

Lucile McDonald, "The First Crossing of Naches Pass," Seattle Times. November 1 and November 8, 1953.

As soon as the creation of Washington Territory became a fact in 1853 the several counties on Puget Sound, some of them newly formed, considered steps to insure the opening of a northern route into Puget Sound country that year.

General Joseph Lane, delegate to Congress from the Oregon territory, obtained a twenty-thousand dollar appropriation for this purpose in January, 1853, but the money was not available to the settlers on the west coast.

While the means for paying for construction of the road were still in doubt, an Olympia committee composed of the Reverend Benjamin Close, Olympia Postmaster A.W. Moore, James Hurd, John Alexander and Edmund Sylvester, hotel man and townsite proprietor, agreed early in June, 1853, to receive names of volunteer workers and to accept contributions of cash or supplies for the road builders.

They collected about one thousand, two hundred dollars.

Edward J. Allen, a twenty-two year old engineer, set out with Whitfield Kirtley, George Shazer, and John Edgar, a retired Hudson's Bay Company shepherd, to view a trail over the mountains described by The Rev. Francis N. Blanchet in his journal of 1848 and used sometimes for bringing furs from the inland country to Fort Nisqually. Indians living near Edgar's house on the Yelm prairie said the men would find the route impassable because of snow.

Undeterred, the group headed toward the Puyallup River, striking it three miles beyond the point where a previous road had been completed in 1850 to Porter's prairie. This earlier effort of settlers to open a wagon route over the mountains halted at the A.L. Porter land claim, three miles south of present day Enumclaw and two miles from Buckley.

Allen described the trail from there on:

We struck up a small stream to the right, crossed the White River Valley to the Greenwater, then up Greenwater Canyon to Ahnepash River on the east side of the summit then to Bumping River."

It is assumed that Ahnepash may have been the Little Naches River. Allen said that "...at the ridge between Drift River and the Yakima River..." believed to have been near Rocky Flat between the Naches and Wenas Rivers, two men turned back to carry the news of their findings to Olympia and the two others continued blazing the road.

The party reported that route, "...so feasible that we consider it unnecessary to survey any other trail." It was well watered, with plenty of grass, important considerations for wagon caravans. They estimated the distance from Muck River to the summit as eighty miles.

Captain George B. McClellan of the Stevens Railroad survey party also was out looking for a road, but his delayed arrival in Olympia tried the patience of pioneer businessmen anxious to have their new townsites attract migrant population. Meeting July 9, 1853, they decided "...the eleventh hour

has come and the road must be made ready."

Accordingly two crews set forth, one under Kirtley and one under Allen, some of the men obtaining equipment at cost from Lafayette Balch, Steilacoom townsite owner and merchant. Major Charles H. Larnard, newly arrived commandant at Fort Steilacoom, bolstered their determination by sending an express message asking McClellan to spare part of his men to help the citizens.

Allen's party was made up of eighteen men, among the A.C. Burge, Thomas Dixon, Ephraim Allyn, James Henry Allyn, George Gathers, John Walkers, John H. Mills, R.S. More, R. Forman, Ed Crofts, James Boise, Robert Patterson, Edward Miller, Lewis Wallace, James R. Smith, John Barrow and James Meeks.

They cleared the earlier road for a distance of about six miles and then altered the course so as to escape the three worst hills on the whole route. Allen said that these, being heavily timbered had been fired. When the men returned after reaching the summit they planned to clear the route more thoroughly.

By August 20, 1853, Kirtley's party had finished swamping out the eastern end of the road to the summit where, at an elevation of about 5,000 feet, they found grassy meadows suitable for grazing animals in the wagon trains.

Theodore Winthrop, who passed there a few days after Kirtley quit described the eastern descent as "...an elaborate inclined plane of very knobby corduroy down the steepest slope." He said his Indian guide preferred aboriginal paths to this effort of the white man. Winthrop, previous to this, on August 26th, visited Allen's camp on the Greenwater and shared the latter's blanket for the night. He wrote of the robust, good-natured road crew to whom it was but play for any one of them with his ax "...to whittle down a cedar five feet in diameter."

At the camp Winthrop dined and breakfasted on coffee, bacon and toasted flapjacks with molasses, served at an enormous bonfire, which powdered the country roundabout with its ashes. In the morning Allen walked a short distance with Winthrop on the trail. At the summit Winthrop again saw a white man, Lieut. Henry C. Hodge, a member of McClellan's party, who had been detached from the military group and sent with a message for Fort Steilacoom.

The lieutenant was sitting in a meadow writing his day's observations when Winthrop and his Indian guide passed. Hodge went down the west side and on his arrival at the road building camp expressed approval of the settler's steps toward making the route passable.

However, by then Allen was ready to admit that the task required much longer than anticipated and he feared his crew might not finish that season. Also, nothing had been heard from the immigrants. Nelson Sargent, a young man from the vicinity of Olympia had gone over the trail late in August expecting to meet members of his family in a westbound wagon train.

No news had been received from him. The road builders, discouraged suspended work and returned to Olympia. Allen explained, "We still have some three miles of road to finish before crossing the White River for the last time." He said his men had put fire to this stretch on the way out. Burning

was a standard method of land clearing both for Indians and white persons.

Allen was confident that after 1853 the Cascade Range no longer would be a bugbear adding, " We have but one really bad hill down the mountainside, which is, with our limited time and means for improving, without a doubt a bad place, but can be made with but little outlay very good. It is not to be compared with Laurel Hill on the other route." He referred to a difficult portion of the Barlow Road around Mount Hood.

The White River country looked so good to some of Allen's workers that they staked claims there. The leader went on to his own home on Budd Inlet, to find that the house had been destroyed and two thousand dollars worth of cut timber on his property had been burned while he was absent.

By this time the settlers doubted they could turn the tide of immigrants toward Puget Sound because it was so late in the season and part of the road still was no more than a trail. It was late in September, 1853, when Postmaster A.W. Moore of Olympia made a final effort to turn the tide toward Puget Sound over the newly built Naches Pass route.

Moore left by horse for the east side of the Cascade Mountains planning to meet Governor Isaac I. Stevens and persuade him, if possible, to enter Olympia by the settlers' road.

Already young Nelson Sargent had ridden out from Olympia in the direction of Walla Walla and Indians brought word that he had met his father, who was with an immigrant party of thirty-six wagons led by James Longmire. When Nelson found them they were camped at Grand Ronde.

Sargent told of the wagon road built directly to Puget Sound and assured the party he had traveled it and that work doubtless had progressed to the summit, as a crew still was clearing the way when he had seen it a few weeks earlier.

Accordingly the Longmire party left the Oregon Trail at Umatilla and struck out for Fort Walla Walla, ferrying its wagons across the Columbia on a flatboat made of driftwood lumber. Young Sargent, who could speak some Chinook, made a bargain with the Indians to swim the stock. The tribesmen demanded pay before they would commence.

"We gave them eighteen dollars and they brought up twenty five canoes, forming them in line below the crossing," Longmire related. "We drove our stock into the river and they saw to the opposite shore in safety. Next came the horses and when they were about in the middle of the stream the Indians laid down their oars and made signs, which I understood to mean more money."

The party crossed the Yakima River and reached a canyon at Wells Springs which seemed an insurmountable obstacle. Indians, who had followed them, got off their ponies and marked on the ground two roads, indicating by dots the "sleeps" or camping places. At the end of the roads they indicated "soldiers."

Thinking the shorter route would be better, the whites went northeast as far as White Bluffs on the Columbia. The Indians followed them and the settlers suspiciously ordered the tribe to keep at a distance. Next day all retraced their steps to Wells Springs. Nelson Sargent had gone in another

direction to look for the settlers' road and came back with word that he had found it.

The party traversed the formidable canyon September 18, then went on to Coal Creek, the Selah Valley and on to the Wenas where a member of the group, John Aikin, was dispatched to ride ahead and seek supplies. Next the caravan reached the Naches River, following it four days and crossing it sixty eight times. At the summit grass was found and the wagons stopped for two days' rest.

Three miles farther to the west was Summit Hill where the most storied episode of the trek took place. The steep descent was accomplished only after cattle were sacrificed for the purpose of making rawhide to augment the scanty supply of rope with which to lower the wagons three hundred yards down the slope.

An end of the rope was tied to a wagon axle, and the other end, thrown around a tree, was held by the men of the party. One by one the wagons were eased past the danger point, then the ropes were loosened and the vehicles continued another quarter of a mile with locked wheels to the Greenwater. The only wagon lost was that of John W. Lane. A rope broke, the prairie schooner was smashed and the Lane family made the remainder of the trip on horseback.

By this time Aikin had reached Edward J. Allen's road camp, arriving there just before it was abandoned. Allen, hearing that the wagon party was in need of food, sent three hundred pounds of flour from the worker's supplies into the mountains, then accompanied Aikin to Steilacoom and Olympia for more. Michael Simmons and others got together one thousand pounds of flour, onions, and other provisions and sent a party back with Aikin.

Meanwhile Andrew Burge, of the road building party, was traveling along into the mountains with packhorses laden with Allen's donations of food. At Summit Hill he saw two white women, Mrs. James Longmire and Mrs. Erastus Light, and their children walking. "My God, women, where in the world did you come from?" he demanded, seeing them shrinking back in the bushes to give his horses room to pass on the narrow trail.

When he saw the wagons he tried to persuade the men to camp on the summit meadow, saying the trail he had come over was too narrow and had not been finished. Unable to convince the immigrants that they could not pass, he left the food he brought as the wagons were badly in need of it. As Burge returned to Steilacoom, he blazed trees and left notes tacked up to guide and encourage them. His messages read, "a shade better," or "a shade worse," and so on.

The wagons crossed the Greenwater sixteen times and the White River six times. The dreariest pull, Longmire said, was over Wind Mountain, "which was covered with heavy fir and cedar trees, but destitute of grass, with a few vine maples on whose long leaves our poor oxen and horses had to live for seven long days, not having a blade of grass during that time."

Logs were made into bridges to cross creeks, some being laid alongside windfalls, already on the trail. The men walked in order to ease the pull for their tired, half starved oxen. Finally the leaders came out on Porters' claim but the owner was in Olympia. They made their seventh crossing of the White River and reached Connell's prairie, thence to the Puyallup where humpback salmon were running and they had a fish feast.

On the way they had been heartened by the appearance of several other settlers. A day after Burge reached them, another Sargent boy, Wils, accompanied by Orington Cushman, hiked in from Olympia and paid a visit to the mountain caravan. At a ford on the White River before they descended Mud Mountain three Tumwater boys delivered the supplies from Michael T. Simmons.

On October 8, when the wagons were on the Nisqually Plains, a party of well dressed horsemen approached. They were members of the Olympia committee which had raised the road funds. Longmire said that when the two groups met he was wearing torn and ragged pants and a cap. One of his boots was missing and he wore in its place an improvised moccasin made from the hide of a cow killed a few days earlier.

"Our embarrassment," he recalled, "soon was dispelled by a copious draught of good old bourbon, to which we did full justice while answering questions." Scarcely had the Olympia welcome squad departed when another group rode up from the rival town of Steilacoom.

At Clover Creek the men decided to leave the womenfolk camped near the home of Mrs. Mahan and ride to Fort Steilacoom. While the party was still there Dr. William F. Tolmie, factor at Fort Nisqually brought the gift of a cart load of dressed beef.

"Distribute it to suit yourselves," the doctor said. The immigrants offered to pay for the beef, but money was politely refused. "It is a present to you," the doctor insisted. With this gift he issued a formal warning that while settlers were welcome, they must not take up land belonging to the Hudson's Bay Company.

Both Olympia and Steilacoom opened their arms to the newcomers and mass meetings were called to welcome them in the two towns.

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(Unsure who the speaker is in this segment.)

During the summer of 1853 the residents of Olympia received word that there was a large party of emigrants with ox teams, prairie schooners and horses near the confluence of the Snake and Columbia Rivers who with great difficulty were endeavoring to come to the Sound and willing to try the mountain trails. The citizens of Olympia and the vicinity were desirous of extending a hearty welcome and E.J. Allen called on me with a subscription list to raise funds necessary to cut a wagon road across the mountains by improving the Hudson's Bay Company trail via the Natchez pass.

The subscription then comprised the signatures of G. A. Barnes, Joseph Cushman, and Moses Bettman pledging twenty five dollars each. I persuaded Mr. Allen to be guided by my suggestions to which he assented. Destroying his subscription list, I wrote a new one headed it with one hundred dollars and sent him with it to Moses Bettman.

Moses' pride was instantly aroused and down went his name for two hundred dollars. George

Barnes raised Bettman's two hundred dollars by subscribing three hundred and Judge Cushman, not being outdone by Barnes subscribed four hundred dollars.

Captain Crosby also subscribed liberally, the amount of which I have forgotten, and Dr. William F. Tolmie, then the chief factor of the Hudson's Bay Company subscribed also which was greatly appreciated by all of us.

Other residents of the vicinity donated provisions of various kinds and other necessary material and a party of over fifty muscular young men from Olympia and vicinity fitted out with the supplies and equipment needed, commenced at Montgomery's on the eastern edge of the Nisqually prairie and cut a rough road across the mountains.

Quincy A. Brooks and myself met the emigrants on the summit of the Cascades near the Natchez pass. We were on horseback and attended by the celebrated Indian chief and guide Quiemulth, Leschi's brother, leading a pack horse that carried our blankets and provisions. The first party was followed a couple of weeks later by another party among whom were Isaac Carson, Rev. G.F. Whitworth and family, Mr. Boatman and family and the Wright brothers.