances of sending a letter through the isthmus of Panama, over which our government has, as yet, established no control. The time required for a vessel to sail from New York or Boston to the Sandwich islands, or to the mouth of the Columbia river, does not generally fall short of six months; and even this slow communication at times does not offer for some three or four months. The time required for a letter to go from New York or Boston to Independence, in Missouri, is 13 days. It is believed that the mail may be carried from Independence to the mouth of the Columbia, at present, in 40 days, which may be reduced in a short time, as soon as stopping places can be established on the road, to some twenty days, making, at the present time, less than two months from Boston to the mouth of the Columbia, instead of six months, by Cape Horn; and when the time shall be reduced to twenty days from Independence to the mouth of the Columbia, a letter may regularly go from Boston to the Pacific in little over one month. The great advantage of this rapid intercourse would at once be felt by the whole commercial portion of the United States.

A letter from Mr. Gilpin, of Missouri, addressed to General Atchison, of the United States Senate, and by him politely furnished to the committee, will show the importance, in a commercial point of view, of the establishment of the mail route proposed. This letter is appended to and made part of this report.

It is probable, however, that the greatest advantage to this country which a mail route to the Oregon will produce, will be the immediate and ultimate effects which it will have in strengthening the bonds of friendship and union between the people of the east and the west; in affording the means of acquiring information of the Oregon, so as to promote emigration to those regions, and ultimately to control the vast trade of the Pacific ocean. As an agricultural country, when compared with the valley of the Mississippi, it is probable that the Oregon may be considered of minor importance. As a manufacturing country, with its unlimited water power, it will, when the population becomes dense, be of more importance; but both these together are of but little importance to the United States, when compared with the gigantic maritime and commercial power that must, in the nature of things, soon grow up on the shores of the north Pacific, should it be inhabited by the enterprising people of this country. The trade and commerce of six hundred millions of people, about three-fourths of the

whole population of the globe, is nearly as convenient to the mouth of the Columbia as the trade of Europe is to New York. The centre of the valley of the Mississippi is nearly as convenient to the trade of the Pacific as it is to that of the Atlantic. The vast commerce that now exists, and must grow much greater, will nurture and support many hundreds of thousands of seamen, who, while they spread over the Pacific with the commerce of three fourths of the world, will have their homes among the high mountains of Oregon, and their affections placed on the people of the United States. To secure this trade and this great maritime power, the government of the United States should lose no time in taking all the steps necessary to facilitate emigration, and extend the protection and benefits of our laws to that country. The establishment of a mail route to the Pacific will be one of the incipient steps, and, in the opinion of your committee, one of the most important that can at this time be taken.

Your committee cannot, at this time, determine whether the facilities for obtaining supplies on the route would render it practicable for a contract, or to carry the mail in the ordinary way or not. Taking into consideration the possibility of attacks from hostile bands of Indians, and the consequent necessity for a few armed men to accompany the mail, your committee, in draughting the bill which accompanies this report, have left it discretionary with the President, either to have the mail carried by contract, or to cause it to be carried by detachments of mounted men appertaining to the army of the United States.

WASHINGTON, D. C., *January 23, 1846.*

DEAR SIR: It gratifies me much to reply to your inquiries relating to the establishment of a mail between the western border of our State and the settlements formed by our fellow-citizens on the shores of the Pacific. This boon is prayed for by the memorial of the people of Oregon, and by that of their legislative body. It is also recommended by the President in his annual message, and is a measure involving such small expense, yet about to engender results so large and brilliant, that I cherish very ardent hopes of generous and liberal action by the national Congress.

The American population of Oregon nearly reaches 10,000. They have seventeen flour and saw mills; twenty thousand head of cattle; the crop of 1844 and 1845 exhibits 100,000 bushels of surplus wheat; vegetables, and other meats and grains, are produced in parallel abundance; vessels find continual occupation in the traffic of produce and groceries between the Columbia and the Sandwich islands. A half a dozen years ago the Wallamette was occupied by beaver and eagles; it now exhibits an American republic, with a government, agriculture, mills, and commerce. The settlements planted two centuries ago by our Atlantic ancestors, at Plymouth and Jamestown, had not, in a whole generation, reached the pith and sinew of this first location on a new seaboard of another ocean. The causes of this sinewy and solid growth are found in the superlative character and position of the Oregon territory, and in the ripeness of mankind for a new order in commerce, and its adjustment into direct, easy, and natural channels.

Oregon and Japan, upon the Pacific ocean, occupy the same relative positions of command as Old and New England—facing one another on the

Atlantic. The business ground is between the two former upon the Pacific, as between the two latter on the Atlantic. Oregon is the maritime wing of the Mississippi valley upon the Pacific, as New England is on the Atlantic. It is in northern Oregon that the great laboratory of marine construction for our western seaboard is having its foundations laid. In short, if the commerce, navigation, and international traffic now in existence in the north Atlantic, owe their present stirring and prodigious development in any degree to natural causes and elements existing in those regions originally in combination, then do these same natural causes, elements, and material for a similar development exist in the north Pacific in pre-eminent abundance, excellence, and convenience.

But there is already a great American commerce in the Pacific ocean, and most of that in the vicinity of the mouth of the Columbia river. The whaling fleet is estimated to consist of 675 vessels, of 197,187 tons, employing 40,000 men, and valued, in the census of 1840:

| | | | | | | | | |
|----------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---------------------|
| Capital | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 16,429,620 |
| Proceeds | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 19,610,463 |
| Total | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | <u>\$36,040,083</u> |

The fisheries of cod and mackerel employed, in 1845, 91,238 tons. Four hundred and fifty of these whaling vessels are engaged in the fisheries of the Pacific, chiefly on the coasts of Japan, Oregon, and in the seas around the Sandwich islands; to which islands they resort, *because the United States has no domestic port in the Pacific!* Forty-four ships were employed in the China trade, sailing between Canton and New York and Boston, in 1845. These vessels brought home 20,751,562 pounds of tea, and other Asiatic productions about equal in value to the teas.

In addition to these, is a great commerce, employing many ships, to Java, Manilla, Polynesia, Chili, Peru, Colombia, Mexico, California, and Oregon! The mouth of the Columbia is a grand salient point, and the most central and convenient in the whole Pacific ocean for mail communication from the United States with this immense shipping and commerce. It is the best located harbor on the Pacific for a *domestic American harbor*; it is the most accessible, time and distance considered, from the interior; it is the best point wherefrom to communicate onward to the Sandwich islands, and the most central to the present business ground of the Pacific; it is the best point wherefrom to communicate with China, Polynesia, and the East Indies.

The American whaling fleet is at present in almost exclusive occupation of the north Pacific: the owners, who reside in New England, communicate with their vessels round Cape Horn, or not at all. The American people, in spite of the refusal of the government to recognise them, and in defiance of its frowns, have made a wagon road across the continent, and *now occupy* the mouth of the Columbia!

The route for a mail is, then, already prepared, and the necessity of one indispensable and pressing. Is government to do nothing to give order and union to the great interests already in existence, and in contact, upon our Pacific seaboard? Are this mighty commerce, and this brave, agricultural people, to be consigned forever to a melancholy banishment from home? Is government to do more than this, by keeping up a harassing diplomatic

game, to *tantalize* our people in their remote and isolated position?—to sour them by unrelenting neglect, and chaffering on *their value in money*?—debating whether American wisdom had not better suffer British hyenas to gorge country, people, commerce, and all, and stop our republic short at the Rocky mountains?

This route is the best, shortest, and least obstructed, from London itself to Canton; much more so, then, from New York; and only 5,000 or 6,000 miles from Astoria.

The road from Independence has great advantages over any other, because it may be made to embrace a mail to New Mexico; to which place there are an immense and valuable commerce, and many American residents. By this route, too, a more southern pass, as that by the head of the Arkansas, may be used, should the snows preclude the passage by the South pass during the winter.

The transportation of this mail may be effected by contract in the ordinary way, or through the War Department, or by special law, prescribing the mode and means. Three gentlemen, now residents of the Wallamette, formerly mail contractors in the States of Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri, and familiar with the route and country, stated to me that they would undertake a monthly mail for \$10 per mile, going and returning. The Indians beyond the Rocky mountains may be employed safely in this business; and horses are very abundant and fine on the lower Columbia. The average price of a good horse is \$10.

Provision should be made in the same law which establishes this mail, for its early enlargement to a weekly one, and its continuation on to the Sandwich islands, and eventually to China. The time required for the trip, as soon as the line shall be well established, will probably not be more than *forty-five* days, which may soon, by night traveling, be reduced to *twenty*, or even *fifteen*. This route, which connects the Atlantic and Pacific seaboard, and gathers the correspondence and printed matter of the whole interior, branching to Mexico and the settlements along the base of the Rocky mountains, will immediately become immensely important and very lucrative: ample employment for such an one has for some time existed.

Of its importance in a national and military light, an example has recently occurred. It was desired recently to retain on the western coast of Mexico some vessels of war to co-operate with the squadron in the Gulf and the army of General Taylor on the Rio del Norte, in diverting the attention of Mexico and averting war. As no route existed whereby orders could be forwarded, the vessels returned home by Cape Horn. The capture of Monterey, by Commodore Jones, and the continual embarrassment of our fleet in the Pacific, added to the jeopardy in which our mercantile marine would find itself on any rupture of peace, all warn us not to delay the establishment of an efficient overland mail, to be extended forward into the Pacific. Imagine, too, the dearthiness of the Americans in Oregon, who receive but one uncertain mail a year, and are subjected to the charity of the Hudson's Bay express to communicate backwards by the circuitous route of the Saskatchewan and Canada.

This mail will effect greater objects, and with more rapidity, than any measure which Congress can enact or accomplish by direct appropriations, however large in amount. It will attract shipping to the Columbia. If extended to the islands, a dozen vessels will find cargoes to and fro in connexion with the carrying of the mail. It will directly suggest to mankind,

in an easy and agreeable manner, that the channels of oriental trade are to be reversed, and that the time is ripe for the change. Diplomatic functionaries should be obliged to take this route to their stations, and be carried to their destination by ships of war sent for that purpose to the Columbia. All the naval and mercantile marine of the Pacific may, in case of war, be gathered into the Columbia, and protected there. It may readily be armed and equipped for war by guns and supplies transported overland, and rendered as formidable and overpowering a naval force in the Pacific as that of England is in the Atlantic. It is thus that we shall slip away from the supremacy of the British, and crush her, if necessary, in Asia, where her commercial empire is in most danger, and impossible to be adequately fortified against us. The British cannot avail themselves of a steam navy in the Pacific. It is through the ports of Oregon that *we shall turn and upset the elsewhere almost impregnable position of the British empire.*

Here is the population around the great ocean into which we are about to launch from the Oregon strand :

| | | | | | | | |
|----------|------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|--------------------|
| America. | Mexico | - | - | - | - | - | 7,439,000 |
| | Oregon, &c. | - | - | - | - | - | 150,000 |
| | Guatemala | - | - | - | - | - | 1,800,000 |
| | Chili | - | - | - | - | - | 1,500,000 |
| | Bolivia | - | - | - | - | - | 1,716,000 |
| | Peru | - | - | - | - | - | 1,500,000 |
| | Colombia | - | - | - | - | - | 3,187,100 |
| | Total | - | - | - | - | - | <u>17,592,100</u> |
| | China | - | - | - | - | - | 367,821,000 |
| | British India | - | - | - | - | - | 135,301,000 |
| | Burmah, Siam, &c. | - | - | - | - | - | 33,850,000 |
| | Japan | - | - | - | - | - | 41,150,000 |
| | Malays and Polynesians | - | - | - | - | - | 32,800,000 |
| | Arabia and Persia | - | - | - | - | - | 15,000,000 |
| | Africa, &c., | - | - | - | - | - | 7,500,000 |
| | Total | - | - | - | - | - | <u>633,422,000</u> |

Behold 651,014,100 people about to be attacked by that mighty agriculture and commerce which has unbound Europe and filled the Atlantic with a million of craft, and about to engage with us in direct trade across the north Pacific.

The establishment of this mail will familiarize our people with the approach of a new order and direction in trade, the advent of which is close at hand, and the *first step towards which is over and accomplished*, almost before mankind has awakened to its probability or possibility. The opening of the Chinese empire; the independence and civilization of the Sandwich islands; the occupation of the north Pacific by the American whaling fleet; the completion of a wagon road across the continent, and the establishment of the advanced guard of the American nation in permanent position upon the Columbia, are detached events which have all transpired simultaneously, though apparently without any connexion the one with the other, but which, when linked together by this simple connecting line of intelligence,

will be found to be, in *fact* and *full operation*, this new field of commercial enterprise which orators sportively ridicule as Utopian. This should teach us that the deep designs of destiny work steadily their own accomplishment, leaving the blunders and feeble interferences of the shallow and incredulous to evaporate with the harmless wind.

I have mentioned but a few in a thousand of good reasons for the establishment of this mail route, which have suggested themselves to me when standing upon the beach of the Pacific, and traveling upon the road between it and us. Lest this much should weary you to read, I will mention but one or two more.

Here is the American trade for 1844 :

| | Imports. | Exports. |
|---|----------------------|----------------------|
| Total - - - - - | <u>\$108,435,035</u> | <u>\$111,200,046</u> |
| Of this, the following was into the Pacific ocean : | | |
| China - - - - - | \$4,931,255 | \$1,756,941 |
| Dutch East Indies - - - - - | 935,984 | 359,383 |
| British East Indies - - - - - | 882,792 | 675,966 |
| Australia - - - - - | 122 | 29,667 |
| Cape of Good Hope - - - - - | 29,166 | 82,938 |
| Bourbon - - - - - | - | 16,967 |
| Manilla and Philippine islands - - - - - | 724,811 | 222,997 |
| Asia - - - - - | 34,908 | 462,662 |
| Africa - - - - - | 459,237 | 710,244 |
| South seas - - - - - | 41,504 | 349,379 |
| Northwest America - - - - - | - | 2,178 |
| New Grenada - - - - - | 189,616 | 124,846 |
| Chili - - - - - | 750,370 | 1,105,221 |
| Peru - - - - - | 184,424 | 16,807 |
| South America - - - - - | - | 125,938 |
| Total - - - - - | <u>9,164,169</u> | <u>6,083,044</u> |

In this trade the imports exceed the exports just by one half of the latter. Such a trade cannot but be carried on at great loss, and our trade to Asia has steadily declined as the British have bound up the oriental world in their military embrace. It is now gradually confining itself to the tea trade alone, and that to supply the home consumption. It is however clear, that in countries where four hundred millions of people dress almost exclusively in cotton clothing, there must be the great market for raw cotton. British policy has changed her conquered subjects in India from a manufacturing to a cotton-growing people, in order to give her thereby the command of the China trade. Those people now grow cotton, opium, indigo, rice for the China market, and themselves consume the chief fabrics of the British steam mills.

If, then, the Americans aspire to the oriental trade, it cannot be attained by the present channels of commerce. The British do and can crowd us out. But let the Americans bring the valley of the Mississippi into direct trade with China across the north Pacific, then the prize drops to us, and British monopoly and rivalry is turned and pushed from our trail.

Neither are we left to mere speculation to demonstrate the practicability

of an infinite overland trade between the valley of the Mississippi and China. The Russians have solved for us this problem. An immense commercial traffic is carried on at this moment by the Russians from the Baltic to Kiarka, a free port of China, upon the northeastern frontier of the latter.

Kiarka is in $50^{\circ} 21'$ north latitude, and $106^{\circ} 29'$ east longitude. St. Petersburg, on the Baltic, is in $59^{\circ} 56'$ north latitude. The traveled route, between these two termini, is 5,000 miles in an hyperborean climate. Yet the statements show the following exhibit of this flourishing and lucrative trade in 1843:

| | | | | | | |
|---------------------|---|---|---|---|---|--------------|
| Imports from China | - | - | - | - | - | \$12,038,055 |
| Exports from Russia | - | - | - | - | - | 8,685,805 |

Of the imports from China, there appears the article of superfine teas, amounting to \$5,969,350; and other articles, silks, satins, camphor, crapes, crape shawls, porcelain, &c., \$6,068,705.

Of the exports to China, the following are some of the articles, with their value:

| | | | | | | |
|----------------|---|---|---|---|---|-------------|
| Furs | - | - | - | - | - | \$1,460,700 |
| Russia leather | - | - | - | - | - | 173,365 |
| Hides, &c. | - | - | - | - | - | 177,100 |
| Linens | - | - | - | - | - | 149,480 |
| Cottons | - | - | - | - | - | 786,375 |
| Woolens | - | - | - | - | - | 1,034,195 |

An especial value attaches itself to the teas imported by this route, partly because the teas of northern China are superior in quality to those exported by Canton, and partly that the teas retain their strength and flavor when conveyed by land under a cold climate. Other overland lines of commerce, hardly second to this, extend through Siberia, and, by the Caspian, into Thibet, Persia, and other countries in the remote parts of Asia.

The amount of this trade is thus given in aggregate quantities:

| | | | | | | |
|---------|---|---|---|---|---|-------------|
| Imports | - | - | - | - | - | \$6,093,405 |
| Exports | - | - | - | - | - | 3,247,915 |

Now, the open port of Shang-hae, at the mouth of the Yantzi-Kiang, in the very heart of China, is about 32° north latitude; the mouth of the Columbia in $46^{\circ} 19'$; and St. Louis in 37° . The distance between St. Louis and Shang-hae does not exceed 8,000 miles, and is entirely within the most temperate zone of climate, avoiding the equatorial heats. A portage is necessary by this route over the Rocky mountains; for the rest, the Pacific ocean, the Columbia and Missouri rivers, afford a direct navigable channel. What may be the necessary length of this portage, between the Missouri and Columbia, cannot be ascertained in the present state of our geographical knowledge. It will not exceed 400 miles.

Behold, then, the example presented by Russian energy for imitation by American enterprise!

But neither are the Americans themselves without a parallel overland trade, now in vigorous and successful existence. This is between Missouri and the northern portions of Mexico, Chihuahua, New Mexico, Durango, and Zacatecas. This trade, carried on across the great plains in wagons, extends partially even to the city of Mexico, and the ports of Guymas and Mazatlan, upon the Pacific. The distance from Independence to Chihua-

hua is 1,750 miles ; yet wagons arrive at Independence with specie, and return to Chihuahua freighted with goods, during the same summer season. The road, from Independence to the lower Columbia, is as good, and the country as favorable, as that to Chihuahua ; the distance too is much the same.

Moreover, the following list of imports from China into the cities of New York and Boston, in 1845, shows what light but valuable articles that trade embraces :

| | | | | | | |
|--------------------|---|---|---|---|---|--------------------|
| Teas - | - | - | - | - | - | 20,751,562 pounds. |
| Camphor | - | - | - | - | - | 242,480 do |
| Cassia | - | - | - | - | - | 1,020,906 do |
| Sewing silk | - | - | - | - | - | 2,613 do |
| Silks | - | - | - | - | - | 49,252 pieces. |
| Satins | - | - | - | - | - | 2,351 do |
| Silk handkerchiefs | - | - | - | - | - | 51,406 do |
| Crape | - | - | - | - | - | 5,072 do |
| Crape shawls | - | - | - | - | - | 88,529 do |
| Crape scarfs | - | - | - | - | - | 16,870 do |
| Matting | - | - | - | - | - | 28,738 do |
| China ware | - | - | - | - | - | 1,498 boxes. |
| Sweetmeats | - | - | - | - | - | 7,596 do |
| Fire-crackers | - | - | - | - | - | 65,708 do |

And, in addition to these, rhubarb, India ink, vermilion, pearl buttons, split ratans, drugs, curiosities, &c., &c.

From this very partial analysis, we get a hint of what a full and detailed elucidation of the subject would demonstrate. viz : . That the two countries, of all the world, which, by their relative positions, wants, and productions, are in a condition to engage mutually in a traffic infinite in extent, well balanced and infinitely lucrative and advantageous to both, are the Americans and Chinese, by this short and easy overland route. I have already stated that the establishment of a mail line will engraft together the detached sprouts of activity along this route, and cause the whole to germinate.

I pray that Congress may not let the voice of western commerce blow by on the wind, but rather gather its prayers and complaints, and cover its feebleness with substantial legislation, aid, and protection.

Your friend,

W. GILPIN.

To Senator ATCHISON.