

THE THOMAS-RUCKEL ROAD

The Thomas and Ruckel Road across the Blue Mountains was one of the earliest roads to be built, other than the Emigrant Road via Meacham. It was built to provide a short route between Walla Walla and the Grande Ronde Valley for the purpose of carrying on trade with mining districts of Powder River and the Idaho mines and also for the new settlements in the Grande Ronde Valley.

This road was financed by Walla Wallans and some of the prominent farmers of the Summerville district. It was operated as a toll road during the entire time that it was in use and paid handsome dividends during the days of the heavy freighting to the mines.

After the Lincton Mountain Road was built in 1863, it was found that travel was impossible for several months during the winter on account of the heavy snow which piled up to depths of several feet for a distance of about 20 miles along this route. Men looked for a lower pass across the mountains and found it about 18 miles south of the Tollgate, the elevation being about 4,500 feet, whereas the elevation on the Lincton Mt. Road was about 5,000 feet. Moreover, the high country was quickly passed over on the new route, while the Lincton Mt. Road was forced to follow at the high elevation for about 10 miles.

The road crossed the Wildhorse Creek about 5 miles up from what is now Athena and then climbed the mountain between the Wildhorse and the Umatilla Rivers. This road dropped down the Ryan Grade to the Umatilla River, went up the river by and beyond "Warm Springs" which is now Bingham Springs (or Bar Ranch), along the South Fork to Thomas Creek, then up that stream to a low pass at what is now Ruckel Ranger Station. A great number of bridges were necessary along the Umatilla River.

From that point the road dropped down to Summerville (following pretty much the grade of Willow Creek). It was finished (probably) in 1865. A stage line was put on that route from Wallula, Washington to Boise, Idaho by a man named Greathouse. After running a short time, he sold the line to John Hailey. Travel was very heavy to the mines and newly established settlements in the Grand Ronde and beyond.

The tide of travel changed to this road as it was more direct and also served the Umatilla Landing traffic where the heaviest tonnage came during the early 60's.

A stage station was built directly on the summit of the mountains in the pass

for the convenience of the traveling public and when the stages changed horses. It also served as a toll station. A man by the name of Charles Davis operated the station, known as "The Summit House" and collected the tolls. He was in charge here from 1867 to about 1875.

The numerous bridges up the Umatilla River proved to be the weakness of this road. There were two disastrous washouts, the first in the spring of 1882 when nearly all of the bridges were swept away on the crest of the flood. The bridges were replaced at great expense and sections of the grade rebuilt where it was washed out.

In 1884 the railroad was completed across the mountains and most of the freight hauling by wagons discontinued. There was no longer sufficient revenue from the tolls to pay for the upkeep of the road and it fell into a state of disrepair. A few years later another flood carried away the bridge and washed out much of the grade. The company never rebuilt the road and it has never been used again through the entire length.

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