

With Wild Goose Bill Days soon upon us, it's time to celebrate the life of Wilbur's early pioneers, particularly Samuel Wilbur "Wild Goose Bill" Condit (or Condon). Early Wilbur pioneer Holgar Jurgensen described Bill as a very good friend and a very bad enemy.

The story of Wilbur's founder has been told many times – and few versions are exactly the same. Following is the story of Condon, as written and recalled in 1912 by his friend, Major R.D. Gwydir, who was an Indian Agent from 1886 to 1889:

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I became intimately acquainted with Bill and found him, as the Indians expressed it, "a skookum Indian." Condit came to the northwest in 1856. He began packing (freight) between Walla Walla and Fort Colville. Afterwards, he built and operated a ferry on the Columbia, which is still known as "Wild Goose Bill's Ferry." He also had a trading establishment at that point.

Gwydir described Condit, saying, "Tall, gaunt, and slightly stooped, invariably wearing a red bandana loosely knotted around his neck, and a slouch hat; he was a typical frontiersman. Impulsive and generous, warm in his friendships and bitter in his enmities, quick to anger, but ever ready to acknowledge errors and to make reparation – these were the characteristics of William Condit."

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Following are two of the more colorful stories of how Condit earned his nickname "Wild Goose Bill," the first written by Major Gwydir: "Condit won his sobriquet by firing into a large flock of tame geese owned by a settler between Walla Walla and Colville under the impression they were wild. The owner of the flock had brought the eggs all the way from Oregon and was so indignant over the loss that she followed Bill to his home, delivering all the way a scathing tirade against the stupidity of a man who pretended to be a frontiersman and didn't know the difference between a wild goose and a tame one."

Another version of the "goose" tale was written by Al Thorpe, a sidekick of Bill's: "The proprietor of a country tavern known as Seventy Mile House had tamed a brood of wild geese, which frequented a little lake along the road, near the house. All the party was well acquainted with the circumstances, but Bill, feeling a bit reckless just at that time, and being somewhat hungry for goose, pretended to think the geese were untamed. He drew his

revolver, and being an expert with that weapon, began picking off the geese. Hearing the shooting, the proprietor looked out to see what was going on. Taking in the situation at a glance, he rushed out toward the slayer of his fowl, shouting, "Them's my geese! Them's my geese!" Without looking around, Bill proceeded to pick off another goose, while cautioning the owner to "keep still or I'll get the whole flock."

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In 1855, six years after the California gold rush began, gold was discovered in the northwest, redirecting many of the prospectors to the vast Washington Territory. Bill, who had worked hard to amass two fortunes and seemed to play just as hard to lose them, followed the trails north as well. (He was known as "Dancing Bill" at this time.)

The mining advance began at Fort Colville. The first rush of prospectors spread over the entire area instead of concentrating near a few rich lodes. Soon after, some miners pushed into British Territory as far as Thompson River.

In 1862, between 20,000 and 25,000 men were mining and prospecting in Washington Territory. At the same time, there were many men in the area building a wagon road planned by Governor Steven to connect the headwaters of the Columbia River at Wallula (old Fort Walla Walla) with the Missouri River.

The prospectors, alone or in parties of five to fifty men, with picks, shovels, and pans, ventured everywhere in the area searching for gold dust. They usually constructed rude sluice boxes out of cedar bark to wash out the gold.

When gold was discovered, whether in a mountainous area or a stream, the person discovering it staked out a claim. The discoverer was entitled to two claims and each subsequent newcomer to the site - to one claim. The size of a claim varied according to the laws of the Territory and the lay of the land, but most were between 150 and 250 feet.

Much picking, shoveling, and washing of sand and earth took place for every ounce of gold a miner secured - even in the richest gold fields, nuggets were rare.

Perhaps this is why Bill Condit decided he could make more money freighting than mining. He also had experience and a way with horses and mules. He knew a gambler who needed someone to run his freighting business and together, they formed a very profitable enterprise. Bill was

known as hard working, and perhaps more importantly, he could be trusted.

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Mule trains were leaving Walla Walla every day for the Okanogan and Kootenai, loaded with goods. The town was overflowing with miners, pack trains, mules, horses and wagons, and Bill joined them.

He eventually gained a share in the business for his diligence and honesty, and continued to cover the trackless plains from Walla Walla, the main supply depot, to the placer camps along the Columbia River.

On one of his trips to the Wild Horse mining district in East Kootenai, he discovered other packers had reached the area before him and the stores were stocked. He knew Chinese miners were scratching out diggings the white men had abandoned near Lake Okanogan some 250 miles further west. Condit traveled to the "Celestials" and found them eager for his supplies. After his sales were made, he turned southward to return to Walla Walla.

It is believed that it was on this return journey that he first discovered the valley he was later to call home. From the "History of the Big Bend" we learn that **Condit stood on the ridge south of the present town of Wilbur and saw the clear waters of the stream meandering through the valley. It was fringed with a luxuriant growth of aspens, willows, and cottonwood. As Condit grew older, and the gold coming from the placer mines declined, he decided he would like to settle down, so he returned to the valley he had discovered earlier.** He sold his pack train and with the proceeds, built a log cabin, 1½ stories high.

An early Wilbur Register described the location of the cabin, which was apparently between the site of the present Wilbur Post Office and the Napa Auto Parts store. In the 1890s, the cabin was purchased by Henry Odenrider and moved down Main Street to a new site, which was later purchased by James Llewellyn, who planned to raze the cabin. A movement to preserve the building as a historic relic was headed by Wild Goose Bill's old friend, Holgar Jurgensen. It was moved to the municipal farm at the west end of Wilbur and remained there until it burned to the ground.

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Wild Goose Bill established a post office on his property on February 25, 1885 but closed it on June 22, 1886. About 1½ years later, it was reopened

by David R. Cole. Mail was brought in twice weekly from Hesselstine, which was located near Wilbur.

When Condit first arrived at his valley, the land was unsurveyed, but he staked his claim. Later, Condit acquired title from the United States government to the land on which the **Town of Wilbur** now stands.

After the mineral discoveries at Ruby City and Concunully, the area grew as miners and others moved in. The railroad had been completed to Sprague by 1883, and this helped to settle the country. Condit's ranch was the stop-over point along the route to the north for those with wagons or riding horses, or even walking.

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Ever the entrepreneur, Condit saw the need for a ferry across the Columbia and a trading post for miners, settlers, and the Indians; therefore, he started such an establishment about 18 miles downriver from the present site of Grand Coulee Dam.

Early pioneer Holgar Jurgensen wrote, "In the summer of 1887 my father, Gerhard Jurgensen, Henry Bair, and Frank Robertson built a road across the Grand Coulee through to the ferry. There was already a road of sorts as there was freight going through to the mines across the Okanogan River, but no one would travel such a road now – you risked your life every hour." The Condit ferry deposited its travelers, horses, etc., on the east side of the Okanogan River, therefore it was necessary to build a bridge, though crude, to allow travelers to reach the mines. Wild Goose Bill exacted a toll from those using this bridge; also, he charged for using his road from the ferry to Ruby City.

Condit's first ferry over the Columbia River was propelled by oar-power and could hold only a wagon and team. Later, he had a larger ferry built at the sawmills at the mouth of Hawk Creek on the Columbia. It was floated down river. This ferry was approximately 16 feet wide and 60 feet long. During the winter of 1886-87, Wild Goose Bill brought overland to the ferry a steel wire cable from Sprague. He stretched the cable over two wagons for the journey because it was so long and heavy. After reaching the river, he took advantage of the fact that the extremely cold weather had left a heavy layer of ice on the river, allowing him to stretch the cable across the river.

In 1964, a story by John Andrist of the Omak Chronicle, told of Wild Goose Bill's activities. He described Bill's road north, saying, "The road headed southwest out of Wilbur, skirted the edge of the vast coulee carved by ancient waters of the Columbia River, then plunged down a natural pass to the Columbia River.

The trip from Wilbur took the freighters along the tops of coulee walls, down across the head of the dry coulee, which now contains Banks Lake, and back up onto the plateau of the Big Bend. Somewhere north of Del Rio, the route found a notch in the coulee wall and swung down to the Columbia. A dirt road still runs in that vicinity, westerly across Alameda flat to the ferry site.

Condon's Ferry was known far and wide. It was one of the few places a man could cross the treacherous Columbia River safely. From the ferry, Condon's road climbed to Goose Flats, crossed the southern edge of the flats and headed up a steep coulee wall to the high country of what is now the south half of the Colville Indian Reservation. Wild Goose Bill's toll road struggled up a sharp incline, following the road past Alkali Lake before wandering off to the west to begin climbing the steep grassy slopes above Omak Lake." One of the reasons Wild Goose Bill found it profitable to live at the ferry was the fact that he owned one of the few sets of gold scales in the territory. The miners and the Indians on the Colville Reservation were frequent customers at his trading post at the ferry. His freight came from Sprague, which was 107 miles southeast of his ferry. It usually took Bill's freighters three or four days, depending on the weather or any trouble, to make the trip from Sprague to the ferry. This trip included stopovers at Coffee Pot Lake, Bill's ranch at Wilbur, and Park Springs, a few miles below the Coulee Dam of today.

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Talk of a railroad reaching Wilbur drew considerable excitement, but its arrival in 1889 caused packers like Condon to lose much of their business. The Columbia Townsite and Investment Company, a subsidiary of certain railroad interests, contacted Condon to obtain part of his land holdings in exchange for a railroad station in the new town, ample capital for all necessary construction, and the active participation of an organization whose interests lay primarily in promoting the growth of towns along the railroad line. This added greatly to the value of the land Condon retained.

In the following years he attended to the sales of his townsite properties and management of his store and ferry on the Columbia River.

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There were no white women in the area when Condit first settled here, and he married an Indian woman, Julia. They had two sons (there is conflicting information about this), George and William (Billy). After a time, Julia left him, and he married an Indian woman from Chief Moses' band who was known as Mary Ann. They had one child, Charlie, who was badly crippled in mind and body as the result of an accident. Later in life, Wild Goose Bill fell in love with the young woman, Millie Dunn, which led to his demise.

*An excerpt from "The Story of Wild Goose Bill," featured in the Wilbur Register in 1932, written by Tressa Hankel offers a different version: "Soon after Condit came to live in Wilbur, he married an Indian maiden, according to the tribal custom. He was blessed with three sons by this Indian wife, George, Charles and William.*

*George was accidentally shot when operating a mowing machine. He had the gun with him to shoot birds and in some manner, it was accidentally discharged, wounding him fatally. Charles was always sickly and died in early life. William is still living and resides at Nespelem with his wife and family."*

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In 1893, two years prior to his death, Bill's personal life began to go sour. His second wife left him, and the man who hauled his freight down to the ferry from Wilbur quit. He hired a man named Elwell to haul the freight and hired Elwell's daughter Millie Dunn to keep house for him and look after his crippled son, Charlie.

By the time of Condon's death in January 1895, the Wilbur Register identified Millie as "Condon's mistress." Millie had a son, James Sykes, and what follows is his account of the fatal shooting of Wild Goose Bill: "We lived with my grandparents while my mother worked and I went to school in Wilbur. As I remember, the roads were very rocky and crooked as a snake. Condon was a determined man and when he made up his mind to settle any difficulty, he did it, no matter how dangerous it might be. I was with mother on this job (at Condon's), but it was very lonely because I had no playmates except for the crippled child of Condon's. It was a most unpleasant life for both mother and me (Millie was in her 20s while Bill was in his 60s).

In the winter of 1895, mother and I went to live in the Bratton cabin on the Hollis King ranch and here the biggest thrill and excitement of my life occurred on January 21, 1895."

Sykes described the day as bleak and cold with about three feet of snow on the ground. The printed account of Sykes' recollections continued:

"Mother's sister had been out to warn her that Condon was coming after her and that she should come back to Wilbur to be safe. This occurred the day before he actually came, but mother was so sure Condon loved her too much to ever harm her, she would not go home. We stayed there in the cabin with young Barton Park, but Bratton, the coward, took off and stayed away so he wouldn't get hurt."

Sykes wrote that the shack had only one room with curtains to divide it.

"Mother and Park each lay on their bunks waiting. Park was a young, hired man and he told mother he would do anything he could to protect her. He took the rifle from the wall and placed it beneath his blanket on his bunk and lay there with his revolver by his side, out of sight.

I was playing on the floor of the cabin when mother saw Burt Woodin drive up with Condon. He got out of the cutter and started for the cabin. Mother was lying crosswise on her bunk and Park lay on the foot of his while they waited for Condon to come in and start something. When he reached the cabin, he walked right in without knocking and picked me up and sat me on a box that was all we had for chairs. He asked me if I would come back and live with him, and he gave me some candy. That was the way with Condon, he always treated me kindly."

"Then he went over and talked with mother, but first he told me to get back of an old cookstove that we had there with two oven doors, one on each side. He pulled them open and told me to stay there so I wouldn't get hurt.

Then he asked my mother if she was going to marry him. She came back with a blunt, 'No!' He said, 'All right, then, I will kill you!' He started firing at her. She threw up her arms to cover her face. The bullets made two holes through her arm. At that moment, Park began shooting at Condon and Condon turned and started firing at Park. At the same time, he was backing towards the door where he fell in the snow on his face. Although Park was bleeding badly, he went to the door and fired at Burt Woodin, the man who had brought Condon there, but he was 200 yards away and was only wounded in one of his heels. Mother was standing in the door beside Park

when he shot at Woodin – he then turned and walked to the foot of his bunk, got down on his knees, and said to mother, ‘I have done all I could for you.’ Then he died with his head in his arms as if in prayer.

I was so frightened that the picture of this scene will never leave me. What has always puzzled me was why these two men could still stand after they were shot so full of holes at a distance of not over 10 feet apart. Mother wrapped up her arm and started with me to the nearest neighbor, about two miles away. The snow was very deep, and we had a hard time getting to the Burn ranch. From there we were taken as soon as possible to Wilbur. But Dr. Yount was not there and George Wilson, a veterinarian, cared for mother and the wounds healed satisfactorily.”

Bratton was afraid of Condon and had been warned Condon was coming early the morning of the shooting. He left on horseback and didn’t return until late the evening of January 21.

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Wild Goose Bill must have anticipated the outcome of the confrontation with Millie – he wrote his will before leaving the ferry to look for her. It was witnessed by two men who were with him at the time. In his will he left his ferry to his eldest son, George. To his second son, Billy, he left only \$5.50. The remainder of the property, which was considerable for that time, went to care for his crippled son Charlie. Further, in the case of Charlie’s death, it was Condon’s desire that his property be applied to the school fund of Wilbur. His business associate, R.J. Reeves, was appointed executor.

Charlie died in March 1899 and the Wilbur Register announced the school district (No. 59) would receive the Condon property. Shortly after, the legal firm representing Reeves and the Condon estate, represented Condon’s former wife Mary Ann in opposition to the claims of the school district, with the lawyers getting 50% if successful. Two years later, the State Supreme Court reversed the original decision and stated that when Charlie inherited the property, he had absolute title. Therefore, when he died, the estate should go to his next of kin, his mother Mary Ann. Sadly, Charlie’s mom received very little from the court’s decision, with the lawyers coming out as the actual big winners.

Rollin J. Reeves took charge of Wild Goose Bill’s gun, and 20 years later made a gift of it to Major R.D. Gwydir, the early Indian agent, because of Gwydir’s friendship with Wild Goose Bill. Reeves wrote to the Major, “The revolver has been in my wife’s custody ever since it was turned over to me



with Bill's body in January 1895." He told how it had grown rusty from disuse, otherwise it was in exactly the condition it was found in Bill's hand when he died. Gwydir said when he opened the package with the gun and handled it, memories flew back over the 20 years since their lamented friend, Wild Goose Bill, had died.

"I also remember with pleasure, one of the bravest and truest friends a man ever had. Had he lived in an earlier age and in another country, he would have been one of Dumas' heroes for certain. No man was truer to his friends than was Bill, and there is not a particle of exaggeration in what you have said regarding his character or manhood."

Gwydir went on to say, "I could write for a month without exhausting my fund of knowledge of his good deeds and I fully believe that when the spirit of Wild Goose Bill passed over the Great Divide to that Country from whose Border no traveler returns, that there was a host of old timers to meet, welcome and escort him to the Pearly Gates where entrance was not forbidden him, as he was a true man and Christian according to the teachings of the Divine Master. I hope that the day is not far distant when the state of Washington will erect monuments to the memory of men like William Condon (Wild Goose Bill)."

*In 1988, Phyllis Hinkins, a Wilbur Register reporter, compiled this story, using information from articles in The Inland Empire magazine, The History of the Big Bend, and the works of other writers already mentioned. Content edited by Courtney Ruiz in 2022 for Wilbur's website.*