MULLAN ROAD

For fifty years after the exploration of Lewis and Clark, the Oregon Trail was the usual route to the Northwest. It is true that at first the trappers and later the traders ascended the Missouri to Fort Benton and that the Indians of Eastern Washington and Northern Idaho went across the mountains to hunt buffalo in Montana, but the trails used by the Indian were not known to the white man and he himself had no roads or routes.

But in the fifties there came a demand for a northern route to the Pacific Coast. There was need of a transcontinental railroad westward from St. Paul. The Indian wars of 1855-6, on the upper Columbia, caused the settlers in Oregon and Washington to ask protection of the National Government and roads were needed if soldiers were to come quickly. Immigrants to the Northwest from St. Louis could come to Fort Benton by water, about two-thirds of the distance. The Walla Walla country, after the Indian wars, was settled very rapidly and there was soon a surplus of grain, livestock, etc., for which a market was sought.

In response to these demands, the National Government decided to build a military road. Lieutenant John Mullan was commissioned to build the road. One day during the presidency of Polk, a boy was admitted to his presence, for in those days a president did not have so much to do and was not so difficult to see as today. The boy was below the average in height, but well built and had a keen eye. He asked the President for admittance to West Point. "What is your name?" asked the President. "John Mullan, sir," replied the boy. "Well, don't you think you are rather small to want to be a soldier?" asked Polk. "I may be somewhat small, sir, but can't a small man be a soldier as well as a large one?" The President thought so and Mullan was appointed and in due time graduated from West Point at the head of his class and became a lieutenant of artillery.

When the government organized the expedition under Stevens, to find routes for railroads and roads from the upper Mississippi to the Pacific Northwest, Mullan was a member of his party. He spent the next three or four years in this work, exploring the Rocky and Bitter Root mountains of Montana, Idaho and those of Washington, seeking suitable routes for the purposes mentioned. Stevens finished his work, became Governor of Washington Territory and later its

delegate in Congress, but Mullan was still interested in the road to the Northwest.

On one of his trips to Washington, D. C., he called on Jefferson Davis, then Secretary of War, and gave him such a glowing description of the possibilities and practicability of this road that the Secretary immediately assigned him the task of building it.

Briefly, the road beginning at Wallula extends eastward to Fort Walla Walla. The route is then North, crossing the Snake river where the Palouse empties into it, continuing northward almost to the present city of Spokane. Here the road turns east and two locations were made, both leading to the old Coeur d'Alene Mission at St. Mary's, one going around the Southern part of Lake Coeur d'Alene and the other around the Northern. The latter became the permanent route. From the Mission, the road follows the Coeur d'Alene river to its source, crossing the Bitter Root mountains at Sohn's Pass to the river St. Regis Borgia, which is a branch of the Bitter Root. This river, together with the Hellgate and Little Blackfoot, furnish the route to Mullan's Pass, where the road crosses the Rocky Mountains. From this point the road is parallel to, but some distance north of, the Missouri river until it approaches Fort Benton, when it reaches the river. From Wallula eastward, Mullan describes the country as follows: "First one hundred and eighty miles open trail or rolling prairie; next one hundred and twenty miles densely timbered mountain bottoms; next two hundred and twenty-four miles open timbered plateaus with long stretches of prairie; and next one hundred miles level or rolling prairie."

The construction of the road involved one hundred and twenty miles of difficult timber cutting, twenty-five feet broad; thirty miles of excavation fifteen or twenty feet wide; the building of miles of corduroy road, of many bridges varying in length from a few to hundreds of feet; the provision for ferries when bridges were not practical, the most notable one being that kept by a half-breed Indian, Antoine Plant, across the Spokane. The river at that point was three hundred feet wide and eighty feet deep. The ferry was operated by a strong cable and a boat forty feet long.

The terminals of this road were Forts Walla Walla (Wallula) and Benton. The former was located near the junction of the Snake and the Columbia and was built by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1830, and next to Vancouver the most important fort in the Oregon country. Here were kept the supplies for many of the forts on the upper Columbia and Snake rivers and here were collected the furs

from these forts. Here resided Peter Skeen Ogden and here were brought the survivors of the Whitman Massacre when ransomed by him.

Fort Benton was built in 1846 and was to the upper Missouri what Walla Walla was to the upper Columbia and in the early days it became the head of navigation when steamboats came up from St. Louis.

On July 1st, 1859, Mullan began actual work on the road, starting from the Western Terminal. He had about one hundred men, together with wagons, pack horses, axes, picks, shovels, whip saws and other tools necessary for the work. The men were divided into parties, each party being in charge of a foreman. The topographers and engineers first made permanent locations, selecting lines of least resistance, choosing suitable places for fords or ferries across the streams; avoiding so far as possible canyons, hills or mountains that would require much rock work, swamps and bogs that would require corduroy or bridge work, or thickly timbered sections that would require much chopping. Of course, there were places where these obstacles could not be avoided.

The location having been made, the laborers followed. Little was required till the Coeur d'Alene region was reached. Here the heavy work began. Over one hundred miles through "standing timber that was dense, and fallen timber that had accumulated for ages formed an intricate jungle well calculated to impress one with the character of impenetrability." Twenty bridges varying in length from a few feet to a hundred or more were built across the Coeur d'Alene river in going a comparatively short distance. At another place six miles of heavy rock work had to be done which required the labor of one hundred and fifty men for six weeks.

Depots for supplies were established at regular intervals along the route. In summer a place would be selected where there was plenty of wood and water for the men and pasture for the stock, consisting of work animals and beef cattle, while in the winter the stock was taken to the lower and milder altitudes. The men, however, built log houses and remained near their work. Deer and bear were abundant. These, together with the beef cattle, could be killed, the meat hung in the trees where it froze and could be used as needed. Flour, sugar, coffee, etc., must be brought from one end or the other of the road, while fresh vegetables could be obtained at certain seasons from the Catholic missions or fur trading stations. The most noted of these missions were the St. Mary's, located on Coeur d'Alene Lake, and

another on Lake Pend d'Oreille. Aside from furnishing a certain amount of provisions, they secured from the Indians for Mullan much valuable information of the country as regards trails, passes, etc.

The Indians rendered Mullan great assistance as guides, mail carriers, packers, etc. During the winter of 1859, Garry, Chief of the Spokanes, brought the mail regularly by way of Clark's Fork. In the Spring of 1860, Mullan was at work in the Bitter Root valley and in great need of supplies from Benton. He says: "for my men and stock my necessity was so great that I laid my wants before the 'Flat Heads.' I told them I needed one hundred and seventeen horses, with pack saddles, and from fifteen to twenty of their men to accompany Mr. Sohn across the mountains. They promised me a reply next day, when they would send me as many sticks as they had men and horses to furnish.

"The next morning their Chief Ambrose came to Fort Owen, where I was a guest, with a bundle of one hundred and thirty-seven sticks, each representing a horse or a man. Such nobleness of character as is found among some of the Flat Heads is seldom seen among Indians. I here record to their credit that I never had a want, but which when made known to them, they supplied and that they always treated myself and my parties with a frank generosity and a continuous friendship.

"They were paid for the use of their animals and the services of their men, and made the trip in the month of March safely across the Rocky Mountains, bringing me back eleven thousand rations."

August 1st, 1862, Mullan and his road builders reached Fort Benton, where he met Major Blake and three hundred recruits awaiting his arrival. Captain Reynolds, a topographical engineer, and party who had been surveying a route from Fort Laramie to the headwaters of the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers were also there. Mullan turned over some of his men and equipment to Major Blake, who was to come over the new road to Wallula, secured a number of pack horses from Captain Reynolds and within four days started on his return trip over the road. His purpose was to make all needed changes and repairs that the road might be thoroughly tested by Major Blake, who had many wagons and a considerable party.

Shortly after his departure four steamers arrived at Fort Benton from St. Louis, bringing three hundred and sixty-four emigrants for Walla Walla and other points. They had saw- and grist-mills. There were also many miners among them who intended prospecting enroute.

Captain Mullan found little to demand his services on his return, arriving at Wallula late in August. Here he disposed of his property at public auction and departed for Washington, D. C., to make his final report. He had been seven years in the field, four of which were in the actual building of the road, which was now complete. It had cost $230,000, or less than $400 per mile.

This road enabled the government to move its troops rapidly to the Northwest; furnished a way for the miner, the pack train that came soon after its completion; induced thousands of immigrants to come to the new country; supplied the transcontinental railroad in the North with the information necessary for the proper location of their lines; and showed to the whole United States the richness of the natural resources of the "Oregon Country" and provided a safe means of transit to it and safety for those who would settle it.

In 1866 the Legislature of Washington Territory in a memorial to Congress for an appropriation to repair this road, four years after its completion, sets forth its advantages as follows:

"The opening of this road is of the greatest, most vital importance to the people of Washington, Idaho and that portion of Montana lying West of the Rocky Mountains. There is a constant stream of population flowing into the region of country lying along and adjacent to this so-called Mullan road. The immigrant who is seeking farming land comes on down to the Walla Walla and other rich valleys lying along the Western terminus of the road and thence on to Puget Sound. There is at the present time a population of over 100,000 inhabitants in the territories of Washington, Idaho and Western Montana. Rich deposits of gold, silver, copper, lead and iron are constantly being discovered and rapidly developed. Mining towns are springing into existence in all parts of the newly settled region. Branch roads leading from this main trunk (Mullan road) to the different mining camps are being made by individual enterprises. The vital importance of an early opening of a free road through this rich and fertile region of public domain, whereby the producers of the valleys may be enabled to reach the mining regions with their produce, and supply the miners with the necessaries of life at prices which will enable them to remain in and develop the mines.

"We submit the following statistics carefully compiled and drawn from reliable sources relative to the productions and ruling prices for the same of Walla Walla valley alone, together with the number of tons of freight landed by teams at Wallula, and the amount passing over the Mullan road by pack trains to Western Montana.

"The Walla Walla valley, including that portion which lies in the State of Oregon, has produced this season (1866) 500,000 bushels of wheat, 250,000 bushels of oats, 200,000 bushels of barley, 150,000 bushels of corn, 170,000 pounds of beans, 4,500 head of hogs, 1,800 head of horses, 2,500 head of cattle.

"From January 1 to November 15, 1866, 1,500 head of horses have been purchased by individual miners at Walla Walla horse markets, 2,000 miners have outfitted at Walla Walla, 5,000 head of cattle were driven from Walla Walla to Montana, 6,000 mules have left Walla Walla and the Columbia river loaded with freight for Montana; fifty-two light wagons with families have left Walla Walla for Montana, thirty-one wagons with immigrants have come through from the States via the Mullan road, a portion of whom settled in Walla Walla valley and the remainder crossed the Columbia river at Wallula and settled on the Yakima river or passed on to Puget Sound; not less than 20,000 persons have passed over the Mullan road to and from Montana during the past season; $1,000,000 in treasure has passed through Walla Walla and Wallula during the same period.

The Walla Walla valley contains six flouring mills, six sawmills, two planing mills, two distilleries, one foundry and fifty-two threshing, heading and reaping machines."

HENRY L. TALKINGTON.