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THE LOLO TRAIL

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When Lewis and Clark traversed the Lolo Trail in 1805-1806 during their search for a land connection between the upper Missouri and the Columbia, they crossed rather a new, slightly used route. Traffic on the Lolo Trail had been light enough that even their experienced Shoshoni guide had a lot of difficulty finding and staying on it. Strictly a pack trail (the word "Lolo" is Chinook jargon for "carry," suggesting in itself a pack trail), the route gave mounted Nez Perce Indians access to the plains buffalo country. Equipped with horses less than a century before Lewis and Clark came to see them, even the boldest Nez Perce bands had not been able to venture too frequently or too far into the plains. Blackfoot Indians, armed with guns obtained from fur traders farther east, kept most of the Nez Perce out of the buffalo country until shortly after the time of Lewis and Clark. During the years of the northwest fur trade, the Nez Perce had a chance to meet the Blackfeet on more even terms, so that they could use the Lolo Trail more regularly in going on long buffalo hunts.

Lewis and Clark found the Lolo Trail the most difficult part of their long route to the

Pacific. The day after they crossed Lolo Pass, their route, September 14, became “excessively bad & thickly Strowed with falling timber & Pine Spruce fur Hackmatack & Tamarack, Steep & Stony.” At this point they were descending to an Indian fishing area near later Powell, after which their trail wound up a long ridge to the divide between the Lochsa and the north fork of the Clearwater. Ascending Wendover Ridge, “Several horses slipped and roled down Steep hills which hurt them very much,” and Lewis’ desk was broken in one such fall. Generally the Lolo Trail held to the top of the ridge which separates the two rivers. More than one option was available on the trail, though: on the upper end, Lewis and Clark came west on the route that went through Powell, but returned in 1806 on the easier trail that proceeded more directly from the high ridge route to Lolo Pass. Toward the western end of the Lolo Trail, another alternate was available. Lewis and Clark took what usually proved to be the more difficult option south of Rocky Ridge. Altogether they had a hard time: aside from the difficult terrain, they had to find their way through snow and to survive much of the trip without much to eat. Game proved to be exceedingly scarce, and a really tired and hungry band of explorers finally reached the Nez Perce country at the western end of the Lolo Trail. Their report of the hazards of this route induced very few of their followers to risk going that way. David Thompson, a North West Company fur trader, found better ways to get about that part of the country in 1809, and the Lolo Trail was reserved mostly for the Nez Perce Indians who began to use it more heavily as their buffalo hunting trips became more frequent.

Fur traders generally avoided the Lolo Trail; the top of the highest ridge in the region hardly seemed like too good a place to look for beaver ponds. In 1831, however, John Work brought his Hudson’s Bay Company Snake expedition across the Lolo Trail, September 28-October 18, on his way from Fort Vancouver to the upper Missouri, upper Salmon, and the Snake country. Work’s men had a pretty disagreeable time on the Lolo Trail: rain, snow, and lack of forage made the trip particularly hard on their horses. By this time, most of the Snake country had been largely trapped out, and Work had to search some pretty rough country, so when he got through, the Lolo Trail did not seem too bad in comparison.

After the fur trade had gone into hopeless decline, Dr. John Evans--a geologist for the Department of the Interior--inspected the Lolo Trail in 1850. He finally concluded that it was “by far the most difficult and uninviting country that he has ever examined in all his tours through the Rocky mountains.” John Mullan, who checked out the Lolo Trail, September 19-30, 1854 concurred. He too had “never met with a more uninviting or rugged bed of mountains. The whole country is densely timbered, save at a few points where small patches of prairie occur sufficiently large to afford camping grounds; but beyond this it cannot be converted to any useful purpose.” Upon getting over Lolo Pass, “it was only with the greatest difficulty that we could restrain our animals from taking the back track” to return to the Bitterroot. From the ridge top that the trail followed, Mullan reported, “nothing met our view but one immense bed of pine clad mountains.” To the south a ridge now known as the crags presented “a series of high jagged peaks, all destitute of timber.” He found a lot of bear grass, but not much grazing for his horses. Unlike Lewis and Clark, Mullan tried the northern ridge route, thus avoiding some of the worst stretches that plagued the 1805 expedition. Before Mullan got through, though, his horses “presented a meagre and gaunt appearance, and showed the effects of a want of grass.” Mullan

finally decided to build his famous road through the Coeur d'Alene country, farther north.

John Mullan might just as well have run his military road--connecting Walla Walla with Fort Benton--over the Lolo Trail, the way things worked out. Lack of funds for maintenance during the Civil War turned his road into a pack trail right after completion in 1862. The Lolo Trail at least had the merit of much shorter length and easier maintenance. When at the end of the Civil War, Idaho's congressional delegate managed to get Congress to appropriate \$50,000 for a wagon road from Lewiston to Virginia City, the Idaho legislature recommended the Lolo Trail for the route. Aside from connecting Lewiston and Virginia City, a Lolo Trail road would shorten the distance over Mullan's route from Walla Walla to fort Benton by 160 miles. The Mullan route could not serve even as a pack trail during wet weather, and had never really been a road at all since 1862.

Wellington Bird of Mount Pleasant, Iowa got the job of improving the Lolo Trail into a wagon road, but he could not reach Lewiston until May 1, 1866. Spending \$20,000 of his building fund for wagons, oxen, mules, and equipment, Bird led a force of sixty men out to examine two possible routes, the Lolo Trail and the Nez Perce Trail. The latter, running through Elk City, had gained a lot of mining traffic after 1862. Yet it did not connect with the Mullan Road at Missoula, the way the Lolo Trail did. Guided by William Craig, Bird's party went out to survey the Lolo Trail and to improve it as a pack trail. Cutting out timber to make the survey proved time consuming and expensive. With time out to wait for snow to melt on the higher ridges, the Lolo Trail survey took from May 24 to July 7, 1866. His men exhausted by the trip, Bird assigned a fast survey of the Nez Perce to some deputies and returned to Lewiston. John Owen, who had a post in the Bitterroot valley not far from the Lolo Trail, reinforced the Lewiston preference for the Lolo route, and Sewall Truax directed the sixty man party in cutting out timber for a wide, ten to twelve foot grade from his base camp at Musselshell across Lolo Pass and into Montana. By now, \$42,000 of the congressional appropriation had been spent. Truax was assigned to use the remaining \$8,000 to finish the preliminary road in 1867. But after a long hassle in the national capital, the balance of the fund never was released for this purpose. The Trail emerged as a better pack trail than the Mullan Road. But Congress disregarded an Idaho request to put \$60,000 more into completion of the Lolo wagon road, and Nez Perce Indians on their annual buffalo hunts still proved to be the major traffic on the trail.

National attention focussed once again upon the Lolo Trail during the Nez Perce war of 1877. After the battle of the Clearwater, the non-treaty bands concluded they would be better off by moving over the Lolo Trail to Montana. Taking along all their herds and possessions, they spent a little over a week--from July 16 to July 24--getting across the trail and down off Lolo Pass. General Oliver O. Howard and his army finally left Kamiah, July 30, in pursuit. More than ten years had gone by since Major Truax had improved and cut out the trail, and Howard would have been a lot better off if more work had been done after 1866. Howard reached Lolo Pass August 8, having traveled about as fast as the Indians, and the long campaign continued in Montana and southeastern Idaho. In order to get his artillery and mule train through the overgrown route, Howard had fifty-two axe men clear the trail back to the condition to which it had been improved in 1866.

Sixty-nine years after the project started, the Lolo Trail at last was improved into a good

wagon road. By that time, of course, wagons had gone out of fashion. In order to provide fire protection and access to important timber lands between Pierce and Missoula, the United States Forest Service completed an easily built ridge road on the route of the Lolo Trail in 1935. Construction of a standard highway--designated as U.S. 12 and known as the Lewis and Clark Highway--followed in Lochsa Canyon below the Lolo Trail. By 1962, ordinary highway traffic finally could get from Lewiston over Lolo Pass to Missoula.