Excavations to start at Fort Owen

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EXCAVATIONS TO START AT FORT OWEN

New knowledge about the early history of Montana is expected to come to light during the course of proposed excavations at Fort Owen, scheduled to begin in April.

An archaeological and historical survey of the site in the Bitterroot Valley is being undertaken as a cooperative venture by the State Parks Division of the Montana Highway Dept., Montana State University, and committees representing the Fifty Year Club, the Bitterroot Improvement Assn., the Stevensville Civic Club, and the Bitterroot Historical Society. The last group, under the leadership of its president, Mrs. Phyllis Twogood, has been especially active in initiating the project.

Fort Owen is one of three state monuments administered by the State Parks Division, according to Ashley C. Roberts, division director. The excavations are a preliminary step in the division's long-range plan of development of the fort as a state monument, he said. It is the division's intention ultimately to restore the fort to its original condition and to set up a museum at the site.

"The present project might be termed a 'pilot operation' because if it is successful, we plan to use similar methods in developing other historical landmarks in Montana," Roberts said.

The actual survey will be conducted by the University, in cooperation with the other interested groups. The archaeology class taught by Dr. Carling I. Malouf, assistant professor of anthropology at MSU, will examine the original part of the fort, which is now in ruins. The party will look for post holes that will show where the boundaries of the original stockade fort ran. The later fort was

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constructed of adobe bricks. "In excavating at Fort Owen, we may possibly find evidence of the location of the original St. Mary's mission, established by Father DeSmet in 1841," Dr. Malouf says.

John W. Smurr, University instructor in history, and a group of graduate students will participate in the project by doing research into the historical background of the area.

An important source of present knowledge of Fort Owen is the Fort Owen ledger, the earliest known account book kept by a free trader in the Rocky Mountain Northwest. The ledger was discovered in the attic of the barn of the McCormick house in Missoula a few years ago, where, presumably, it had been gathering dust for 70 years when Dr. George F. Weisel found it.

Dr. Weisel, associate professor of zoology at the University, edited the ledger and published it as "Men and Trade on the Northwest Frontier as Shown by the Fort Owen Ledger." He provided a biographical sketch of each person named in the ledger, a task which required intensive inquiry into the past. The book contains much original material, gathered by Dr. Weisel from journals not previously published. He did much of the research for the book at the Historical Library in Helena.

The fort was a trading post set up by Maj. John Owen on land purchased from the Jesuits at St. Mary's mission. The ledger's record of this land transaction indicates that the first St. Mary's mission, founded by Father DeSmet among the Flathead Indians, was located in the immediate vicinity of the fort. The mission was probably started in about 1841, Dr. Malouf says. The present mission at Stevensville was built in the 1860's by Father Ravalli after the original mission was abandoned. Set up for trade with the Indians, the fort soon became a center of trade for pioneers trekking westward to California and Oregon. Goods for the post came from Fort Benton, Fort Walla Walla, The Dalles, and from as far west as Fort Vancouver. Agents of the Hudson Bay Co. figure prominently in the ledger, and
the name of Capt. John Mullan, who engineered the first road through the area, also appears in the entries.