

CAPTAIN JOHN MULLAN AND THE ENGINEERS' FRONTIER

By the year 1850 the heroic age of far-western exploration was rapidly drawing to a close. Since the epic expedition of Lewis and Clark the country between the Missouri and the Pacific had been trodden by thousands of trappers and traders who had peered into every nook and cranny of the Rocky Mountains in their search for beaver skins. More venturesome traders, like the Astorians, like Jedidiah S. Smith, the Christian gentleman of the desert trails, William H. Ashley, Peter Skene Ogden, and many another pathfinder had charted out, in pursuit of his own calling, the great spaces between the Rocky Mountains and the Western Ocean. Along their trails had journeyed hopeful missionaries and eager homeseekers. By 1850 the Mexican war was over. The Southwest had been annexed. There were 100,000 settlers in California. A new state had been admitted with shores washed by the Pacific. Thousands more of American settlers had established themselves in the newly acquired Oregon territory, laying the foundations of another new Pacific Coast state. Great political questions over the administration of the newly acquired territory were ominously stirring the Union. The heroic period was over. The day of the engineer had dawned.

The explorations of traders and trappers and the tales of immigrants and prospectors printed in various ways had already broadcast over the United States a good deal of information of a more or less reliable nature as to the character of the western country. But this was gathered and disseminated in an unsystematic way and had comparatively little scientific value. For example, though people knew generally that it was possible to build a railroad across the Rocky Mountains, particularly through the South Pass, it was not certain which of several would really be the best route nor was there enough topographical information available from Fremont and others on which exact estimates of comparative costs could be based. The far west so well known to the trader and prospector still remained to be scientifically mapped and measured. Only when that should have been done could the tremendous material developments occur which have made this country such a vital part of the American union of the twentieth century. Only then could the railroad come. Only then could the reclamation engineer estimate the possibilities of irrigation. Only then could

we reckon the power of our falling waters, the value of our mighty forests, the extent and utility of our vast mineral treasure.

This mapping and measuring of the far west, the scientific foundation of our present day civilization, was the task of a numerous group of hard-working, conscientious and adventurous young engineers mostly selected from United States army officers and working under the command of the Secretary of War. From the time of Lewis and Clark, the first army explorers, down to the work of that grand old man of the west, Major John W. Powell, men like these have continued to devote their lives to this great public service. Today on the frontiers of Alaska the work is still carrying forward. With a few notable exceptions, these patient mappers of the west have passed out of memory. Their voluminous reports, replete with scientific data, have gone into the gloomy repositories of forbidding government documents. Yet, like many another pathfinder of science the work of the army "topographer," to use a once familiar word, lives with us today in our railroads, our reclamation works, our hydroelectric plants, in short in the whole material foundation of the west. The "Engineers' Frontier" of the fifties and sixties has long since passed by, after that of the fur trader and the prospector, but into a deeper oblivion. The American people are all too ignorant of the great services of these engineers who surveyed the west for no profit to themselves, while at their side other men were making fortunes and contributing nothing to posterity.

One of these obscure army engineers built this Mullan Road. Let us hope that these pyramids along the way may rescue from total obscurity of at least one young officer who deserved well of his country. Captain Mullan's survey and construction of this wagon-road from Walla Walla to Fort Benton was really an off-shoot of the great work instituted by an act of Congress in February, 1853, calling for a thorough survey of all the several routes possible for a transcontinental railroad. Congress appropriated \$100,000 for the purpose, with the hope that agreement might eventually be reached as to which one of the routes thus accurately charted would be the best for the road which was to be built under government direction. The surveys were made by competent engineers. Because of bitter sectional differences between northern and southern representatives no agreement on a route could be reached until the secession of the southern states in 1860. After this the Union Pacific Railroad was soon chartered with a right of way through the South Pass to California.

The survey of the northernmost route, between Lake Superior and Puget Sound, was made under the direction of Isaac I. Stevens, first Governor of Washington Territory, who took charge of the expedition incidentally to the journey overland to his new post. The energy, ability and leadership of this man were responsible for the preparation of the report on the northern survey before that of any of the others. Its publication was a most important factor in securing, after the delay caused by the Civil War, the organization of the Northern Pacific Railroad and the consequent opening up to civilization of the large part of the northwest.

In October, 1853, while in the Bitter Root Valley among the Flathead Indians, Governor Stevens left Captain (then Lieutenant) John Mullan to spend the winter making meteorological observations and exploring the surrounding country with a view to selecting the best passes for any wagon road between the heads of navigation of the Missouri and the Columbia Rivers. Such a road would fulfill three purposes: a means of transport of supplies for the future railroad; a highway for emigrants; a military route over which contingents for the garrisons of the northwest might be moved from the east with greater celerity and economy. It eventually served most efficiently all three of these purposes. In addition, it became the pathway for an army of mining prospectors who followed the gold rush into Montana in the early sixties. As such it was for a while a rival route to the Oregon Trail passage to the Pacific Northwest.*

From 1853 till 1862 Lieutenant Mullan worked at surveying and constructing the new road through the northwestern wilderness. He encountered the greatest difficulties. When Stevens' survey was commenced the only mathematical data and maps available were those made during Lewis and Clark's hasty transit through the mountains nearly fifty years before. These were not fully published until the twentieth century. The parts of them accessible to Mullan could have been of little help for the purposes of a road survey. It was all new work. It was necessary not only to examine the various passes from the Lo-Lo pass north to those between Clark's Fork and the upper Missouri. Mullan had to measure the climate as well as to examine the lie of the land. The matter of snowfall and temperature is vital in mountain road work, as even Mullan found to his chagrin before he submitted his final report. The elements and the wilderness were

*For this suggestion as to rivalry to the Oregon Trail, I am indebted to Mr. Victor J. Farrar, of the faculty of history of the University of Washington. A full bibliography, prepared under his direction, is available at the University.

not all he had to encounter. Public apathy, official red-tape, and the disorganization of the war department consequent on the change of administrations and the great political issues of the election of 1860, together with the difficulty of keeping the remote Washington government consistently active in the far west, served to delay completion of the work. Three times Mullan crossed the continent and returned to the mountains in order to keep alive his project.

During the eight years of survey and construction, in which much time was thus lost, many significant events happened. No sooner had the first appropriations been authorized for the new road than the Indian wars of 1856-1858 broke out and stopped everything for a while; the natives of Washington Territory were then defeated and placed on reservations as a result of the famous campaign, in which Mullan volunteered his services; the Walla Walla Valley was opened up to settlement; the great gold rushes to Colville, Idaho, and Montana brought their hectic population of thousands into the new Inland Empire. In the latter connection the beginnings made on the road proved of greatest assistance as a pathway of civilization in the first years of the settlement of this section. Walla Walla, the biggest settlement in the inland Columbia country, though not itself located on that river, naturally became the western terminus of the road. By 1859 steamboats were ascending the Missouri to Fort Benton and the Columbia to Wallula. Walla Walla became for a period one of the two great distributing points of the northwest. The sixties were the "roaring" days of Walla Walla's frontier life which are being represented here in pageantry tomorrow.

The military utility of the new road was abundantly demonstrated in 1860 by the march overland from Fort Benton of three hundred men under the command of Major Blake. Near the present site of Spokane this force divided, one-half of them departing north to relieve the garrison at Fort Colville, the others going on to the south. In the autumn of 1860 these men marched onto the parade ground of the new fort at Walla Walla, fifty-seven days out from Fort Benton. A part of them remained to serve in the local garrison. The rest were sent on for the service of posts at The Dalles and Vancouver. As raw recruits they had embarked at St. Louis on the Missouri River steamboats. By the time they reached Walla Walla the march overland had served to whip them into disciplined soldiers.

In the east the Civil War had broken out in 1861. It is perhaps an indication of the potency of Captain Mullan's persuasive visits to Washington City, and of Stevens' unflagging efforts there as territorial delegate, that the work on the road continued during the first two years of the war. The task was finally completed in 1862. It is significant of the importance which Congress had by now come to attach to transportation in the distant northwest, that a resolution was passed by the Senate in February, 1863, for the printing and distribution of Captain Mullan's final report on the road. This was in the very darkest period of the whole conflict. During those weary weeks when Grant was mired in the Mississippi mud north of Vicksburg, the great flood of population which had followed the mining stampede of 1862 to Idaho and Montana, was pouring out over the whole inland Empire, to leave after its subsidence the groups of settlers who were the fathers and mothers of so many of those here present today. Mullan's appraising eye had discerned the magnificent agricultural possibilities of the country through which his road lay. His very readable report is full of advice for the immigrant homesteader, and he later wrote a guide book for the immigrant miner. As the Walla Walla district filled up with settlers during the course of his work he observed with much satisfaction the prosperity of this new country. "Already have each and all of these valleys," he wrote, "become the comfortable homes of the pioneer farmer and grazier, where the hand of industry, adding daily to the wealth and prosperity of the country, gives a new beauty, by the erection of schoolhouses and churches, those barometers of the intelligence and morality of a people."

The coming of the Northern Pacific Railroad followed finally the Stevens survey and the Mullan road. It was the work of Stevens and his faithful subordinate Mullan, which opened the way for the railroad. It was the railroad which opened the way for the millions of settlers who make up the people of the northwest today. For all this the young engineer after whom this road is named, was a real inspiration and a powerful contributor. May this monument serve to mark in our memory the name of a faithful follower of the "Engineers' Frontier."

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