

THE MULLAN ROAD: ITS LOCAL HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE*

This occasion is another reminder to us of rapidly passing years; the erection of this monument, aside from its special purpose, serves to mark another milestone in the life of the community which bears the name Walla Walla.

It was in June, 1859, sixty-four years ago, that Lieut. John Mullan, a West Point graduate, commanding a detachment of about one hundred officers and men, left the newly constructed Fort Walla Walla, which was situated one mile to the south, and led his little company past the spot upon which we now stand. There had been no surveys of the public lands here and the trail, which he was to transform into a road, left the level of the valley and ascended the bench lands through a gently sloping ravine or draw, which then ran directly through the site of the stockade and buildings of yonder state institution. The equipment of this company included scientific instruments to determine levels and latitude and longitude, and tools to build bridges and dig away banks of earth and rock, as well as tents, arms and ammunition for protection and food for sustenance of man and beast. That day and date marks the beginning of official road building in the Inland Empire.

In June, 1859, the population of civilians in Walla Walla was very small. Only six months previous the valley had been, by the War Department, declared open for settlement, and settlers were just beginning to arrive. Of that population there are now living here, as far as known, only two persons, both then lads of less than fifteen years. The father of one of them had begun to improve the first land claim here, just to the southward of the city; the father of the other, the trusted clerk of Col. Wright at the Army Post, was selecting a homestead of 160 acres now within

* In Montana there are four permanent monuments, along the line of the Mullan Road between Fort Benton and the summit of the Bitter Root Mountains, and in Idaho there are at least three similar monuments. Last year, 1922, near Spokane, two permanent markers were erected by the Washington State Historical Society, and now a third has been erected at Walla Walla, where Lieut. John Mullan began the actual construction of that historic road in June, 1859. The monument is located on the edge of the highway, near the Washington State penitentiary, where it will always be under the care of the State, and where the setting is very beautiful.

The dedicatory exercises were held on the 5th of June, in connection with the meeting of the Walla Walla Pioneer Association on that day. The presentation was made by Governor L. F. Hart, and the acceptance by Mr. Burgunder, of Colfax, president of the Pioneer Association, who personally traveled the road in the early sixties.

Two brief addresses of a historical nature were delivered, one by Mr. T. C. Elliott, of Walla Walla, upon the local significance of the Road, and the other by Prof. Samuel Flagg Bemis upon its national significance. The text of these addresses is presented in this number, for proper preservation and reference.

the present city limits. Those two boys¹ are present today—now beyond the allotted span of three score years and ten; but they heard the sunrise gun and bugle call on that morning in June, 1859, at Fort Walla Walla.

The orders to Lieut. Mullan (promoted to Captain in 1862) were to construct a "Military Wagon Road" between Fort Walla Walla, Washington Territory, and Fort Benton, at the head of navigation on the Missouri River in what is now Montana. The first bridge on this road was built across a slough known as Mud Slough, three miles from the Fort, the second was across Dry Creek, 7½ miles out; the third was across the Touchet River just below Prescott. From there the course turned east and then north through the rolling hills to the crossing of Snake River at the mouth of Palouse. Those who now have occasion to travel over the fine macadam highway from this city to Prescott by way of the ranches bearing the well known pioneer names of Nelson, Hadley, Berryman and Flathers, and then on to Lyons Ferry, are making use of the Mullan Road. The bridge at the Touchet was for many years known as the Mullan bridge; and there were located one of the first school houses of this county and one of the first voting places. Mullan precinct has since been reduced in size and includes now this portion of the city of Walla Walla. By this road and his voting precinct, and now by this monument, the name of John Mullan is officially linked to the permanent records of Walla Walla County.

Reference has been made to a trail. Be it remembered that, speaking broadly, this Mullan Road followed the meanderings of one of the old and well traveled Indian trails through the Inland Empire of today. Before the coming of these soldiers there had passed this spot for many years the original dwellers in this land of plenty. The engineering of the red man was quite sufficient for the pony, the pack animal or the tepee poles, but transition to a road suitable for wagons to travel over brought many problems to Lieut. Mullan and his fellow officers, even through the prairie country of Walla Walla.

Tradition tells us that in years long gone by this portion of the Walla Walla Valley, where the city now stands, was a favorite meeting place for the Indians to perform the religious ceremonies of the sun dance, or to carry on a potlatch (or fair), or for visiting, trade and sports, or to hold a war council concerning their enemies to the south of the Blue Mountains. To such occasions there

¹ Charles Clark and Frank Singleton.

would have passed down this trail numerous bands from the various tribes living north of Snake River; the Spoknaes, the Kullyspells (Pend d'Oreilles), the Skeetshoas (Coeur d'Alènes), the Okinakanes, the Nez Percé bands along the lower Snake, and others. The mouth of the Palouse River has always been known as the great crossing place of the Indians journeying north and south through this country. These then were the original travelers over this Mullan Road.

In June, 1859, the present city of Walla Walla was not much more than a trading camp, to supply the needs and demands of soldiers and officers at the army post, and of the rapidly arriving settlers from the Willamette valley. But its growth immediately after was phenomenal, owing to the discovery of gold in the mountains of Idaho and Montana and British Columbia. There was nothing at Spokane but a water fall and gravel bed. Walla Walla held the prestige of the most populous city in Washington Territory until about 1882, even Seattle taking second place before that date. From Walla Walla as a trade center the extensive country lying north of Snake River was settled and commercially organized.

Families went from here to take up homesteads in what are now known as the Big Bend, the Palouse and the Spokane and Colville districts. Stockmen selected their large ranches and hauled from there annually their large quantities of supplies. Merchants from here established the first stores in Lincoln, Spokane and other counties, and freighted from here much of their merchandise, including wet goods. The early traders in the Bitter Root Valley, near Missoula, Montana, did business here, and sent their gold dust here for safekeeping. Much mail was distributed from here to the residents of all that extensive region; a star route was maintained between Walla Walla and Helena, a brother of Senator Clark being an original contractor on that route. Drove of cattle were driven from here to the mining districts of Montana and British Columbia. For years the larger part of this travel and transportation was served by this Mullan Road, and the pounds of freight crossed at Silcott's, afterward Lyons Ferry, and dragged up the steep grades on the north side of the river there would be impossible to estimate. Think, if you will, of the difficulties and distress connected with such travel, during the dust of summer and the chill and mud of fall and spring, the distances between watering places, the broken wheels and the dry camps. Think, if

you must, of the oaths which have been uttered on the grades and crossing of that road.

This is the story of the origin and early use of the Mullan Road. Ten years or more after its completion the rich Palouse Country was more rapidly settled upon, towns began to multiply and stage lines to be established there; and travel began to be diverted to other crossings of Snake River. And then came the railroad to the door of the city and the farm, and with the advent of the automobile another chapter is being written. There always has been, and still is a steady use of the Mullan Road, but probably never again will it attain to its former prestige between Walla Walla and the "Upper Country."

Time on this occasion permits of this mere outline of what the Mullan Road has meant in the history of Walla Walla. It is fitting and proper that the State Historical Society, functioning for the culture of citizenship and the honor of the pioneers, should cause to be erected this monument, as a permanent reminder of Captain John Mullan and his work, and of the sturdy pioneers who followed after him, the great majority of whom have now "rested from their labors."

T. C. ELLIOTT.