

MULLAN CHRONICLES

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Gustavus Sohon—artist and trailblazer

Artists of the Old West

By John C. Ewers
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Although he was only a private, this man was to play a significant role in the exploration of the Northwest. Born in Tilset, Germany, December 10, 1825, Sohon had received a good education in his native land when, at the age of seventeen, he migrated to the United States to avoid compulsory service in the Prussian Army, which was distasteful to him. But, after a decade of residence in Brooklyn as a bookbinder – and a maker of wood carvings – he volunteered for service in the army. Sohon enlisted in July

1852, and a few days later his Company K, Fourth Infantry, was ordered to board the steamship *Golden West* for service on the Pacific Coast.

When Saxton's little force reached Fort Owen, the trading post for the Flathead Indians in the Bitterroot Valley, in late August 1853, Sohon was twenty-seven years of age. A gifted linguist, who spoke German, French and English fluently, possessed of a keen, inquisitive mind, a marked talent for drawing, and a knack for making friends, Sohon soon made himself invaluable to the survey.

By the time Governor Stevens reached the Bitterroot Valley, after

crossing the Rockies by way of Cadotte's Pass, in late September, he was convinced that his most critical problem was finding the most practical and economical route for a railroad over the Rocky and Bitterroot ranges. The only mathematical data and maps available for this area were those compiled by Lewis and Clark in their hasty travels. He needed much more detailed scientific information. So he decided to leave a small party in the Bitterroot Valley through the winter to take precise meteorological observations and to explore and survey the intermountain region, with special

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Mullan Day 2004 once again brings enlightenment to ardent Mullanites

Mullan Day 2004 was held at DeBorgia Saturday, May 8. Almost thirty ardent Mullanites were in attendance. Several new persons made the trip to attend and were rewarded by two very interesting presenters and discussions.

Jim Stravens, chairman of the Kootenai County Historical Commission, showed the work he has done in mapping the Mullan Road in Idaho and points west. He has donated several of his maps to the museum.

A year ago Professor J William Youngs of Eastern Washington University, Cheney, came over to Superior with several students and was pleased to go

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*Crossing the Bitterroot Mts Nov. 20th 1855.
18 Incl. snow*

*Sohon. Crossing the
Bitterroot Mountains.
November 20, 1855.
Pen and ink.
Smithsonian Institution*

Sohon began his service with Lieutenant

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emphasis upon the examination of the entrances to the mountain passes.

Stevens ordered Lieutenant John Mullan to take charge of these critical investigations, and he assigned Private Sohon and fourteen other men to Mullan's command. They proceeded to erect four log huts some ten miles south of Fort Owen on the Bitterroot River. Named Cantonment Stevens, this little settlement served as a weather station and winter quarters for Mullan's explorations.

With remarkable rapidity Sohon learned to speak the Salishan languages of the nearby Flathead and Pend d'Oreille Indians, both of which sounded strange to American ears. Sergeant Ordway, of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, had observed when that party met the Flatheads forty-eight years earlier: "They have the most curious language of any we have seen before. They talk as though they lisped or have a burr on their tongue. We suppose that they are the Welsh Indians if there is any such from the language." Sohon became Mullan's interpreter and aided him in obtaining from those Indians valuable information on the trails and general geography of the region. He also accompanied explorations of the intermountain region southward as far as Fort Hall on the Snake River and northward to the Kootenay River. They crossed the Continental Divide six times and measured the snowfall in the various mountain passes. Sohon also executed landscape sketches depicting the country traversed, its landmarks, Cantonment Stevens, and the party on the march. Some of these drawings were reproduced as colored lithographs in the published report of the survey.

Sohon quickly made friends with members of the flathead tribe who lived

near Cantonment Stevens. This small tribe, numbering about three hundred persons, had had a peculiar attraction for all white men who had come to know them since Lewis and Clark first encountered them on their way West in 1805. Fur traders, missionaries, and explorers were unanimous in their praise of the courage and morality of these Indians, and their constant friendship for the whites. In and near their Bitterroot Valley homeland they hunted deer, elk, bear, beaver and wild fowl, fished in the mountains streams, and gathered edible roots and berries in season. But they also made semi-annual excursions over the Rockies to hunt buffalo in the country of their powerful and aggressive enemies, the Blackfeet. In numerous battles and skirmishes with the Blackfeet the Flatheads lost many warriors. Yet they stoutly insisted upon their right to hunt on the buffalo plains.

Early in the nineteenth century some



Iroquois Indians, who had followed the westward expanding fur trade as canoemen and trappers settled among the friendly Flatheads. In their original homeland in the St. Lawrence Valley these Iroquois had been converted to Christianity; they introduced among the Flatheads some of the concepts and simple rituals they had learned from the Catholic fathers, such as the offering of daily prayers,

Sohon Pass name change update

There have been some adverse comments in response to the proposal to return the name of St. Regis Pass to the name put to it by Mullan in 1859, Sohon Pass. Dr. Paul McDonald submitted a proposal to the national board of names in 2003.

We are asking you to write letters of support to: Judy Stang, Mineral County Commissioner, P.O. Box 550, Superior, MT 59872. Mention that the names in no way dishonors St. Regis DeBorgia as those names are used in several places particularly in Mineral County while Gustavous Sohon, who was instrumental in the original road building effort has nothing to honor him. Dr. McDonald notes in his proposal that the indigenous tribes had no name for the pass and it was not named by Fr. DeSmet. He named waterways but not physical land features.

Chuck Mead is considering an open meeting with the commissioners to show support for the return to the original name for the pass.

We need all of your support so please send a letter to the commissioners and a copy of it to the museum for our files. **MC**

John Mullan as interpreter to the Indians



and the observance of Sunday as a day of rest. They urged the Flatheads to join them in seeking missionaries who would bring them the blessings of a Christian life. Repeated deputations of Iroquois and Flatheads to distant St. Louis in quest of "black Robes" culminated in 1841 with the founding by Father Pierre Jean DeSmet of the first Catholic mission in

Mullan Day 2004 (continued from Page One)

through our museum's extensive collection regarding all aspects of the Mullan Road.

"Bill" Youngs gave his presentation on what he has put together for a project in Teaching American History with the focus for K-12 teachers this year on "Roads, Trails and Journeys."

Our dedicated president, Chuck Mead, was able to take several people to portions of the original road. Ardent Mullanite Glenn Koepke met Bill Youngs at Lookout Pass and took him to East Portal where they examined the area of the old railroad and its history as related to the pass.

Our meeting next year will be Saturday, May 14, 2005 at a place to be selected. If anyone would like to host it in their area, please let us know.

the Northwest, Saint Mary's, among the Flathead in the Bitterroot Valley.

The primitive Flatheads eagerly presented themselves for baptism in the new faith. Their warriors looked upon baptism and the wearing of crosses as potent war medicines which would protect them and bring them success in their frequent battles with the dread Blackfeet. But when Father DeSmet tried to convince them that warfare was evil, that they should abandon their hazardous buffalo-hunting excursions to the plains, and that they should be content to remain in their own valley, raise crops and livestock, and become a farming people, these Indian warriors and hunters were not impressed. When the missionaries also insisted that they give up gambling (which they dearly loved), abandon polygamy, and the enforcement of law and morality by flogging the bare backs of offenders, they simply refused to do so. The missionaries were surprised to find that these friendly Indians, whom they thought would be so amenable to civilization, resisted all economic and social practices which were at odds with their own cultural experiences. The priests failed to recognize that nothing was more dear to the flatheads than their independence. These Indians insisted upon their right to live their own lives. When they prayed to the white man's God they generally asked "to live a long life, to kill plenty of animals and enemies, and to steal the greatest number of horses possible," as Father Mengarini, one of the priests, acknowledge.

During the spring and early summer of 1854, Gustavus Sohon executed a series of pencil portraits of the Flathead chiefs. Even in their visored caps and cloth shirts, there were handsome, stalwart Indians. Figuratively speaking, none of

them wore the white man's collar. Sohon's portraits provide a unique record of the appearance of these remarkable Indian leaders, who were some of the first converts to Christianity in the northern Rockies.

During the same period Sohon sketched the only known likenesses of the two most prominent Iroquois still living among the Flatheads. Pierre Gaucher (also known as Iroquois Peter), and Aeneas (a Flathead corruption of the name Ignace) had played historic roles in the introduction of Christian missions among the tribes of the Northwest. In 1839, they had comprised the deputation to St. Louis which had secured the first priests for the Flatheads. In 1840, Aeneas had guided Father DeSmet on the first of his many journeys across the Rockies, while Pierre went ahead alone to break the news of their coming to the Flatheads. Aeneas was a restless wanderer whose knowledge of the Rocky Mountain region was very useful to Lieutenant Mullan. Pierre, after the missionaries brought seeds and cattle, became the best farmer in the Bitterroot Valley. Yet his success in growing wheat, oats and potatoes, and raising livestock never persuaded the flathead buffalo hunter to follow his example.

The spring Sohon also drew portraits of the principal chiefs of the Upper Pend d'Oreilles, allies and northern neighbors of the Flatheads in the beautiful Flathead Lake-Kootenay River region. Hardly more numerous than the Flatheads, this tribe had also welcomed Christian missionaries, but continued to hunt buffalo in the country of the hostile Blackfeet. Outstanding among them was No Horses, baptized Alexander, who had been head of his tribe for twenty years. Although Sohon's portrait shows him wearing a cross on his chest, Alexander

Gov. Isaac Stevens was so impressed by

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was a proud war leader and a stern disciplinarian who did not hesitate to use his whip on unruly young men of his tribe.

In the fall of 1854, after a year of exploratory work in the mountain valleys, Lieutenant Mullan led his little party westward to rejoin Governor Stevens at Fort Dalles. The governor was so favorably impressed by Sohon's work that he arranged for his transfer to detached duty with him. Before Stevens set out on a march to obtain additional field data for his railway survey and to make the first treaties for the United States with the northwestern tribes, he paid tribute to Private Sohon as "a very intelligent, faithful and appreciative man who ... had shown great taste as an artist, and ability to learn the Indian language, as well as facility in intercourse with the Indians." Governor Stevens' son, Hazard, who accompanied this expedition, wrote of Sohon as "the artist, barometer carrier, and observer ... an intelligent German, a clever sketcher, and competent to take instrumental observations."

In late May 1855, on a tributary of the Walla Walla River, Sohon was present at one of the largest gatherings of Indians in the history of the Northwest. During it Governor Stevens negotiated treaties with the Walla Walla, Cayuse, Umatilla, Yakima and Nez Perce tribes of the Columbia Valley in which they ceded to the United States an area larger than the entire state of New York. Sohon made pencil sketches of the mounted parade of some 2,500 Nez Perce arriving at the council ground, the feast given the Indians by the Commissioners, a general view of the council in session, and the exciting scalp dance by Nez Perce braves on the day after the treaty was signed. He also drew

portraits of the chiefs who signed the treaty, and sketched a group a young Nez Perce, who had been taught to write by Presbyterian missionaries, as they recorded the proceedings in their own language.

In mid-July, Governor Stevens negotiated the first treaty with the Flathead, Upper Pend d'Ouille and Kutenai tribes at a council ground northwest of present-day Missoula, Montana. Sohon's panoramic view of this council shows why the Indians still refer to this site as "where the trees have no lower limbs." Sohon also served here as one of the official interpreters; the negotiation resulted in the cession of 25,000 square miles of Indian land.

The Stevens party then continued eastward over the Rockies. After reaching the plains Sohon sat down and painstakingly drew the first panoramic view of the lofty main chain of the Rocky Mountains in present Montana, extending from Chief Mountain, near the Canadian border, southward as the eye could see. Redrawn by John Mix Stanley for publication as a colored lithograph in the official reports of the railroad surveys, this is a magnificent view of the "shining mountains," Father eastward Sohon made the earliest known drawings of the Great Falls of the Missouri, the passage of which had been so arduous for the westward-bound Lewis and Clark exploration.

Sohon participated in the council on the Missouri River at the mouth of the Judith in October 1855, when Governor Stevens negotiated the first treaty with the warlike Blackfoot tribes and the Gros Ventres. He interpreted for the Flathead and Pend d'Ouille chiefs who eloquently argued their traditional right to hunt buffalo on that northwestern portion of



the Great Plains which Stevens marked on his map at the exclusive domain of the Blackfoot tribes. He drew the only known view of that historic council and a fine series of portraits of the principal Blackfoot and Gros Ventre chiefs, including the Piegan head chief, Lame Bull, the first signer of the treaty.

When a mounted courier brought word to Stevens that the tribes with whom he had treated recently on the Walla Walla had broken out in open warfare, he purchased arms and ammunition for his party at Fort Benton and pushed on westward, over the Rockies, the Bitterroots, and the Coeur d'Alenes, and through the country of the hostiles, reaching Fort Dalles by the end of the year. Sohon sketched the pack train crossing the snowcovered Bitterroots on this long forced march.

Private Sohon spent the remainder of his enlistment – until July 2, 1857 – working over his field sketches and preparing maps and meteorological data. During his final months of military service

Sohon that he had Sohon assigned to him



he helped to prepare the first reasonably accurate map of the Western United States in the Topographical Engineers' office at Benicia, California.

By the spring of 1858, Sohon was back in the Northwest working as a civilian "guide and interpreter" for his former commanding officer, who had been placed in charge of constructing the first wagon road over the Northern Rockies, from Fort Benton on the Missouri

to Fort Walla Walla on the Columbia. Sohon's title is no true indication of his contribution to the success of this difficult enterprise. Not only did he negotiate with the Indians through whose country the road was to pass, but he led the advance party that marked out the route through the wilderness, and over mountain passes. He guided the first wagon train in a two-months' trip over the new road.

For two more years Sohon worked with Mullan making improvements and short cuts in the wagon road. A few sketches drawn by Sohon during this period provide an idea of the rugged country through which the road passed and the difficulties in its construction. When completed, after more than four years of work, it was 624 miles long and from 25 to 30 feet wide. It could be traveled by wagons in 57 days, by pack trains in 35. Popularly known as the Mullan Road, it served as a military wagon road and as a highway for travelers and settlers and for the transport of freight to the Northwest until the completion of the railroads across the northern Plains and Rockies to decades later.

At the close of the 1862 field season, Sohon accompanied Lieutenant Mullan to Washington (D.C.) to help in preparing the text, maps and illustrations for the official *Report on the Construction of a Military Road from Fort Walla to Fort Benton* (published in 1863). It contained ten colored lithographic reproductions of original drawings by Gustavus Sohon. Two maps in this report give the name *Sohon Pass* to the crossing of the Coeur d'Alene Mountains through which Sohon had literally blazed the trail for the mountain road.

Sohon never returned to the scene of his nine years of activity in the Northwest. For a brief period in the middle 1860 he

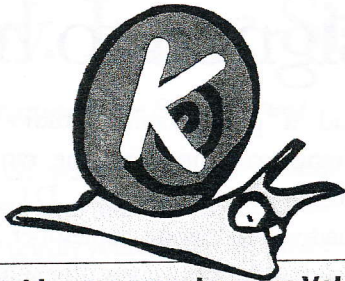
had a photographic studio in San Francisco. Thereafter, he ran a shoe business in Washington, D.C., and he died in that city on September 3, 1903.

It is doubtful if any other nineteenth-century artist contributed in so many ways to the development of the West, or possessed a more intimate knowledge of the Indians or the landscape he pictured. It may have been that Private Sohon's artistic background had nothing to do with his assignment to duty with the northern railway survey in the year 1853, but it was a fortunate circumstance for the pictorial history of the American West. Sohon extended the pictorial record geographically westward from the mouth of the Marias, across the Rockies and Bitterroots to the valley of the Columbia with the same regard for accuracy in drawing that Karl Bodmer had shown on the Upper Missouri two decades earlier.

More than one hundred of Sohon's pencil or pen-and-ink drawings executed in the Northwest from 1853 through 1862 are preserved in various collections. They are characterized by clean, sure lines, and a very realistic three-dimensional quality, whether the subjects are landscapes, historic councils, Indian activities, portraits. Hazard Stevens, who was present when Sohon drew many of his Indian portraits at the treaty councils of 1855, observed that Sohon "had great skill in making expressive likenesses." At his best, in his portraits of the flathead leader, Adolphe, and the two Iroquois living among the Flatheads in 1854, Gustavus Sohon demonstrated a talent for portraiture that justifies ranking him among the most able artists who interpreted the plains and the Rockies during the nineteenth century.

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