

Longmire Party's Crossing Of Cascades in 1854 Told

Walla Walla, Wash., Union-Bulletin, Sunday, December 16, 195[?]

Reference to the Longmire party's difficulties in crossing the Cascade mountains was made lately in a Seattle newspaper concerning how the community of Elma in Grays Harbor county secured its name.

The Longmire party made the famous Naches pass crossing in 1854 [note: date error, should be 1853]. According to the Seattle newspaper's account this party traveling by covered wagon into the Oregon country took a northern route to Puget Sound rather than the previously traveled way down the Columbia to Vancouver and then northward. They had been told of the Naches pass, across which an old Indian trail ran. Arrangements had been made to have the party met at Walla Walla and conducted to Olympia.

Work Abandoned

In the meantime a roadway was under construction from Olympia eastward to the summit, across which this first caravan would pass. Funds, labor, horses and oxen had been contributed by Sound communities. The work, begun enthusiastically, lagged as winter approached and was abandoned just a week before the Longmire party arrived. when wandering Indians told the road builders that no whites were coming through.

When the Longmire party found no guide awaiting them at Walla Walla, they were forced to proceed under guidance of Indians, the account states. But they were mis-directed and after harrowing and time-consuming experiences, with gales and snows of approaching winter dogging their efforts, they at last crossed the summit, only to be faced by a 1,000-foot cliff drop-off. They were forced to kill oxen for a rawhide rope with which to lower their wagons, their remaining livestock and themselves, but they finally won through. [note: apparent errors in fact in this paragraph]

Relic in Museum

On a visit to the Tacoma museum of the State Historical society in 1947, the late A..W. Nelson, roving reporter for the Union-Bulletin, viewed a wheel from one of the wagons used in that crossing. "For many years the wheel was half buried in the underbrush near the base of the 1,000-foot rock face, where it was found a few years ago by members of the forest service," Nelson wrote.

Historical society members suggested the wheel should. be displayed in the Tacoma museum—the request agreed to by the forest service. The hub is in Washington hall and the balance on the Pioneer floor there.

Many Crossings

Of the momentous crossing of the Cascades, Nelson wrote:

"Following the, Naches river, the party crossed that stream 63 times and other rivers many times in order to find places for the wagons to travel. When they finally came to

"The Cliff," a short distance west of the summit, all hope seemed lost for the party was at the top of a 1,000-foot precipice, with no way to get down. [height exaggerated?]

"Finally a young man, believed to have been E. A. Light; olferei¹ to drive a team of oxen and a wagon down the face of the rock, with a rope fastened to the rear of the wagon and snubbed .around a tree.

"In the 31 wagons there was not enough rope and three animals were killed and their hides cut up and twisted into rope. Light made the trip successfully. and that was the way all the wagons were let down but in one instance the rope broke and the wagon crashed into the forest. No attempt was made, of course, to salvage any of the wagon itself.

Three-Week Trip

"Apparently the remains of the one wheel are all that remain to remind the public of that thrilling trip, which required three weeks rather than the three hours necessary today in making the same trip (by auto)."

The site of Elma was chosen by D. F. Byles in 1853. Byles was one of those in the Longmire party. Byles took up a land claim where Elma now stands. It was named to honor the first soldier killed in the Civil war. The settlers called it Elmer, after Elmer E. Ellsworth.

Postoffice authorities, however, listed the station as Elma and the name held. By 1886 municipal government was established in Elm: which is today on U.S. highway 410 between Olympia and Aberdeen-Hoquiam.