

MULLAN CHRONICLES

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Mullan Road Was Route to Gold Rush in 1865

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 (*Chronicles*, Vol.2, #4) saw Dr. G. Thomas Edwards, Professor of History, Whitman College, Walla Walla, WA, give an in-depth presentation of the importance of the Mullan Road in early inland commerce.

Early Commercial Importance of the Mullan Road Oscar Osborn Winther

(continued from Volume 8, #4, final installment)

II.

Travel and Commerce on the Mullan Road

The Mullan Road was, as stated, first thought of as a military road connecting the Missouri and Columbia rivers. By the time of its completion in 1862 the military urgency of the road was greatly diminished in view of what appeared to be a marked quiescent state among the Oregon Indians.

NOW WIRED!!

mrshezzie@blackfoot.net will get to me. Please send address changes and your email address to me so we can keep our files up to date.



Dedicating the Mullan Military Road marker located at the intersection of State Highway 195 South and Excelsior Road, south of Spokane about 5 miles.

More important, therefore, from the point of view of meeting immediate needs, was that Montana, already enjoying a fur trade, was on the verge of what was destined to be a great and historic gold rush. And in no small measure the Mullan Road was to play a significant role in the early history of Montana, first as an important route of commerce, and second, as a avenue for immigration. In 1822

there was organized the western department of the American Fur Company with headquarters in St. Louis. Immediately this concern began penetrating the upper reaches of the Missouri River and it was not long before the American Fur Company built several posts in Montana, namely, Fort Union, near the mouth of the Yellowstone, Forts Piegan and McKenzie on the Marias, Fort Cass

(continued on Page Two)

Steamboats thronged to Fort Benton

(continued from Page One)

near the mouth of the Big Horn, and, among others, the previously referred to Fort Benton which was located not far below the Great Falls and as such was destined to become the head of steam navigation on the Missouri River. Near

The need for almost all agricultural and industrial commodities was being met by suppliers from outside the state of Montana.

Thompson Falls and on the banks of Flathead Lake the rival Hudson's Bay Company had its only two posts in Montana, but out from Fort Colville in what is now north-eastern Washington came many traders who penetrated into the Montana country. In addition to the fur traders there were the missionaries, but not until the general

rush of population to California and the coming of Governor Isaac Stevens and his party to this country in 1853 in search for a railroad route to the Pacific did the Montana region attract the attention of people who might wish to settle permanently there. Among the first to settle were retired mountain men and these appear to have gone into the little valleys of the Bitter Root Mountains which now separate Montana from Idaho. Mullan made references to such people as being there when his road was being built. Added to these was Major John Owen who as early as 1850 came as a sutler and had purchased the St. Mary's Mission in the Bitter Root country, and developed a trade that embraced the whole area spanned by the future Mullan Road.

Then, finally, between 1857-65 came what gave Montana its

first great impetus and what on May 26, 1864 made her a separate territory—the development of gold diggings. Gold had been found in Montana as early as 1852, but not until the arrival of the Stuart party in 1857-58 was prospecting taken seriously. Gradually excitement and interest spread until between 1862-64 fever height was reached with the development of extremely rich placer and quartz mines at Gold Creek, Bannack, Deer

There emerged immediately a keen awareness of competition between St. Louis, Missouri and Portland, Oregon, for the Montana trade.

Lodge, Last Chance Gulch (Helena), and Virginia City. The population increase occasioned by the gold discovery was tremendous. In 1863 Bannack's inhabitants had reached 2—3,000; Virginia City had a population of 10,000. By 1865 the estimated population of Montana was 120,000, and most of these people were in the southwestern part of present Montana—literally hundreds of miles away from the source of supplies. And since, as Dr. Robert E. Albright has pointed out in his dissertation, "practically nothing was being produced within the Territory in agri-

Weikel Wows at Mullan Day 2001

We had a great turnout at St. Regis on Saturday, May 12. Bill Weikel, surveyor from Missoula, displayed early surveying instruments and handed out materials on the number of people that were in the command. His research has turned up quite a bit of information concerning the meals and rations per man in the military and how the men were divided

into work parties. Freight was set at 10 cents per pound.

Bill has acquired many antique surveying instruments that make his presentation come alive. If you are interested in more information from Bill he is great at putting on a "dog and pony" show on this subject. Contact him at 406-728-4133, or write: 240 E Kent, Missoula, MT 59801.

Higgins and Worden made use of MR

cultural, stockraising or industrial lines, almost the entire demand was met from the outside." Bannack and Virginia City, as H.H. Bancroft states, lay 400 miles from Salt Lake, 1,400 from Omaha, 1,000 from Portland, 600 from the point of navigation on the Columbia River, and 200 miles from Fort Benton.

It was this situation which first of all gave importance to old Fort Benton, next to the Mullan Road. Steamers had for a long time plied the waters of the Missouri, but never before 1859 had such a vessel ascended this great stream from its mouth to near the Great Falls. But, on November 1, 1859, Charles P. Choteau wrote to Secretary of War John B. Floyd:

I have the honor to submit the following report of my journey by steamboat from St. Louis to Fort Benton on the Upper Missouri. I

Higgins and Worden of Hell Gate lost a big stock of goods... the fire was caused by a deckhand who went down into the hold to steal some alcohol...

left St. Louis on the 28th of May last, taking two boats, the "Spread Eagle" of 550 tons of measurement, and the "Chippawa" a stern wheeler, 165 feet long, 30 feet beam and 350 tons capacity.

Leaving the first of his ships at

Fort Pierre, Choteau moved on up the river to Fort Union where he recorded in his log:

By my present experience I have arrived at the conclusion that with suitable boats and the removal of boulders here and there obstructing the channel and forming the rapids, that the navigation of the Upper Missouri can be made just as safe and easy and (sic) the Upper Mississippi or Ohio rivers, and I have no hesitation in affirming that the trip from St. Louis to Fort Benton can be easily accomplished within thirty-five days.

That this feat was practicable is demonstrated by subsequent arrivals of steamboats at Fort Benton, the number of which coincided with the rush of population to western Montana and the completion of the Mullan Road. Up until 1864 no more than four steamers arrived in any one season; but in 1865, 8 came; 1866, 31; 1867, 39; 1868, 35; 1869, 24; etc. (For further information see Joel Overholser's book) Hiram Chittenden adds, furthermore, that as many as seven steamers could be loading and unloading cargoes at one time.

The opening of this Missouri River freighter service at a time coinciding with the completion of the Mullan Road was not accomplished without having far reaching effect. Not only was there opened up an entirely new trans-continental line of communications via Montana, but there emerged immediately a keen awareness of competition between

there was competition between steamboat transportation and mule packing, for it must be emphasized here that very few wagons ever passed over the Mullan Road. Nearly all freight transported over this route was carried on the backs of mules.

St. Louis, Missouri and Portland, Oregon, for the Montana trade. To put it another way, there was competition between steamboat transportation and mule packing, for it must be emphasized here that very few wagons ever passed over the Mullan Road. Nearly all freight transported over this route was carried on the backs of mules. At first there was a ratio of 15 to 13 cents per pound on rates over the two routes with Portland offering the lower figure, but in later years St. Louis gained a very decided margin. Freight rates from Oregon to Montana, wrote the Montana Post in 1868, "are about three times as great as from St. Louis, yet the price of many descriptions of goods will be materially cheapened by the arrival of these trains, even at freight ranging from 20 to 25 cents in gold..." Regardless of rates each region had certain necessities to offer Montana—for

Railroad spelled end of MR's popularity

example food from the West and merchandise and mining equipment from the East—and as such a vigorous trade was maintained over both routes for several years. Salt Lake City and San Francisco were not unaware of the profits made in this Montana trade, and in time exerted much effort to share in it.

Traffic over the Mullan Road was frequently confined to the eastern section of it and during the first year or two of the Montana gold rush this was particularly true. As early as 1861 the pioneer miner Granville Stuart made many references in his diary to goods taken over the Mullan route to Hell Gate and vicinity. Note the following

October 14... Put handles in the picks and sharpened the shovels... These tools were brought up for us from Walla Walla by Worden and Higgin's pack train...

for July 11, 1861:

The American Fur Company's steambot "Chippewa" burned and blew up at the mouth of Milk River. Cargo total loss, no lives lost. Higgins and Worden of Hell Gate lost a big stock of goods...the fire was caused by a deckhand who went down into the hold to steal some alcohol...The d___ fool had a lighted candle...

And to continue:

September 7...Robert Pelkey and party of three wagons arrived from the states en route to Bitter Root valley...

September 9...Last night Jack Collins and Ned Williamson arrived from Hell Gate en route for Fort Benton with whiskey for Indian trade.

October 14...Put handles in the picks and sharpened the shovels...These tools were brought up for us from Walla Walla by Worden and Higgin's pack train...

Then in 1862 writing in Deer Lodge Valley, Stuart again refers to the Montana-Walla Walla traffic:

July 13. Many emigrants arriving some going back to the states and some adventurous spirits are going to Salmon River...

July 20. Worden and Higgin's wagon arrived from Fort Benton loaded with merchandise...

Similar and reported references appear for the year 1862, chief of which relate the coming of Captain James Fisk immigrant party from St. Paul and of how this officer was "inspecting Captain John Mullan's military wagon road from Fort Benton to Walla Walla." Then with the coming of thousands of immigrants to Montana in 1863 Stuart was quick to recognize the Mullan Road for what in the final analysis it was—a pack trail. Notations such as the following are found in this important journal:

May 5, 1863. Two pack trains arrived from Walla Walla. Bought from them the following:

52 lbs. Tobacco	@\$4.00	\$208.00
168 lbs. Bacon	@ .40	67.20
241 lbs. Sugar	@ .60	144.60
17½ lbs. Soup	@ .50	8.75
		\$428.55

The idea of it requiring an immense sum to make it a good, practical wagon road is fallacious in the extreme...to make it a perfectly good road in low water, will not require a sum in excess of \$3,000...

These pack trains varied in size but most frequently there were about twenty animals in a train.

The discovery of gold on the Little Blackfoot River and its tributaries in 1865 brought additional thousands to Montana, a vast number of which came from the Pacific Coast region, and to use the words of one of Montana's pioneers: "Nearly all of this restless, shifting crowd came over the Coeur d'Alene Mountains by way of the Mullan Road and through Hell Gate Ronde. During the whole of the summer and the fall of 1865," continues this observer, "the road was literally lined with men and animals on their way to the new El Dorado."

Contemporary accounts pertaining to routes of travel—particularly newspaper sources—frequently contain conflicting evidence. Reports regarding the Mullan Road were no exception. The reason for this may be attributed to local interests. Thus, for example, the *Idaho Statesman* for April, 1866 refers to the Coeur d'Alene route as "totally impassable for loaded animals if they are indeed passable for animals at all." But as for the Boise City route to Montana "there has been no obstruction..." Likewise some other correspondent wrote in July of this same year that along the Mullan Road were "decayed remnants of bridges," "debris of fallen timber,"

Cattle, pack mules, wagons, and people...

“huge boulders,” and other obstructions which “render the passage of pack and saddle horses almost impossible.”

Evidence to the contrary comes from the Montana Post correspondent who

5,000 head of cattle were driven from Walla Walla to Montana, 6,000 mules have left Walla Walla and the Columbia river loaded with freight for Montana, fifty-two light wagons with families have left Walla Walla for Montana,

in a letter published in a San Francisco paper, November, 1866, wrote:

Wagons have passed over the road the present season, and with little trouble, and the idea of it requiring an immense sum to make it a good, practical wagon road is fallacious in the extreme... to make it a perfectly good road in low water, will not require a sum in excess of



We are sorry to report the loss of another of our members. A note from Terry Johnson, son of Dr. Theodore Johnson, Spokane, related that his father passed away in July 2000. Dr. Johnson attended one of our May meetings when a descendent of the Mullan family was present.

three thousand dollars... would cost \$18,000 to repair bridges.

In a memorial to Congress for 1866, which asks that the road be repaired, one finds this important statistical account of the volume of business on this road:

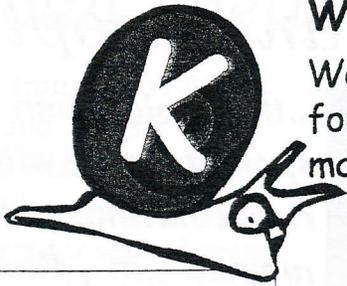
From January 1 to November 15, 1866, 1,500 head of horses have been purchased by individual miners at Walla Walla horse markets, 2,000 miners have been outfitted at Walla Walla, 5,000 head of cattle were driven from Walla Walla to Montana, 6,000 mules have left Walla Walla and the Columbia river loaded with freight for Montana; fifty-two light wagons with families have left Walla Walla for Montana, thirty-one wagons with immigrants have come through from the states via the Mullan road, a portion of whom have settled in Walla Walla valley and the remainder crossed the Columbia river at Wallula and settled on the Yakima river or passed on to Puget Sound; not less than 20,000 persons have passed over the Mullan road to and from Montana during the past season; \$1,000,000 in treasure has passed through Walla Walla and Wallula during the same period.

Towards the close of the 'sixties two things occurred which bring a close this particular episode in Montana history. Firstly, the gold rush had spent its force with the result that those who remained in Montana turned to the business of raising their own food supplies and as such became less dependent upon the outside world for such commodities. Secondly, the first transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869; and while this road did not pass directly through Montana it was not long before connections of different

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types and over varying routes were made with it.

In retrospect the Mullan Road, nevertheless, was of great commercial and military importance to the early history of the Far West in general and of Montana in particular. It served for a time as a link in East-West communication. Finally, the Mullan road—such as it was—must be thought of as a monument to Lieutenant John Mullan who at this early date first had the vision and the courage to even think, let alone, build a road through 624 miles of rugged wilderness, over the precipitous passes of the Coeur d'Alenes, and finally over the great continental divide. Today a broad paved highway (U.S. #10) winds its way along much of Mullan's original route—through beautiful and scenic Idaho and western Montana—and the existence of this road is in itself a monument and a tribute to the man who first mapped its course.



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

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Cathryn (Kay) Strombo, Editor

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