Charles A. Homan (1847-1918)

By Jerry C. Olson

Born in Canada in 1847, Charles first showed up in the U. S. census as a soldier in 1880. Both of the census records of Vancouver Barracks and Port Townsend listed him on their rolls, with the particulars being identical. He served in the New York Infantry in the Civil War in 1863 at the age of 16, and continued in the military after the war. On May 22, 1883, First Lt. Frederich Schwatka embarked from Portland on a military exploration of Alaska and the Yukon River. Private Charles A. Homan served as a topographer and photographer. They crossed over Chilkoot Pass on the route later followed by the gold miners in 1899 and descended the Yukon River by raft as far downstream as Anvik, where they boarded an Alaska Commercial Co. steamer. They reached St. Michael on August 30, 1883 and returned to the Northwest. Homan completed a survey of the route of the expedition and made the first map of the Yukon River. His photographs were transformed into engravings and incorporated into books written by Schwatka. Schwatka named a river that flowed into the south end of Lake Bennett after Homan, which also later resulted in a Homan Lake and a Homan Peak. Charles memorialized his river with a photograph displayed in the expedition collection.

Schatka had earlier achieved notoriety with his 1878-1880 sledge journey into Alaska of almost 3000 miles to locate the Franklin expedition records. Schwatka attempted two more expeditions, one to climb Mt Elias and the second to explore more territory in the Yukon and Alaska. The first was aborted because of Schwatka’s poor health, and the second in 1891 was successful. Upon his return he went on the lecture circuit again but soon checked himself into treatment for alcoholism. He declared the
cure a success, but soon died on the streets of Portland of an overdose of the medicine laudanum (tincture of opium) in 1891.

Just prior to the Yukon expedition, Homan was also topographer for an exploration from Fort Colville to Lake Osoyoos in 1883 under the command of George Goethals of Panama Canal fame. Homan continued employment with the Army Engineers in Vancouver until at least 1900. In 1889 and 1890 he was elected Vancouver City Surveyor, and in the next two years surveyed the subdivision plats of Riverside in Clark County and Grandview in Cowlitz County.

The U. S. Congress appropriated $64,000 on Aug 5, 1892 for surveying townships inside and outside of railroad grant lands in Washington State. The U. S. General Land Office had preceded this event in 1889 by sending Major John B. Brockenbrough, accompanied by Deputy Surveyor William B. Marye, to inspect the timber resources of the Pacific Northwest. Following through, the U. S. Surveyor General awarded 19 survey contracts, mostly west of the Cascades. This was at the time of the “Panic of 1893”, a severe recession, and most contracts were small, going to surveyors inexperienced in government contracts.

A surveyor named William E. Elwell had been doing examination surveys for the Washington Surveyor General in 1892 and 1893, and he and Homan formed a business arrangement where Elwell was to do the work, Homan supplied at least part of the money, and Homan would be one of the sureties to sign the bond. The first instance of Elwell’s surveying experience is that in March 1892 he was on the Vancouver City survey crew with Robert Webster under the direction of Manford Lisher. All of these surveyors received contracts from this special appropriation.

Contract 414 for T3N R4E was awarded on May 27, 1893 to Robert A. Webster, who was working for Clark County at the time. Contracts 415 for T4,5N R4E and Contract 416 for a portion of T5N R3E were awarded on May 27 and 29, 1893 to William. E. Elwell.
Webster surveyed his township to the south of Homan’s in 1894, and was authorized for payment by the Washington Surveyor General in December 1894. However the commissioner ordered an inspection of the work by T. R. Hinsdale, detailed examiner, in May 1895, and that resulted in the entire survey by Webster being rejected. Until this time, inspections were normally done by other Deputy Surveyors, but in 1893 Congress passed a law forbidding that practice and required them to be done by Special Examiners under the control of the Surveyor General. He received the letter in April, 1896 and resurveyed about 30 miles of line in July and August, 1896. He had pledged his father’s farm for the bond to get the survey and appeared to have no choice but to comply. The survey was approved in 1897 and signed off January 21, 1898.

For Elwell’s contracts, Homan signed as surety and bonded twice the price of the contract, listing a house in Vancouver, one-half-interest in 80 acres in Pioneer, and $500 of stock in the Vancouver Building and Loan Co. as collateral. Lynn Clough signed also with $10,000 of value in ten acres of improved prune land just outside of Vancouver. The instructions said he could use a compass needle on subdivision lines but not on township lines and to use the 1889 Manual of Instructions.

Elwell spent the year of 1893 doing the inspection surveys in Cowlitz and Lewis Counties, reporting favorable results on all instances. He inspected Levi Vickery, Charles Murray, Gilbert Ward and Elijah Ward. A typical evaluation was: “After a careful examination of the work, I believe it has been well done by a competent surveyor.” In March of 1894 Elwell requested an extension of the time for his contracts. Reasons included a late notice to proceed, his inspection work, and two feet of snow on the jobsite. He surveyed T5N R3E from April 12th to 28th and finished the other two townships by the end of 1894, submitting his notes to Surveyor General Watson. Watson approved Contract 416 of T5N R3E, which had only about twenty miles of survey, and submitted it to the commissioner, who approved it in May of 1895.

The rest of the work was inspected by Waller R. Staples, detailed clerk, in May 1895. He found many errors, including a 2.85 chain (188 ft.) jog in the alignment of the standard parallel at the standard corner to sec 31 & 32 and a 4.53 chain (299 ft.) error East and West also at that point.

In his report Staples states: “The deputy’s corners as a rule are poorly established and his lines are very poorly blazed. The blazed lines bet. Secs. 31 & 32 intersects the line bet. Secs. 29 & 32 about 3 chs. East of the corner, and that between Secs. 32 & 33 starts from the Standard Parallel about 1 chain West of and across a brook from the Standard cor. to these Sections. A further examination of this survey would have been made had not a forest fire visited my camp destroying bedding, clothing and provisions. I attempted an examination of the line between Sections 30 & 31 but the fire was still raging in this locality and the danger from falling timber necessitated abandoning this line. That the survey has been carelessly executed and contains errors too large to permit its acceptance is clearly indicated by this examination.”

This report resulted in supplemental special instructions to Elwell on March 28, 1896, almost a year later, to redo the survey of T4.5N R4E. Elwell realized that he was not competent or financially able to correct the work, and asked the Surveyor General to allow Homan to do the
corrections. The Surveyor General appointed Homan on July 29th as a compassman to “assist” Elwell in making the corrections, and he agreed, to at least protect his interest as a surety. Homan acquiesced as long as he was to get the same money as Elwell, and that it was to be sent to him. This was approved on August 18th by the Surveyor General. On August 24th the commissioner appointed Homan as compassman to “assist” Elwell and that the money was to be sent to Elwell. On August 29th Homan stopped work on the contract and suspended the crew due to bad faith on the part of the commissioner.

On January 25th, 1897 the Surveyor General asked what steps Elwell had taken to correct the survey, Homan replied that “he” had entered into an agreement with the Surveyor General to correct these surveys under his own contract, and that Elwell was no longer in the picture. Homan asked why the Surveyor General was still talking about Homan “assisting” Elwell in finishing the survey.

Homan explained: “From August 19th to 28th, 1896, I spent in making an examination of the work in the vicinity of the First Standard Parallel North through townships 4 & 5 East. The country is mountainous and covered with heavy timber, underbrush and windfalls so that progress on true line was necessarily slow, but enough work was done to convince me that any attempt at adjustment of the original work would be labor lost.

The errors of alignment and distance are so great that in many cases original corners were so far from true position that, with the assistance of Mr. Elwell, I was unable to find them.

Mr. Elwell trusted entirely to a very indifferent compass needle for his alignment. He admitted that to save time he established his section corners on latitudinal lines entirely across the township, and that no attempt was made to adjust these lines. In my opinion the records of the surveys of Townships 4 & 5 North, Range 4 East, are entirely unreliable and worthless.”
Homan asked that the Surveyor General correct this situation by naming him as a Deputy Surveyor to act in his own capacity to redo the work surveyed by Elwell and to make payment to him exclusively when the work was finished. On February 16, 1897, Surveyor General Watson issued supplemental special instructions naming Homan as a Deputy Surveyor, saying he will be paid, subject to the approval of the commissioner, but still saying he will “assist” Elwell. Also, all work will be done by a solar instrument, and no compass needle will be allowed. This agreement was approved by the commissioner on March 5th. The instructions were amended on March 11th to state that the South boundary of T4N R4E as surveyed by Webster is still “unaccepted” and that Homan was not authorized to survey T4N R4E until further instructions.

Obviously Homan had his heels dug in and would not resume the resurvey until he had an acceptable contract. On May 5th, the Surveyor General wrote Homan that he could have the contract in his own capacity and not be “assisting” Elwell. Homan agreed and reaffirmed that the money would go to him.

The survey parties were organized and from June 16 to September 19, 1897 the First Standard Parallel and T5N R4E were resurveyed by Homan. On July 31st detailed examiner T. R. Hinsdale accepted the North boundary of T3N R4E as surveyed by Webster, and the on August 2nd the Surveyor General told Homan he could proceed with T4N R4E. On March 29th 1898 Homan wrote to the Surveyor General that the South boundary of Section 36, T4N R4E was off alignment by over one degree and that the East line of the township was long by almost 5 chains. Surveyor General McMicken countered by directing Homan to create a sectional correction line on the north line of the southerly tier of sections and to create government lots on the south township line. Webster’s line had already been approved.

By August 8th of 1898, Homan had finished the field work of the corrections and soon thereafter turned in his notes to the Surveyor General

Apparently the Surveyor General had further special instructions for Homan for in May of 1899 he was again in the field, this time to retrace the entire south boundary of T4N R4E to document the deviations from the manual as surveyed by Webster. He turned in those notes in early June, and Surveyor General McMicken approved the survey and sent Homan an accounting of the payments he would expect. Unfortunately he also told Homan that the commissioner would be sending the money to Elwell.

D. W. Kinnaird, Detailed Examiner of Surveys, inspected his work in August 1899 and issued more Special Instructions. This time they found that Homan did not obliterate all the marks from the old corners, and his monuments for the corners were inadequate. He was ordered to go back to the 140 miles of survey and replace most of the wooden posts with marked stones. Homan replaced 63 posts in November of 1899, signed his work in December of 1899, and received approval March 26, 1900. (Homan may not have been too sympathetic when a few years later D. W. Kinnaird was indicted for fraud as part of the Puter Land Fraud case.) The contract amount was $2840 with the contractor receiving the maximum special rate of $20 per mile. In January he was still protesting the proposed payment of money to Elwell.

Most of these two townships were patented to Northern Pacific RR, who very soon sold them to Frederick Weyerhauser. A railroad was built from Vancouver, through Yacolt, and into the
forest. This whole area burned in 1902 as part of the Yacolt Burn, and this survey facilitated the land sales and therefore the salvage operation. The deputy surveyors were required to list settlers on the land to help prove homesteading claims. Homan listed about 40 settlers and used several of them for his chainmen and axmen. One was future Judge Robert McMullen, and another was Harold Hall, a future engineer and brother of Judge Charles W. Hall.

Another contract was awarded to Homan by the Surveyor General on March 3, 1901 for three townships in Cowlitz County. In January of 1901 he asked for an extension of that contract as he explained:

“That owing to the uncertainty and risk caused much by the method of settlement of my claim for the surveys of Townships 4 and 5 North, Range 4 East, W. M., executed by me as compassman under instructions from your office, and the jeopardy in which the compensation for this work was placed by the action of the Department for many months, made it imperative for me to remain in Vancouver to protect my interests and also prevented the giving up of the situation held by me under the U. S. Government, without the risk of serious loss and distress to myself and family. That when settlement was finally made, I was in duty bound to give my employers ample notice of my intention to resign, and to remain in office until a suitable person was found to take my place. This delay, covering most of the field season of 1900, was unforeseen and unavoidable on my part.”

It is unknown when Homan got his money or if it was sent to Elwell. He had been paid by January 1901, but he never proceeded with the new work, and it was awarded to Edwin Sharp and Robert Omeg as contract 593. As an experienced bureaucrat in the Army, Homan actually stood up to the General Land Office better than most Deputy Surveyors.

Homan continued to reside in Vancouver, WA, working as a surveyor and civil engineer until his death in 1918. He is buried with his wife Ona in the Post Cemetery of Vancouver Barracks. His son, William Platt Homan, also a civil engineer, showed up on the 1910 census in Vancouver and on 2 subdivision plats in the Auditor’s office.

---

Figure 5. Gravestone of Charles A. Homan at Vancouver Post Cemetery.

---

*Exploration of the Yukon River in 1883 by Frederick Schwatka, Journal of the American Geographical Society of New York, Vol. 16, (1884), pp. 345-382. (article consists of 38 pages), Published by: American Geographical Society*