

Blue River ferries

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A history of the ferries and ferry companies that operated around Kansas's Blue River, more commonly known as the Big Blue.

Creator: Root, George Allen, 1867-1949

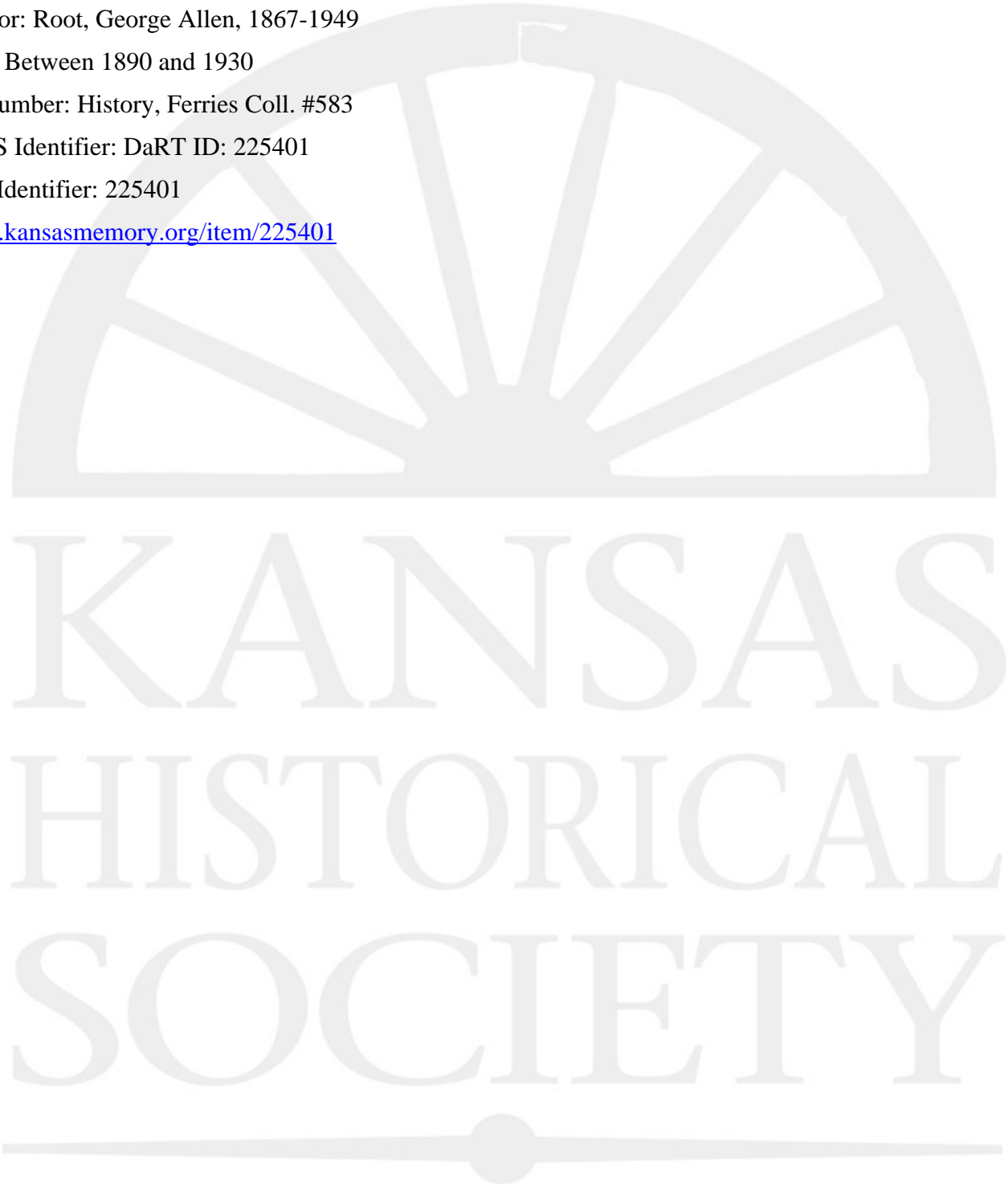
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their contents were safely ferried over during the afternoon." . . .
The next day "the business of ferrying was resumed at an early hour, and continued with vigor until nine o'clock at night, all the wagons, oxen, and horses were safely landed on the western bank of the river, where our corral⁽⁷⁰⁾ was formed."

70. Bryant, What I Saw in California, pp. 62-65.

The Independence crossing was also known as the "lower crossing" and Marshall did a flourishing business here up to about 1853.⁽⁷¹⁾

70. F. G. Adams, in Marshall County News, Marysville, Feb. 22, 1873. Andreas, History of Kansas, p. 914.

In 1849 Lieut. Howard Stansbury, surveying the route from Fort Leavenworth to Great Salt Lake, located a more practicable crossing on the Blue, about six miles above the Independence crossing. The Government opened a road to this place in 1850, and by 1851 and 1852, this upper road and crossing became the favorite one with the traveling public. Here early in 1851 Marshall established his second ferry, built a blacksmith shop, erected a store building and established a store, carrying on a thriving business up to 1853, travel up to this time being divided between his two ferries. The ferry at this new location was located about 100 yards below where a bridge later spanned the river, while his trading houses were about the same distance above the bridge location. Mr. John G. Ellenbecker of Marysville, in a letter to the author, says the ferry "was about 30 rods above the present old bridge and 60 rods above the ford in S. 29, T. 2, R. 7 E." Marshall's store was as convenient for the Otoes and Pawnees as it was for emigrants to the west, and many ~~wixix~~ a dollar of the red men were spent at Marshall's for ammunition, whiskey, red flannel, ~~xxx~~ bright colored calicoes, and other

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essentials to Indian life. Marshall spent his winters at his home in Missouri, coming out to the Blue in early spring and operating his ferries and trading business during the period of California emigration. Only an eye witness can have any idea of the magnitude of the travel at this time, or any conception of the stirring scenes and incidents transpiring in the vicinity of Marshall's during those eventful years. A traveler starting out from St. Joseph in the spring of 1852 has said that there were thousands of people there awaiting their turn in crossing. The throng was so great that Marshall would only cross wagons and people, compelling owners to swim their stock or ford the river. His ferry boat accommodated three wagons at a time, for which, ~~was~~ up to 1852 he charged \$5 a wagon, his rate this year being \$3 each. Fording stock was something of a risk at times. Cholera had broken out along the road at this time, probably having been brought by emigrants from ^{the} Missouri river boats. A number of victims of this scourge had been buried this spring (71) in the vicinity of Marshall's.

71. Marshall County News, Marysville, Feb. 22, 1873. Andreas, History of Kansas, pp. 917, 918.

A California emigrant who reached Marshall's in mid-May, 1852, wrote:

Upon the banks of this river is a post office, carried on, I believe, by private enterprise. There is also a store, groceries, and many articles whereby a person can refit if he is out of such articles that's necessary for the journey. The Big Blue river is quite a stream of water and when it is high has to be ferried. At the time of our crossing the water had fallen so as to be fordable. Although a cold and wet morning the boys took to water like young ducks. The ferry charges are \$3 per wagon for crossing. At this point the traveler begins to learn the reality of high prices, especially if he notices the diminution in the weight of his pocketbook from time to time as he has to use it. There are many new made graves upon the banks of this river, perhaps fifteen. We overtook a large train at the ferry. They have near 100 passengers and have lost (we have been informed) ten or fifteen. Put in wood and water and pushed out into the open prairie, and near good grass. . . ." (72)

72. Copy of manuscript of John H. Clark, in possession of author.

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Marshall was sole ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ operator and owner of his ferry up to 1854, when the Kansas-Nebraska bill was signed. The next year he took a partner, one Albert G. Woodward, and applied to the territorial legislature for a charter, which was granted. This act authorized them to establish and maintain a ferry across the Big Blue at the crossing of the great military road leading from Fort Leavenworth to Forts Kearney and Laramie, and also a ferry at the crossing of the Independence and California road across the Blue, with special privileges from the south line of the Oto Indian reservation to a point one mile below the crossing of the Independence road.
(73)

73. General Statutes. Kansas, 1855. p. 777.

Marshall's ferry charter gave him a monopoly on the business along this most widely traveled route. In 1856 he was operating both ferries, and his license granted by county commissioners sitting at Palermo on June 2, this year, prescribed the following schedule of rates for his two ferries:

Loaded wagon and team, \$3; empty wagon and team, \$1.50; carriage and two horses, \$2.~~00~~ Loose stock, per head, 25 cents.

These rates were materially reduced this year by the commissioners, the new schedule being:

Crossing a loaded wagon, \$1.50; man and horse, 50 cents; footman, 25 cents; all stock at 25 cents per head. (74)

74. Andreas, History of Kansas, p. 918.

In 1859 Marshall paid a tax of 25 for his ferry license, the commissioners on March 22 establishing the following rates:

Four horse team and wagon, \$1; two horse team and wagon, 50 cents; man and horse, 15 cents; footman, 5 cents.

The above figures were again reduced by the commissioners at a meet-



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ing held June 4, following:

Two horse wagon, 50 cents; four horse wagon, 75 cents; six horse wagon, \$1; loose cattle, per head, 10 cents; hogs and sheep, 5 cents; per head; footman, 5 cents; man and horse, 30 cents.

On January 21, 1860, a new schedule affecting all ferries operating in the county went into effect and established the following as the legal rates:

One yoke of cattle and wagon, \$1; two yokes of cattle and wagon, \$1.20; three yokes of cattle and wagon, \$1.65; four yokes of cattle and wagon, \$2; five yokes of cattle and wagon, \$2.25; six yokes of cattle and wagon, ~~XXXXX~~ \$2.50; two horses and wagon, \$1; four horses and wagon, \$1.50; six horses and wagon, \$2.50; loose animals, per head 12 1/2 cents; horse and rider, 25 cents; horse and buggy, 50 cents; freight, per cwt., 3 cents.

By 1862 there must have been a demand for lower ferry charges, for at the January meeting of the county commissioners rates were again revised, this time downwards, and as follows:

For United States mail coach, 40 cents; two yoke of cattle and wagon, 75 cents; four yoke of cattle and wagon, \$1.25; six yoke of cattle and wagon, \$1.50; two horses and wagon, 50 cents; four horses and wagon, 75 cents; loose cattle, per head, 5 cents; horse and rider, 10 cents; footman, 5 cents.

Marshall was connected with the ferry business until about 1858, when he joined ~~him~~ a party of gold seekers and set out for the Pike's Peak region, leaving his brother-in-law, Henry D. Williams, in charge of his trading house and ferry. After the Leavenworth and Pike's Peak Express route was moved north from the Kaw valley to the old Oregon-California trail which ran through Marysville, Mr. Williams was made a division superintendent of the line. Williams was a native of Missouri, and aged 20 years

75. Colorado Magazine, v. 8, p.232.

in 1860.

Marshall laid out the town of Marysville in 1855, and the Territorial legislature that year passed an act incorporating the Marysville Town Company. Franklin G. Adams, a resident of Marshall county in the early 1870s



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gives this description of early Marysville and Marshall's ferry:

During the Pike's Peak rush in 1859, Marysville was a lively place. Early in the spring the ferry was thronged with travelers to the gold regions. Later these travelers began to return. Thousands started back, without ever reaching the mountains. Supplies they had bought to take along with them were sold and almost given away at Marysville and elsewhere. At the ferry this spring a tragedy occurred. Several hundred returning Pike's Peakers had gathered on the west side of the river. "Incensed at everybody who had profited by what had proven their misfortune, they charged that General Marshall, the owner of the ferry had been one of the leading instruments in circulating the fabulous accounts of the riches of the Colorado mines. He had, they said, done it in order to make traffic at his ferry and at his town. They therefore resolved that, as he had made money enough out of them as they went west, they had a moral right to free ferriage in returning. A part of them took possession of the boat, arresting and confining the ferryman. Word came of the fact to Henry Williams, brother-in-law of Marshall, in whose control the ferry had been left. Hastening to the boat, he demanded that it should be given up. His demand being resisted, he deliberately shot and killed two of the usurpers, when the others quickly abandoned the boat. Lawful ferriage was thereafter paid. Williams was indicted for the killing, but was not convicted. (76)

76. Marshall County News, Marysville, March 1, 1873.

Marshall, in a letter to J. S. Magill, of Marysville, written during the summer of 1895, about four months before his death, gives the following account of the establishment of his trading house and ferry:

In the early settlement of Kansas, it is to be remembered, I established a trading post at the government crossing of the Big Blue river on the road leading to the great west, over which went all the travel starting from Fort Leavenworth and all other points below old Fort Kearney on the Missouri river to new Fort Kearney, Fort Hiram and all the Indian country, Utah, Oregon, Washington and the great emigration to California, which meant at least five thousand to ten thousand people a day from April to July. Over this route went the great pony express enterprise to California, which the country now knows led to the building of the Union Pacific Railroad. Most of the time the river could be forded, but often for six weeks at a time it could not be crossed except by means of the ferry. This was one of the greatest thoroughfares which the country has ever known.

I applied to the Indian agent for the privilege of establishing a ferry and trading post at the point where Marysville now stands. It was in the Indian country, and there was no particular agent having jurisdiction over this part of the Indian lands. He informed me that it was the battleground of the different ~~xx~~ tribes when at war with each other, hence a dangerous place for the establishment of a trading post, as I proposed.

I then applied to Major Ogden, the Quartermaster at Fort Leavenworth, for a contract with the government to put in boats, build ware- and store-houses and to supply troops returning from the western forts in the winter



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time, and he protested that on account of its dangerous proximity to the ground described such an establishment might not last long without military protection. I expressed myself, however, as willing to arrange for my own protection, to which he afterwards gave his consent. On securing his permission, I proceeded at once, bought a piece of artillery, mounted it, loaded my wagons and was on my way to the Big Blue crossing at the point referred to within twenty-four hours after my contract with the government. This arrangement was universally concurred in by the officers at Fort Leavenworth. Colonel Sumner, who then commanded the Second Dragoons and who afterwards commanded a division in the late war, and Lieutenant Stuart, who was his quartermaster on expeditions into the Indian country in the spring and summer and afterwards known as the rebel General Stuart, of the Black Horse cavalry, on returning late in the fall crossed at this point, always required supplies for his soldiers and horses, knew of the facts in connection with my enterprise, and I had their hearty co-operation. . . . In 1851 the Big Blue river rose to the top of its banks, and perhaps this fact had something to do with the facility with which I secured permission from the government officers to carry out my plans for establishing a ferry, etc. (77)

77. Extracts from letter of Francis J. Marshall to J. S. Magill, secretary of Marshall county Old Settlers Pioneer Association, dated Denver, July 22, 1895, and published in Porter's History of Marshall County, Kansas, pp. 65, 66.

Mrs. Porter, in her history gives additional history of Marshall:

F. J. Marshall established a ferry at that point and for a time the place was known as Marshall's ferry. Business thrived and Marshall brought his wife, Mary Williams Marshall, to live here and named the place Marysville in her honor. It will be recalled that in his letter to Judge Magill, Marshall says "There were five to ten thousand people at this point daily." A careful research shows that about seventy-five thousand people traversed this county and crossed the Blue river either at the lower crossing or at the crossing here, from 1846 to 1856. So it is safe to say Marysville has never had an equal number of inhabitants since that time.

Horace Greeley mentions an incident that occurred at this ferry in 1859. Writing ~~to~~ from Manhattan under date of May 24, he said:

. . . . Let me close with an incident which is currently reported throughout this region as having recently taken place at a crossing of the Big Blue, known as Marysville (of course not the Marysville of Bull creek), some sixty miles north of this place.

A party of disheartened gold seekers, it is said, were returning from the plains, and came to this ferry, which they insisted on crossing without payment, saying ~~that~~ they had no money. The ferryman refused to take them over until paid--(another account says he asked them an exorbitant price)--when they attempted to take the boat and put themselves across--whereupon ~~they~~ he drew his revolver, they drawing almost at the same ~~time~~ instant. He was, of course, riddled with balls, and fell dead, but not until he had either killed or severely wounded five of his assailants. (78)

78. Greeley. An Overland Journey, p. 59.

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Marysville was the most important point on the old Oregon-California road in Kansas after leaving the Missouri river. It was the starting point as well as the terminus of a number of roads. The legislature of 1855 established the first territorial road to this place, which started from a point opposite St. Joseph, Mo., to the town of Richmond, on the Great Nemaha, thence to the town of Woodson on the Vermillion, and on to Marysville. Another ran from Marysville to Council Grove. The military road

79. General Statutes, Kansas, 1855, p. 957.

80. Laws, Kansas, 1857, p. 173.

from Fort Leavenworth to Fort Laramie, as far as Marysville, and passing through the counties of Leavenworth, Atchison, Brown, Nemaha, and Marshall counties was declared a territorial road. Another ran from Marysville by

81. Ibid., 174.

~~XXXXX~~the way of Richmond or the geographical center of Nemaha county, thence to Claytonville on Secs. 15 and 22, T. 3, R. 17, in Brown county, thence to Troy, Wathena, and Roseport, opposite St. Joseph. In 1860 a

82. Ibid., p. 179.

road was laid out from Elwood to Marysville by way of Wathena; another

83. Ibid., 1859, p. 584.

started from the Blue river, running west on the First Standard Parallel to the Republican river; another, running from Elwood, up Peter's creek, by way of Troy, Lewis' crossing of Wolf river, Highland, Hiawatha, Seneca

84. Ibid., p. ~~584~~ p. 585.

and Marysville was declared a territorial road; another, established in

85. Ibid., p. 593.

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1861, ran from Marysville to New Hope, via Washington; ⁽⁸⁶⁾ another ran from ~~Marysville~~

86. Ibid., 1861, p. 248.

Atchison, via Kennekuk and Granada to Seneca, thence by one branch to Marysville, and, by another branch via Ash Point, Guittard and Oketo, to ⁽⁸⁷⁾ the Nebraska line; another ran from Marysville, by way of St. George to

87. Ibid., p. 248.

⁽⁸⁸⁾ Port Leavenworth ⁽⁸⁹⁾
Wabaunsee; another ran from Marysville, by way of Holton and Nottingham;

88. Ibid., p. 248.

89. Ibid., p. 247.

Another ran from Marysville via Washington, thence by a westerly course up ⁽⁹⁰⁾ Mill creek to some practicable point on the Republican river; the legisla-

90. Ibid., 1865, p. 243.

ture of 1863 passed an act declaring the road leading from Seneca, on the township line west to S. 36, T. 1, R. 7 E., thence west by north to Marysville, to intersect the incorporated limits of Marysville on the east of Broadway Street in that town, thence west to the most suitable point for a bridge across the Blue river, thence to follow the old military road to S. 2, T. 2, R. 5 E., in Washington county, thence to follow the old military road to the north line of the state of Kansas be made a state ⁽⁹¹⁾ road.

91. Ibid., 1863, p. 86.

The last ferry location on the Big Blue in Kansas, was at Oketo, close to the Otoe Indian reservation, this being about ten miles above Marysville by the river and about two miles less by land. The legislature

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of 1859 passed an act granting to Henry W. Poor, V. C. Poor and Robert M. Smith the right to keep a ferry at this town for a period of ten years, having exclusive rights from the north line of S. 14, T. 1, R. 7, to the south line of S. 26, T. 1, R. 7, including three miles up and down the river. Ferriage rates were to be fixed by the county. This act was approved by Gov. S. Medary February 10, 1859, and became effective from and after its passage.
(92)

92. Private Laws, Kansas, 1859, p. 114.

The following is the earliest mention of this ferry we have located:

A company, known as Poor, Whitehead and others, have built a ferryboat and laid out a town some ten miles above here, on the Blue, and have located a road from that point east, intersecting the military road at Ash Point, and are directing emigrants by their ferry, telling them it is 25 to 30 miles nearer than by the old road. Moses Blanchett, one of the principal men of Ash Point was directing right straight on the old road, which conflicted with the interest of those living upon the new road.

Last Wednesday a body of armed men arrived at Ash Point from the new road, and informed Blanchett that he must either quit working on the road or they would clean him out; and commenced pulling coats and making other fighting demonstrations. Blanchett then procured a shot gun and returned to the store where the mob was collected, when he was informed by them must quit working for the old road or leave the country. Blanchett told them he should do as he pleased, when Wilson, with his coat off, approached him, and Blanchett told him to keep off, or he would shoot him. "Shoot and be damned," was the reply, and Blanchett discharged the gun at him, the shot entering his breast and killing him instantly. Blanchett then fled and was pursued the next day by a large party who intended to hang him on the first tree if overtaken.(93)

93. Marysville Platform, copied in Kansas State Record, Topeka, June 2, 1860.

Frank A. Root, in his "Overland State to California" mentions this ferry. He says that the Holladay stages which previously had run via Guittard's station through Marysville, were in the fall of 1862 run over a "cut-off" Holladay had built from Guittard's, via Oketo. This road was known as the "Oketo cut-off", and was laid out by Holladay to spite Marysville. About the middle of October, 1862, stages began running over the "cut-off" in spite of anything Marysville people could do about it. Hol-



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laday evidently had first gotten permission from the Post Office Department to change the stage route to the new road on which he and other interested parties had expended a lot of money. He had a suitable ferry boat built for crossing the river during periods of high water; and had put in bridges and culverts over small streams and ravines. Naturally Marysville was indignant at the change. The town had been getting mail three times a week by stage. For a month afterwards they were almost without service. Then a man was hired to bring it from Guittard's by horseback three times a week. A petition to the Post Office Department asking for a daily service by coach brought a reply cutting the service to a semi-weekly delivery by horseback. A second petition was sent, when service was cut down to once a month. A third petition was forwarded after which service was discontinued. For some time after that mail was forwarded by oxteam and freight train from Guittard's to its destination. Finally Marysville hired a man to carry it regularly between the two points. Missouri river papers from St. Joseph, Leavenworth and Kansas City were often a month old when received at Marysville. Marysville, however, got even for this injustice that had been done to her. During a flood in the Blue the ferryboat at Oketo was cut loose during the night and floated away, causing considerable annoyance and delay in the operation of the stage line. Later, parties unknown during the night dug a ditch across the cut-off road, and tore up a stone ~~mixxxx~~ crossing in a bad slough. That night the west bound stage came along, and the driver not seeing the ditch in the dark, drove into it, the severe jolting that ensued throwing him off the seat and to the ground. A general of the United States army was a passenger at the time and received a good shaking up. He asked the cause of this sudden stop and the driver explained it was probably on account of the ill feeling of Marysville for Holladay. The general at once wrote to the commanding officer at Fort Leavenworth for troops to

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protect the overland mail line and stage company's property. A few days later a detachment of the Third Wisconsin cavalry was sent out, making their headquarters at Marysville, after which time further trouble ceased. The cut-off was abandoned after about four and one-half month's use and the stages again ^{ran} ~~EN~~ through Marysville on March 4, 1863. ()

Root and Connelley, Overland Stage to California, pp. 200, 519-523.

Mr. John G. Ellenbecker, of Marysville, furnishes the following regarding the Oketo ferry:

The Oketo cut-off was laid out in 1861 and 1862 by Ben Holladay, and his agents, no doubt, put in a ferry at old Oketo, one-half a mile south of the present Oketo, in 1860 or 1861, and ~~these~~ provisions were made to cross the stages over the Big Blue at that place especially during high water. There was, however, a good ford there. This point was located in S. ___, T. 1, R. 7 E. Since Whitehead was in the employ of Holladay, no doubt the ferry company you speak of--Poor, Whitehead & Co., were the employees of Holladay. That Poor was Val Poor who came to the Oketo country in 1857. So no doubt the first ferry at Oketo was started by ~~1862~~ October, 1862, when Holladay's coaches began to travel the Oketo cut-off.

The best living witness I could find at Oketo lately was Oscar DeLair. He said he came to Oketo in 1866; thought the ferry was then running and ran till the summer of 1867.
