

# MULLAN CHRONICLES

Volume Three

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Number One



## Building the M.R.—Part Two

**I**n the August 1, 1991 issue of the Mullan Chronicles appeared the first part of an article by the same name that originally was printed in *Sunset: The Magazine of the Pacific* and of all the Far West (Vol. 24, #6, June 1910). It concerned an interview conducted with an aged John Mullan in 1908, a year before his death, with Day Allen Willey.

Prior to the actual contents of the interview appearing, Willey wrote a long biographical introduction of Mullan, including this:

**It commenced at the western end, for contrary to most ways of travel, it was built from west to east.**

"M R officially stands for Military Road, but the settlers who followed John Mullan and his men into the Inland Empire and made homes in other inviting spots, would not have it that way. They began calling it the Mullan Road, and that is how it is known to this day to the rancher of the Palouse, the miner of the Coeur d'Alenes or the farmer of the Spokane valley. So they speak when they see those branded posts all the way from old Walla Walla to the shore of the Missouri, for the Mullan Road was blazed amid the forest, dug out of the hillside, laid through swamps and staked across plains, from its beginning near the great river of the Pacific watershed to the right arm of the greatest waterway of America entering the Atlantic—the Missouri. It commenced at the western end, for contrary to most ways of travel, it was built from west to east. By making portages around



John Mullan, looking more like a Old Testament prophet than a pioneering road builder, is caught by the photographer a few years before his death in 1909.

the Columbia rapids at the Dalles, and the Cascades, the adventurer could pole his way up the Columbia in the flat-bottom barges. Leaving the river near Walla Walla, he could take the road — but a curious road, turning and twisting like the figure 8. Up the Palouse valley it passed to the northward, after crossing the Snake River in southeast Washington. Cutting through what is now the City of Spokane, but was at that time a forest, the route turned eastward into the foothills, then mountains, of that corner of Idaho that sticks against Canada. Up and up went the road until it crossed the Coeur d'Alenes by a pass nearly at the line of perpetual snow. Now to the south it turned following the course of the Bitter Root and Hell Gate Rivers through Idaho and Montana, until reaching the valley of the Missouri, the last post was driven at that old settlement which is farther inland than

*(continued on page 2)*

### Reprint Available

At long last the reprint of the 1863 edition of the "Report on the Construction of a Military Road" is available for researchers.

For those interested in obtaining their own copy, it comes in two different editions. The first is bound and the second is loose signatures in a plastic case for those who would want to put it in a binder or such. Both have all the maps and prints.

The last price quoted at a rare book store was over \$400 for an original, so this will be a welcome addition for all Mullanites.

Copies can be ordered from The Bird's Nest, 219 N. Higgins, Missoula, MT 59801, (406) 721-1125. A bound copy is \$50, unbound is \$35, plus \$4 postage and handling.



# *Building the M.R. (continued)*

any other town in America to which you can float from the sea — Fort Benton at the head of navigation of the Mississippi waterway.

*"A few months ago John Mullan died at his home in the Capital City. His body had become enfeebled with many years, and his flowing hair and beard had been whitened until he resembled the patriarches of old. But his mind, still alert, went readily back the fifty-odd years to the route through the wild that was his lifework. This tale of Western pioneering, just as he told it to the writer, is now published for the first time: (the story continues in Mullan's words)*

Arriving in the St. Regis Borgia valley we found we would have to winter amid the mountains. What the Indians said of the cold and snow storms convinced me that it would mean failure to the expedition, perhaps death to some of us, to try to push forward until spring, so early in December a curious little town sprang up in a corner of the Bitter Root country. I don't suppose there was a white man outside of ourselves in all that basin. To the west of us rose the Bitter Root range and to the eastward the main backbone of the Rockies over which we must go to reach the world again. Cantonment Jordan, as I named it, was composed of log-huts with a stockade around it, and a hut which you might call a block-house fitted into each corner. We thought it best to be on guard against the Indians, for we knew we were far from any aid, and that if attacked we must depend on ourselves. When the storms came and covered the ground with snow from three to nine feet on the level, we found too late that the stockade was a waste of work. No savages would ever think of attacking us walled in as we were by drifts.

We stayed in that valley from December until March. We were as much out of the world as though we were

on an island far at sea. Messenger after messenger was sent from Walla Walla, only to be driven back by the weather. We had our army rations including a supply of fresh beef which was kept frozen in the snow banks. Our food might have lasted all winter but scurvy broke out among the troops, because their commander followed the army regulations about diet, giving them salt meat five days out of the week. My own men had fresh meat five days and bacon on the others. When the scurvy threatened to kill off the soldiers, I took matters into my own hands and assumed command. Dr. Mullan ordered more beef and less bacon for them, and by cutting off the red tape, we probably saved many lives.

While we were snowed in here, so to speak, our instruments made a remarkable discovery of which we took advantage. What I called a stream or wave of warm air passes through this section of the West, apparently coming from the Plains country. It penetrates some of the valleys through mountain passes and raises the temperature so that cattle and horses can remain out all winter and graze. We heard from the Flatheads and other tribes of such a place where we sent our stock before settling in the Cantonment. Unfortunately we did not happen to locate within the warm belt but just on the edge of it, for fifteen miles away at the crossing of the Bitter Root river but little snow fell during the winter, and where our thermometers registered at times twenty degrees below zero at the river it was much warmer. I decided to take advantage of this heat belt to get some supplies from Benton if possible, for we had eaten so much fresh meat that food was getting scarce. I needed horses for a pack train. Our nearest neighbors were the Flathead tribe, so

I sent a messenger to Chief Ambrose, of the tribe, to ask if he would loan me men and horses. The man returned the next day with a bundle of sticks. "The Chief says he will let you have as many horses and men as there are sticks in this bundle."

And he did. I counted one hundred and thirty-seven sticks in the bundle, and a few days later twenty Indians and one hundred and seventeen horses started for Benton. Thanks to that stream of warm air, they got through successfully and brought us rations so that in March the party of path-makers were ready to begin work on the home stretch. I hoped to reach the old post during the summer, but only by working every man of the force were we able to make it. Crossing the Bitter Root we came to Big Mountain where the soldiers put aside their guns and took up the pry-bars and shovels. For six miles we had to dig our way through the rock, and the sixty miles to the Hell Gate river formed one of the hardest pieces of the entire road. Not until the last part of June did we reach this river which is well named.

*(Part Three, the final chapter, will appear in the next issue.)*

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## Deb considers the mystery of Mullan's "curious little town"

The "curious little town" that Mullan talks about has long been an interest of mine. This "town" was located in the vicinity of a modern dude ranch, east of DeBorgia, Montana. Those who have Ray Borchers' *Mullan Road Detail Maps* can find the site on

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**They were located approximately one mile west of Henderson, Montana, and were just west of a point of rock known locally as Mullan's Point. The St. Regis Borgia River was about twenty-five to thirty yards distant. U.S. Highway 10 now runs through the site.**

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page 29. There is still some question about where the actual site is. In 1973, University of Montana History Professor Duane Hampton and an interested layman, Thain White, did an extensive search for the site. The Mineral County Museum acquired a copy of their report, which contains a map that shows that they believed the site was actually about two miles northwest of where Borchers locates it. They refer to *Men and Trade On The North West Frontier*, edited by G.F. Wiesel, published by Montana State University in Missoula, 1955. On page 74 it states:

Some of the earth embankments which were thrown up along the sides of the buildings at Cantonment Jordan were still visible in 1915. Dave O'Keefe, a member of Mullan's gang, pointed them out to the author's father. They

were located approximately one mile west of Henderson, Montana, and were just west of a point of rock known locally as Mullan's Point. The St. Regis Borgia River was about twenty-five to thirty yards distant. U.S. Highway Ten now runs through the site."

As White writes later, it is hard to be sure of where the actual site is because the area saw a series of roads built through as well as a number of logging activities having taken place there. In addition, a lumber mill was located in the area from 1904 to 1921. Significant among the sketchy finds the two men made there were three rock piles found adjacent to an old logging road.

White wrote that they "did find some old square cut nails at the center pile of rocks plus some sort of old banding iron. ... The square nails appeared to have been in some sort of log about 3 inches under ground ... about 6 inches in diameter." And some of the banding had obviously been burned, he noted. Also found in the vicinity were tin cans, stumps and a brass trigger guard (I will talk about these further in the next issue).

White's notes about the burned strapping does relate to a piece written by R.H. Hewitt called *Notes By the Way, Memoranda of a Journey Across the Plains from Dundel, Illinois to Olympia, Washington Territory, May 7-Nov. 3, 1862*. He wrote at "Camp 91, Sunday, Sept. 14: ... In a clearing made for the purpose, stood the charred remains of the cabins where the engineers and workmen wintered while building the road. A fire had swept over the place destroying them, and stripping the foliage from an immense area of timber."

In 1919 interest in the site sparked among local residents. The April 11, 1919 issue of the *Mineral County Press* carried the following article:

### Old Graves Will Be Opened by Kresse

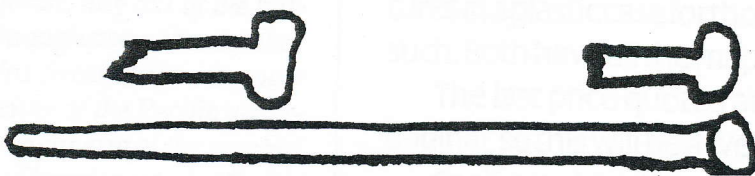
There are five mounds of earth on the farm of A. R. Kresse at DeBorgia. It is known that five of the crew who were working with Capt. Mullan on the Mullan trail in 1862, died of scurvy near this point. Capt. Mullan's log book is authority for this statement. Tradition has always had it that the five mounds on Kresse's farm are the graves of the five who died of scurvy. Scoffers have ridiculed the idea declaring that these mounds are only ovens.

Kresse proposes to go to the bottom of the controversy with a pick and shovel. If he finds that men are indeed buried there, he will fence off an appropriate graveyard with signs to notify tourists that they are passing a historic spot.

Later on he will announce the day that he expects to do the digging in order that any persons interested may be present.

Kresse did later announce that the "graves" would be opened on July 4th of that year, but following that date absolutely nothing appeared in either local newspaper on the subject so one has to assume it wasn't done or, if done, it turned up nothing. Whatever the source of these mounds, both Kay and I agree they could not have been from deceased members of Mullan's crew. As far as we have been able to determine, although there was a scurvy problem among the troops, it was taken care of before any deaths occurred. And there is no reference to any deaths there in Mullan's report. Kay suggests that if they were indeed graves, they may have belonged to immigrants who traveled the road at a later date. We have nothing at this time, however, to confirm either.

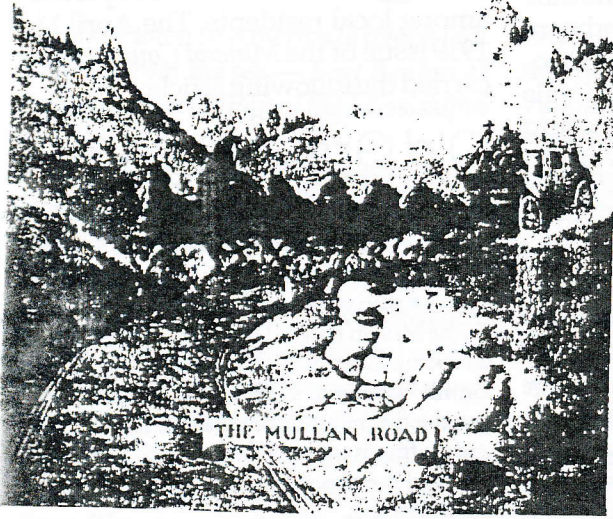
*(The final installment on Mullan's interview with Willey will appear in the next issue, along with the rest of Deb's commentary about Cantonment Jordan and Thain White's research notes and sketches on the nails and iron strapping.)*



This is one of the sketches of nails and iron strapping that appears in a report by Professor Duane Hampton and Thain White. Next issue we'll reproduce all the sketches and their commentary.



# from the mail pouch

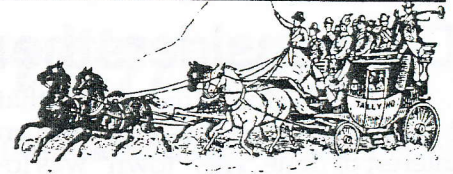


Enclosed please find reproduction of "The Mullan Road." This painting by Irvin Shope was done in 1937 on commission from the Montana Department of

Highways. At that time the latter was charged with developing tourism in Montana. I doubt if either the depicted road or mode of transportation created the desired effect!

The painting is on the wall of the Scott Hart Bldg. of the Capitol grounds—southeast entrance hall, a ground level entrance to the second floor. A similar painting for the Bozeman Trail hangs on the opposite wall. The Highway Department was housed in this building at the time.

Want larger or better? Let me know. Or write the Historical Li-



brary in Helena – not the Highway Department. The latter has forgotten about the painting—they don't know where it is located.

Sincerely,  
Raymond Borchers

Ray,

Thanks for your kind letter. You may be surprised that we have a copy of this painting in a lithograph form that was given to the museum by the American Society of Civil Engineers when they designated the road as a national historical landmark. It is interesting to learn of its origin, however. Deb

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