

NACHES PASS TRAIL HILER ACCT.

Mike Hiler, "A history of Naches Pass," *Signpost for Northwest Trails*, (July, 1989), p. 34-37.

Washington State is covered with historic trails. Most were inherited from natives and many were used in early exploration and settlement of the Washington Territory. These old trails saw many uses, including early explorers and government expeditions, fur traders, military excursions, wandering sightseers, railroaders, and cattlemen.

Traces of many of these old routes remain, either as present-day highways, as recreation trails, or as shapes on the landscape. Many of those trails are known to local communities, but few of the old corridors stand out as playing a significant part in state history.

One notable exception is the Naches Pass trail, also known as the "Walla Walla to Steilacoom Citizens Trail" and the "Cascade Emigrant Road." Located a few miles north of Chinook Pass, this trail has hosted most kinds of uses, with the exception of a modern highway.

When explorers first entered the country north of the Columbia River they found a network a native trails connected by mountain passes.

This trail system was used for the important cross-country Indian trade. While the Hudson Bay and its sister fur-trading companies concentrated their enterprise at forts along the Columbia River, they were aware of the inland trail network and their "voyageurs" were familiar with Naches Pass.

In 1841 the Pacific Exploring Expedition, led by Charles Wilkes, entered Puget Sound to collect scientific and geographic information. While the body of this group explored Puget Sound, Lieutenant Johnson, accompanied by the botanist Brackridge, rode over Naches Pass to look at the Columbia Basin.

Though Hudson Bay records mentioned Naches Pass before the Wilkes visit, the records of the Johnson party were the earliest to document the actual route. Their journals make fascinating reading.

In the 1840s the Washington Territory was a tiny community of rugged mountain men. Records regarding those individuals are scant. Nonetheless, the names of Peter Brecier, Pierre Charles, John Edgar, A. J. Moore, James K. Hurd, Pierra Pambrun, Simon Plamondon, Cornelius Rogers, Andy Burge, and the Fathers of the Athanum Mission—Brother Blanchet, Chirouse Casimir, Father Pierra D'Herbomez, and Marie Pandosy—remain today in a variety of old Territorial documents.

The Territorial interest in Naches Pass quickly accelerated in 1853. Territorial citizens were clamoring for access off the Oregon Trail and the military and railroad surveys were both looking for practical and convenient Cascade crossings. All of these forces were brought together by Isaac Stevens.

Stevens was a career military officer who resigned his commission to become the first Washington Territorial Governor. Assigned to the additional task of completing the western portion of the Northern Pacific railroad survey, he looked to others of his profession when making assignments. George B. McClellan was selected to assist Stevens with this project.

As Stevens approached Naches Pass from the east, McClellan was heading north toward Vancouver to take up the exploration on the western portion. But before either arrived on the scene, the territorial citizens committee, under the able leadership of Edward Allen, had already collected funds and by early July was busy converting the trail into a rough road.

With Allen working from the west and similar crews under Nelson Sargent working from the east, these groups, through great personal effort, successfully completed their task by mid-October.

McClellan did finally cross Naches Pass, made contact with the road builders, gave them some small assistance, and then returned to Steilacoom without exploring Snoqualmie Pass.

Disappointed with McClellan's lack of enthusiasm, Stevens appointed Frederick W. Lander to take his place. Hearing false rumors that an Emigrant Wagon Train had met with early snow on Naches Pass and been forced to abandon their wagons, Mr. Lander quickly conferred with McClellan and gave up the survey.

In desperation for a pass report, Stevens contacted Abiel Tinkham who was exploring the Montana section of the railroad survey. Tinkham left Walla Walla in early January of 1854 and arrived in Steilacoom by way of Naches Pass some 21 days later, thus refuting McClellan's claim that the Cascades were impassable in winter.

Though Tinkham established that an early winter crossing was possible, his assessment that Snoqualmie Pass was the most favorable route helped seal the fate of the Naches Pass Road.

While the railroad survey and road construction proceeded that summer, an unusual visitor crossed Naches Pass and wrote a Civil War-era best seller about his trip. The tourist was Theodore Winthrop and the book *Canoe and Saddle* has been in almost continuous printings up to the present. Winthrop's book offers a unique window to those times, to the men and their attitudes and to the old Naches Pass trail.

If the Naches Pass story stopped with Winthrop it probably would be forgotten today. However, in the fall of 1853 a wagon train branched off the Oregon Trail at Walla Walla. Following rumors of Allen's volunteer crew, but preceding Tinkham, the wagon train headed toward the Cascades. Led by James Longmire, they entered the Wenas and dropped into the Naches Basin near Benton Creek.

When Longmire's train finally succeeded in approaching Naches Pass in the fall of 1853, the advance group met on the trail a prominent mountain man of the area, Andy Burge. Stories relate Burge's surprise to find women and children walking up the trail and of his willingness to help the group with its journey west.

The Longmire group stopped just west of Naches Pass at Government Meadows. This was a good place to refresh their animals and rest. But winter was advancing and they soon hurried on. As they approached the famous "cliff" above Green Water, the legend goes that they killed some of their oxen and lowered their wagons with ropes made from the raw hides.

Though the fact may not have been as dramatic, still the steep sections of the trail above Green Water remain today as testament to the noble pioneers who crossed here.

For those who enjoy interpretations of history, the tribute of Della Gould Emmons' novel *Nothing in Life is Free* remains. History is rather vague about the wagons which followed the Longmire group, but there is little doubt a smaller wagon train followed that fall, and that other wagons crossed this pass the following year.

Because the wagons depended upon the open gravel bars along Naches River, and because they crossed the river innumerable times, a fall crossing was preferred.

The hardship of Naches Pass, heightened by the "cliffs" and scant forage on upper segments, did not make this pass a popular crossing.

Richard Arnold resurveyed Naches Pass in the summer of 1854 and found it wanting as a wagon road. He counted 44 river crossings along the Naches.

In addition to the difficulty of Naches Pass, other factors contributed to its unpopularity: Puget Sound populations had been shifting toward Seattle, and as they did, the feasibility of Snoqualmie Pass, outlined by Tinkham, became more apparent. Finally, the growing Indian hostilities ended all thought of using Naches Pass as a wagon route.

The friction between natives and pioneers added yet another chapter to the history of Naches Pass. After the signing of the 1855 Indian Treaty, feelings became threadbare and confrontations finally erupted south of Yakima. These limited battles resulted in military retreat. With knowledge that additional military reinforcements were due to arrive by way of Naches Pass, and sensing victory, the Yakimas set out to waylay them.

As the native forces hurried west toward Naches Pass, the US military was headed east on a collision course. The military scout, John Edgar, knew the area well and had the trust of the natives.

When he came upon their scouts, somewhere near Sawmill Flat, he convinced them he offered no threat, learned their intent, and hastened to warn the troops.

The military retreated and the natives, realizing they had been tricked, vowed vengeance on Edgar. The war was put on hold until spring and Edgar was killed the following year, no doubt in consequence for his actions.

Later that year and throughout the next, Naches Pass received heavy use by both native and

military forces. Leschi retreated over Naches Pass and troops, both regular army and Territorial volunteers, traced and retraced their steps over this popular mountain trail. (It is probably from these excursions that the legend of the Naches Pass cannon originates.

The Indian War soon wound down and by 1857 hostilities had ceased. By the early 1860s, cattle drives were going from Yakima through Naches Pass to Puget Sound.

The famous Indian chief, Kamiakin, had brought the first cattle into the Yakima Valley over Naches Pass before 1850 and now Andy Burge and his son Milt, among others, carried on that hearty tradition.

These cattle drives continued through the 1880s, during which time the cross-Cascade drives were slowly shifting to Snoqualmie Pass, which the railroad finally traversed in 1889.

After the railroad was constructed, Naches Pass trail was almost forgotten. The primary use of the Cascades from 1890 to the 1920s was sheep grazing.

After the Forest Service was established in 1905 the "Rangers" began to maintain trails for fire control purposes. The combination of these uses, along with occasional fishermen, hunters, and a few curious sightseers, kept the trail corridor and its memory alive.

After World War II many new users entered the Cascades. One particularly noticeable change was the availability of the sturdy little all-terrain vehicle, the "Jeep."

As jeeps became more common, they were soon entering the forested lands on both sides of the Cascades. In 1951 a Yakima jeep club, accompanied by surviving relatives of the first Longmire train, crossed Naches Pass—and the route has been a motorized jeep trail ever since.

Today the sections of the trail from Walla Walla to Yakima are mostly lost from record and rumor. We know the Longmire Wagon Train left the Yakima River, traveled up the Wenas drainage to drop into the Naches near Elk Ridge.

From there the trail follows the river past Whistlin' Jack Lodge and into the Little Naches drainage. From Pile Up Creek to Bear Creek, old abandoned sections of the trail remain but are not managed within the National Forest trail system.

The route from Bear Creek to Road 1914 is presently a managed four wheel driveway.

Though this portion can be walked—and it is interesting—it really isn't suitable for carefree hiking. The trail from Road 1914 to Government Meadows is also a four wheel driveway, but the double tread and good maintenance give the flavor of the old road, and all who venture here can "see" the difficulties the pioneers encountered.

Freshly-logged private portions of the trail in this section will be encountered, the trail crosses the PCT and beyond here enters vast clearcuts.

Robert Kinzebach's "Naches Pass Trail Guide," along with the 1989 WTA Centennial Trails book, offer insights for visiting this unique old pioneer corridor. The Yakima Museum's "Naches Pass Study Guide" offers an annotated bibliography with study information.

In the words of Richard Perko, a historian who has written about Naches Pass, the pioneers' "courage, dedication, and faith on that overland journey was matched by their similar exertions in establishing the communities throughout Washington.

"As such, the exciting legacy of those founding fathers deserves to be remembered and told. When that is done, our state pioneers will be seen in proper light and their strength and courage will be an inspiration to the people of the Pacific Northwest."