

NACHES PASS TRAIL.

Ida Wilcox Howell, "Historic Cascade crossing," The Seattle Times. June 23, 1946.

Stimulated by the Second World War, a great, new wave of immigration of population and industry is in progress from the East to the Pacific Coast area.

This westward movement is just a hundred years behind the historic push of the first daring settlers who saw the promise of the Far West and came to develop its virgin resources.

By 1853, hundreds of pioneer families had passed through the Columbia River Gorge, main gateway to the Pacific Northwest coastal country, bent on obtaining free land and independence. They had settled, for the most part, in the fertile Willamette Valley of what is now Oregon State.

In the meantime, the Puget Sound area had attracted several comparatively small groups that made their way north from the Willamette region or arrived by waterway via the Pacific. Olympia had become a thriving settlement whose inhabitants had more than a fair share of civic pride and aggressiveness.

The Olympia residents -determined that a road should be built over the Cascades, thus diverting a portion of the flow of oncoming settlers to the Puget Sound country.

Their efforts and a petition to Congress for \$100,000 resulted in an appropriation in January, 1853, of \$20,000 to be used in building a road over Naches Pass, just north of Mount Rainier.

The old Indian trail over the pass, narrow and hazardous, had been used by the Puget Sound and Inland Klickitat Indians, the inland Indians visiting Puget Sound to feast on salmon and clams, and the coast Indians traversing the high trail to gather huckleberries and nuts.

The trail later was used by horsemen of the Hudson's Bay Company This then appeared the logical and most accessible way from Fort Walla Walla on the Columbia River to the Puget Sound settlements over the formidable Cascade Mountains.

Capt. George B. McClellan of the Army, stationed at Fort Steilacoom opposed this road program stating emphatically that the road was impractical and could not be built and that the Columbia River trail far to the south was a sufficient inlet.

In spite of this attitude, Isaac Stevens, governor of Washington Territory, selected Captain McClellan to cut through a road which would enable the Longmire party, known to be en route from the East, to get through Naches Pass. The Longmire party consisted of some 36 wagons and 160 persons and, drew its name from one of the leaders, James Longmire, who had set out from Indiana with his wife and four children.

Captain McClellan took 40 men, including ten officers, and started off in the required direction, only to return after an extended absence with the renewed statement that the task of building a road at that point was impossible.

The Columbian of Olympia, first newspaper established north of the Columbia River, had taken up the Naches Pass road idea, and under its continuous urgings work was begun on the road in June, 1853.

The beginning actually was made by the settlers themselves, without waiting for governmental action. Funds, labor, horses and oxen were contributed by residents of Olympia and other Puget Sound communities. Crews went into the mountains and began hacking out a crude route.

The road building plan was to reach the summit from the west through dense, jungle-like Pacific Coast vegetation, thus opening a passageway for the approaching immigrants who would have been guided safely up the east slope from Yakima to the summit.

The road work progressed enthusiastically at first, then lagged. The season advanced and the rigors of late fall became imminent, and still the summit had not been reached nor had the Longmire party been sighted. Wandering Indians told the road builders that no wagon train was coming through that fall.

The roadbuilders suspended work and departed for Olympia just a week before the arrival of the approaching party.

When the Immigrants reached the Columbia at Fort Walla Walla, they had come to the end of any known immigrant trail. From that point to the journey's end the way was unplotted, grim and arduous, stretching the endurance of every man, woman and child to the breaking point.

That they survived at all is testimony to their hardihood and determination to win through.

First, the Columbia must be crossed and several days were consumed in whipsawing driftwood into rafts on which the wagons could be ferried across; the cattle were forced to swim.

Indians appeared and volunteered to pilot the party to the western crossing of the Yakima. Gladly and trustfully they were employed. However, upon reaching a fork they took the wrong direction and the immigrants found themselves down the Columbia below Priest Rapids, a high bluff preventing their ascent.

Retracing their steps, they struck the trail and in a few days came to the Yakima River, which they followed, being forced to cross it eight times as they proceeded.

The hungry travelers were able to make an appetizing addition to their slender fare by a purchase of potatoes from the Indian Chief Owhi. So impressed was 9-year-old David Longmire with this toothsome delicacy, with the lands of Chief Owhi which had produced the potatoes, and with the Yakima Valley generally, that he returned to the same spot when he married and acquired the old chief's farm, which became his home.

Spurred with renewed enthusiasm, the immigrants continued their journey, following the Naches River toward the Naches Pass. This river was crossed 68 times in the ascent, the party traveling

in the river bed itself much of the way. The contents of the wagons often were wet and soggy. When the banks were too steep for travel along the stream, the men were forced to hew a trail through the dense forests that would enable the wagons to pass.

On October they reached the Summit. Here they found beautiful mountain meadows, where herds of elk deer fed. Mount Rainier, in all its sparkling majesty, loomed to the south.

Surely this was a lavish, benevolent Country to which they had come!

Pausing only long enough to refresh their famished livestock and to spend one night in the bitter cold altitude, they pushed on. About two and a half miles beyond, just an hour after breaking camp, they came to an abrupt halt.

They had reached of a steep bluff, or cliff—an almost perpendicular precipice for about 30 feet, then an additional 1,000 feet so steep that a human could scarcely stand.

There appeared no way in which the oxen and wagons could proceed; on the other hand, the approaching winter and lack of food supplies prohibited an attempt to break a roadway the long way around the bluff, which might take weeks or even months.

The stock might be driven around, but the oxen and wagons must go over the bluff.

Hungry, exhausted and dismayed at the new dilemma, one of the women exclaimed, "Well, I guess we have come to the jumping-off place at last."

One member of the party had a 180—eyeing the emaciated oxen, remark good length of rawhide would sure in mighty handy."

"That's the idea!" exclaimed others. "We'll kill the leanest and worst of the oxen and cut the hide into strips!"

Promptly they set to work. It required the hides of three oxen to bring the rope to the required length. Then one end was wrapped around a sturdy tree and securely fastened.

One by one the wagons were lowered, their tongues tied upright, their wheels locked and small trees attached behind to act as a drag to keep the wagons from upsetting. Only one wrecked.

The journey down the western slop proceeded slowly. The Greenwater River was crossed eighteen times, the White River seven. At times it was necessary to construct bridges of logs, old fallen timbers and bark. Hunger was a constant gnawing presence, dogging their steps. Not a day passed but that one or more of the animals dropped and died.

Indians informed the party that there was bunch grass for the animals on a prairie a few miles away. It as decided to drive them there to graze for a few days while the women and children stayed in camp where they were able to rest and where berries and edible roots were obtainable.

Finally the cattle and wagons camp down into the Puget Sound Country. The wagon train was met by representatives of the Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Nisqually and food was soon dispatched to them.

The final camping place of the wagon train was on Clover Creek south of the present city of Tacoma. Earlier settlers invited the ladies of train for tea at one of their homes giving them the first taste of civilization in many months.