

corn-meal mush, white or navy beans, salt-rising bread, dried fruit (if they had it), and any meat they may get along the trail. Things that packed well like flour or beans were the staples.

There was usually fresh baked bread or biscuits. To bake the bread, the dough was placed in a dutch oven. The oven was then set on the fire embers and the lid stacked with hot coals for more even cooking. Baked or simmered beans, begun the night before, could be on the menu as well.

Weather had a big impact on the settler-colonist's eating habits. For example, if it was raining hard enough that a fire couldn't be built, hardtack was the meal. Hardtack was one of the least liked foods on the trail. Made with flour and water, cut into biscuit form and baked, it would last for years, but was stiff and had little flavor. Dunking the tough biscuit into coffee would add a little flavor and create a softer texture.

Tom worked as a cook throughout the four months of the wagon train from Shakopee to the West.

Tom arrived to the valley of what was later Montana Territory. But that is all we know about him.



Accounts of the first settlers to the Prickly Pear Valley included an unidentified African American male, one of three who first discovered gold deposits in the Helena area in August 1862.

This might be Tom.

But that is all that is known of Tom, a cook during the 1862 Holmes Wagon Train to the West.



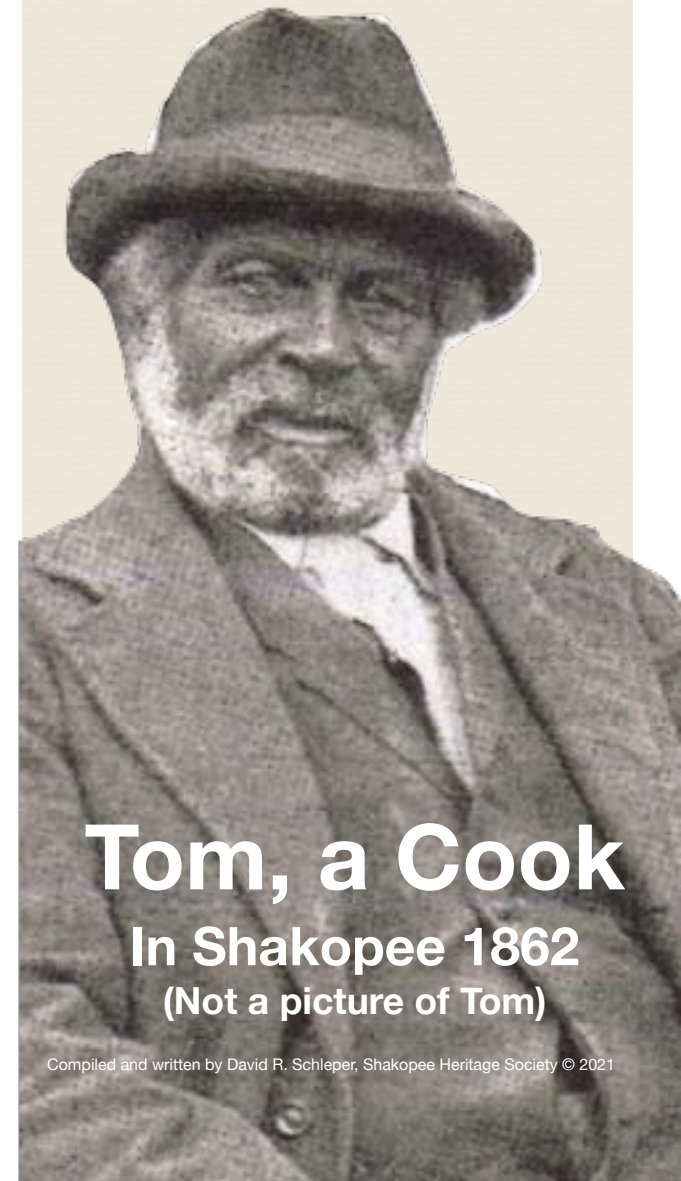
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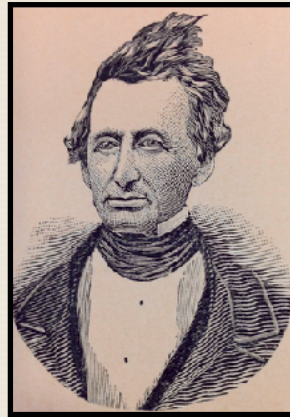


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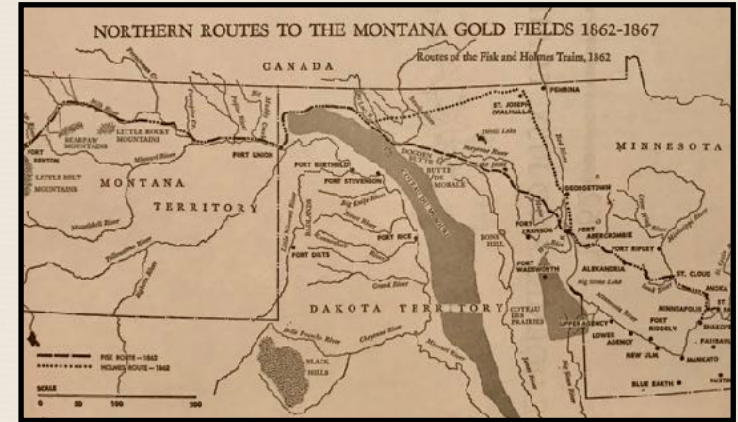


Tom, a Cook In Shakopee 1862 (Not a picture of Tom)

Compiled and written by David R. Schleper, Shakopee Heritage Society © 2021



On left is Thomas A. Holmes, who the head of the Holmes Wagon Train in 1862. On right is a map showing the routes to the Montana gold fields. From Helen McCann White (1966). *Ho! For the Gold Fields: Northern Overland Wagon Trains of the 1860s*. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society, p. 22.



Thomas A. Holmes led the Holmes Wagon Train to the Montana gold fields of 1862, the first of three times that he headed West. About seventy-odd persons were members of the Holmes train, mostly people from Minnesota. According to Helen McCann White, the group included two lawyers, a doctor, a dentist, several carpenters, at least two lumbermen, and farmers throughout the state. Also on this trip was Tom, who was African American, and was a cook on the way West.

Holmes was the *de facto* leader because of his experience and reputation as a frontiersman. In fact, Thomas Holmes himself said that “While I can only just about write my name now, I can skin a musk-rat quicker than an Indian.”

“Trains led by Thomas Holmes were characterized by spontaneity and informality. The emigrants organized into companies, each with an elected captain. Holmes, the captains, and such other officers as wagon master, chaplain, and Indian interpreter formed the train’s governing body.”

Thomas A. Holmes was highly respected among early Minnesotans for his intimate knowledge of of Indians and frontier ways.

“Although he seems to have been an ineffective organizer and at times a poor guide, emigrants gathered eagerly to travel with him, and placed great confidence in his ability to take them safely across the plains.”

Most accounts of the African American men and women, free and slave, who came by overland routes were members of companies organized by whites, such as the Holmes Wagon Train. The African American were generally remained nameless or known only by their first names. The common relationship of the African Americans were servant, laborer, or enslaved person. However, at least three men of African ancestry were guides for overland parties, including James Beckwourth, a black scout, fur trapper, Indian chief, and guide, and an unnamed Black interpreter who spoke several Indian languages, and well as French.

Tom was not alone. There were other African Americans who were in Montana Territory, including William Rhodes. He was an African American miner who had been successful as a gold miner in California. He came to Idaho in 1860 and by 1862 had accumulated \$80,000 in diggings. His skills brought him the attention of many financial backers and he died in the winter of 1886 while developing a mine for silver ore deposits in the Bitterroot Mountains.

Tom, the cook, may be free or he may be enslaved. There is no more information about him, including his last name, which could be because he was forced into the role.

Cooks were employed for their combined skills in food storage and preparation, a knowledge of sources of comestibles on the trail, and a general ability to control rambunctious gold seekers. Some cooks were accomplished players of fiddles, harmonicas, and guitars. The musical sounds of a human voice calmed nervous cattle.

Much of the food was cooked over an open-hearth fireplace with a few utensils, perhaps made of wood or gourds, an iron skillet, a pot for boiling, an iron griddle, and a tea kettle. The early pioneers survived by eating meat, wild berries, and food they found in the forest.

Like flour, settlers-colonists brought along tons of cornmeal for the trail. Cornmeal was easy to make and transport, so travelers got creative with how they used it in their meals. A favorite food was cornmeal pancakes, which could easily be fried up over the campfire.

The typical settler-colonist diet consisted of