

This month's theme:
The Mullan Road



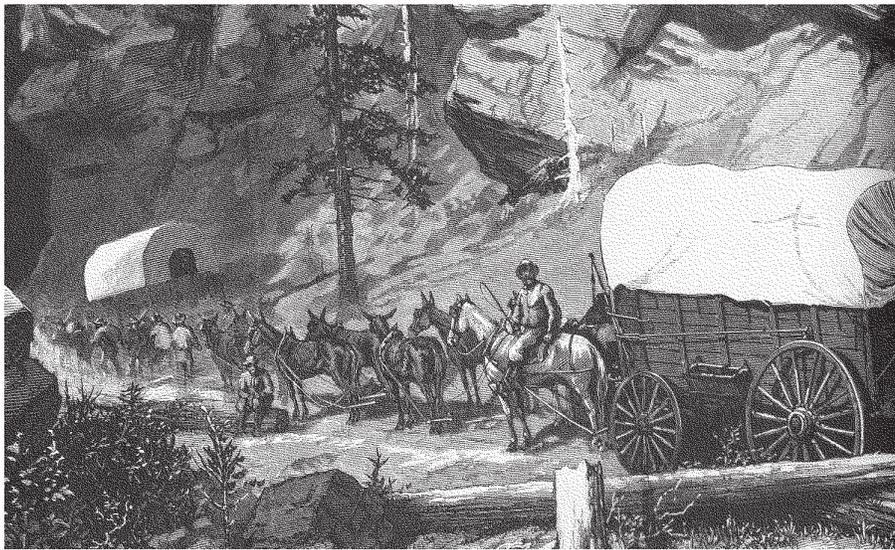
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The Newsletter of the Idaho State Historical Society's Junior Historian Program

PROSPECTOR

January, 2007



The Mullan Road

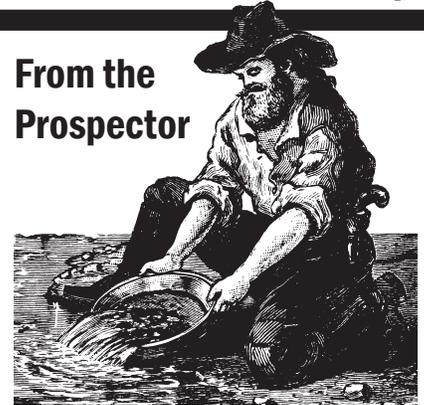
Most everyone is familiar with the Oregon Trail. The story of this pioneer path that crossed the desert of Southern Idaho is filled with adventure and excitement. But sometimes we get so caught up in the saga of this important trail, that we forget that there were other early roads in Idaho that are important to our history. One of these is the Mullan Road of Northern Idaho. In the southern part of our state, the Snake River Plain provided

pioneers with some fairly gentle geography. Although river crossings and the harsh desert could still make a trip across southern Idaho difficult, it was easy compared to a trip across the northern part of the state. The steep mountains of the panhandle region made traveling by wagon almost impossible.

In the late 1850's a small band of military surveyors set off to Northern Idaho. Their job was to find a possible route across the Northern Mountains. If they could find an

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From the Prospector



Howdy Prospectors!

I've got the transportation blues. My mule is in the shop for repairs so I've got no way to get around. We prospectors rely on our animals to move from place to place. This can be a big deal when you're staking a claim or working in a mine way out in the wilderness. Take northern Idaho for example. The panhandle of our state is known the world over for its rich mineral deposits, but it wasn't always easy to find those rich rocks. In pioneer days, there weren't any roads up in the Northern half of our state. If you wanted to get around you had to use thin trails or bushwhack through the forest. This month's story is about a project that changed all that. I'm going to tell you the story of the first road project through the panhandle: the Mullan Road.

The Mullan Road Continued

easy land connection between the Missouri River and the Columbia River, people could travel back and forth between the great waterways without having to go through the southern deserts. The road would help the military move troops, the pioneers move their wagons, and act as a future route for a northern railroad. The man in charge of this ambitious plan was named Captain John Mullan.

At its completion, the ambitious Mullan Road would stretch over 600 miles, from Fort Walla Walla in Washington to Fort Benton in Montana. Construction would not be easy. Crossing the rivers and mountains of Idaho and Montana would take considerable time, money, and energy. The entire project would end up costing over \$200,000, a huge amount of money for the time.

John Mullan's crew started in Walla Walla and worked their way east. The entire road project took three years, from 1859 to 1862, to survey and build. The challenges were numerous. Thick forests had to be cut. Steep slopes had to be graded. Over fifty bridges had to be built over winding rivers. At several points, Mullan had to reroute his road when he realized the original path was a bad choice. Eventually, the hardy crew made it through to Fort Benton.

Unfortunately, almost immediately after the road was completed it began to deteriorate. Trees fell across the road, blocking the path. Rivers flooded and washed away the bridges. Only one military expedition actually used the road and the few pioneers who attempted the crossing complained of the difficulty. One such pioneer wrote in

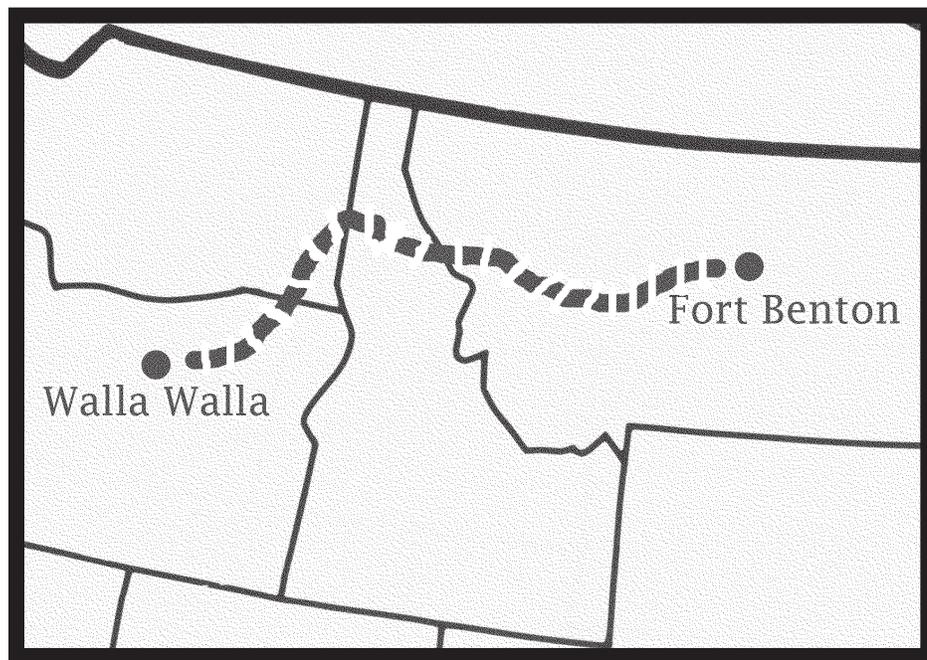
his diary:

We push on over as poor a road as government ever made—and they do say that the government was never beat for the best of roads. There are several places where wagons have to be lowered with ropes and pulled in the same way.

Although the military and pioneer settlers avoided the road, there was one group who used it frequently. Gold and silver discoveries in Idaho and Montana filled the region with prospectors. The Mullan Road provided a good way to get long pack trains to the remote mines in the mountains. Long strings of horses and mules carried supplies back and forth across the new road.

For many years, travelers complained about the low quality of Mullan's Road and many people said he had picked a poor route. In modern times though, Mullan's surveying skills have been proved. When the railroad and highway were to be built through Northern Idaho, modern engineers choose the same route Mullan did to get through the mountains. Small pieces of Mullan's Road still exist, but most of the original road has been rebuilt or abandoned.

Looking at the steep mountains and thick forests of the panhandle today, it's hard to imagine a small crew with basic tools cutting a road through the wild. John Mullan's hard work helped bring settlers and commerce to northern Idaho. ❖



The route of the Mullan Road



The Fun Page

Silly Stories

Fill in the blanks with the required words and then read the silly story out loud to your friends

June 15, 1864. Well, we're about half way between Fort Benton and Walla Walla and, _____, this Mullan road is one of the craziest paths

Exclamation

we've already seen. _____ and _____ are in the wagon

Name of Classmate

Name of Classmate

behind us and they keep getting stuck in the _____.

Noun

Yesterday we tied a _____ around the wagon and it took eight _____

Noun

Adjective

men to pull the wagon out. Tomorrow we have our first river crossing. We

heard the road designers built many _____ to help get across

Plural Noun

the water, but we're worried that a _____ storm has destroyed

Adjective

them all. Everyone is nervous. Luckily, Old Grandma _____

Name of Classmate

keeps our spirits up. Last night she made a stew out of _____

Animal

and _____. It was a little bit _____, but it sure

Noun

Adjective

made us happy. If everything goes well, we'll be in Walla Walla before

_____.

Holiday

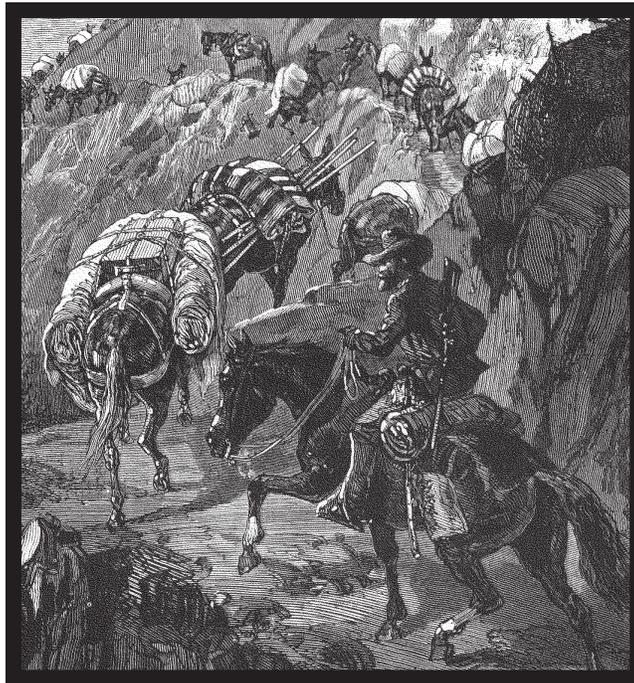


Next Month's Activities

Well, we've told you all we know about the Mullan Road in Idaho, but we need your help so that we can learn more. Pick from one of the activities below or make up your own Mullan Road project and send it in to our Prospector Headquarters. We'll take some of your best work and print it in next month's magazine. Remember to include your name, where you're from, and the name of your Prospector chapter. We can't wait to see what you send in!

The Wilderness Maze: Building a road through northern Idaho was like finding your way through a maze. Steep mountains, thick forest, and raging rivers could change the builder's direction and make the road curve and twist like a long snake. Using some of the challenges that Mullan's crew faced, draw a fun maze from Walla Walla to Fort Benton. Remember to include lots of difficult forks and turns to confuse people.

The Fate of the Mullan Tree: While building the road, John Mullan carved dates into trees to mark the trail. Although almost all of these carvings have been lost, one in



Northern Idaho survives and is known as the Mullan Tree. This historic marker has undergone many changes over the year. A few years ago, a storm broke off the top of the tree and a fence was built around to protect it. Later the trunk was

moved to the museum of Northern Idaho. What is the condition of the Mullan Tree today? Do some detective work or, if you live in Northern Idaho, visit the tree and give the Prospectors a report on how the tree looks today.

Historic Roads: The Mullan Road isn't the only historic road in the Pacific Northwest. Research one of the West's other important roads like the California, Oregon, or Mormon trail and help the rest of us learn its history. Remember to include a map to show us exactly where the road was located.

Send in your work by Feb. 17th to:

Prospector Club
 Lucky Noah
 Idaho State Historical Museum
 610 North Julia Davis Drive
 Boise, ID 83702

Or email it to us at kzwolfer@ishs.state.id.us.