

In reviewing a book titled THE DISPOSITION OF THE PUBLIC DOMAIN IN OREGON, by: Jerry A. O'Callaghan. (Arno Press, Inc., ISBN 0-405-11382-X)

Quoting from that Book: Beginning on page 54

THE DALLES MILITARY WAGON ROAD

The third eastern Oregon military wagon road was authorized by the usual grant to the State of Oregon in 1867. It was the Dalles Wagon Road whose construction was the most fraudulent. The Oregon Central and the Willamette Valley & Cascade Mountain Cos. Built fairly satisfactory roads west of the Cascade summit. The Dalles wagon road from the Dalles to the Snake River opposite Fort Boise hardly had this to show for its 500,000 acre grant.

The grant was authorized February 22, 1867. The other Oregon grants had passed without congressional debate. It was something of a sign that there was some questioning of The Dalles grant. Oregon men in Congress said that land granted had very little value. Senator George H. Williams told his colleagues that the road would be constructed through mountain and desert. He was quoted in the Congressional Globe, 39th Cong., 2d session, p. 1678 as saying "and I presume all the land that can be seen on the route of this road is not worth enough to pay for surveying it."

He qualified his statement to say that the valleys might have some value. The road was being urged, according to Oregon supporters, at the behest of the military commander of the Department of the Columbia for transportation of supplies to the East. It was allegedly to open communication between the Columbia at The Dalles and the mining regions of western Montana and Idaho.

Oregon Senator James W. Nesmith said the land in the grant would not sell for 10 cents an acre. Considering the grant was sold for \$125,000, the Oregon representatives would seem to have been greatly mistaken in their estimates. However, in the 1860's Oregon could think of land values only in terms of the arable acres of western Oregon. Not until the wheat-growing possibilities of eastern Oregon become apparent in the 1870's did that estimate change.

There was in the House of Representatives one objection to the land grant. Francis C. LeBlond of Ohio objected to wholesale disposition of the public domain without commensurate benefit to the United States. Oregon's James H. D. Henderson was sharp in his answer that Oregon have given up asking for money for roads but thought it was entitled to ask for land.

Harvey W. Scott, 40 years editor of the Oregonian, valued the lands in the grant higher than the congressional delegation. Scott objected to the Government's acceptance of the road until its route was straightened out. He writes "The route followed is about as crooked as the track of the ancient people through the wilderness – the object being to follow all the valleys of eastern Oregon and gobble up all the available lands of that region."

It was built, Scott maintained, by driving an oxcart with two men walking behind with shovels. The company built the road through the middle of valleys including: The John Day, Willow Creek, Burnt River, and Malheur. One-half million acres were given to the company, which had been at no real expense. A Government estimate placed company expenditures at \$6,000. The true policy for the Government, Scott urged with mild sarcasm, was to extend land survey to open eastern Oregon to homesteading. "The people will then find ways enough of passing through the country."

The road extended 357 miles and earned 576,000 acres. The grant was sold in 1876 to Edward Martin of San Francisco. Ultimately, it emerged from legal transactions as the property of the Eastern Oregon Land Co. The company did not, as a rule, sell land but leased it. In wheat countries, it leased on a crop share basis. In 1910, 430,000 acres of the original grant remained. In that year, the company put its grant up for sale. It was to be sold in graded lots. In Sherman County, improved wheatland was to be sold for \$25-\$40 per acre. In the John Day Valley, bottom land was priced at \$75 per acre, bench land, \$40 to \$50; and grazing land, \$6 to \$10. The company also put up for sale 55,000 acres of timberland on the headwaters of the John Day River.