

NACHES PASS TRAIL MERRY ACCT.

Robert W. Merry, "The Ordeal of Naches Trail," Washington Highways. XIII (September, 1966), p. 4-5.

The Cascade Mountains hardly challenge motorists today as they hasten across our seven Washington passes comfortably at 60 to 70 miles an hour.

But to the 148 pioneer immigrants of the James Longmire party who brought the first covered wagons over Naches Pass in 1853, the Cascade Range represented a formidable obstacle. The travelers, determined to reach Puget Sound before the winter months, crossed the Columbia River at old Ft. Walla Walla on September 8 and set out for the new Naches road that was supposed to be completed in time for them to roll quickly over the mountains.

The road was far from ready, however, and the Longmire party found itself blazing its own trail through Naches Pass. Reaching the mountains on September 15, the party inched through the thick forest along the Naches River, frequently crossing to gain a few yards of easier traveling, then slashing the brush and timber ahead of them where necessary.

The Cascade crossing was climaxed by the descent of the famous "Summit Hill," so steep that the 36 wagons were lowered backwards by ropes. Only the determination of these families, spurred by the threat of the approaching winter, pushed the weary pioneers over the mountain forests to the fertile valleys and sparkling waters on the other side.

The story of the first crossing of the Cascades at Naches opened at Council Bluffs, Iowa. Here the Longmire party gathered to prepare for the 2,000-mile journey to the West Coast. The party, starting with 25 wagons and led by James Longmire of Indiana, rolled out of Council Bluffs on May 10, 1853.

Among the pioneers was Asher Sargent. His young son, Nelson, had already made the long journey to Puget Sound and settled in Olympia. Nelson's description of the beautiful Western Washington country inspired his father to make the tough trip to Puget Sound. And it was probably the elder Sargent who convinced Longmire and the rest of the party that the Puget Sound region was a land laden with the greenest and most abundant pastures.

The days and weeks passed slowly for the continental pilgrims as their wagons creaked over the prairie, across the Platte, over the Bear River Mountains and finally down to the Snake River. The party moved on to Fort Boise, crossed the Snake again, and moved on to Grande Ronde.

At Grande Ronde the wagon train was met by young Nelson Sargent, who had ridden his horse from Olympia to meet his father and the rest of the travelers. He brought the inspiring news that a party of workmen had started from Olympia and Steilacoom to cut a road through the Cascades at Naches Pass.

The story of that Naches road began back in September, 1852, when the first newspaper north of the Columbia was established in Olympia. The Columbian, edited by J. J. Wiley and Thornton

McElroy, devoted its initial efforts to call for the construction of a road through Naches Pass. Wiley and McElroy knew that such a road was necessary for the development of the Puget Sound area.

Without an accessible route through the mountain barrier, Puget Sound settlers nourished little hope to attract new people.

In January, 1853, General Joseph Lane, delegate to Congress from the Oregon Territory, obtained an appropriation of \$20,000 to build the Naches road. But the money had not reached settlers on the West Coast, and time was running short.

The people of Olympia and Steilacoom knew the Longmire party planned to settle on Puget Sound in the fall if an accessible road could be built.

Responding to the call of *The Columbian*, the citizens of Olympia formed a committee to organize a party of volunteer road builders and to raise funds through contributions. The amount collected is believed to have been more than \$6,000 in cash and supplies.

Backed with this money, Edward T. Allen, a 22 year old engineer, set out in June of 1853 with three others to look over an old fur transport trail described by the Reverend Francis W. Blanchet in an 1848 journal. They declared the route to be "so feasible that we consider it unnecessary to survey any other trail."

In late July, 1853, the volunteer road building party, in two crews, set out for the task. Whitfield Kirtley and 13 others were to go to Wenas Creek near the present site of Yakima to cut a road from the creek westward to the Naches River. Then they were to follow along the river until they met Allen and his group working eastward from Olympia.

Kirtley's crew returned to Olympia on the 20th of August. Ezra Meeker, Washington pioneer and historian, claimed that the crew "could not have done very effective work on the east slope, as it would take at least a third of that time to make the trip out and back from their field of labor."

Allen's party was still at work on the western part of the road on September 26. Shortly thereafter, his group also disbanded and returned to Steilacoom. Historian Meeker noted: "With twenty men and over sixty miles to cut in sixty days he could not be expected to build much of a road."

Meanwhile, the Longmire party with Nelson Sargent as its guide reached the Selah Valley on the upper Yakima River. The wagons rolled along to the source of Wenas Creek, then crossed the Naches River and followed it for four days. According to Longmire's Journal, the party crossed and recrossed the Naches River 68 times as it tried to make westward progress each day.

Hopes of reaching the promised road faded as evening neared and each morning brought new barriers and more timber to blaze. In late September, the wagons left Naches River and started for the summit of the Cascades about 25 miles north of Mt. Rainier. Three miles from the grassy plain of the summit they encountered "Summit Hill."

George H. Himes, a boy of nine at the time of the crossing, told of the "Summit Hill" episode years

later when he was secretary of the Oregon State Historical Society:

"We were confronted by a bluff full thirty feet high, almost perpendicular, and for a thousand feet farther it was so steep that an animal could scarcely stand up and there was no other way to go, as careful examination demonstrated. It was soon decided that the wagons should be lowered with ropes, and the teams driven single file by a circuitous trail to the foot of the mountain."

Van Ogle of Missouri, who was 22 in 1853, also wrote of the descent later. The wheels of the wagons were rough-locked with chains, he recalled in 1912. Two men had to hold the tongue of the wagons as they slid down the embankment.

At the top of "Summit Hill" the party was greeted by a youthful rider leading several pack horses loaded with provisions. Andy Burge, a member of the Allen road party, was on his way from Olympia with food for the road builders. But the builders had disbanded, and Burge missed them on his way up.

Burge tried to persuade the travelers to turn back, arguing that the road was in no shape to accommodate them. When they would not heed his warning he left the provisions with the wayfarers and returned to Fort Steilacoom, blazing trees as he went.

The wagons crossed the Greenwater 16 times. They forded the White River seven times on the way down. More hardships were endured over Wind Mountain, according to Longmire. The mountain, he said, "was covered with heavy fir and cedar trees, but destitute of grass, with a few vine maples on whose long leaves our poor oxen and horses had to live for seven days."

Finally, the travelers reached Puyallup. Travel became considerably easier and in mid-October, while the caravan was on the Nisqually Plain, it was greeted cordially by parties from both Olympia and Steilacoom. The six-month ordeal for the 148 travel-weary immigrants was over.

The story of Naches Pass does not end with that brave party of men and women who gambled their lives that fall of 1853 to reach Puget Sound before winter. Several other wagon parties crossed by the same route in succeeding years, and the road was improved somewhat by Lieutenant Richard Arnold in 1855. The same route was used by cattlemen up to 1884.

After that year, however, Naches Road was nearly forgotten. Today, Highway 410 follows the old Naches Trail along the Naches River but it leaves the old route near Bumping River and winds south to Chinook Pass, more than a mile high. U.S. 410 then resumes on the Longmire route along the White River.

And, when Washington motorists speed over that route, they may find some pleasure in remembering that the first party of tired but determined pioneers blazed their own trail over the Cascade barrier.