

THE NACHES PASS WAGON ROAD.

Margaret Bundy Callahan, "The Naches Pass Wagon Road," The Cascades, Mountains of the Pacific Northwest. Roderick Peattie, ed.
New York: The Vanguard Press, 1949, p. 57-63.

[After crossing the plains and following the route of the yet to be established Barlow Road,] the Barlow party continued on the last lap of its expedition, arriving at Oregon City Christmas Day 1845, just eight months and twenty-four days from the time they rolled out of Fulton, Illinois.

As soon as snow melted that spring, Samuel Barlow and his crew commenced work on the western half of the road from Clackamas Valley to the summit. Funds for road building were subscribed by the settlers, all of whom were eager for the benefits they knew would ensue, but only a small fraction of the pledged money was ever collected.

During the following two years Captain Barlow collected toll from the immigrants, keeping the road open each year until the last wagon of the season had rumbled over the pass. His records state that during the first year the road accommodated 145 wagons, 1,059 head of horses, mules, and horned cattle and one drove of sheep.

The Barlow Road is said to have been a greater spur to the settlement of western Oregon than any other one enterprise up to the building of the first railroad.

The first road over the Washington Cascades was not built for another eight years. (Washington, of course, was at that time still part of Oregon Territory.) Oregon's peaceful, lush Willamette Valley, designed by nature in a gentle, affable mood, had absorbed the immigrants bent on settling quickly into an ordered existence.

The more restless, who had still a taste for adventure, pushed farther into the wilderness, into the far northwest corner of the territory, where indeed they could go no farther, where the long fingers of Puget Sound lapped quietly at the pebbly shores of islands and peninsulas to form myriad coves and bays.

To reach the Sound the immigrants had to take their wagons apart at The Dalles, travel by boat to the mouth of the Cowlitz River, then up the Cowlitz by Indian dugouts, by pack trail over rough, hilly country until they came to the prairies. There they reassembled their wagons and struck out across low grassy prairies for "Whulge." (This Indian name for Puget Sound seems to me to describe something of the calm, placid quality of the great bay.)

It was a rather devious and difficult route for the cross-country travelers; it took money, which few of them had; and it involved more adventure, with which most of them were satiated.

Those who did penetrate to the Sound were wild with enthusiasm for the richness of the new land. With untiring zeal they hacked away at the wall of giant trees which closed in about the water's edge, turning the great trunks into log houses, forts, stores, and mills. Boat loads of prime Douglas fir were shipped to lumber hungry markets in California.

Earliest reference to a road over the Washington Cascades is in the Fort Nisqually Hudson's Bay Company's Journal of Occurrences, the entry for August 6, 1850, stating, "A party of men here today on their way to cut a road across the mountain to Wally Wally, the expenses incurred to be paid by a subscription among the settler . Mr. Robertson, the deserter from Fort Victoria, was among the working party."

Two years later Congress, under President Fillmore, passed an appropriation of \$20,000 for building a "military road" over the Cascades, and the following year Washington's first governor, Isaac Stevens, relegated the job to the leadership of a Captain McClellan, who, the governor pointed out, had served his country gallantly in Mexico.

Apparently Captain McClellan's experiences in Mexico had not fitted him for pioneering in the Cascades, for his sole contribution to the road was to consult with the Indians and to accept their verdict that the project was impossible, that the Cascades offered no practicable opportunity for a road because of the great depth of snow and other engineering difficulties.

Already, however, a handful of settlers had collected \$1 200 in cash and numerous contributions of supplies, and on July 10, 1853, they had begun to build the road. One group of workers, under Whitefield Kirtley and Nelson Sargent, crossed the mountains along the old Indian trail over Naches Pass to begin at the Yakima River and work toward the west.

The other, led by Edward Jay Allen, a brilliant young engineer, began on the coast side by improving the six miles of "trail road" constructed along the Puyallup River by deserter Robertson and his comrades in 1850, then whacked a clearing through the dense timber along the White and Greenwater rivers to the very foot of the mountain range.

All summer they pursued their gargantuan labors, felling and bucking the great trees by day, eating enormously of beans and flapjacks around crackling fires, sleeping in the blackness of the forest night while the blue smoke from the fire's embers mingled with the pitchy branches to make a fragrance better than any other in the world.

Behind them they left a chaos of resinous wreckage—enormous trunks and bristling branches overlapping in a welter of confusion which the Indians eyed gravely, shaking their heads over the hopelessness of the "Boston hooihut."

Late in August the road building reached a crisis. The eastern party had completed a steep corduroy affair following the river to its source at the pass. The western crew, however, had exhausted their funds, their supplies and a good percentage of their energy, and they had come to an impasse, a formidably steep ridge leading to the summit.

They had worked furiously in an effort to complete the road for a wagon party they had heard was on its way. As they were contemplating that final ridge they received word that the immigrants had changed their course, and were heading for the Willamette.

Color in the woods bespoke the season; the vine maples were flaming; the cottonwoods and

alders sailed an occasional golden message downward with the breeze; nights held a hint of frost. Early autumn storms in the mountains can be death-dealing in severity.

The road builders decided to wait one more year to complete their project hoping in the meantime congressional funds would at last be made available.

No sooner had Allen and his crew returned to the shores of Puget Sound than they learned that they had been misinformed, that a large pioneer caravan was approaching, laboring up the east side of Naches Pass over the new road. Accepting the challenge, some members of the crew, Allen among them, hurried back to the mountains, where they found thirty-six wagons on a painfully slow and difficult ascent of the east side.

Ninety-six times the caravan had crossed and recrossed the torrents of the river; now at the summit they looked down upon an apparently impossible descent of the west side.

The job, then, was to build the road as they traveled; to inch forward day by day, a few feet at a time, trusting that fall storms would hold off. There was but one possible route to follow on the descent; this led over a long ridge between the canyons holding the two forks of the Greenwater River as they flow from the summit of the pass. This steep, rocky ridge had long been the Indian's route; now over its dramatic alpine contours the white man's road, the Boston hooihut, must be constructed.

James Longmire, whose family settled in the superb forests on the southern slopes of Mount Rainier, where Longmire Lodge now stands within the National Forest, described for the Oregon Pioneer Association the descent of the caravan so tersely that it almost sounds easy, until your imagination begins to fill in between the lines:

"One end of a rope was fastened to the axles of the wagons, the other thrown around a tree and held by our men. Thus, one by one, the wagons were lowered gradually a distance of three hundred yards, when the ropes were loosened, and the wagons drawn a quarter of a mile farther with locked wheels. All the wagons were lowered safely save one, which was crushed by the breaking of the rope ... We made the road as we went along. We crossed the Greenwater sixteen times and the White six times."

Eying that perpendicular wall on the west side, Captain McClellan said to Allen: "My boy, you have done well so far. You and your crew have done wonders with the amount of money you have expended. But this ends it. You're up against a stone wall, so to speak."

Allen heatedly replied, "I will make up that almost perpendicular twelve hundred feet not only a road that an emigrant can get down, but one that six yoke of cattle can haul one thousand pounds up."

Some months later Allen invited McClellan to return for a look at the finished job. "We had constructed a road," Allen related in a letter to a friend, "up which I hauled, with four oxen fifteen hundred pounds. It was buttressed up an average of fifteen feet, and in some places forty feet, with the huge trees that covered the mountainside, and was stayed down the mountain from

tree to tree, with thousands of braces. It was impossible, but we were ignorant, and not fully conscious of this impossibility; and so we did it."

McClellan, standing on the highest point of the buttress, did not hesitate to express his admiration. "Young man," he said, "do you know what you have done here? Under the conditions Napoleon's passage of the Simplon was an engineering feat no greater than this."

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NACHES PASS TRAIL.

Leta May Smith, "Naches Pass Trail" The End of the Trail. Hicksville, New York: Exposition Press, 1976. p. 25.

There were other less known and traveled trails to Puget Sound. The Nachez Pass route was one of these. The first herd driven over this route was in 1868. Ike Carson went to the Yakima Valley and purchased 200 head of fat beef steers from Egbert French.

These cattle were driven over the Nachez Pass to Tacoma. Carson's drivers were Indians from the Puyallup Valley near Tacoma. The Nachez trail was a rough one, and cattlemen preferred the Snoqualmie Trail; the Nachez never became as well known and was seldom used for larger herds.