HOLE-IN-THE-ROCK HISTORIC TRAIL, B.S.A.

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Scouting Roundtable Commissioner

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The Hole-in-the-Rock Trail, built by a group of pioneers sent to settle along the San Juan River in Utah, extends from present-day Escalante, Utah, where the people gathered to begin the trek, to Bluff, Utah, where the exhausted travelers and livestock settled. Nearly two hundred and fifty men, women, and children in eighty wagons with hundreds of cattle and horses began a six weeks journey which lasted nearly six months, exhausting people, animals, and supplies. They literally blasted their way across two hundred miles of almost impenetrable country as they built roads for their wagons to ford rivers and cross rough slickrock.

The purpose for earning the award is to better acquaint the youth with the difficult and perilous journey these people undertook. To qualify for the award, the unit must do the following:

1. TRAIL IMPROVEMENT - An application form and project assignment is to be obtained from the Bureau of Land Management office in Monticello, Utah (located at San Juan Canyon Resource Areas Office, 284 South 1st West).

2. EDUCATIONAL PRESENTATION - Instruction about the trail and ways to preserve the desert environment while completing the projects will be provided at the Edge of the Cedars Museum, 660 West 4th North, Blanding, Utah.


4. PROJECT - Complete the assigned project on the trail.*

5. AWARD - Return the completed application form to the San Juan High School office (311 North 1st East) in Blanding. Medals designed especially for the Hole-in-the-Rock centennial commeration may be purchased for $8.50 at that time.
Where an on-site contribution is not possible, units may make a contribution by developing projects which do the following:

1. Increase the awareness of unit members of the historical significance of the Hole-in-the-Rock trail.

2. Increase the awareness of unit members of environmental considerations for camping in desert regions.


4. Raise funds to assist in the preservation, development, and marking of the Hole-in-the-Rock trail.

In the event a unit selects this alternative outlined in the above four points, the unit must first submit a plan as to how the unit will accomplish these requirements. After approval, the unit will complete their proposal and thus make application for the medals.

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By the 1870's the San Juan region of Utah had become a refuge for outlaw bands as well as being the traditional home, hunting ground and grazing lands of the Navajos, Utes, and some Pah-Utes. It was anticipated that with the establishment of white settlements in the area friendly relations could be established with the Indians and that law and order could be established. Morgan Amasa Barton, son of Joseph F. Barton (a Hole-in-the-Rock expedition leader) wrote of the purpose for the San Juan settlement: "These people were to be the shock absorbers of premeditated plots of Caucasian outlaws and Indian renegades and if they failed in tact, diplomacy, mental ingenuity and patience in handling this phase of their mission they would fall in the category of what we term today as expendable . . ." (Miller, Hole in the Rock, pp. 8-9).
Thus in 1877 the idea for a permanent settlement in the San Juan region was conceived but the death of President Brigham Young delayed action until the latter part of 1878. Then at a conference held December 28 and 29 in Parowan, Utah, the call was issued to a number of people there to colonize the San Juan area. An expedition was sent under the leadership of Silas Smith to explore the area for the proposed settlement. After five months they returned to Parowan with a favorable report that there was suitable land for settlements along the San Juan.

The next problem was how to get the settlers there. The original scouting party had gone south by way of Moenkopi in Arizona and through the Navajo reservation. They had experienced difficulty locating sufficient water for themselves and the few horses and cattle they had with them. Besides the difficulties posed by nature, there was the problem of hostile Navajos who would resent intrusion upon their grazing lands of a large migration of people, wagons, and animals. For these reasons the southern route was not considered feasible.

The northern route, taken by Smith and the scouting party would have been practical. By going over the Old Spanish Trail the company could have arrived at present-day Moab over a fairly well established road. South of there the recently returned explorers had pioneered a road to the San Juan that wagons could have easily been taken over. But the distance was considered too great as it would have necessitated a four hundred and fifty mile trek to reach a point only two hundred miles due east of their departure.

Thus it was that a "short cut" east of Escalante was chosen as the desired route. Part of this decision was based on some preliminary exploration and favorable reports by Charles Hall, Andrew P. Schow, and Reuben Collett.
THE TREK TO HOLE-IN-THE-ROCK

During the summer of 1879, while the exploring party was locating a desirable site for a settlement, plans and preparations were undertaken by those called to make the trek. Cattle and horses were rounded up from their grazing ranges. Homes, farms, machinery, and furniture had to be disposed of. Wagons and harnesses were fixed. Clothing, cooking gear, food supplies, and tents had to be obtained. Finally all the necessary arrangements had been completed and by mid October the migration was prepared to get underway.

They came from many different communities - Cedar City, Parowan, Harmony, Paragoonah, Holden, Oak City, Beaver. Not all would be ready to start at a specified date, nor would they all travel the same route. "So instructions were sent out for the colonists to get under way to travel in small groups if necessary; the general rendezvous point would be somewhere in the desert beyond Escalante." (Miller, p. 44) The point of rendezvous was Forty-mile Spring, located forty miles from Escalante and only twenty miles from the Colorado River. There the various contingents of San Juan missionaries met until the population of the camp had swelled to over two hundred. Most of the company was made up of young married couples with small children. The oldest man in the party was Jens Nielson at age fifty-nine.

Forty-mile Spring was the end of the road. Ahead lay mostly unknown country--especially to the majority of the expedition. It became necessary to send out scouts to obtain more detailed information of the country which lay ahead. Four men were chosen for the task: William W. Hutchings, George B. Hobbs, Kumen Jones, and George Lewis. "They were instructed to push forward and explore the country for the specific purpose of locating a spot where the Colorado could be reached and crossed and also to explore beyond that stream for a possible road out of the river gorge to the east." (Miller, p. 56) With saddle horses and
pack animals they set out along the trail which would take them by way of Fifty-mile Spring to the Hole-in-the-Rock. "When they arrived at the Hole-in-the-Rock, after sixteen miles of hard driving over rough sandstone hills and sand, they found themselves two thousand feet above the river bed, and they could find no way to get to the bottom of the cliffs." (Perkins, Saga of San Juan, p. 41) The scouts were not overly impressed by the grandeur of the region and their negative report was received by the whole camp with a very sobering effect. Work came to a standstill at the San Juan Mission faced a crises.

The arrival of Andrew P. Schow, Reuben Collette and Charles Hall with a small boat for use in further exploration gave new life to the company. Because of their insistence that a suitable route could be found, it was decided to send another expedition while the road work continued. This expedition moved along the cliff to a point where it was less abrupt. Here they lowered their boat by hand to a sandy beach over a mile downward. After dragging it another mile across sand and two hundred feet of solid surface, they finally put their boat into water nearly a mile above the Hole. After crossing the Colorado they proceeded to scout the rugged land only to find numerous washes, gullies, and precipitous sandstone hills. After spending six days exploring the numerous box canyons and draws, they recrossed the river and returned to Forty-mile camp to report their findings.

Detailed reports of the scouting expeditions were made—both favorable and unfavorable. Some felt a road could be built through the area even though the scouts had been unable to locate a possible route. Other influencing factors had to be taken into consideration. It was now early December and winter was upon them with its snow and cold. The nearly 2000 head of livestock were short of feed. To make matters worse, recently heavy snows in the Escalante Mountains had made a return trip impossible. A mass meeting was called to discuss the situation and make a final decision. When the vote came there were few, if any, dissenting votes. "Platte
D. Lyman states: "All expressed themselves willing to spend three or four months if necessary working on the road in order to get through, as it is almost impossible to go back the way we came because of the condition of the road and the scarcity of grass." (Perkins, p. 44)

The country ahead was very rough; therefore a road had to be constructed to accommodate the entire party. They had encountered some difficulty in the forty miles since leaving Escalante but the remaining fifteen miles were many times more difficult. The land was filled with numerous gulches, straight-walled gorges and deep canyons, many which were not apparent until the travelers were on the very brink of the deep chasms.

Numerous problems were encountered along the way. One of the major problems was the scarcity of fuel. There was virtually no timber available in that part of the country. A scrubby brush known as shadscale was the commonest shrub in the area but was unsatisfactory for anything more than a small fire. When larger fires were needed for camp meetings or dances, it was a difficult problem.

Another serious problem was the decrease in the food supply. The people were told to take sufficient provisions for a six weeks trek. It soon became apparent that the trek would take many more months than originally anticipated. Flour became so dangerously low that some were forced to grind their seed wheat and other grain. Parched corn became a staple part of their diet. Limited quantities of flour, beans, corn, and other supplies were obtained from Escalante--for a price. Meat supplies were also difficult to come by because there was very little wild game available and the pioneers were reluctant to slaughter their cattle which were needed for future herds in the new location.

Even the livestock had a difficult time finding sufficient forage. The large herd quickly consumed
the available edible vegetation, thereby necessitating their being pastured at greater distances from the camp.

Winter weather was an ever present problem for both the pioneers and their livestock. Several times during the winter, snowstorms of blizzard proportions were endured. Other times the bitter cold delayed work for days.

Not all was gloomy and despondent, however. Christmas and New Year's Day were appropriately celebrated as the sandstone rocks became the dance floor where people danced to the tunes of fiddlers Samuel Cox and Charles E. Walton, Sr. Religious services were also a regular and important part of camp life.

On December 14, 1879, the company was officially organized into traveling and working units with the following leaders:

Captain of the company, Silas S. Smith
Assistant Captain, Platte D. Lyman
Captain of the first ten, Jens Nielson
Captain of the second ten, George W. Sevy
Captain of the third ten, Benjamin Perkins
Captain of the fourth ten, Henry Holyoak
Captain of the fifth ten, Zechariah B. Decker, Jr.
Captain of the sixth ten, Samuel Bryson
Clerk, Charles E. Walton
Chaplain, Jens Nielson

Each man and each family was put under the leadership of one of these captains thus affecting a more organized company. This they would need as they were now on the rim above the Hole-in-the-Rock facing the most difficult obstacle of their journey.
"This "Hole" as described by Halls was a cleft one hundred feet in depth, between the sheer rock walls, and a tall pinnacle that erosion, or possibly a cleavage, had left standing beside the cliff. The river lay two thousand feet below, of which the most gentle descent was at an angle in excess of forty-five degrees. There were two distinct drops over perpendicular cliffs of smooth red sandstone. One cliff was nearly sixty feet high, the other slightly less. The entire two thousand feet to the muddy Colorado was contained in less than three-fourths of a mile. The descent was so abrupt that at scarcely any point was it possible to walk directly toward the stream--one could progress only in a series of diagonals." (Perkins, p. 39.)

Platte Lyman made a survey of it with the aid of a level and square. He found that for the first third of the distance the road would drop eight feet to the rod. The rest of the way it was five and a half feet to the rod. The total distance from the top to the river was about three-fourths of a mile.

There were three road-building tasks that had to be accomplished. First the notch itself (the actual Hole-in-the-Rock) had to be widened; second, a road between the base of the solid rock cliffs and the river had to be completed; and third, a dugway had to be cut from solid rock wall out of the river gorge to the east.

The company was divided into three groups to undertake each phase of the construction simultaneously. Equipped with picks, shovels, sledge hammers, and chisels, the companies set to work carving out a roadway. Men dangling over the edge of the cliff in half-barrels hand-drilled holes in the face and placed small charges of blasting powder. Jens Nielson, Benjamin Perkins, and Hyrum Perkins were in charge of blasting inside the notch itself. They had come from the British Isles where they had become proficient in
the use of blasting powder in the coal mines of Wales. They gained the nickname of "the blasters and blowers from Wales."

"The first and most difficult obstacle was at the very top of the Hole. By climbing about fifty feet up an incline of approximately 25 degrees, along the edge of the narrow slit, the men found themselves at the brink of a sheer drop of forty-five feet. It was now necessary to cut away that huge block of solid sandstone in order to approach the lower portion of the notch which the leaders considered feasible for a road. The existing narrow crack had to be widened and deepened on a grade that would not be too steep for wagons.

From the base of that forty-five foot drop the crevice broadened somewhat, being wide enough for wagons in most places. But it was exceedingly steep, with a grade of approximately 45 degrees, full of pits and strewn with huge boulders. There were some places that would have to be widened and many that would need to be filled in order to pass over the huge blocks of stone that had fallen into the notch from the sheer walls towering above. This condition continued for approximately a quarter of a mile, or about one-third of the distance to the river. From that point the notch fans out still more into a sort of canyon. The upper part of this canyon, but still below the notch itself, the pioneers found to consist mostly of solid rock, but the grade was not quite so difficult, and by comparison a road could quite easily be built there. The bottom third of the descent was mostly through deep sand, which was probably a welcome change for wagonmasters going down because the sand would act as a sort of brake.

Once the Colorado had been reached and crossed, there still remained the difficult problem of getting out on the other side. Since several of the men had already explored the east river bank, they understood the immensity of the problem facing the company. In order for wagons to roll eastward a road would have to be hewn from the face of a solid sandstone wall some
two hundred fifty feet high. Even when completed, of course, the road would merely take the company out of the Colorado River gorge; there still remained ahead approximately a hundred and fifty miles of almost impassable country. (Miller pp. 102-3)

One of the most remarkable portions of the whole road was named "Uncle Ben's Dugway" in honor of the man who conceived the idea. Because of a shortage of blasting powder and other difficulties which had been encountered, Benjamin Perkins suggested tacking a road into the face of the cliff. This by-pass could be built around the fifty-foot chasm because the notch widened out into a canyon-like area with enough room for this type of construction. A shelf wide enough to accommodate the inside wagon wheels was chiseled and picked out. Next they would build the face of the cliff so the outside wheels would be level with the inside ones. This was accomplished by drilling two-and-a-half inch holes ten inches deep and a foot-and-a-half apart. Two feet long stakes were then driven into the holes and on top of the poles brush, rock, and gravel was added to form the road.

While work was progressing on the road, Charles Hall and his two sons were busy preparing a ferry to be used in transporting the wagons across the river. Lumber and heavy timbers had to be transported in from Escalante. Since the trail was not yet finished, all the materials had to be carried by hand down through the Hole. By the time the road was completed, the ferry was also ready to ferry the outfits across the river.

On January 25, 1880, work on the road was completed. The first wagon down was one of Benjamin Perkins' outfits and driven by Kumen Jones. The wagons were prepared by locking the hind wheels in such a way that it would help hold back the vehicle by digging into the ground, thus creating a very good brake. In addition to this, long ropes and chains were attached to the rear axle and held by a dozen or more men who helped slow it down as it plunged forward.
Thus it was that every wagon descended through the hole with horses or oxen hitched to the front, a driver in the wagon, and a dozen or so men hanging on behind.

All wagons camped at the Hole were driven down to the river by the next day. Twenty-six were ferried across in one day leaving forty wagons to spend the night on the west bank and then be ferried across the next morning. Not one wagon had been tipped over or seriously damaged. Although some animals were badly mauled, none were killed in the descent. The Hole-in-the-Rock had been traversed and for the next year it was to be the major highway from southern Utah to San Juan County.

ONWARD TO BLUFF

Once across the river they were now faced with another obstacle—a sheer wall nearly two hundred fifty feet high. However, work crews had already prepared a road by cutting a dugway from the face of the cliff.

"This road is a rather steep, narrow, dangerous cut that angles up the face of the cliff and then follows along a shelf not far from the top into the mouth of a small gorge that breaks through the solid rock approximately a quarter of a mile downstream from the ferry landing. The road continues up this small gorge for about a hundred yards, then leaves it by means of another short dugway up the south side, coming out on top of the first benchland above the Colorado." (Miller pp. 122-3.)

From the Colorado the expedition moved with relative ease toward Cottonwood Canyon. Following Cottonwood Creek several miles they established a camp where for the first time they found sufficient forage for livestock, wood for campfires, and pure fresh water so they were able to wash for the first time since leaving the settlements. Here they remained while additional
road work was being completed. They were five miles from Grey Mesa but it was impassable country and a road had to be hewn from solid rock or over fine drifting sand. The road up Cottonwood hill proved to be one of the most treacherous stretches of the road. Several accidents occurred along this stretch because of its steepness.

The next camping spot became known as Cheese Camp—a name which resulted from auctioning forty pounds of cheese which had just arrived from the Panguitch Tithing Office along with other supplies. While camped at Cheese Camp there was a serious confrontation which nearly erupted in violence. Several members of the company wanted to drive their herd of horses ahead, leaving the camp behind. Some felt they wanted to take unfair advantage of what little vegetation there was, thus leaving little for the oxen and horses which would be along several days later. A compromise was reached in that the owner of the horses agreed to move his herd as rapidly as possible across Grey Mesa so their animals would have little time to pick of the scant forage.

From Cheese Camp a road had to be cut from solid rock to reach Wilson Canyon and the Chute, a natural U-shaped notch which extended from the floor of the canyon to some relatively flat slickrock country. Once inside the Chute very little road work was necessary to traverse this natural road. The head of the Chute opened to a rocky ridge which then led to Grey Mesa some two miles away. The road engineers found little difficulty building a road to the top of this mesa and once the summit was reached the trail became relatively obstacle free for seven and a half miles as it was a flat, sandy tableland.

Here they were faced with one of the most difficult parts of the whole undertaking—making a road down the precipitous slopes of the mesa. While work had been progressing on the Hole during December, George Hobbs, George Sevy, Lemuel H. Redd, Sr., and George Morrill had been sent to go over the proposed
route. They reached the edge of the mesa only to find it terminated with no natural "chute" down into the valley nearly a thousand feet below. However, a seemingly innocent incident was to help them find the way to reach the bottom. As George Hobb related it:

"The second day, having crossed the river, we ... traveled over a bench to what is called The Slick Rocks or Lookout Rocks. Just before reaching these rocks a herd of mountain sheep, fourteen in number, came up and followed us for some distance. They were quite curious to know what kind of animals we were! While cooking breakfast the next morning at Lookout Rock one of these animals came within fifteen feet of our campfire and stood watching us. I tried to catch it with a pack rope, but it was very active in dodging the lasso. I could have shot it, but I thought the animals were too pretty to kill. I followed it for some distance; it seemed to draw me off down in the rocks until I finally got to the bottom of the rocks about half a mile from camp; there the animal left me. I climbed back up the rocks and soon learned that Brother Sevy and Morril had been trying to find a way to get down these rocks, but had returned to camp reporting that we could go no farther. I told them that I had already been clear to the bottom. They told me to swallow my breakfast and lead out and they would follow. This seemed to be the only passage down these slick rocks." (Perkins, pp. 47-8.)

It took a week to cut a series of dugs ways out of solid rock from one ledge to the next one below to complete the half-mile road.

From the base of Grey Mesa the road followed a northeasterly direction toward Lake Paghril, a distance of seven miles. Here was a clear, fresh body of water which had been formed by nature. Sand had drifted into a canyon to create an obstruction behind which the water had accumulated from natural springs and occasional storms. The road ran across this natural dam.

This lake no longer exists as in 1915 a heavy
storm and resulting flood waters cut a channel through the soft sand of the dam emptying the waters of the lake into the Colorado.

The next stretch from Lake Pagahrit to Clay Hill Pass was made with relative ease. Deep sand in some of the stretches slowed down some of the more exhausted teams but they had good weather and ample spring water so that by March 5 they had all reached the top of Clay Hill Pass. Here was a drop of approximately a thousand feet so that a road had to be built all the way. Rather than working with solid rock, however, they were faced with a sticky blue clay. In a week's time, however, they had completed the three mile stretch of road needed to take the wagons safely to the bottom. They began the descent March 13 and once down a howling blizzard hit the camp ripping wagon covers, tipping over tents, and causing great discomfort to the weary travelers.

"From the bottom of Clay Hill Pass to the head of Grand Gulch, at the foot of Elk Ridge, less work was required on the road, and the company could travel at speeds limited only by the ability of their nearly worn-out teams to drag the heavy wagons forward. As a result the company soon spread out, with the stronger teams moving rather rapidly and the weaker ones lagging as much as thirty miles behind. The trek had now settled down to a test of sheer endurance. Road conditions varied with the weather; sometimes two feet of snow slowed wagons to a snail's pace while at other times the wheels sank to the hubs in mud." (Miller, p. 136.)

The road builders now encountered a new type of obstacle—trees. As they approached the base of Elk Ridge the cedar forest became more and more dense. Crews of choppers were now sent out to blaze the trail for the wagons. Natural clearings were called "Flats" and became natural campsites.

It was somewhere in this area that an old Ute rode into camp. Amazed at his encounter with a wagon caravan in such forbidding land, he wanted to know
where they had come from and where they were headed. "When informed of the route the wagons had taken, he simply threw up his hands in disbelief. No wagon road could possibly be built through that region!" (Miller, p. 136.)

Comb Wash was the final barrier of the long trek. Here was a ridge of solid sandstone extending from Elk Ridge southward into Arizona. Approached from the West it presented a solid, sheer wall over a thousand feet high. The only natural break in this solid wall was one cut by the San Juan River some ten miles downstream. Here they were able to reach the bottom of the Wash and get to the north bank. Here they had hoped to build a road along the bank to the site of Montezuma, their final destination. But they found that the river cut too close to the perpendicular cliffs and that it was impossible to build a road. They had to get to the top of Comb Ridge to continue.

"But to get to the top of the Comb required the building of another dugway up the face of that solid rock barrier, which the pioneers promptly named 'San Juan Hill'..." (Miller, p. 138.) It took a week to build the road, during which time the expedition camped along the north bank. Although sparse vegetation necessitated driving the livestock to the south side, ample wood and abundant water made it the most comfortable camp site since leaving Lake Pagahrit.

San Juan Hill was the final challenge and was almost too much for the exhausted teams. They had been weakened by a long hard winter without sufficient feed. Here they were taxed to the limit. Charles Redd described the conditions of the final pull:

"Aside from the Hole-in-the-Rock itself, this was the steepest crossing on the journey. Here again seven span of horses were used, so that when some of the horses were on their knees, fighting to get up to find a foothold, the still-erect horses could plunge upward against the sharp grade. On the worst slopes the men were forced to beat their jaded animals into
giving all they had. After several pulls, rests, and pulls, many of the horses took to spasms and near-convulsions, so exhausted were they. By the time most of the outfits were across, the worst stretches could easily be identified by the dried blood and matted hair from the forelegs of the struggling teams."

(Miller, p. 138.)

It took three grueling days to accomplish the task. By April 6 most of the outfits had pulled into the flat river bottom—still nearly twenty miles from their final destination—Montezuma. But they were exhausted, both men and teams, and could go no further. Here was what appeared to be good farm-land—here they would stay and build their homes. They called their new location Bluff City. Here they would complete the mission they had been called to do.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


RELATED SOURCES:


SAND JUAN DISTRICT
UTAH NATIONAL PARKS COUNCIL
BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA

HOLE-IN-THE-ROCK HISTORIC TRAILS MEDAL

UNIT APPLICATION

Unit type ___________ Unit Number ___________
Unit's Community _____________________________
Unit's Council _______________________________
Unit Leader ________________________________
Unit Participants ___________________________________________________________

Work/Service Project -- assigned by the BLM, Monticello, Utah: __________________________

_______________________________________________________________

Educational/Environmental Component -- presented by the Utah Parks Service, Edge of the Cedars Museum, Blanding, Utah: ________________________________

(signature)

Unit Leaders verification of the completion of the Work/Service Project:

_________________________

(signature)

Present completed application at San Juan High School, Blanding, Utah, with $8.50 per medal.
HOLE IN THE ROCK
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