

Mount Idaho-Salmon Meadows Wagon Road

Number 96

The need for unifying Northern Idaho with Southern Idaho by means of a passable wagon road was recognized as early as 1878. The War Department in that year authorized First Lieutenant John L. Sehon of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to conduct a survey to determine the possibility of such a route. Lt. Sehon carried out his survey June 6 through 11, 1878. Based upon his findings and observations, he concluded that the road was feasible and estimated the cost of construction at \$80,000. The subsequent inaction with regard to Lt. Sehon's report came to be attributed by many to those in the North who desired no contact with the South.

The richness of middle Idaho's mineral fields with no easy access to markets coupled with the other untapped natural resources of the area proved to be a strong argument in favor of uniting North and South.

The initial stumbling block toward building the road presented itself in the form of the territorial debt. The U.S. Congress in 1887 at the urging of President Harrison passed a law stating that territorial debts could not exceed one per cent of the assessed property value of a territory's property. In 1889 Idaho's assessed property valuation reached \$21,000,000. This enabled a ceiling of \$210,000 and Idaho possessed a debt of \$160,000. Thus any road bill passed by the legislature costing \$50,000 or more would have to be sent to Congress for approval because it would leave the territory without any funds to operate with. Keeping this in mind, House Bill No. 67, an act to provide for a wagon road between Mount Idaho in Idaho County and Little Salmon Meadows in Washington County was conceived. It asked for an appropriation of \$50,000, meaning that if passed it would have to be sent to Congress. To insure its correctness, the bill was drawn up by the Honorable James H. Hawley. The bill was introduced by Representative Day of Idaho County late in the session of the 15th legislature. The late introduction, according to Day, revolved around the bill's controversial nature. Both the pros and cons received a presentation, but surprisingly, the bill ran into very little opposition. This might be attributed to the lateness in the session, as suggested by Day. The measure passed the house on January 30, 1889, when he attached his signature to the document. All that remained was congressional approval.

Idaho's delegate to Congress, Fred T. Dubois, introduced House Resolution 1590, on December 18, 1889, to ratify the action taken by Idaho's lawmakers. This resolution passed the

House March 13, and the Senate May 3. It was signed by the speaker of the House and the vice-president on May 10, and the president on May 19, 1890.

The bill called for the governor to appoint a board of three commissioners to supervise construction of the road. In keeping with this request, Governor George L. Shoup appointed C. B. Wood, Grangeville; N. B. Willey, Warrens; and Frank Smith of Weiser, on May 24.

N. B. Willey, writing from Grangeville July 21, 1890, released a description of the route which was printed in the *Idaho County Free Press*. The road as surveyed began at Payette Lakes near Wagon Bay. There appeared to be no need to build from Salmon Meadows to that point as a passable road already existed. From Wagon Bay, the road followed the North Fork of the Payette on the west side to the upper Payette Lake. From here it advanced through Squaw Meadows to the summit or watershed between the waters of the Payette and Salmon rivers. From the summit, the road followed the valley of Secesh Creek to Warm Springs or Burgdorf. Then it went up Lake Creek, turning away from the creek to take the route of an old trail to the mouth of French Creek, at which point a good steel bridge was to be erected across the Salmon River. Continuing on from the proposed bridge site, the road climbed out of the canyon past the old Knott ranch and on into Florence. From Florence to Mount Idaho, the terminus, the route generally traced the Mose Milner trail.

After the survey became known, notices appeared in seven newspapers announcing that bids would be accepted for the construction. By September of 1890 all the contracts were let, and construction started that same month.

Not all were satisfied with the accepted route. Some thought the road should be located along the Salmon River. These opponents argued that the proposed route could not be maintained year around. Their view, though, fell on deaf ears and not until three years later, in 1893, did their idea find favor. On the other side, the proponents of the accepted road believed that the discussed Salmon River road would be unrealistic because the terrain was too rough and rocky for a wagon to travel safely on. However, on March 29, 1889, an interesting article appeared in the *Idaho County Free Press*:

A wagon passed up Salmon River last week, on wheels--sometimes on only two, it is true--but it was a real wagon, with real wheels, nevertheless, and the residents along the river are indebted to the enterprise of Mike Deasy of John Day Creek, for the unaccustomed sight. The wheels in some places were at right

angles to the bank, but they got her through at that.

Meanwhile, work progressed rapidly on the authorized road and by September 1891, the road was completed except for the bridge at French Creek. For construction purposes the work was divided into four sections. Each section, after completion, needed the okay of the commissioners. Even though all four sections were finished in September, only two were immediately accepted. The remaining two got the stamp of approval shortly, but only after requested improvements were accomplished. The last link of the road, the bridge across the Salmon, proved to be the ultimate downfall of the route. The contract allowed \$7,500 for its erection. A company from Washington was granted the bid and had until December of 1891 to complete the project. At this point the problems started. The sections of the bridge arrived in Weiser too late in the season to be transported to the proposed site. An extension until spring was then granted. The bridge company at the same time had contracted to build a similar structure across the Spokane River in Washington. Since work on that job was possible in the winter, they proceeded with its construction. Not long after work had begun on this job, they realized that inadvertently the wrong bridge sections had been sent to Weiser. This meant that when spring arrived the bridge across the Salmon would be sixty feet too short. Extra spans were ordered from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, but unfortunately the order could not be filled for some time. Consequently, when the weather permitted, a wire bridge was substituted for the steel structure. In effect, this action delayed completion of a unifying wagon route until January 1895, when the present U.S. Highway 95 became a passable road, as it was questionable if the wire bridge could sustain heavy wagon loads. \$47,000 was expended on this lost effort. The remaining \$3,000 went toward extending the road south from Payette Lakes in the direction of Horseshoe Bend and Boise.

In 1893, the legislature recognized the need for a more comprehensive system of state roads and passed extensive legislation for that time, calling for the internal improvement of the state by construction of a system of wagon roads in the counties of Boise, Custer, Lemhi, Idaho, Shoshone, Kootenai, and Nez Perce. Funds for this network of roads was to be provided by the issuance of a series of state bonds. This action met approval February 16, 1893. The problems encountered in the building of the first state road furnished valuable insights into the state road construction business, and as a result later undertakings were largely more successful enterprises.

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