

The Naches Trail

crosses the Cascade Range through Naches Pass, roughly from today's Bonney Lake in the west to Yakima in the east. Later the name was applied to the route from Walla Walla to Steilacoom, as an extension of the Oregon Trail.

This route was used by Native American peoples to travel from one side of the mountains to the other, for food and trade purposes. One of the earliest written accounts of the use of this trail tells of the travel of a Lt. Johnson of the United States Exploring Expedition (Wilkes Expedition), crossing on horseback, as the Expedition explored the Pacific Northwest in 1841. Theodore Winthrop described an 1853 trip over the trail in *The Canoe and The Saddle*.

In 1847, an article in the *Oregon Spectator* described a trip from Walla Walla to Fort Nisqually. Six years later, in 1853, a series of actions was initiated by the western communities to induce its use by pioneers coming west on the Oregon Trail. Citizens of the territory had collected funds and

begun work widening the trail over the mountains

for use by wagons, under the direction of Edward Jay Allen. Meanwhile the Longmire-Biles wagon party left Walla Walla anticipating that the work would be sufficiently done for them to take their wagons over this route. *The Columbian* newspaper carried the story

of a developing road, but the reality did not match the expectations of oncoming pioneers. The tale of the crossing that Ezra Meeker recounts in his 1905 book, *Pioneer Reminiscences of Puget Sound*, may overstate the hardships of the pioneer party, but not by much. It is clear that parties from the west bearing food were necessary to assist the oncoming



party, whose joy, on reaching the Puyallup River near Alderton and finding it choked with salmon (Longmire, *Told by the Pioneers*), must have been palpable.

In 1854 at least one party of pioneers used the trail (Yantis, Ebey, Meeker accounts), but after that its use isn't well documented. The trail was used by both sides in the Indian war of 1855/6.

Edward Huggins, a clerk at the Hudson's Bay Company's Fort Nisqually, related two accounts of use of the trail in 1855 and 1860, one by the Company's Fur Brigade, bringing furs to the fort, and later when he drove a herd of horses over the pass.

In the early 1860s the road was promoted as a route to Wenatchee gold fields. A typical headline in the *Puget Sound Herald* read: "New Gold Discovery, Gold found on all the streams near Naches Pass: Miners earn from \$40 to \$60 per day." (*Puget Sound Herald*, July 16, 1858, Steilacoom, Washington Territory.)

Gustav Rosenthal, an Olympia merchant, reported in 1869 collecting a subscription of some four hundred dollars and hiring James Longmire to superintend construction of a wagon road through the pass. He reported that a Sam Coulter brought a band of cattle over the new road "which produced

very choice beef." (Blankenship, *Early History of Thurston County*.)

James Longmire himself reported herding sheep over the trail in 1877, and reported that several other parties were bringing cattle, as well. ("*Rough trip across the Mountains*," *The Tacoma Herald*. October 27, 1877.)

To celebrate the centennial of the first crossing, a group of jeepsters hacked and gouged a route over the pass in 1953, and since then the trail has been heavily used by motorbikes and off-road vehicles. (McCune, *Exploration Northwest*, "Jeeping on the Meeker Trail" Video, 1961.) A proposed road through the pass was added to the state highway system in 1943, and is still in state statutes as State Route 168, but has never been built.

The Naches Trail is being considered for designation as a National Historic Trail under the National Trails System Act.

For more information and to learn about historic sites along the way, see the website www.piercecountyhistory.org

The Naches Trail by Andy Anderson, brochure design and graphics by Jerry Bates. Support provided by the Northwest Chapter of the Oregon-California Trails Association.

Naches Pass Trail

