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NEZ PERCE TRAIL

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Traveled in the fall of 1835 by Samuel Parker (and described in his narrative, Journal of an Exploring Tour from Beyond the Rocky Mountains, published in 1838), the Nez Perce Trail offered a convenient route from Camas Prairie in North Idaho to the upper Bitterroot in Montana and to the buffalo country beyond. John Mullan considered but rejected, as too expensive to construct, this route for his military road. Then with the Clearwater gold rush to Elk City (on the Nez Perce Trail) in the summer of 1861, the western part came into heavy use. After more mining excitement on the upper Missouri at East Bannock in 1862 and Virginia City the next season, the Nez Perce Trail offered the most direct route from Lewiston and Walla Walla to the new mines. Packers hauled supplies to these eastern mining camps, and while returning to Lewiston from a profitable Virginia City supply trip in the fall of 1863, Lloyd Magurder's party of packers was wiped out by bandits on Magurder Mountain after ascending from the upper Selway canyon.

After the Mullan Road across Idaho turned out to be only a pack trail, efforts were resumed to develop either the Nez Perce Trail or the Lolo Trail into a wagon road in place of the unsuccessful route farther north. George B. Nicholson, an Ohio engineer, and Major Sewell B. Truax, a military road builder, made a fast eight day inspection of the Nez Perce Trail, July 12-19, 1866. On the basis of this examination, Truax undertook to improve the Lolo Trail instead. Traffic to Montana had declined, and the Lolo Trail gained ascendancy even though the superior new Lolo Route that Truax cleared in 1866 was not developed into a road until 1935. But at that time, the Nez Perce Trail also was made into a Forest Service road.

As was the case with the Lolo Trail, the new road along the Nez Perce Trail did not follow the pack route over the top of all the ridges, but ran along a convenient, if somewhat primitive, road grade nearby. Both the trail and the road ran close to the divide between the Clearwater and the Salmon from Elk City to Nez Perce Pass through the Bitterroot range. That stretch of country still is wilderness, and travelers along the Nez Perce Trail go through a forested region that is not greatly changed from the time that bands of Nez Perce Indians used to go that way on their hunting trips to the buffalo country.

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