

MULLAN CHRONICLES

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Mullan Road's commercial importance was noted early

From our friend Robert Dunsmore of Osborn, ID we are grateful for copies of many articles in different publications. This one is from the Oregon Historical Quarterly, March, 1945. The Mullan Day of May 1991 (Mullan Chronicles, Vol. 2, #4) saw Dr. G. Thomas Edwards, Professor of History at Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA, give an in-depth presentation on the importance of the Mullan Road in early inland commerce.

EARLY COMMERCIAL IMPORTANCE OF THE MULLAN ROAD

OSCAR OSBORN WINTHER

1. Building the Mullan Road

When in 1853 Issac I. Stevens came west to assume the office of territorial governor of Washington, he was also conducting a survey for a northern route for a Pacific railroad, and brought with him no less than 243 officers and men, some of whom were scientists and artists. Stevens proposed

to explore the northern Rockies, Cascades, and intervening mountain ranges in the hope that a practical northern railroad route to the Pacific might be found. One of the officers assisting with this survey was Lieutenant John Mullan. Upon

arrival in the Oregon country Stevens left Lieutenant Mullan with thirteen men at Fort Owen—an outpost in the upper reaches of Clarks Fork and the Coeur d'Alene Mountains—in which general re-

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Monana Historical Society photograph

On the front of the August 1999 TV schedule printed by the Missoulian was a picture of the Mullan Tunnel with the workmen who built it. The accompanying article told of the Japanese and Chinese workers who were a large part of the workforce that built the tunnel. The picture depicts the opening of the tunnel about 1884 near Helena.

Mullanite Deb Becomes Mrs. Kenneth Quitt

Our own Deb Davis—journalist, historical writer, and deeply involved in all things Mullan—became Mrs. Kenneth Quitt on July 22 at Superior. She now resides in Seeley Lake and will no doubt be a force in getting that area involved in their history. Deb and Ken have known each other for a long time; they have the best wishes of us all.

Road was seen as impetus to immigration

(continued from Page One)

gion he was to collect data on winter weather. Not since the Lewis and Clark expedition had there been any formal or official exploration of that country, and so the young lieutenant made the most of his opportunities. During the winter he crossed and recrossed the continental divide six times and traveled an aggregate distance of one thousand miles. And in addition to making personal observations Mullan and his men learned much from the Indians and from the Catholic Fathers who were carrying on missionary work in the area.

...a wagon road which would join together the two great river basins of the Columbia and the Missouri.

The purpose of the general survey was, as stated, to find a suitable route, but it is clear from the outset Lieutenant Mullan, sensed the more immediate prospect of constructing over the mountains a wagon road which would join together the two great river basins of the Columbia and the Missouri. "From what I saw of Clark's Fork and the neighboring country," wrote Mullan in his official report, "I concluded that a wagon route could easily and economically [sic] constructed from Hell's Gate

Ronde to the east end of the lake ...; from which I concluded a construction at this point could only be made at a heavy outlay..." Then in 1854 Lieutenant Mullan returned east only to find that Congress had appropriated \$30,000 for the survey of a military road to run between Fort Benton, the head of navigation on the Missouri, and Wallula (the site of old Fort Walla Walla) on the Columbia River—a route very similar to what Mullan had in mind—and that he was asked to take charge of the work.

It will be recalled that from Wallula, emigrant roads leading over the Cascade Range into Puget Sound had already been built, and from this river point it was possible to sail down the Columbia River into many parts of the Oregon country. Thus the successful construction of this proposed road would enable emigrants, or other people for that matter, to go from St. Louis up the Missouri to Fort Benton and from there to travel directly overland into the Pacific Northwest.

Official negligence, Army red tape, sectional jealousies, and finally the "Mormon War" of 1857 all conspired to

postpone operations, and it was March, 1858, before the much disappointed army officer was permitted to begin

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his work. Even then came interruptions, for hardly had Mullan come to Oregon and assembled his crew when ominous news came that the Palouse Indians were on the warpath, that Lieutenant Colonel E.J. Steptoe had been defeated, and that these blood hungry savages were seeking to destroy Mullan and his men. "The news," to use the Lieutenant's own words, "though much exaggerated, as is usual on the frontier, was such as to cause me to halt at this point till I could confer with [sic] letter with Colonel Steptoe." What he actually did was to join the forces of Colonel Wright who with his United States regulars dealt a revengful blow to the recalcitrant Palouse.

Congress, meanwhile, showed a renewed interest

Bridges and signs were branded "M.R."

and generosity with regard to the proposed road, and in March, 1859, appropriated and additional \$100,000 not only for the survey but also for the actual construction of the Fort Benton-Wallula road. "This sum," reported the *Oregon Union* gleefully, "with an unexpended balance of some twenty thousand dollars... will be ample to build an excellent road ... This will open up a direct communication between the valley of the Mississippi and Oregon." Furthermore, the *Union* believed that the construction of such a road would bring about an "immense immigration pouring into the Flathead country from Minnesota, Missouri, Iowa and other western States. We have a promising future before us."

With the restoration of peace in the Palouse country, Mullan, who meanwhile had gone to Washington for new instructions, reorganized his construction gang and on June 4, 1859 is reported to have arrived at the mouth of the Palouse River with an escort of 100 artillerymen and with the news that other workers were enroute. By June 27—so reads a report—Mullan's survey and grading work had reached the mouth of the

Tucannon River, the point chosen for crossing the Snake. It appears that

One such inscription may still be seen at Fourth of July summit in Idaho at a place where United States Highway 10 follows the course of the old Mullan Road... It reads "M.R. Fourth of July 1861."

Mullan did his work with more than the usual care exercised in pioneer road construction, although the

forces of nature were quick to play havoc with it. Some bridges were built, places and distances were indicated on signposts, all of which were branded "M.R." (military road). Thus one would note signs such as these: "To Dry Creek, 9 miles;" "To Tocket, 21 miles;" "To Fort Taylor, Snake River, 50 miles." Interestingly enough one such inscription may still be seen at Fourth of July summit in Idaho at a place where United States Highway 10 follows the course of the old Mullan Road. It reads "M.R. Fourth of July 1861." **MC**

(To be continued...)

We lose three ardent Mullanites

Last December we received word that Bernard Merriman of Coeur d'Alene has passed away. He and his wife Dorothy were early Mullan recorders.

A post card from Grass Range, MT informed us of the death of Montana historian, Joel Francis Overholser of Fort Benton who died October 20, 1999. Joel's book "Fort Benton, World's Innermost Port" is a tour d'force of steamboat history of Montana.

On July 31, 2000 we lost Anna Lukens of Missoula. Mrs. Lukens was avidly interested in the Mullan Road and when her health allowed it she attended many of the Mullan Day get-togethers.

Another loss that will be hard to replace is Ye Galleon Press of Fairfield, WA who shut down their presses after 36 years due to the ill health of owner Glen Adams. The printery did an exceptional job of making reprints of many rare volumes of history, especially the northwest, that otherwise would be out of the reach of the average researcher. His reprints made it so they were available and affordable for everyone. Sure hope someone picks up this valuable service and continues his outstanding work. **MC**



We won't give up, hope you won't give up on us!

We will continue to get the *Chronicles* out. When you pay for a year you will get a full four issues no matter how many years it takes!

We have started a new system to tell you when your membership is due. Note the number below your address. If it is a + followed by a number, it shows the number of issues you have coming; if it's a -, you are behind. BE PATIENT WITH US PLEASE, FOR THERE IS HOPE!

Cathryn (Kay) Strombo and
Deb Davis, Editors.

In a Christmas card, long-time Mullanite Bill Trublood sent along an obituary for valued historian Bernard Merriam of Coeur d'Alene, last fall.

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