

# MULLAN CHRONICLES

Volume Nine, Issue #4

Winter 2002-2003



## Mullan's axe and shovel passage

By Joe Baily

*This article, found by our good friend and Mullanite Robert Dunsmore of Osburn, ID, appeared in The Pacific Northwesterner, Winter, 1958, reprinted with permission.*

*(Continued from Volume 9 No. 3.)*

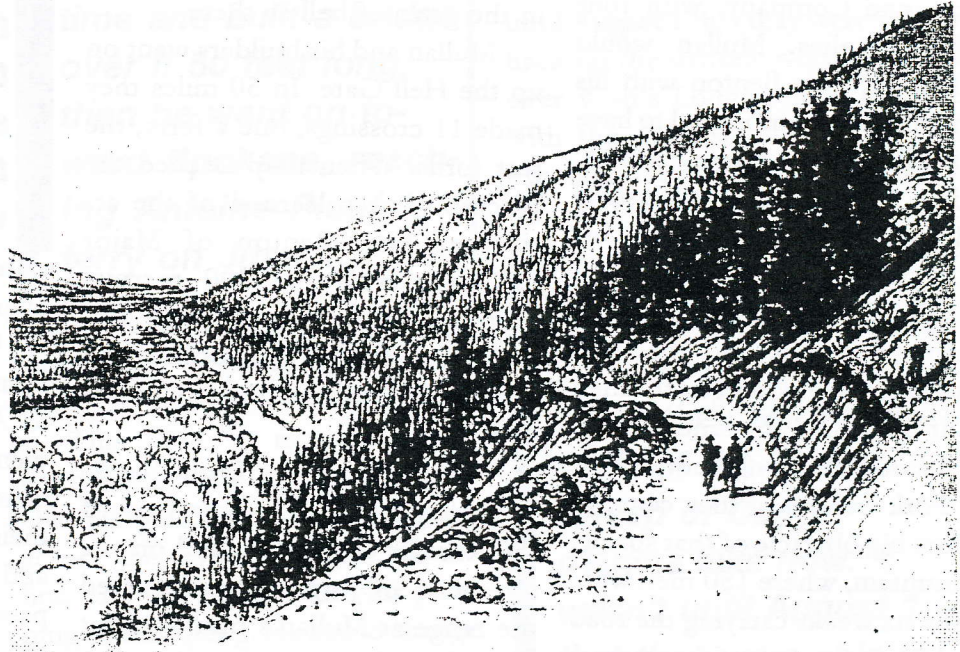
From the creek, they moved over gentle hills, with the considerably less gentle spurs of the Bitter Roots south of Coeur d'Alene lake becoming ever more prominent ahead. Their most difficult problem confronted them when they had to descend 700 feet from the tableland to the valley of the St. Joseph, now the St. Joe, called by Father DeSmet, the St. Joseph.

Four miles up the St. Joseph, they selected a suitable place for a ferry boat crossing, whipsawyers went to work in the timber, other men went to burning tar, and having brought along the all-essential oakum they built two flatboats, 42 feet long and 12 feet broad and two feet deep, one for this crossing of the St. Joseph, one to be rowed down into the lake and up the Coeur d'Alene river to serve in the crossing of it.

It was 12 miles from the St. Joseph river to the Coeur d'Alene mission, which they reached on August 16.

Now they were at one of the landmarks of their endeavor, the Mission of the Sacred Heart.

From the mission it was four miles through timber to Four Mile prairie, more timber to Seven-mile prairie, still more to Ten-mile prairie. On



*Sketch of Big Side Cut, made by Gustavus Sohon in April 1862. Presumably it shows the road under construction along a mountainside somewhere near the present location of Alberton, MT. (Courtesy National Archives)*

they went, following the serpentine Coeur d'Alene and then the St. Regis.

From August 16 to December 5, 1859, the work of Mullan's tenacious party consisted in cutting through the dense standing timber and matted fallen timber for 100 miles, building scores of small bridges, grading hundreds of places. The axe and shovel passage was being forced by resolute men through the barriered way, one of the most rugged areas in all America.

Their goal of wintering in the "Bitter Root valley," as Mullan called it, could not be achieved. Snow came down heavily, winter overwhelmed them. They settled into camp in the woods of the St. Regis Borgia valley on December 4.

Their stock was snowed in by this time and many died of exposure and starvation.

The men were set to work erecting log huts, and the camp was named Cantonment Jordan. Their winter was a bleak one.

Mullan, sent W.W. Johnson, the 24-year-old staffman, to Washington with orders to see the Secretary of War, the Topographical Bureau, Governor Stevens in congress - to leave nothing undone to secure the movement of troops over the road the next summer. Specifically he was to ask for the replenishing of companies serving in Oregon and Washington by 300 recruits to be

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# His axe and shovel passage would do it

sent from St. Louis to Fort Benton in the spring by the steamers of Choteau and Company, with four months' supplies. Mullan would meet them at Fort Benton with his wagon train, and he promised to have them in Walla Walla, wagons and all, in 60 days. His axe and shovel passage would do it. The movement was ordered as Mullan requested.

Finally the chinooks came and the snow departed, and the mild winds of spring encouraged the men to be at their road in earnest again. They headed on along the present Clark Fork river until they came to their first big obstacle of that spring. Big Mountain, where 150 men were busy for six weeks carrying the road around the mountain-side; a man, Sheridan, lost an eye in the blasting then, another was stunned. On to

**Finally, the chinooks came and the snows departed, and the mild winds of spring encouraged the men to be at their road in earnest again.**

Hell Gate, 60 miles away, they had to build a bridge 150 feet long over a slough seven deep. It was 90 miles from the ferry to the Hell Gate.

Like the crossing of the Snake, the Coeur d'Alene mission, the Bitter Root ferry, Hell Gate itself was one of the landmark points of the road. This gate in the mountains earned its name in the distant days of the mountain men when, because the Blackfoot could so easily swoop down on anyone camping in its

traplike confines, French-Canadians insisted that they might as well camp in the gates of hell as there.

Mullan and his builders went on up the Hell Gate. In 50 miles they made 11 crossings, one a ferry, the rest fords. When they reached the Blackfoot, they learned of the arrival at Fort Benton of Major L.L. Blake with the 300 recruits promised in the winter. It was notable news for Mullan, assuring the immediate testing of the usefulness of his road.

Following up the Little Blackfoot, they reached the west base of the Rockies by July 16, and on the afternoon of July 17, they crossed the range at Mullan's pass without difficulty. That morning they left the waters of the Columbia, that night they were camping on the

**...hewing with their axes, grading with their shovels, now they had their axe and shovel passage ready through the north-western wilderness.**

waters of the Missouri. They were over the continent's backbone.

On August 1, they were at Fort Benton. Thus from early June of 1859 to August 1, 1860, Mullan and his men had been forcing their way eastwards from the Columbia, hewing with their axes, grading with their shovels, and now they had their axe and shovel passage ready through the northwestern wilderness.

Mullan didn't waste any time. He turned over to Major Blake all his

## *2003 Meeting to be in Alberton*

The annual meeting of people interested in all aspects of the Mullan Road will be held Saturday, May 10, 2003, at Alberton. Ardent Mullanite Robert (Bob) Dunsmore of Osborn, ID will be the featured speaker.

Bob has collected materials relating to the road and persons connected with it for many years and has trekked much of the road himself. He has put the materials in albums for all to appreciate.

Refreshments will be served.

Chuck Mead, president of the Mineral County Historical Society and an owner of pieces of the original road is looking to have a

walk-about on a piece by the old Eddy Ranch.

Glenn Koepke has located a possible original bridge on the Camel's Hump road. After the tour last year he went back and did a more in depth search of one of the roads. He is going to try and get some photographs to share.

The sketch on page 1 is purported to be near Alberton and done in April 1862 by Sohon. It was in the recent publication by Paul McDermott on Gustavus Sohon's cartographic works. McDermott spent some time in our area tracing the original road and taking comparable photographs.

# Antoine Plante's ferry used by Mullan

available wagons, Gustavous Sohon as a guide, Creighton as a wagonmaster. He swung back on August 5, ahead of Blake and the recruits, going forward with a few men and pack animals.

The Major and the recruits came over the new-made road, the first to test it, the first wagon expedition, short of Mullan's own to travel this wilderness passage. It took them 57 days and they had no mishaps.

Mullan that winter of 1860-61 took the stage from San Francisco to St. Louis by the southern overland route, and on to Washington, D.C., which he found in a chaotic state. With and appropriation of an additional \$100,000 for the road, bringing the whole to \$230,000,

***This was a time of ferry charterings, and Mullan knew of chartering of Antoine Plante's ferry across the Spokane farther up the line.***

Mullan was eager to be on the way again. Early in April, glad no doubt to be off for the wide spaces, he went back to Walla Walla, where he organized that year's expedition, and

***He camped on the creek four days this time and built a bridge over it 50 feet long, then he went on toward Spokane, reaching Antoine Plante's ferry on June 1.***

was ready to leave, with 100 men from the 9<sup>th</sup> infantry as escort, by May 13.

This was a time of ferry charterings, and Mullan knew of chartering of Antoine Plante's ferry across the Spokane farther up the line, and this entered into his planning of that spring. He had to change the route somehow to avoid the wet and murky character of the valley of the St. Joseph.

Along the Colville road and his own, Mullan went to Cow Creek again. He veered to cross Hangman Creek farther to the west, now in the locality of the Spokane River. He camped on the creek four days this time and built a bridge over it 50 feet long, then he went on toward Spokane, across what is now Moran Prairie and down into the Spokane valley, reaching Antoine Plante's ferry on June 1.

The ferry, he found was a good one, a boat 40 feet long held by a strong cable stretched across the river.

Mullan and his road builders, now in their axe and shovel passage north of Coeur d'Alene lake, went on to Chief Seltice's farm through open pine forest.

Often they were in sight of the

broad sweep of Coeur d'Alene lake now. They had 30 miles of new road to make to the mission. It wasn't until August 1 that they were able to hack up the densely wooded draws over Wolf's Lodge prairie to unite with the old road. It was on this expedition of 1861 that the hard-pressed construction party took time out on July 4 to carve on a white pine tree Lieutenant Mullan's name and the date. Here, too, Mullan and

***Often they were in sight of the broad sweep of Coeur d'Alene lake now. It wasn't until August 1 that they were able to hack up the densely wooded draws over Wolf's Lodge prairie to unite with the old road.***

his men set off gunpowder and blasting powder and considerably upset the Indians in the woods clear through to the mission. The canyon became thereafter Fourth of July Canyon.

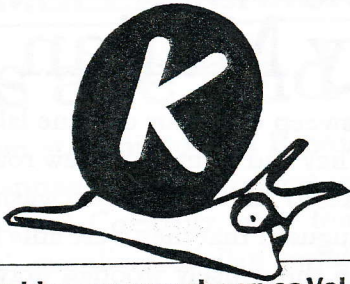
*(To be concluded next issue)*

## Dr. Mullan on TV

How many saw our own Dr. FitzHugh Mullan on the Lehrer News Hour, Tuesday, June 18, 2002. Dr. Mullan was speaking on the state of rural health in this country. He also said the their daughter, Caitlin, accepted a proposal of marriage in front of the statue of John Mullan in Mullan. He said they have told Wes Crain that he will need to change his name!!

### Now wired!!

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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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