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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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. ✦

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The route of the Mullan Road
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 we’ve already seen. ______________ and ______________ are in the wagon behind us and they keep getting stuck in the ______________. Yesterday we tied a ______________ around the wagon and it took eight ______________ men to pull the wagon out. Tomorrow we have our first river crossing. We heard the road designers built many ______________ to help get across the water, but we’re worried that a ______________ storm has destroyed them all. Everyone is nervous. Luckily, Old Grandma ______________ keeps our spirits up. Last night she made a stew out of ______________ and ______________. It was a little bit ______________, but it sure made us happy. If everything goes well, we’ll be in Walla Walla before ______________.
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 Prospector 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 kzwolf@ishs.state.id.us.