



IDAHO STATE
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY REFERENCE SERIES

THE MULLAN ROAD IN IDAHO

Number 287

December 1964

Surveyed and built between 1859 and 1862, the Mullan Road connected Fort Benton, the head of navigation on the Missouri, with Walla Walla near navigable waters of the Columbia. Thus after half a century, a major purpose of Lewis and Clark at last was realized. Although John Mullan's wagon road did not use their rather difficult route over the Lolo Trail, it opened the way for long sought improved communication between those two major northern United States river systems. Farther south, the Oregon Trail had given wagons access to the lower Columbia for almost two decades: now the Mullan Road was intended to provide an alternate route for emigration to the Pacific Northwest through less arid country. In addition, this new northern artery was meant to be the forerunner of the Northern Pacific Railway, in anticipation of which John Mullan had been surveying the interior Northwest while he was working out the advance plans for the wagon road. Along with other leaders engaged in the Pacific railroad surveys in that part of the country, John Mullan had regarded such a road as a necessary preliminary for a railway which would perfect the transportation pattern into the Pacific Northwest.

Constructed by the War Department as a military road, John Mullan's highway cost \$230,000. Actually, Mullan built his road in stages, and at each stage he seriously underestimated the cost and difficulty that confronted him. Otherwise, he might have had a lot more trouble getting the money he needed, if anyone had foreseen just how big a project he was undertaking.

Starting northwest from Walla Walla in the summer of 1859, Mullan had little or no trouble until he approached the southern end of Coeur d'Alene Lake. Unable to bridge the St. Joe, he built a flatboat for use there, and then had to fell logs to put in 400 feet of corduroy in order to cross the swampy bottom next to the river. Getting up the grade to the summit between the St. Joe and the Coeur d'Alene also posed a problem. "A heavy excavation up a suitable spur" was necessary there, and three miles of timber had to be cut out in order to reach the next river. There another flatboat had to be provided as a substitute for a bridge over the Coeur d'Alene. Yet in spite of these troubles, his seventy men worked fast, devoting only a week to the difficult section between the St. Joe and the Coeur d'Alene.

Reaching Coeur d'Alene Mission of the Sacred Heart--the only settlement on the Idaho part of the road--August 16, Mullan found his problems were increasing. Large stretches of timber--some down and some standing--had to be cut out as he advanced up the south fork of the Coeur d'Alene toward Sohon's Pass [modern St. Regis Pass] through the Bitterroots. His twenty soldiers, who had worked steadily getting from the St. Joe to the Coeur d'Alene, now declined to clear any more trees, so his effective crew was reduced to fifty hired workers. Since he could not get up on top of a ridge, nor wind around countless miles of side hill, Mullan had to stay in the narrow valley bottom where numerous

river crossings were unavoidable. Not until well into winter did he finish the Idaho portion. Finally on December 4, 1859, he had completed the grade over the summit down to the valley of the St. Regis on the Montana side. There he had to camp for the winter. Then in 1860 he managed to survey a preliminary route through to Fort Benton.

Hazards of flooding along the St. Joe threatened potential use of the new military road, and in 1860 Mullan concluded that he had selected the wrong route around Coeur d'Alene Lake. Deciding that a new section along the north side of the lake would bypass the St. Joe flood problem, he started in the summer of 1861 to build a long new stretch. At this point, his revised route around the north end of the lake pioneered the course of modern Interstate 90 all the way across North Idaho. Heavy timber on the new section, though, proved worse than that which he had faced before. As a result, his men celebrated July 4 blazing the celebrated Mullan Tree back near the bottom of what now is known as Fourth of July Canyon at a time when they were scheduled to be all the way up to Coeur d'Alene Mission, where they would intersect the previously built road. Reaching the mission August 4, they still had to build bridges for twenty-eight crossings of the Coeur d'Alene, followed by forty-six crossings over the smaller St. Regis in later Montana. That left him still building and improving a large section of road (including the part through Mullan Pass over the Continental Divide) in the following winter. Worse still, the winter proved to be the terror of a century in the Northwest. His men were lucky to survive at all. Many of them decided to quit when spring finally came, and Mullan could not manage to improve the 624-mile road to the standard he had planned for much of the eastern part.

Even before the Mullan Road was complete in 1862, it already had fallen into serious disrepair. Two of the Coeur d'Alene bridges went out during the disastrous spring floods of 1862. Other parts of the road in what then was Missoula County, Washington, but what in 1864 was to become western Montana, were destroyed. With no provision for maintenance by the army, all Mullan could do was to try to make his great military highway into a county road and turn these serious repair problems over to local authorities. Since the counties had only the smallest sprinkling of population at that time, the task far exceeded their means. The gold rushes were bringing thousands of miners to the Northwest in what soon was to become Idaho and Montana, but the mines were south of the road. The mines created potential traffic for the road, but before Mullan's military wagon road could really come into use as a commercial route, it had declined to a pack trail in Idaho and in the Bitterroot section. Except for a force which had been brought out in 1861 (when the road was only half finished) by Major George Blake, no military traffic crossed the Mullan route from Fort Benton to Fort Walla Walla. And aside from a few emigrants accompanying Major Blake, and another emigrant group escorted to Walla Walla by Captain James Fiske in 1862, it really did not function as an emigrant route either. (Fiske brought out a total of four successive annual emigrant expeditions headed for the Mullan Road, but the later ones did not get as far west as Idaho; even if the Mullan Road had been passable, emigrant traffic would not pass the Montana mines to continue westward over the Mullan Road after 1862.) Farther east, the segment from Fort Benton toward Helena and the Blackfoot mines of Montana carried heavy traffic during the mining boom. But across the Bitterroots and through northern Idaho, the Mullan Road had a hopeless defect. With forty-six crossings of the St. Regis, and twenty-eight crossings of the Coeur d'Alene, and with 125 miles of heavy forest that was beginning to block the road with fallen timber as soon as it was complete in 1862, the road was in constant need of repair. Funds were not available for this purpose, and almost no one lived along the section of the road which was hard to maintain. Mullan

reported that in addition to the long forest stretch, thirty measured miles of the road was excavated fifteen to twenty feet wide. All 155 of these timbered and excavated miles--a large share of them in North Idaho--were vulnerable to hard winters, storms, and floods. Unfortunately he had gone to considerable expense and several years of hard work to build a military road that could not be kept open long enough to be completed, let alone be used.

Improvements of an alternate route across North Idaho, yet farther south, seemed to be the answer to the maintenance problem on the Mullan Road. With gold discoveries in the east Bannock area of later Montana in the summer of 1862, considerable traffic had begun to use the Nez Perce Trail from Elk City to the upper Bitterroot Valley, and the Lolo Trail from Lewiston to the lower Bitterroot Valley. By 1864, Lewiston was engaged in a major drive to get the Lewis and Clark route, the Lolo Trail, improved into a usable wagon road. Lewiston promoters hoped that for less than half the cost of the Mullan Road, that they could manage to get their substitute highway through to a connection with the Mullan Road at Missoula. Memorials of the Idaho legislature, January 8, 1864, and January 9, 1866, recited the advantages of the Lolo Trail. Pointing out in 1866 that the Mullan Road had been impossible for wagons for some time and that it suffered from spring flooding even as a pack trail, the Idaho legislature indicated that the Lolo Trail--a ridge route that avoided the kind of construction and repair problem that had ruined the Mullan Road across Idaho--could be improved and maintained much more easily. Congress responded to the 1864 request with \$50,000, and in 1866 the Lolo Trail was improved with a new western ridge section substituted for the older route. Yet the Lolo Trail was not transformed into a wagon road as had been hoped.

Packers managed to use the Mullan Road for at least a few years after its completion in 1862. With the Blackfoot and Helena gold excitements in Montana, especially for a few seasons after 1864, the Mullan Road offered a commercial route from the Northwest Coast to the new mines. A memorial of the Washington legislature asking that the Mullan Road be restored and maintained, noted that thirty-one emigrant wagons had managed to get through to Walla Walla in the dry season of 1866. Heavy pack traffic also was claimed for the military road. Yet aside from the Lolo Trail alternative, packers on the Mullan Road had to compete with freight traffic that went over a still more circuitous route running still farther north by way of Lake Pend d'Oreille. Then, when the time finally came for the Northern Pacific to work out its final grade, the longer Pend d'Oreille route was chosen. Yet a century later, when a direct route for Interstate 90 across northern Idaho had to be selected, the track of John Mullan's military wagon road was adopted. By that time, there was a Highway Department equipped to maintain the route, and the repair difficulties which Mullan could not work out no longer were insoluble.

[For further information, consult W. Turrentin Jackson's, Wagon Roads West (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952), 257-278; Oscar Osburn Winther's, "Early Commercial Importance of the Mullan Road," Oregon Historical Quarterly (March, 1945), 46:22-35.]

Reissued January 1967

Publications--450 N. 4th Street, Boise, ID 83702--208-334-3428