

# MULLAN CHRONICLES

Volume Eight

Spring 2001

Number Four



## Winter offered challenge to Mullan Road builders

*The impressive article on the Mullan Military Road from the March, 1945 issue of Oregon Historical Quarterly continues from Volume 8, Number Three. It will be concluded in the next issue. We are grateful to our friend, Robert Dunsmore of Osborn, ID for this interesting and valuable article (as well as many others).*

Mullan writes that he hoped to reach the foot of the Mountains by the 18th of September...

An emigrant train is reported en route, and some of the settlers think of locating in the Bitter Root country, where it is said great inducements are offered for settlement.

### EARLY COMMERCIAL IMPORTANCE OF THE MULLAN ROAD

OSCAR OSBORN WINTHER

Week by week work on what was to be known as the Mullan Road progressed. "The general character of the country from Walla-Walla to the mouth of the Palouse," wrote Mullan, "is an easily rolling prairie; road excellent; camps good, with fine water and most abundant grass." By October, *The Dalles Journal* wrote:

"We have advices from Lieut. Mullan, in charge of the Fort Benton Wagon Road Expedition, to the 12th ult. At the date he was camped twenty-six miles east of Coeur d'Alene Mission, and the work was being vigorously pushed forward.

"The camp was about ten miles from the summit of the Bitter Root Mountain, and Lieut.

*(continued on Page Two)*

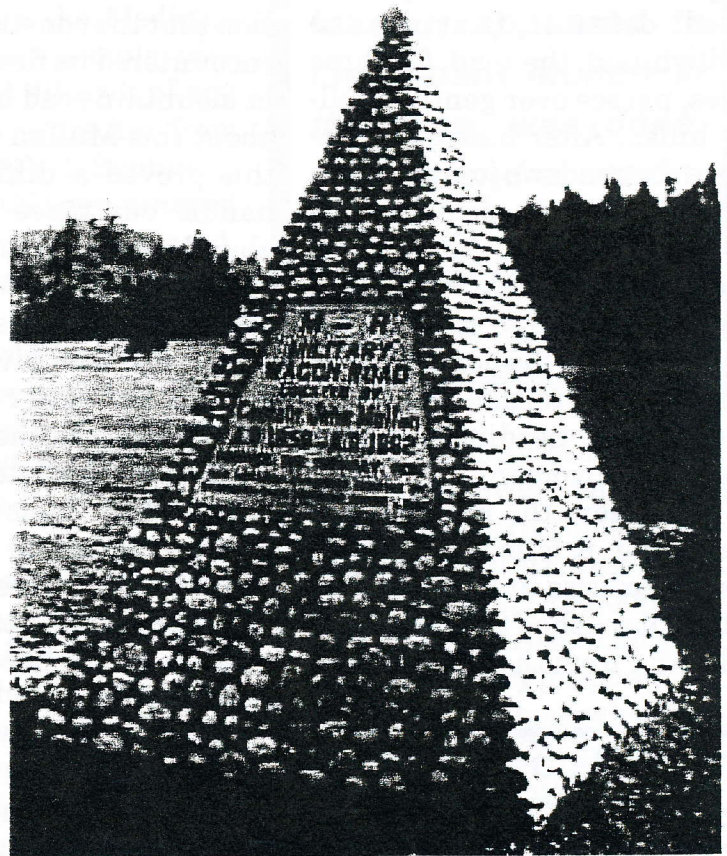


Photo courtesy of Don Popejoy

*Mullan Military Road marker at Sprague and Vista near Spokane. The plaque reads "M-R Military Wagon Road Located by Captain John Mullan A.D. 1858-A.D. 1862 crossed the highway here. This location monument erected by Washington State Historical Society 1922."*

### Mark your calendars! Mullan Day is May 12

We have set Saturday, May 12, 1:00 pm (MDT) in St. Regis. Look for us at the St. Regis Senior Citizens, across the street from the St. Regis school. We have Bill Weikel of Missoula who will be doing a demonstration and talk on the instruments used during the road building period. Chuck Mead has good news to report on the land transfer between his property and the state. Also on the possibility of habingh money from the phone company to help with signing on the Camel's Hump section.

In future issues will be material sent by "cousin-cousin" Don Popejoy of Spokane. He is another ardent road researcher adding his interests to those of the Oregon Trail.

## Construction difficulties began at Cataldo

*(continued from Page One)*

Lieut. Mullan, notwithstanding the apprehension of others, is still confident of reaching the Bitter Root country in time to winter."

For a more complete account of the construction of this road one must turn to the Army engineer's own official report. In plain, direct statements he told of problems and the progress associated with the work. Thus for July 14-15 he wrote:

"Our route of this date skirts the lake from which Colonel Steptoe retreated the day of his noted defeat... Leaving the Nedlwhuald, the road, for three miles, passes over gently swelling hills... After halting to improve the road, we journeyed on through an open prairie basis for seven miles to some wells, where, being provided with wood in our wagons, we made camp for the night. This portion of the route may be termed a natural wagon road, needing but very slight improvement."

From where the road crossed the Snake, it followed a northeasterly course until on August 5, 1859 it reached Coeur d'Alene Lake and from there it followed

the left bank of the river bearing the same name until Coeur d'Alene Mission was reached on August 16. Mullan constantly kept his eye on possible economic developments which his new road might bring. He commented on the "abundance of timber," the indications of gold, and about the presence of game. He spoke of the "fine tracts of land for settlement," about "the most excellent grazing," and mentioned mill sites on tributary streams.

It was at Couer d'Alene Mission that the construction party encountered its first serious test in mountain road building, and about this Mullan wrote: "That this proved a difficult task to handle our three years' labor abundantly proves."

From Mission Coeur d'Alene the road continued to follow Coeur d'Alene River to Sohon Pass in the Bitter Root Mountain divide. On the east side of the divide the route entered the beautiful St. Regis Borgia River country which in turn joined the Bitter Root River (now Clark Fork) along the road was to go until it reached scenic, if not spectacular, Hell Gate. From this point it entered the rugged country of Hell Gate River Valley, wound its way southeastward until it reached the famous Deer Lodge Valley; thence northeast through the mountains along the Little Blackfoot river until it ascended the summit of the Great Rocky Mountain divide. Finally it came into the vicinity of the Missouri and at this junction the road followed

the west side of this river until Fort Benton was finally reached after a distance of 624 miles.

It will be possible here to recount only an occasional detail relative to the construction of this road. The party reached the St. Regis Borgia Valley on December 4, 1859, where camp was made. Here winter in all its fury overtook the men. Lieutenant Mullan wrote that he had pushed his stock "to the last point of endurance, dreading to

***I took the precaution to have the beef cattle driven to camp and slaughtered and the beef frozen, in which condition it kept until the month of March.***

be caught in a mountain gorge to battle out the winter, or to contend with high water of the coming spring." Enfeebled as were the cattle, it was found necessary, since no pasturage existed there, to drive them another hundred miles ahead over slippery and difficult mountain trails. Great losses were incurred. "I took the precaution," said Mullan, "to have the beef cattle driven to camp and slaughtered and the beef frozen, in which condition it kept until the month of March."

This winter and others were spent gauging snow falls, surveying, building boats and ferries. Since no animals were available, all packing had to be done by men. During this first winter of 1859-60 the men built

### Kay is now wired!

Our kids, to make my life a lot easier (so they say) wired me to email. I am now [mrshezzie@blackfoot.net](mailto:mrshezzie@blackfoot.net). Please send us your address to add to our files. It is a machine and most people know what I think of machines. We have 120 members now. I can remember when Deb and I started and we wondered if there would be enough material to do a complete year's worth!

## *First transit of Mullan Road took 57 days*

six bateaux and one large flat-boat. One man was dispatched to Washington, D.C. to ask for additional supplies which in the form of three hundred recruits came directly from St. Louis during the following spring. Soon supplies were brought in from Fort Benton, but not without the help of the Flathead Indians who very generously supplied men and horses. "Such nobleness of character as is found among some of the Flatheads is seldom seen among Indians," Mullan reflected. Communication was also established between Mullan and Salt Lake City by his expressman Ned Williamson who though "caught in the mountains by deep snows, ... lost his horses, made snowshoes from his saddle rigging, and, though snow-blinded for several days, made the greater portion of the five hundred miles on foot." He succeeded in reaching Camp Floyd and returning

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within fifty days.

The work during the spring of 1860 was hazardous and strenuous. For six weeks 150 men were employed cutting a six mile stretch through mountains in

the vicinity of present Missoula. By June 28, however, the work to Hell Gate was completed, and when making his report in 1863 Mullan said: "The 90 miles from the Bitter Root ferry to the Hell's Gate route affords a good road, with camp grounds at convenient points, with an abundance of wood, water, and grass. Many beautifully situated agricultural tracts are found through this region." On July 1 they reached Blackfoot River, and from there regular communication with Fort Benton was established. On July 22 work on the Medicine Rock section was completed—"by far the most difficult of any point along the entire line from Hell's Gate to Fort Benton"—and on the 28th they reached Sun River where work ceased, for as Mullan said, "the remaining distance of 55 miles to Fort Benton was over an easy and almost level prairie road, with no running streams." Thus on August 5, 1860 the job, so at least it appeared to Lieutenant Mullan at the time, was done, and he and a contingent of his men retraced their steps to Walla Walla, 624 miles away. And scarcely had these roadmakers left Fort Benton on the Missouri when Major Blake initiated the new route by dispatching troops over it—a feat which was accomplished in 57 days.

It must be remembered here that what passed for a road in those early days would scarcely be graced with that name today. What Lieutenant Mullan had in reality done was to provide a route over which it might be

possible to convey vehicles during the dry seasons of the year. But even this proved questionable since the builder had not reckoned the full damage which can be inflicted by the heavy spring rains of that region. It was found necessary for Mullan to remain in the field until May 23, 1862, during which time improvements on the road were constantly made. At that time the road which by then was gen-

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erally known as the Mullan Road represented seven years of effort on the part of its maker, less time for scores of other men, and a total expense of \$230,000. The Mullan road was ostensibly designed for military purposes, but it was hoped by those who originally petitioned Congress for it that immigrants might make extensive use of it. Mullan personally anticipated this and made provision for supplies for the immigrants and left memorandum notes at given places along the route regarding suitable camp sites. **MC**

*(To be continued...)*



**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, Editor

from the mail  
pouch



Hank Ramsey (hr1938@aol.com), the fine researcher now removed to Prescott AZ, says he is keeping warm. We will miss him and his talents in finding materials about our road and are especially grateful for his extraordinary donation to our Mullan collection.

Very sorry to report that another fine researcher and ardent Mullanite, Bryan Vallett of Flathead Lake MT, passed away from a sudden illness October 20, 2000. He was able to find materials in divergent places and forward them to us to include in our ever-growing collections. His wife, Rachel, said Bryan enjoyed the *Chronicles* when they arrived.

**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!

**The *Mullan Chronicles* is published by the Mineral County museum and Historical Society, Post Office Box 533, Superior, MT 59872, a non-profit organization. Subscriptions are \$5 per 4 issues to cover printing and mailing. Computerized typesetting by Van Wolverton.**

Cathryn (Kay) Strombo, Editor

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