

Principal Writes History of Naches Pass

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The following condensation of the manuscript, "Naches Pass—The Pass of the Pioneers," give interesting early day historical data. Horace C. Dunham (pictured), Naches grad school principal, wrote his history for a college course.

Naches pass, with its many pages of local history, is known as "The Pass of the Pioneers." It is an airline distance of 20 miles north from Chinook pass, which lies just east of the boundary of the Mr. Rainier National park. This "Pass of the Pioneers" was first recorded in white man's history in the year 1841, when Lt. Johnson of the Wilkes Expedition and two Indian guides were sent out to explore the trail and to visit Ft. Okanogan, Colville, Lapwaih and Walla Walla.

Animals First Users

It is believed and quite possible that the first trail to cross the pass was made by wild animals moving up the Yakima and Naches rivers. And as animals traveling in the mountains prefer the ridges, they naturally chose the one between the Little Naches main fork and the north fork as the easiest ascent. Down the dim days of antiquity it had been used by the Northwest Indians, who located the trails while hunting and then continued to use the pass. To them its grazing meadows, its springs of pure water, the coolness of its 4,928-foot altitude, made it their ideal camping grounds. Their trails from Puget Sound, from the Yakima river, from the Horse Heaven hills, from The Dalles of the Columbia, met, mingled and passed through the Naches pass.

The earliest reference to a road over the Washington Cascades is in the F. Nisqually Hudson Bay Company's "Journal of Occurrences," the entry for August 6, 1850, stating, "A party of men met here today on their way to cut a road across the mountains to Wally Wally, the expenses incurred to be paid by subscription among the settlers." This party led by a Mr. Robertson built six miles of "trailroad" along the Puyallup river.

Not Enough Helpers

In the winter of 1850 – 1851 an effort was made to get work started on the Naches pass road, but the settlers were too few in number to accomplish much at this time.

In September, 1852, "The Columbian," the first newspaper north of the Columbia was established in Olympia with A. W. Wiley and Thornton McElroy as editors. The first issue was devoted to the Naches pass road. On January 7, 1853, congress, under President Fillmore, passed an appropriation of \$20,000 for building a "Military road" over the Cascades, and the following year Washington's first governor, Isaac Stevens, gave the job of leadership to Capt. McClellan. Apparently, Capt. McClellan was not made for the job of pioneering in the Cascades. He consulted with the Indians and returned with a report that the project was impossible.



Gov. Stevens doubted Capt. McClellan and sent Lt. Tinkham and two Indian guides to examine the country between the Naches pass and Walla Walla. Tinkham conducted his survey in 10 days and gave a much better report than did McClellan.

Donations Collected

July 1853, a handful of settlers had collected \$1,200 in cash and numerous contributions for supplies and they began to build the road over the Naches pass. One group of workers, under Whitefield Kirtley and Nelson Sargent, crossed the mountains along the old Indian trail over Naches pass to begin at the Yakima river and work toward the west; the other, led by Edward Jay Allen, a brilliant young engineer of 23, began on the coast side by improving the six miles of 'Trail road' constructed along the Puyallup river by Robertson and his comrades in 1850, then whacked a clearing through the dense timber along the White and Greenwater rivers to the very foot of the mountain range.

There seems to be some discrepancy about Nelson Sargent's work. Some say he was to work from the east side of the mountains toward the west and others say he was sent to intercept the Longmire train. He did intercept the train in the Grand Ronde country in Oregon.

He had two reasons for going to meet the train. The first was that his parents and brothers and sisters were members of the train, and the second reason was to persuade the leaders of the train to leave the "existing trail" coming to the Puget Sound country and come by the newly "constructed" road over the Naches pass.

He had little difficulty in influencing the Longmire party to go over the Naches road since it was a shorter route. The party, consisting of 34 wagons and about 150 people, continued on the Oregon Trail, crossed the Athena Plains and passed the Whitman mission at Waiilatpu, and went then on to Ft. Walla Walla.

After leaving Ft. Walla Walla, they started up the Yakima river, which they crossed eight times, then proceeded to Wells springs. Here they struck a trail which the Steilacoom and Olympia Company had blazed for emigrants. They crossed into the Selah valley by going to the north of the Rattlesnake mountains and on into the Wenas creek area.

It should be said here that the Longmire wagon train of 1853 established the first camp in the Yakima valley; and it was also the first wagon train to come into Benton or what is now Yakima county as it was not yet organized at that time. They came to a garden in the Wenas area that was kept up by some Indians.

Later, a member of the party, a nine-year old boy, David Longmire, purchased the garden spot and his descendents still live there today. They arrive in the Wenas valley in September 1853. They went up the Wenas creek to its source and then crossed over to the Naches river, coming to it at a point about two miles above where the Nile creek joins the Naches river. They followed the Naches river to its source, crossing it about 68 times. Finally they came to the summit of the pass in the government meadows which is downhill and over a mile wide. After resting a few days the train continued its westward trek on October 1, 1853.

To get started from the top of the pass, it was necessary to descend a succession of slopes so steep that the teams and wagons were gotten down with much labor and at very serious risk of life and limb.

Long Rope Used

Then another and still more precipitous descent was reached. The wagons had to be lowered down the cliff by means of a long rope with the pioneer men had made by splicing together all the ropes they had. When this rope did not prove to be long enough to let the wagons down to the floor of the valley, they killed three of their precious steers and used their hides to add to the rope. Two of the 36 wagons were smashed to kindling but 34 were intact at the bottom of the cliffs.

One of the boys who helped let these wagons down the cliffs was David Longmire, who homesteaded with his father at the base of Mt. Rainier. He relinquished his land, long since deeded to Mt. Rainier National park, as "Longmire Springs."

From the Naches pas to the Puyallup valley most of the emigrants including the women and children, traveled on foot, as the road was too rough to made riding endurable. On the way they forded the Greenwater over 16 times and the White river seven times, before they reached the prairie south of Fern Hill where they had their last camp together in October, 1953.

Most of the wagon trains of 1853 and 1854 crossed the Columbia river at Ft. Walla Walla, went into the Horse Heaven country, then followed the Yakima river, then the Wenas, crossed behind Mt. Cleman to the Naches river, then up and over the Naches pass where they met the road which the settlers had opened to the Puyallup valley.

Good Supply Lines

The first three years that the Naches pass road was open it was a very important road, because this was the time of the Indian wars. The pass proved very helpful in the getting of supplies back and forth and also for the moving of military personnel. After the Indian Wars the Naches pass road became almost impassable again. From 1860 to 1884 it was used mainly as a cattle trail for driving cattle in and out of the Yakima country.

Thus in a period of 30 years the road was built and used very extensively, and then became only a trail again.