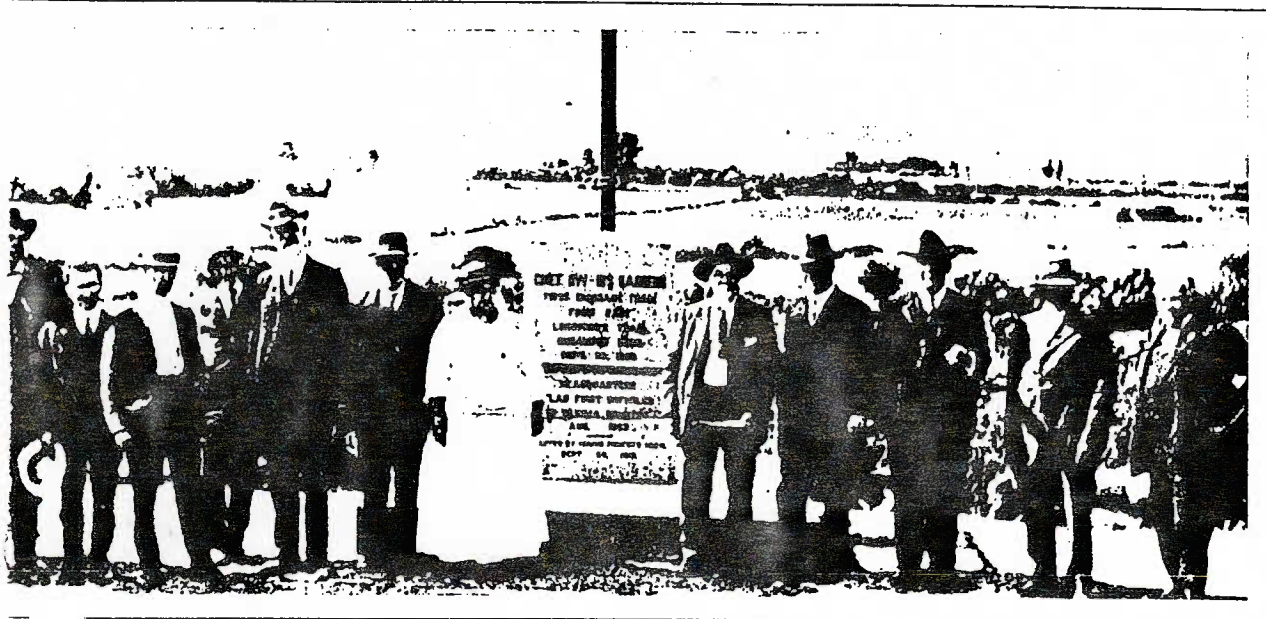


The Hard First Way Across the Mountains

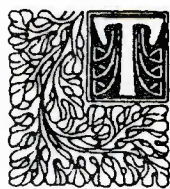


Washington State Historical Society

*Naches Pass was a terrible route,
but the wagon train emigrants conquered it.*



By Joan Robinson



The state of Washington, from the Canadian border to the steep walls of the Columbia Gorge, is bisected by a high mountain range. On other continents lesser ranges serve as borders between whole nations, but in the mid-19th century, when Washington Territory was created, the Cascade Mountains were not regarded as a logical boundary because there was a way, not to climb over them, but to go through them. The Columbia River had cut a gateway and no one foresaw any difficulties in establishing a territory that would have two distinct parts, divided by a range so high that four of its peaks were capped with snow.

But from the very beginning getting over or through the mountain barrier presented a problem and a challenge. It was Washington on both sides.

East-west lines of travel had to be developed. This meant finding the lowest places in the range, called passes. There are 12, none at a low level. The lowest turned out to be Snoqualmie Pass at 3,004 feet. But one of the highest, Naches, at 4,988 feet, was determined by those who came first to be the one that should be conquered.

It was not a good choice. Ezra Meeker, who crossed at Naches Pass in 1854, in later years called it "that execrable shadow of a road." That it was, but it could be crossed, cutting 200 miles from the old route from Fort Walla Walla down the Columbia River and up the Cowlitz to Puget Sound.

An ancient Indian trail began on the Yakima River, led up the banks of the swift Naches River, through rugged forests to the summit, then down the equally rough western slopes of the Cascades into the foothills bordering Puget Sound. Fur trader

Alexander Ross in 1818 noted that "the most direct line of communication from the Grand Forks [where the Snake and Columbia rivers meet] to the ocean [Puget Sound] is by the river E-yach-im-ah. By the E-yach-im-ah road the natives reach the ocean in ten days."



As early as 1839, employees of the Hudson's Bay Company had explored the trail, traveling from Fort Walla Walla, the company's post on the Columbia River, to Fort Nisqually, its post on Puget Sound. Little if anything, however, was done to develop the trail.

The United States Exploring Expedition sailed into Puget Sound in 1842 and undertook extensive land explorations. The commander, Charles Wilkes, sent a party through Naches Pass under the direction of Lt. Robert E. Johnson. It was guided by two Hudson's Bay servants who became permanent settlers in the territory—Pierre Charles, whose poorly pronounced name was given to the town Pe Ell, and Peter Bercier, who was related to Simon Plamondon, a pioneer Cowlitz settler. Their crossing is described in detail in the published journals of the expedition.

Although many emigrants made their way west to the Oregon Country in the first half of the 19th century, few settled north of the Columbia. The trip to Puget Sound was long, whether accomplished by sea or land. The would-be settlers who followed the Oregon Trail to its end found themselves in one of the most fertile locales in the Northwest, the Willamette Valley. Most of the travelers did not continue north. Only a few who were determined to settle on Puget Sound were undeterred by the prospect of a journey north involving sailing down the Columbia River to the mouth of the Cowlitz River and following a rough trail or traveling by bateau or canoe up the winding Cowlitz. At a point about 30 miles upstream at Cowlitz Landing the water journeys ended, and the overland trail to Puget Sound began. The road north was often muddy and always rough going, and their destination—Puget Sound—a hard-won prize.

The people who did straggle north to populate Puget Sound soon realized that if their region were to prosper, many more settlers were urgently needed. And to attract the new settlers, an easier and shorter route to Puget Sound had to be developed. The Naches Pass Trail seemed the answer. But who would improve it? Puget Sound settlers attempted to do so as early as 1850. The Hudson's Bay Company's *Nisqually Journal* of August 6, 1850,

LEFT: The Naches crossings, in later years, were a source of great pride among those who made them, and markers and signs were erected to commemorate what they had accomplished. This is a 1917 group gathered beneath a flagpole erected by the Yakima Pioneers Association at a place where the Longmire wagon train camped on September 23, 1853. Identified are Fred Parker at extreme left; T. C. Hall, wearing a straw hat; A. S. White, at Hall's left; Professor Edmond Meany, the tallest man; David Longmire, who led the first wagon train over Naches, next to the sign; Governor Ernest Lister, next to Longmire; and W. P. Bonney, director of the Washington State Historical Society, at extreme right.

BELOW: A marker erected on June 14, 1931, in eastern Pierce County. It reads, "Site of Camp Montgomery, Naches Pass Branch of the 'Oregon Trail,' to pioneers who passed this way, to win and hold the West." The member of the Monday Civic Club of Tacoma, standing proudly beside the pyramid of stones which the club erected, is not identified.



mentions that a group of men visited Fort Nisqually that day on their way to build a road "across the mountains to Walla Walla." Little came of the effort. The men, including a deserter from Fort Victoria, probably did not get farther east than the Puyallup River, about six miles from the western end of the trail.

Naches Pass was not the only route considered for the pioneering road. The *Columbian*, the Olympia newspaper established in September 1852, reported in an October issue that Dr. P. H. Lansdale of Whidbey Island had returned from an exploring trip over what would come to be called Snoqualmie Pass and said, "He has no doubt that a good wagon road can be easily constructed, leading up the Snoqualmie River to the great falls."

The *Columbian*, eager to trumpet the virtues of northern Oregon as it pursued the goal of dividing the territory, concluded the report on Lansdale's survey with the positive assertion that "the question is now settled that a road leading into our country can be made," and then took a characteristic gibe at lower Oregon with a reminder that an emigrant had to pay a toll of five dollars to get into Oregon by the only land route then existing—the Barlow Road around Mt. Hood. The Cascade Road, the newspaper said, would carry no toll.

When Washington Territory was created in 1853, Congress acceded to one of the settlers' demands and appropriated \$20,000 to build a military wagon road from Fort Walla Walla to Puget Sound, a distance of 275 miles. The appropriations bill was signed by the president early in 1853, but Northwesterners were dismayed to discover that the money would not be forthcoming in time to improve the trail for use that year. Some of the Puget Sound citizens then decided to take matters into their own hands. They took up a collection among themselves, raising about \$2,000 in cash. In addition provisions, tools, animals and labor were donated.



Two groups of men began work on the trail in the summer of 1853. One party worked west of the mountains clearing out the old road (started in 1850) from the western terminus to the Puyallup River and then constructed a new road up the White River to the foot of the mountains. A party that began work on the east side seems to have been less industrious, but a road of sorts was cut out as far as the source of the Naches River.

What resulted could hardly be dignified with the name "road." It was more a narrow opening

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than 68 times.*

through the forest, avoiding the steepest slopes and as many stream crossings as possible. Only the worst obstacles to wagon passage were removed. The ax was the chief road-building tool. Strong men hacked away the dense vine maple and young trees, although in the virgin forest the ground cover was mercifully sparse. Fallen trees often had to be cut through. The broken stumps were simply bypassed. No logging that far inland had yet been undertaken. What little earth had to be moved was done with picks and shovels.

Occasionally, in wet places or on steep slopes, small logs were cut to eight-foot lengths and laid crosswise side by side. This primitive, bumpy, hard surface was called a corduroy road, something to be avoided by travelers and their livestock wherever possible.

Work on the west side stopped when a traveler from the east side reported that there were no emigrant trains heading for a mountain crossing that season. But there were. A train of 36 wagons led by James Longmire of Indiana, which included such well-known pioneer families as the Judsons, Kincaids, Himeses and Bileses, arrived in the Grand Ronde Valley of eastern Oregon in August 1853. George Himes, then 10 years old, in later years wrote that E. Nelson Sargent met them in Grand Ronde and urged them to go to Puget Sound, saying the opportunities were better there than in the Willamette Valley. "As an added inducement to go thither," he wrote, "he said a wagon road was being made by the settlers of Puget Sound to the Columbia River by way of Naches Pass."

The Longmire party left the Oregon Trail and journeyed to Fort Walla Walla (today's Wallula)

where they crossed the Columbia on a flatboat constructed for the occasion. They arrived at the east edge of the forested foothills about mid-September, and began searching for the wagon road they had heard about. Nelson Sargent was chagrined. Many in the party felt they had been misled. But after consultation it was decided not to turn back and go to Oregon but to follow the Indian trail and make the mountain crossing into western Washington Territory.

After taking a wrong turn in the vicinity of Selah, and crossing and recrossing the Naches River no less than 68 times, the long wagon train made its slow way to a pleasant prairie (now Government Meadow) where camp was made and the stock given time to rest for two days.

Shortly after leaving that camp the emigrants came to a steep place—virtually a cliff—300 yards or more high with no apparent way to go down or around it. At the bottom of the cliff the ground for another thousand feet was too steep for wagon travel. The emigrants then hit upon an ingenious solution to their problem. They would unhitch the wagons and lower them over the cliff on ropes and drive the animals by a circuitous route to lower ground. Lacking enough rope, oxen were slaughtered to provide strips of rawhide that could be braided. Describing this operation, Longmire wrote,

One end of the rope was fastened to the axles of the wagons and the other thrown around a tree and held by our men and thus, one by one, the wagons were lowered gradually a distance of over 300 yards, when the ropes were loosened and the wagons drawn a quarter of a mile farther with locked wheels. Here we reached Greenwater River. All the wagons were lowered safely except the one belonging to Mr. Lane, now of Puyallup, which was crushed to pieces by the breaking of one of the ropes, causing him and his family to make the rest of the trip on horseback.

George Himes, in later life the director of the Oregon Historical Society, in his account of the crossing said three oxen were sacrificed to produce rawhide and that two wagons were crushed in the descent. Small trees were cut and fastened to the wagons to slow their descent.

At the Greenwater River the party found the place where the road builders had ceased working, and followed the route on down to the Sound.

Other emigrant parties used the Naches Pass Trail in 1853 and 1854. One especially well-documented journey was made by the Ebey party in 1854. Winfield Scott Ebey, brother of the ill-fated settler Isaac Neff Ebey (see *Columbia*, Spring 1988,

page 24), his father, mother, two sisters and several other families made the crossing of the Cascade Mountains via Naches Pass. Winfield Ebey was then 22 years old. He was a somewhat homesick young man who was looking forward to seeing Puget Sound and joining his brother Isaac. He began a diary (the first of 10) when the family left Missouri to journey West. The diaries cover a 10-year span and are the work of an intelligent, well-educated man. Excerpts from diary number two, part of which was written during the Naches Pass trip, appear below.



On September 11, 1854, young Ebey and his party were at Fort Walla Walla on the east bank of the Columbia River—the beginning of the Naches trail. He wrote,

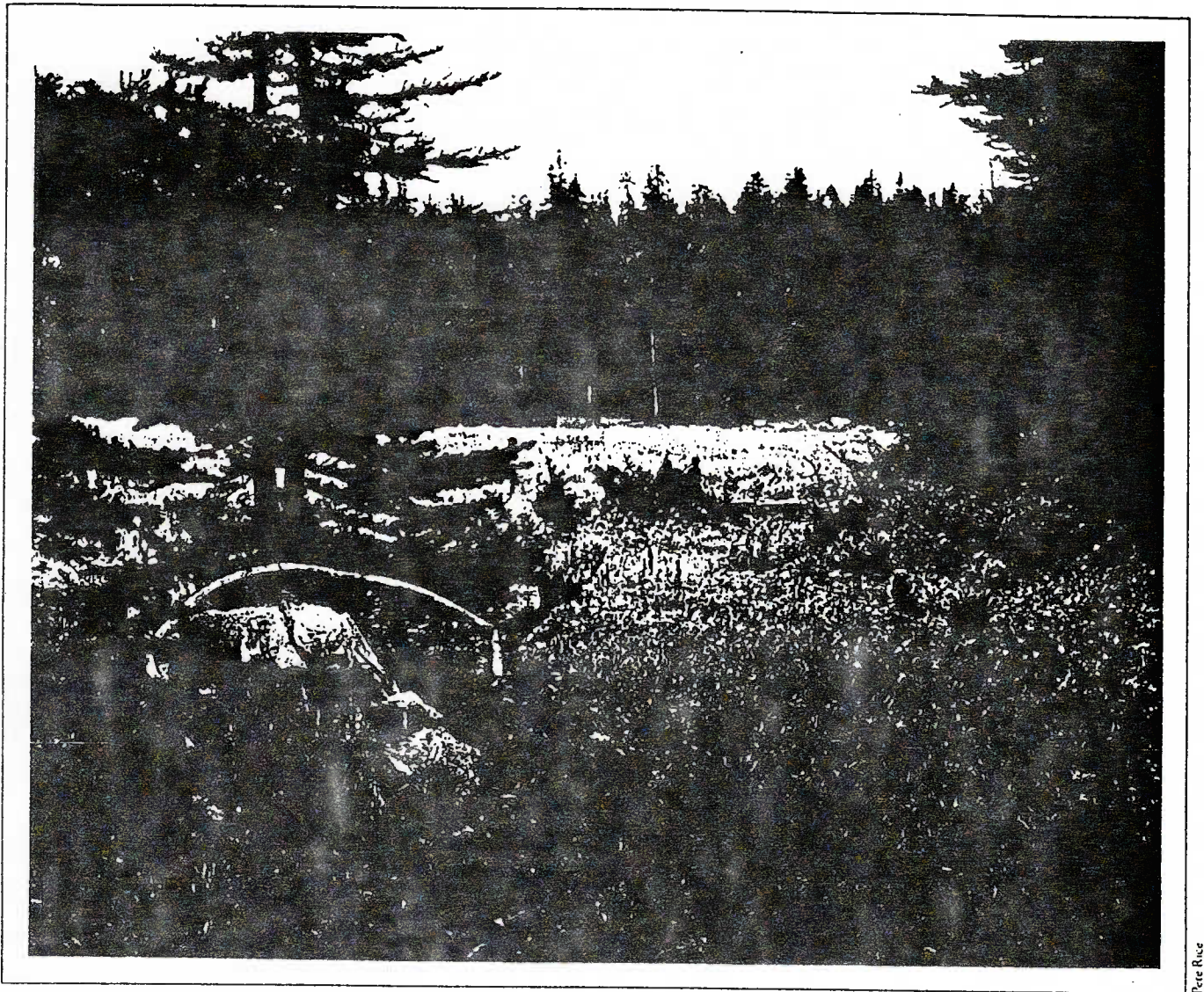
The fort stands on the east bank of the Columbia and north of the mouth of the Walla Walla in a sand plain. It is a miserable adobe place sadly out of repair. Mr. Pambrun is in charge for the H. B. Co. We met here Mr. Shirly [sic] Ensign of Olympia who has established a ferry at this place. The river is 3/4 mile wide, rapid and deep.

Fort Walla Walla was erected after Indians attacked Peter Skene Ogden's party here in 1818. It was first called Fort Nez Percé. The original wooden fort burned in 1842 and was replaced by an adobe fort, the one Ebey saw in 1854.

Five days later the party was at Canon Spring, also known as Wells Springs. David Longmire later identified Canon Spring as being on the E. F. Bensons ranch just below Rattlesnake Spring (near Selah). The Ebey party had chosen the wrong path that morning—evidently a common mistake there.

Today we have made but eight miles though we have been traveling hard all day. We took the road this morning from camp leading north around the base of the hills for three miles where the road strikes into the hills to the westward. The wagons preceding us had kept straight on. We turned to the left, but after traveling for a mile or two, concluded we were wrong, and turned to the right through the sage and grease-wood brush to the other trail. After traveling on this for a couple of miles we found we were wrong again as we were approaching the Columbia River again. It seems that the trains last year had gone wrong here, that the wagons this year following their trail got wrong and we did the same. Here we turned abruptly to the left and got on the right trail late in the evening.

This passage refutes the contention of several historians that Ebey's party was the second to use



Pete Rice

Summit Prairie, where the Longmire party found open space to camp before undertaking the eventful descent westward, as it looks today. The Pacific Crest Trail, extending the length of the Cascade Range, crosses this prairie.

the Naches trail. Winfield Ebey clearly wrote that there were other wagon trains in 1853 and at least one preceded his group in 1854.

On Wednesday, September 20, when the train was camped at Pine Grove, Ebey notes, *Advanced 12 miles. Road much of the way rough and rocky. . . . We are now at the foot of the Cascades and shall have timber the balance of the way. This grove is a very pretty place at the head of the Wenass. . . . This morning we met Mr. Ezra Meeker of the Sound going out to meet his father's family who are behind us. They are from Eddyville, Iowa. Poor fellow he had not heard of the death of his mother before. She died on the Platte. Much of his anticipated pleasure is dashed to earth by this announcement. We thought it better to let him hear the worst before he met his father. He pushed on with a sad heart to meet the family. . . .*

The meeting with Meeker was a melancholy one. Ezra Meeker had left his wife and their two small children in a cabin on McNeil Island in order to help his parents with their overland journey. He elected to travel east via the Naches Pass Trail to check on its condition for himself. He had heard reports that the road had been improved but had some doubt since a similar report the year previous had proved inaccurate. Meeker set out on his eastward journey in September. On September 3, 1854, he appeared at the claim of Jonathan McCarty, near present-day Sumner. He was on foot, carrying a few provisions and half of a blanket. McCarty insisted on lending him a pony for the trip.



Meeker's crossing of 1854 is reminiscent of Theodore Winthrop's Naches Pass trip the previous year. The notes from Winthrop's trip across the mountains formed the basis of his book *Canoe and Saddle*, a far-West classic. Meeker's journey of 1854 made up a large part of his book, *Pioneer Reminiscences of Puget Sound*. Both men followed the trail west to east, Meeker by himself and Winthrop accompanied by an Indian guide. Both thought the trip unpleasant. Winthrop called a part of the trail on the east side "Via Mala," competing with Meeker's "execrable shadow" epithet. The trip proved exhausting to both men—Meeker reveals that he held on to his pony's tail to negotiate the steeper slopes of the trail, and Winthrop was so overcome by weariness at one point he fainted and fell off his horse.

Ezra Meeker encountered the Ebey party camped by Wenas Creek where Winfield says that they informed Meeker of his mother's death. But Meeker, in his *Pioneer Reminiscences of Puget Sound*, perhaps for dramatic effect, says that he was informed that his mother was dead when he joined his father's wagon train.

The regimen followed by the Ebey party was similar to the routines of other emigrants on the trail. In the morning the cattle were put out to graze while the travelers breakfasted. The teams were then yoked, the cows milked and the wagons packed for travel. The train departed with the wagons leading and the livestock following. At lunchtime, an hour's stop was made, then the teams were rehitched and travel recommenced. One of Winfield Scott Ebey's duties as captain of the train was to scout for camping places. He spent part of each afternoon in this task. An hour before dark the wagon train would stop at the selected camping place, dinner would be prepared and con-

sumed, and the balance of the evening would be spent socializing. The routine of the Longmire party of the preceding year differed in one detail. Some of the men had to work at clearing trail ahead of the wagons.

Camped on the banks of the Naches River on Thursday, September 21, Ebey wrote,

The Naches comes winding its rugged way down a deep canyon or gorge of the mountains. It is about 20 yards wide, shoal swift current running over a rough stony bed. It is truly a romantic spot shut out from the world by the high mountains on every side. . . . Down the valley to our left leads an old Indian Trail to the "Yakima Mission" where some of the Catholic Fathers have established themselves for the spiritual control of the red men of the West. Up the stream to the right is the emigrant trail winding among the trees and rocks, scarcely passable. It is an old Indian trail but found to be much nearer for emigrants going to Puget Sound than the old road by The Dalles of the Columbia. At the last session of Congress the sum of \$30,000 was appropriated for the purpose of opening this road for wagons and the work is now going on under the charge of Lieutenant Arnold, U.S.A., and Mr. E. J. Allen, contractor. We are informed that the men are at work near the summit of the mountains and that until we meet them we will have to work our way over the old trail—which I suppose is very bad. . . .

(Ebey was mistaken about the amount of money allotted to build the Naches Road. Congress had, as mentioned earlier, appropriated \$20,000 to develop a military wagon road "from Stilacoomb, on Puget's Sound, to Fort Wallawalla.")

*With a rope of braided
rawhide tied to their
axles, the Ebey party's
wagons were lowered
one by one down a
300-yard slope.*



To Captain George B. McClellan, later a Civil War general, whom Governor Isaac Stevens called "the best military road builder in the country," fell the assignment to open a military wagon road across the Cascades. But McClellan's performance during the summer of 1853 seemed intended to delay the completion of such a project. He arrived at Fort Vancouver later than expected, took an inordinate amount of time forming an exploration party and then set out slowly, sometimes moving only a few miles a day.

McClellan's survey party consisted of 64 men and 173 mules and horses. It was split into four sections to undertake explorations of separate areas and McClellan himself headed the group that

examined Naches Pass. He concluded that it would be an impractical place for a railroad crossing of the Cascades.

It remained for Edward J. Allen, a 22-year-old engineer, in company with Lt. Richard Arnold, to carry out what McClellan had been assigned to accomplish. In May 1854, \$15,000 of the government appropriation was left when Allen and Arnold with a party of workers set out to repair some sections of the Naches Pass Trail and reroute others. Ebey writes of his train's meeting both Arnold and Allen. This entry in the diary was written while the party camped at Summit Prairie.

Today we moved eight miles up the mountain and encamped near the summit of the Cascade Range of mountains. The morning was rainy and disagreeable. A couple of miles from camp we met



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Lieutenant Arnold, U.S.A., who is locating the new road over the mountains. At this place we met Mr. E. J. Allen and party camped. They have the road cut this far and expect to finish it to the foot of the mountains [east] this fall. There are some 30 men at work.

Summit Prairie was recalled fondly by many emigrants. It was a place of abundant grass and water, a place of welcome rest. Theodore Winthrop paused there in 1853, a short time before the visit of the Longmire party. Winthrop described it as "this fair, oval, forest-circled prairie."

When the Ebey party reached the cliff where the Longmire party had lowered their wagons with ropes, the "bad hill" as Ebey termed it, they found that Allen, Arnold and their crews had made a passable descent out of what had been a nightmare in 1853. A railing had even been put in place on the lower side of the trail.

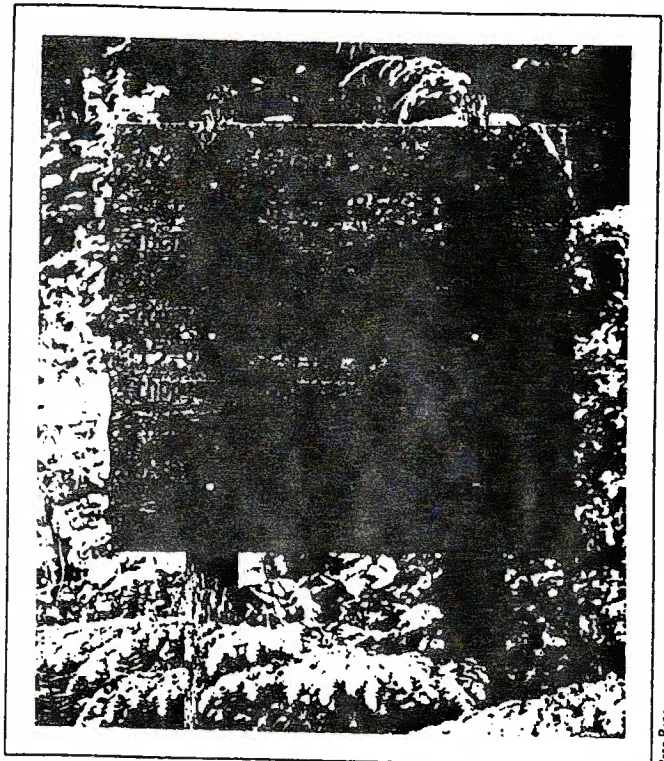
Descending to the canyon of the Greenwater River the Ebey party was compelled to cross it 14 times. Feed for the cattle was gone; the animals were forced to exist on browse. The party traveled through thickly forested country reaching the White River, and crossed it seven times. Fording the White River was a dangerous undertaking; its current was strong, its water rich with glacial flour which obscured the large rocks in its bed. Finally, the train emerged from the forest into open ground. Ezra Meeker had likened the experience to emerging from a dungeon into the sunshine. Winfield Ebey's diary entry made at Grass Prairie shows that his relief at emerging from the forest was tempered by the knowledge that 35 miles separated him from the end of the overland journey:

We are through I suppose as we are west of the Cascade Mountains and near the settlements. We have been on the road five months and three days and feel tired and worn out and are not at our journey's end. It is still some 35 miles to Steilacoom where our land journey will end.



The Ebey family's trip over Naches Pass took 24 days. The Longmire party of 1853 took about 34 days. In part, the trip was shorter for the Ebey party because they traveled a little earlier in the year, before there was snow on the ground. But the main reason was that the Longmire party worked on the trail as they traveled it and the trail was being improved by the Arnold-Allen effort of 1854.

The Ebeys joined Isaac on Whidbey Island. There Winfield served Washington in several



Pete Rice

ABOVE: This sign, at the top of the cliff down which wagons were lowered in 1853, was erected by the Chief Seattle Council of Boy Scouts in cooperation with the Washington State Historical Society. It reads, "The Naches Cliff. In October 1853, the 148 member Longmire party snubbed 53 wagons of its wagon train down this 'impassable' 1,000 foot high, glacier carved precipice, using thongs from oxen butchered for their hides to supplement their meager rope supply."

LEFT: In July 1910, the historical societies of Oregon and Washington sponsored a visit to Naches Pass so that markers could be placed before all traces of the wagon road were obliterated. This photograph, taken by M. H. Gilstrap, director of the Washington society, shows the group, who traveled by horseback, lunching beside the trail among the same old-growth trees that the pioneers passed through. The white-bearded man sitting on a log holding a cup and plate is George Himes, director of the Oregon society, who, as a boy, was a member of the Longmire party. David Longmire, son of James Longmire, the wagon-train leader, is seated at left. Others in the photograph are his sons.

capacities during the 11 years remaining of his life. He was, at times, a lawyer, a deputy marshal and a deputy collector of customs. He lived to see his brother Isaac beheaded by northern Indians and to lament the deaths of others in his immediate family.

Other members of the wagon trains of 1853 and 1854 lived long lives in Puget Sound country. The reminiscences of some of them were published in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Time, however, tends to mutate facts; the "bad hill" changes dimensions, the number of river crossings expands and shrinks, and the time on the trail varies. The most reliable sources remain the diaries kept during the crossing. But despite the unreliability of pioneer reminiscences and the paucity of emigrant diaries, the story of the Naches Pass Trail remains a gripping one. And although after 1854 wagon trains would no longer struggle over Naches Pass, the road continued to play a role in Washington history for several decades. During the Indian War of 1855-56, several incidents took place on Connell's Prairie through which the Naches Trail passed. In one of the incidents, Michael Connell and James McAllister were ambushed and killed by Indians. A few days later, in almost the same place, settlers Miles and Moses, serving as territorial militiamen, were attacked and slain by hostile Indians.

In the late winter of 1856, after the famous skirmish termed the "Battle of Seattle" and after numerous other forays and repulses, the Indian fighting force amazingly retained enough strength to harass the troops building roads and fortifications in the Puget lowland. On March 10, the Indian leader Leschi and his warriors ambushed a group of volunteers as they moved out of Camp Connell. Fighting raged for eight hours, but in the end the Indians were defeated. This confrontation, sometimes called the Battle of Camp Connell, was the last real battle of the Indian War. Soon after his defeat there, Leschi led about 70 of his followers in a retreat across Naches Pass. By an ironic twist the road Leschi helped build was his escape route.

After the war was over, the Naches Pass Trail reverted to its earlier uses, by the Indians to cross the Cascade Mountains and by stockmen to drive cattle from Yakima to the Sound. It was never developed as a road that could be used by any but horse-drawn vehicles or livestock.

The Great Northern Railroad selected Stevens Pass for its mountain crossing and the Milwaukee railroad went over Snoqualmie Pass. Cross-mountain highways eventually were cut through at Chinook Pass, south of Naches Pass, and at Snoqualmie and Stevens passes. The White Pass highway, the southernmost route, was constructed over

a long period in the 1950s. The last mountain highway to be built was the scenic route through North Cascades National Park.



In 1910, as a fitting last chapter, the old Naches road was used by two men who as young boys had crossed the Cascades with the Longmire party. George Himes and David Longmire, both advanced in age, retraced that early journey. George Himes' diary tells of the memories that came flooding back and of the aches and pains he and Longmire experienced during the 1910 revisit.

Today only a shadow of the "terriblest route of all" remains. In its stead there stand innumerable deep ruts made by off-road vehicles, denuded hills where timber harvesting has taken its toll and left in its wake stubble-covered, eroded ground, subdivision piled on dreary subdivision, and strip development with its gaudy signs and serviceless service stations. In less than a score of places, many of them on the east side of the Cascades, the flavor of the countryside and the tread of the Naches trail has been preserved. On the west side of the mountains, in only a few places is the trail at all like its original condition. But I do remember with pleasure standing near the monument on Connell's Prairie looking out at the emerald-clad fields—a replacement in kind of the prairie grass of earlier days. And Elhi Hill, logged in the last century, is once again covered with trees and must closely resemble its former condition. Summit Prairie, if one ignores the nearby evidence of off-road-vehicle use, is practically unchanged from its original state. The cliff—the "bad hill"—has suffered at the hands of bikers and of well-meaning workers who have sought to repair the trail. Imagine the disgust of a group of Longmire party descendants when, on approaching the base of the cliff, they found a group of bikers attempting to rope their vehicles to its top. The time has come for those people who feel that the Naches Pass Trail is an important part of Washington's past to find ways to preserve it before it disappears entirely.

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