



United States
Department
of
Agriculture

Naches Pass Historic Trail

Forest
Service

Pacific
Northwest
Region



The Oregon Trail was pioneered 150 years ago from Kansas City, Missouri to Walla Walla, Washington. This trail brought in a flood of settlers to the Pacific Northwest. The Oregon Trail to Walla Walla was one primary route; but numerous shortcuts, side routes, and access trails were associated with this travel corridor.

After settlers reached Walla Walla, they split off in numerous directions, some traveling to the Willamette and others threading to other small communities in the Oregon Territory.

Yakima residents are often surprised to learn that one of these "branch routes" off the Oregon Trail passed through Yakima County on its way to Puget Sound. This branch is today known as the Naches Pass Trail or the Longmire Trail. When it was utilized by pioneers in 1853-54, it was known as the "Walla Walla to Steilacoom Pioneer Citizens Trail".

The Naches Pass Trail has a long history of human use. It was originally a travel route for Native Americans. The Hudson Bay employees were using this cross-Cascade route by the mid 1830's. In 1841 a famous United States exploring expedition under Charles Wilkes visited Puget Sound and sent an exploring party over Naches Pass. This group left some of the first written descriptions of this old travel route.

In 1853, Theodore Winthrop traveled over Naches Pass and later wrote a book about his travels. His book, titled "By Canoe and Saddle" has been in almost continuous printings since it was first published. The town of Winthrop, Washington was named after Mr. Winthrop.

Another famous person who had a connection with Naches Pass was George Brinton McClellan, the Union Army General under President Lincoln for several years early in the American Civil War. McClellan was assigned the task of surveying Naches Pass as a possible railroad route. Working under Isaac Stevens, he did not favor Naches Pass as a possible route for a railroad.

Besides the many facts associated with Naches Pass and the "Walla Walla to Steilacoom Citizens Trail", there are also a number of legends surrounding this old trail. Rumors persist that a cannon was abandoned there by the military in the 1850's and much effort has gone into locating it.

One interesting chapter in the old trail history is associated with John Edgar, for whom Edgar Rock is named. Mr. Edgar knew this area well and was leading a military expedition over Cascade Pass in the mid 1850's. On one of these trips he encountered a hostile Indian group heading west toward the troops for whom he was scouting. Legend says that he returned to his troops who made a hasty retreat back to Fort Steilacoom. Mr. Edgar was killed the following year in the Indian wars of that time.

Though the Naches Pass Trail was used by a number of different kinds of travelers in the mid 1800's, it is today best remembered for one particular trip which occurred in the fall of 1853. That fall a large wagon train left Walla Walla heading for Puget Sound. They knew that the military and the Territorial Government had spent time improving this old horse trail and they had reason to believe that wagons could travel it, thus saving time getting to Steilacoom.

The wagon train is today known as the Longmire Wagon Train. It was led by members of the Longmire family and Mr. Biles. Though the members of the train probably knew their group as the Longmire-Biles group, later writings by James Longmire have served to define the group for present historians.

The journal of the Longmire wagon train over Naches Pass is today best preserved in the remembrance of James Longmire. This narrative was first published in the Pacific Northwest Quarterly in 1932 (Vol. 23), but has since been reprinted in "Three Wagons West", in "Told By The Pioneers", and other publications. A published article on this wagon train was written by Joan Robinson and published in "Columbia, the Magazine of Northwest History" in 1988.

In addition to the Longmire Wagon Train, there is evidence that other smaller groups crossed Naches Pass in 1853-54. Because the diaries and journals of these travelers have not been published, their trips are not as well known or understood. After 1854 hostilities with Native Americans in the Yakima Basin increased. This, coupled with the difficulty of the Naches Pass Trail for wagons, the famous "cliffs" on the west side of the Pass, and other more popular pioneer travel routes led to the trail being abandoned for pioneer travel by 1854. After this it was used during the Indian wars of the 1850's by both Indians and military groups. After the Indian Wars it was used as a cattle drive route for awhile, but the superior crossing at Snoqualmie eventually displaced its use.

The famous Naches Pass cliffs have also been recorded by legend in the history of this old travel route. The cliffs can be viewed today west of Government Meadows as the present four-wheel driveway drops into the Greenwater drainage. The story of the pioneers lowering their wagons down these cliffs was popularized by Della Gould Emmons in her book, "Nothing in Life is Free".

VISITING THE OLD TRAIL

A portion of the old Naches Pass Trail primitive road is still intact through the Naches Ranger District. As the trail left the Yakima area, it threaded up the Wenas drainage and entered what is now National Forest land at Rocky Prairie. Visitors can visit this point by turning off of State Route 410 at Elk Ridge onto Bald Mountain Road #1701. From here the trail came down the ridge toward the mouth of Benton Creek to a point near Jim Sprick Memorial Park where the Nile Valley Days celebration is held each year. The pioneers then headed along the Naches River and into the Little Naches drainage, following the river. Wagon trains were traveling through this area in late fall, trying to get to Puget Sound before winter snows closed the mountain passes.

The mountain section of the old pioneer trail can be accessed from several points. The primitive section of four-wheel driveway #1900-684 departs the Little Naches paved road #1900 beyond Bear Creek. Forest Road #1913 also crosses the 684 jeep road. The steeper sections of the trail start at the Forest Road #1914 crossing, approximately 1/4 mile from the Little Naches Road #1900. From this point the trail travels west to the actual "Naches Pass" and onto Government Meadows where the pioneers stopped to rest. The remaining double tread corridor still imparts the flavor of what the pioneer wagons had to cross in 1854.

Visitors seeking a map of this trail section can purchase a Naches Ranger District map at the Naches Ranger Station. The section of this trail west of Naches Pass is closed through spring and early summer annually to reduce erosion on wet slopes; it is open from July 15 to November 15. Some sections of the trail cross private land and visitors are reminded to respect management practices in those locations. Please pack out all litter and report any unattended fires to the local Ranger Station.

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