

QUARTERLY OF THE OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ASSOCIATION

# OVERLAND JOURNAL

VOLUME 36 · NUMBER 2 · SUMMER 2018

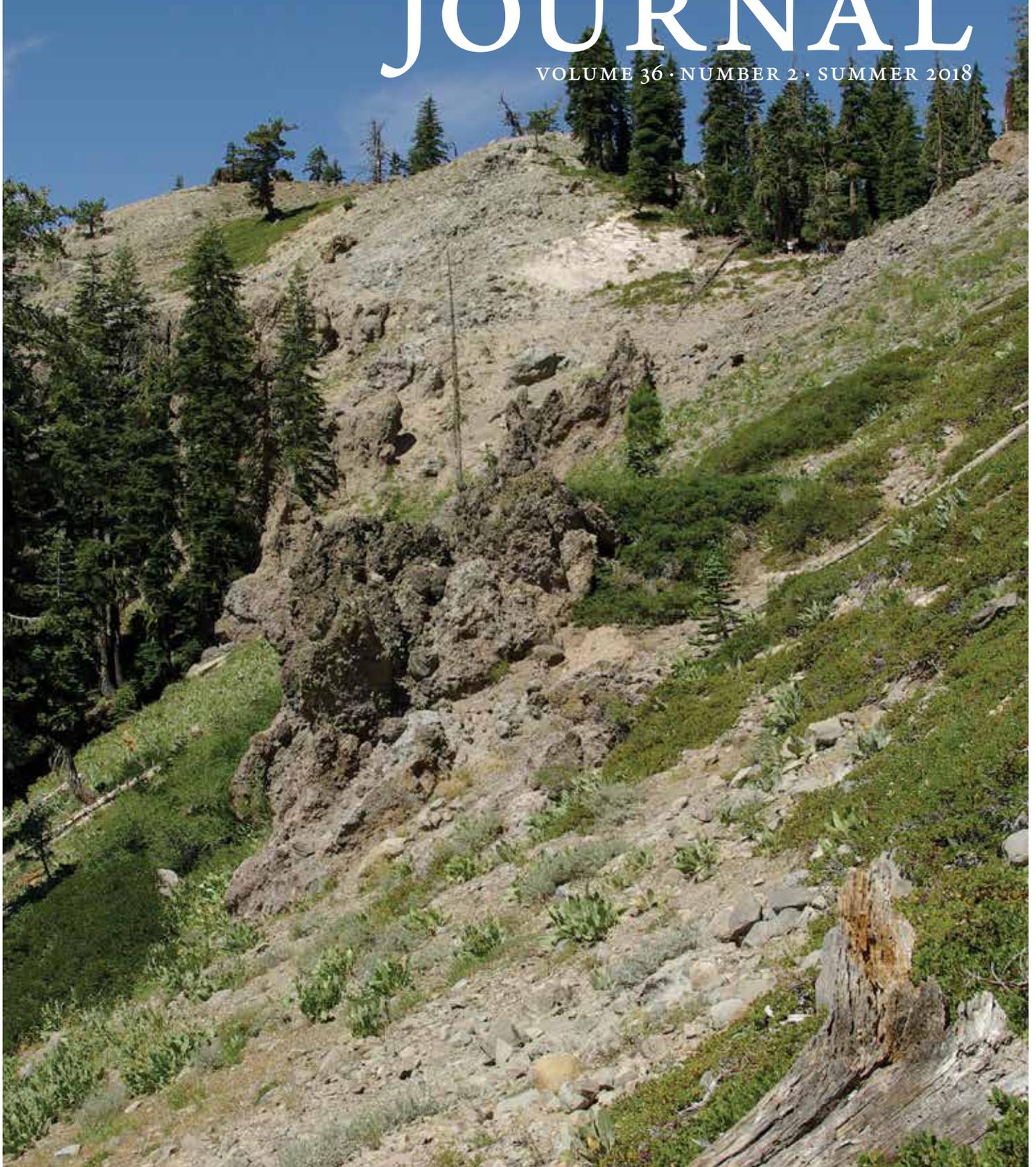


it was one continued jumping  
from one rocky cliff to another.  
We would have to roll over this big rock,  
and then over that then we had to  
lift our wagons by main force up  
to the top of a ledge of rocks

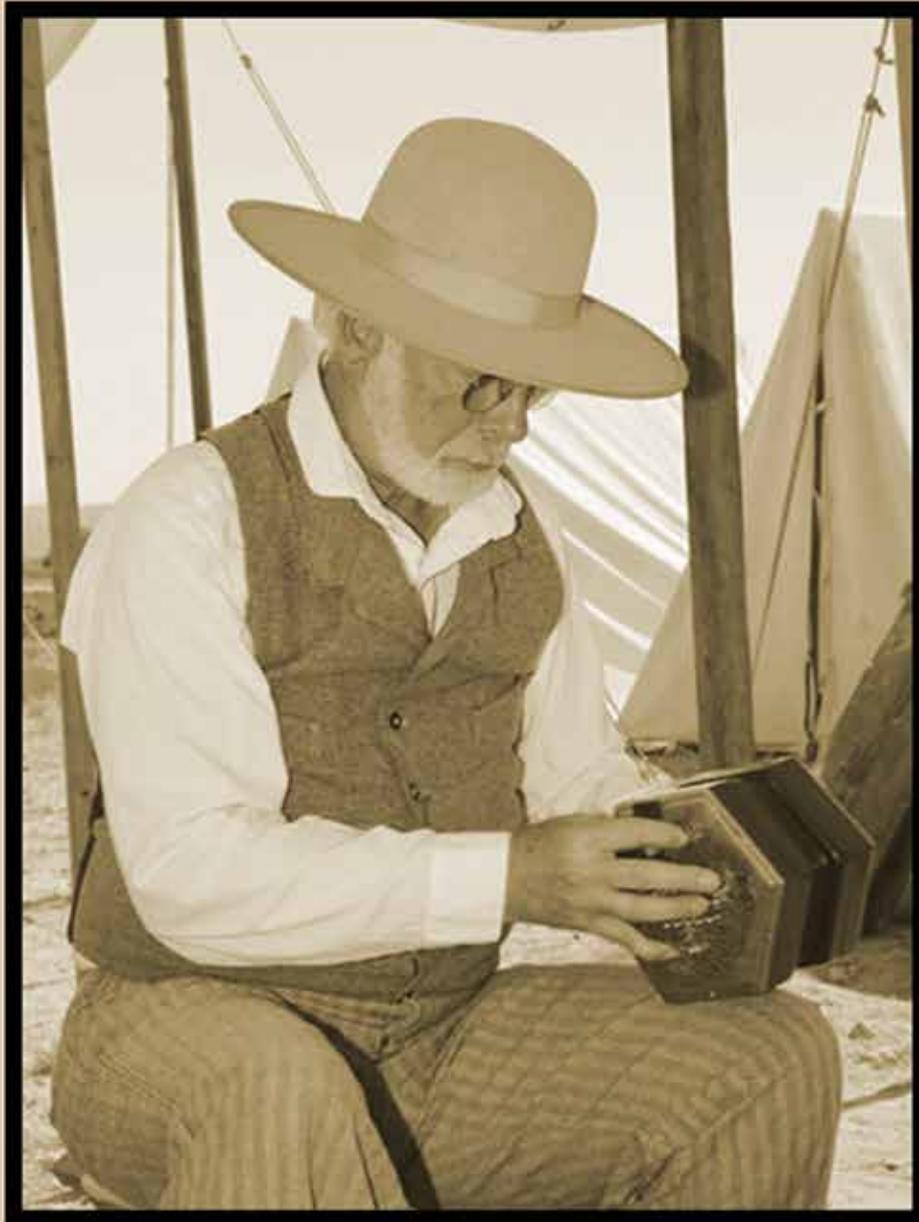
QUARTERLY OF THE OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ASSOCIATION

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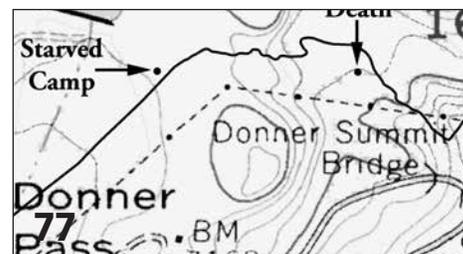


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## ON THE COVER

Looking west from the switchback toward the original steep climb to Roller Pass in the upper right of the photo.  
PHOTO BY CHRIS WRAY

## ON THE BACK COVER

Early map, *Sketch of the Routes of Hunt & Stuart*, fur men who are described as "two of the earliest American Travellers in Oregon Territory." The map shows Wilson P. Hunt's westward expedition from the Missouri River to John Jacob Astor's trading post on the Columbia River, and Robert Stuart's trip from Astoria to St. Louis. Cartographer Carl Wheat called the map "reasonably accurate, . . . an important milestone in western mapping." Hunt and Stuart discovered what would become the Oregon Trail; this is one of the earliest appearances of their route on a printed map. COURTESY OF BARRY LAWRENCE RUDERMAN, ANTIQUE MAPS, LTD., LA JOLLA, CALIFORNIA.

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## THE OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ASSOCIATION

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#### PRESERVING THE TRAILS

OCTA's membership and volunteer leadership seek to preserve our heritage. Our accomplishments include:

- Purchasing Nebraska's "California Hill," with ruts cut by emigrant wagons as they climbed from the South Platte River.
- Protecting emigrant graves.
- Initiating legislation designating the California and Santa Fe trails as National Historic trails.
- Persuading government and industry to relocate roads and pipe lines to preserve miles of pristine ruts.

#### CONVENTIONS AND FIELD TRIPS

Our annual convention is held in a different location with proximity to a historical area each August. Convention activities include tours and treks, papers and presentations, meals and socials, and a display room with book dealers, publishers, and other materials.

Local chapters also plan treks and activities throughout the year.

#### PUBLICATIONS

*Overland Journal*—Issued four times each year, *O.J.* contains new research and re-examinations of topics pertaining to the history of the American West, especially the development and use of the trails.

*News from the Plains*—Also issued quarterly, *News* contains updates about members and the organization, convention reports, legislative action, genealogy, trail preservation, and special activities.

*Special Publications*—Periodic book publications in the Emigrant Trails Historical Studies Series (numbered documentary editions) and the Special Publications Series (trail studies monographs).

#### RESEARCH AND EDUCATION

- Developing instructional materials to help students understand the western migration.
- Marking the trails and maintaining weathered or damaged markers.
- Developing a computer-based census of emigrant diaries, newspaper accounts, letters, and other documents.

#### STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The purposes for which the Association is organized are as follows:

1. To initiate and coordinate activities relating to the identification, preservation, interpretation, and improved accessibility of extant rut segments, trail remains, graves and associated historic trail sites, landmarks, artifacts, and objects along the overland western historic trails, roads, routes, branches, and cutoffs of the Trans-Mississippi region.
2. To prevent further deterioration of the foregoing and to take or pursue whatever measures necessary or advisable to cause more of the same to become accessible or more so to the general public.
3. To implement these purposes by acquiring either alone or through or jointly with others—federal, state, local, or private—title to the land or lands on which any of the same is located or a preservation or other easements with regard to the same—by purchase, gift, or otherwise—and by cooperating with or initiating, coordinating, and assisting the efforts of such others to do so.
4. To publicize and seek public exposure of the goals and activities of the Association so as to create popular awareness of and concern for the necessity of preserving the foregoing.
5. To facilitate research projects about the aforesaid and to publish a journal as a forum for scholarly articles adding to the sum of knowledge about the same.

It shall be the further purpose of the Association to be exclusively charitable and educational within the meaning of Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.

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KENNETH L. ALFORD is a professor of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University. He retired as a colonel from U.S. Army active duty service in 2008. His military assignments included associate professor at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point; professor at the National Defense University, Washington, D.C.; and Pentagon staff officer.

DONALD E. BUCK has been researching emigrant trails since 1980, when he joined Trails West and, soon after, OCTA. Taking time off from college teaching and after retiring, Buck mapped much of the California Trail and branches in northern Nevada and California. This led in the 1990s to the development of emigrant mapping procedures and trail classifications, formalized in OCTA's *Mapping Emigrant Trails* (the "MET Manual"). Also, Buck has co-edited emigrant diaries for OCTA publications and edited emigrant trail guidebooks for Trails West.

JOHN GREBENKEMPER has been a member of OCTA for two decades. He received a Ph.D. from Stanford University in the field of Radio Astronomy. Upon his retirement from a career in technology, he joined the Institute for Canine Forensics. His Border Collie, Kayle, is certified as a Historic Human Remains Detection dog. They travel extensively on grave-detection projects throughout the United States and beyond. In 2017 they participated on the National Geographic Expedition to the South Pacific to look for the remains of Amelia Earhart.

ANDREW "ANDY" W. HAMMOND (1925–2012), a charter member of OCTA, prepared his "Look of the Elephant" essays for the *Overland Journal* beginning in 1998. Upon retirement from Boeing Aerospace in Seattle, he and his wife, Joanne, moved to Chico, California. They mapped the Beckwourth Trail for the National Park Service. Andy's books include *Following the Beckwourth Trail* and *The Look of the Elephant: The Westering Experience in the Words of Those Who Lived It, 1841–1861*.

HARMON MOTHERSHEAD, a native of Missouri, received both his Master's degree and Ph.D. in history from the University of Colorado. He spent most of his professional career teaching at the University of Northwestern Missouri, in Maryville, where he was chairman of the history department for almost two decades, until his retirement in 1997. A regular racquetball player, he was recently benched with an injury and looks forward to getting back on the court. 



# News and Views on the Civil War

Although many emigrants had come from states directly involved in the war, little mention was made of it by diarists of the time.

Two exceptions were Mary Elizabeth Lightner and Harriet A. Loughary, who went west in 1863 and '64, respectively.

LIGHTNER: [At St. Louis, about June 1] We went aboard the steamer, "Fanny Ogden," for St. Joseph. We were to have a stove to cook by, laid in a supply of provisions, and fancied we should be halfway comfortable, but it proved the reverse. We were transferred to the upper deck until the storing of Government supplies was completed, then five hundred mules and horses were taken aboard; consequently we had to remain on the upper deck . . . We met a steamer coming down, saying the rebels were gathering in great numbers and would fire on us. We had a cannon and soldiers on board for our protection; for myself I felt no fear. The captain had built a breast work of sacks of grain and tobacco boxes. All hands prepared for action. June 3rd all was excitement, and a sharp lookout was kept, looking for the enemy every moment. At Lexington the town was almost destroyed by cannon. Houses, partly demolished; it was here my husband's brother, a Unionist, was killed. We passed a gloomy night, some on trunks doubled up any way to get a few moment's rest; but strange to relate, not a shot was fired at us, although in a rebel community . . .

LOUGHARY: June 7th. We were told that Fort Laramie was not far distant which knowledge made us eager to get an early start as we all expected to get letters from home, and news from the seat of war, but after pulling through heavy sandy roads all day, were sent into camp at night still ten miles from the Fort. (June 8th) This morning all was bustle and hurry. We wanted to get to the Fort . . . and still more to get news. At 11 o'clock we arrived. As soon as possible a great many men hastened to the fort . . . The stars and stripes were proudly floating over it. At the sight of which brought forth cheer after cheer from the throats of hundreds of lusty men, women and children, who all know and feel what true patriotism means. A small flag had been tucked away in our wagon, which was immediately brought forth, fastened to a willow rod, and tied to our wagon bow, which soon attracted the attention of the train and then another burst of cheering rang out. At this point some of the men returned with letters from loved ones at home, which filled our already glad hearts with joy. The news that filled us to overflow was the great Union victories by Gen Grant's Army. At night we proposed a ratification out in the wilderness. We could not have any fire works, but by a united effort we got together enough willow and sage brush to make a camp fire, around which all gathered to have a good time and to give vent to our patriotism. An old battered violin and a wheezy accordeon was brought out to give tone to the occasion. We sang with hearty good will "The star spangled banner" "The red white and blue" "Hang Jeff Davis in a sour apple tree" and every war song that we knew. At the close of each . . . shouts of patriotism rent the air of the quiet evening . . . 

**Happy Summer!** In this issue we announce the Merrill Mattes Award winners, celebrate historic trail and river anniversaries, and present current trail research in the Sierra; historic trail and river anniversaries; and a perspectives on emigrants and the Civil War.

First, we congratulate *Overland Journal* authors Frank Norris and Lee Kreutzer, who received the 2018 Merrill Mattes Award for Excellence in Research and Writing. Frank and Lee are honored for contributing “Trails and Rails: The Impact of Railroad Construction on the Overland Trails, 1863–1869,” published in Fall 2017. The Publications Committee thanks every contributor to Volume 35 of the journal.

SCRAMBLED PAGES

ALERT

Please check your Spring 2018 issue of *Overland Journal* for correct page order and numbering. A few issues were bound wrong, with sections missing. If you find this, please contact Headquarters for a replacement copy. We are sorry for the inconvenience.

In the Fall 2016 *Overland Journal*, Marshall Fey described the first half-century of Donner trail marking, mapping, and research. The narrative continues in this issue, as Don Buck shows how this research has developed since the Peter Weddell era, with the evolution of trail research methods, including the use of OCTA’s *Mapping Emigrant Trails* (MET) manual. Elsewhere in the issue, frequent contributor John Grebenkemper describes a recent outing with his forensic canine, Kayle, as they continue the effort to locate sites where Donner Party victims may have died.

Glimpses of Civil War travel are brought to us by Andy Hammond (1925–2012) and history professor Kenneth Alford. While some emigrants celebrated the end of the war, others were being escorted through Indian country for their safety. Dr. Alford introduces Capt. Medorem Crawford’s report, published in his *Utah and the American Civil War: The Written Record* (Arthur H. Clark, 2017).

Finally, rivers. Frank McLynn wrote in *Wagons West* (2002), that “the early pioneers had only one golden rule: follow the rivers.” Appropriately, we continue recognizing 2018 as the 175th Anniversary of the Oregon Trail and the creation in 1968 of the Wild and Scenic Rivers System—

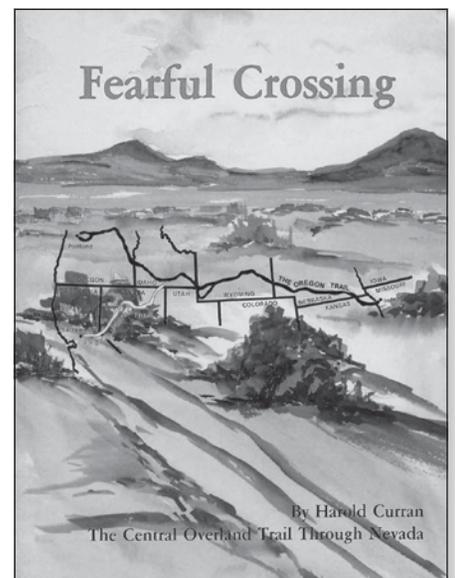
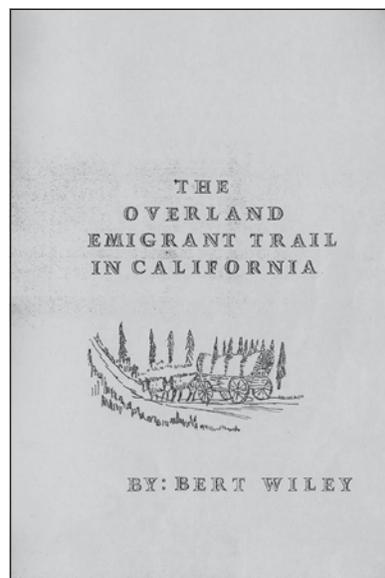
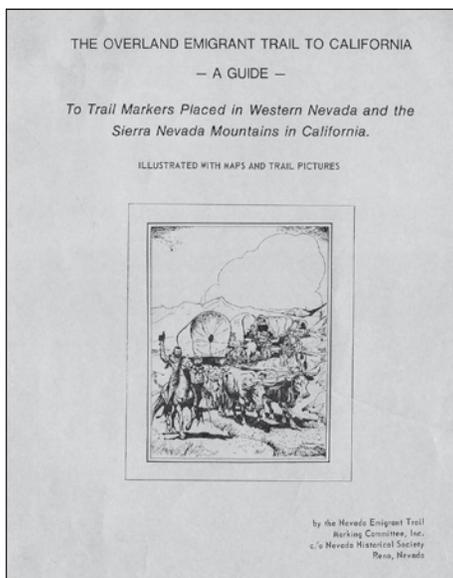
we’ll have more on this in the Fall issue. Our archive “retrospective,” the final article of this issue, features the Missouri River. Not for its wild beauty (though plenty remains), but for its importance to nineteenth-century westbound emigrants. How? For the several river ports that competed in stocking and selling wagon goods, and then transporting the emigrants across the river. With that, these adventurers and optimists had symbolically “hit the trail” westward.

May we also enjoy the trails and rivers as summer drifts into autumn.



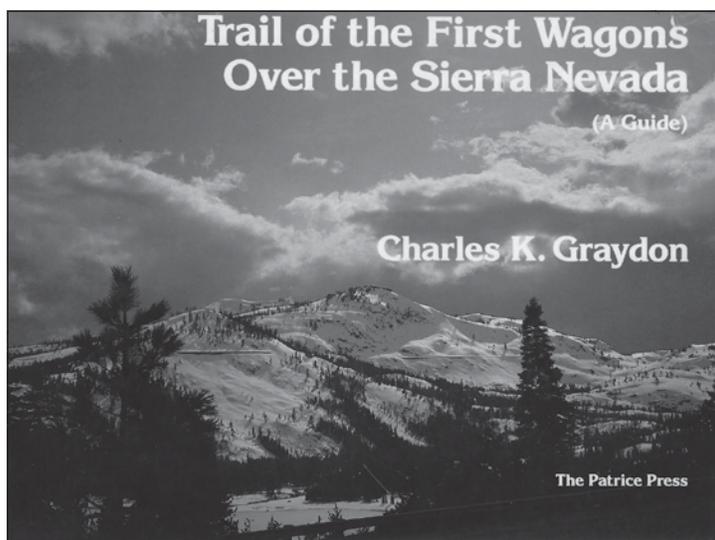
EDITOR

# *Development of Emigrant Trail Research in the Truckee–Donner Pass Region*



# in the Post-Weddell Era of California

BY DONALD E. BUCK



**F**OR NEARLY A CENTURY, beginning in the early 1920s, trail historians have been conducting research on and searching for the earliest emigrant trail routes leading to and over the Sierra Nevada in the Truckee-Donner Pass region of California. In the Fall 2016 issue of the *Overland Journal*, Marshall Fey ably explained in some detail the “First Marking of the Donner Trail,” begun in 1921 by Peter M. Weddell, with the assistance of C. F. McGlashan. Weddell’s unflagging trail research, marking, and mapping continued until his death in 1952, eventually covering the trail on both sides of the Sierra summit. In 1935 Weddell had gained the support of Bert Olson, who became “his ardent disciple.” Later, Earl Rhoads joined the effort to preserve Weddell’s wooden trail-marking signs with his distinctive white blazes painted on tree trunks in a pattern that resembled a triangular buffalo head.<sup>1</sup>

The next venture to mark the emigrant trail for posterity came in 1967 with the formation of the Nevada Emigrant Trail Marking Committee (henceforth NETMC). Until the NETMC formally disbanded in 1973, the group led by its trail authority, Walt Mulcahy, installed nine distinctive T-shaped steel-rail markers. They were placed mostly on the Weddell-Olson-Rhoads-marked route from Verdi, in Nevada near the state boundary, to the Sierra summit at what would become known as Coldstream Pass. In 1975, as their last intended effort, the NETMC published a driving guide to all of the steel-rail markers they had placed along the emigrant trails in western Nevada and eastern California.<sup>2</sup>

After a half-century of trail research and marking of the Truckee Trail route in California to the Sierra Nevada crest,

<sup>1</sup> See Marshall Fey, “Peter M. Weddell and the First Marking of the Donner Trail: Saving the Route before Evidence is Lost,” *Overland Journal* 34, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 101–120.

<sup>2</sup> See Nevada Emigrant Trail Marking Committee, Inc., *The Overland Emigrant Trail to California: A Guide to Trail Markers Placed in Western Nevada and the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California* (Reno: Nevada Historical Society, 1975). Also see the latest update in Marshall Fey, *Emigrant Trails, the Long Road to California. A History and Guide To the Emigrant Routes from Central Nevada to the Crossing of the Sierra*, edited by Stanley W. Paher (Reno, Nev.: Western Trails Research Association, 2008).

LEFT TO RIGHT NETMC, *The Overland Emigrant Trail to California: A Guide* (Reno, Nevada, 1975). Bert Wiley, *The Overland Emigrant Trail in California* (1979). Harold Curran, *Fearful Crossing: The Central Overland Trail through Nevada* (Las Vegas: Nevada Publications, 1982; first rev. ed., 1987). Charles K. Graydon, *Trail of the First Wagons over the Sierra Nevada* (Gerald, Mo.: The Patrice Press, 1986).

it appeared that this much of the emigrant trail had been definitively mapped and marked with wooden signs, tree blazes, and T rail markers. However, as the focus of this article will show, trail research and mapping of the Truckee Trail from Verdi to the Sierra crest did not end by the early 1970s with the work of Peter Weddell and the NETMC. Seemingly, trail research has a life of its own that keeps refining and redefining trail locations, sometimes with very revealing results. As we'll see, various efforts to increase our trail knowledge over the last half-century have led to new techniques and procedures in determining and verifying emigrant trail locations.<sup>3</sup>

Trail exploration continued with Bert Wiley, who had been a major contributor to an "Investigation" by the California State Division of Beaches and Parks in 1949. Its purpose was establishing a State Historical Monument in the State Park System celebrating the centennial of the California Gold Rush. Wiley furnished excerpts from ten emigrant diaries and reminiscences, and referenced interviews with Peter Weddell and Irene Paden.<sup>4</sup>

Wiley's interest in the Truckee emigrant trail within California continued into the 1970s with his privately published booklet in 1979, *The Overland Emigrant Trail in California*. Wiley's fifty-three-page booklet included twenty-eight pages describing the trail route, with excerpts from ten overland emigrant accounts, and nine small hand-drawn maps showing the trail in very little detail. Only the first map covered the Truckee routes to the Sierra summit and followed the Weddell interpretation, including both passes south of Donner Peak, Coldstream Pass and Roller Pass. Overall, Wiley's account was more a short history of the Truckee route in California than a research document.<sup>5</sup>

3 Author's note: Don Buck is both an observer of and participant in what will be discussed in this article. Joining Trails West, Inc. (Trails West) in 1980 and the Oregon-California Trails Association (OCTA) in 1982 as a Charter Member, I quickly involved myself in emigrant trail research. In this pursuit, I came to know and learn from several trail researchers covered in this review, namely Walt Mulcahy, Chuck Graydon, Don Wiggins, and recently, Chris Wray. Also, over the years, I have corresponded with the latter three trail researchers and have been in the field with them. Furthermore, I extend my appreciation to Jo Johnston for her copyediting of the first version of this article and to Marlene Smith-Baranzini, the *Overland Journal* editor, for her suggestions and copyediting of the final article. I am also grateful to Chris Wray for providing the photographs of trail locations and to Jon Nowlin for creating the four trail maps.

4 Department of Natural Resources, Division of Beaches and Parks, *Report of Investigation on Location, Cost of Acquisition and Development of Overland Emigrant Trail*, December 1949. Due to the projected expenses involved in acquiring access through private property to emigrant trail segments and access upkeep, nothing became of this project.

5 See Bert Wiley, *The Overland Emigrant Trail in California* (privately published in a 53-page coil-bound booklet in 1979).

However, Wiley went into some detail explaining his research emphasis in seeking more evidence in the form of overland emigrant diaries. He recounted his 1949 effort, which began with the California History Room of the California State Library in Sacramento, where he got "our first clues." Directed to the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, Wiley spent days reading diaries "without finding so much as one who had entered by way of the road we were trying to relocate."<sup>6</sup> There Wiley had "our first, and, as it turned out, our most important break," when the Bancroft librarian put him in contact with Irene Paden, who had "indexed hundreds of the old diaries by party, route, date and library."<sup>7</sup>

After locating and reading diary accounts on the Truckee route into California, Wiley realized, "Finding the diaries was one thing, using them was another." He explained how "we took those passages that described a physical feature, and in context, reassembled them so as to identify many features of the road." With the "reassembled diaries in hand, we again made a reconnaissance on foot." As a result, Wiley maintained, "We were able to find and identify much of the old road on the east slope of the mountains. All three passes [Donner, Coldstream, and Roller] were found by this method and the Roller Pass was located and identified." Up to the Sierra summit, Wiley's use of diary descriptions had revealed nothing new and supported the existing interpretation of trail routes.<sup>8</sup>

A few years later, Harold Curran from Nevada entered the emigrant trail scene. Relying primarily on a wide variety of overland diary accounts in *Fearful Crossing*, which he published in 1982, Curran took his readers along the various routes in northern Nevada and into California on the Truckee and Carson river branches to the Sierra summit. Curran relied primarily on existing trail route interpretations, especially Walt Mulcahy's NETMC Truckee River Route. As he stated in the preface, "Quotations taken from the emigrants' diaries are used to . . . give reality to the subject, so that the story of the crossing is told largely in the words of the emigrants." For the Truckee route in California, west to the summit, Curran used about fifteen emigrant accounts and two very general map pages.

6 *Ibid.*, 2. This statement is puzzling. The Bancroft Library at U.C. Berkeley has the largest collection of emigrant diaries in the nation.

7 *Ibid.*, 3.

8 *Ibid.*, 4. Wiley referenced only nine emigrant accounts in support of his trail interpretations. His use of diaries "to find and identify much of the old road on the east slope of the mountains" will be discussed later in this article. Wiley had come upon what would become the center piece of emigrant trail research—diaries—but apparently had not found a disciplined method of utilizing them.

His primary intent was to convey a story rather than advance an interpretation of where a trail traversed.<sup>9</sup>

WHILE CURRAN WAS “DOING RESEARCH IN LIBRARIES and in the field” that would lead to *Fearful Crossing*, a retired U.S. Army colonel, Charles K. Graydon, was cross-country skiing up on Mount Judah at the Sierra crest, at age seventy, when he came upon a Weddell sign, which caught his attention. In short order, Chuck Graydon was hooked by the lure of finding out where these emigrants had come from and where they were going. Graydon’s inquiry led to his report for the U.S. Forest Service on the Truckee Route through the Tahoe National Forest. In turn, this resulted in the publication in 1986 of his *Trail of the First Wagons over the Sierra Nevada*.<sup>10</sup>

In this first edition, Graydon relied on the previous interpretation of Weddell, his signs, and Rhoads’s tree blazes. The innovative part of Graydon’s book was the use of USGS 7.5 minute topographic maps that had replaced the larger scale 15 minute topographic maps. Graydon included ten double-page maps (of 8½ × 11-inch size) of the newer scale that allowed him to depict the trail route from Verdi west to historic Mule Spring on Lowell Hill Ridge. This was the first published recording of the Truckee route on the now standard Geological Survey 7.5 Minute Series maps.<sup>11</sup>

*Trail of the First Wagons over the Sierra Nevada* went through two more editions. By the third and last edition of 1994, Graydon had extended coverage to the end of the Truckee route at the Johnson Ranch site (two miles east of Wheatland, north of Sacramento). Also he included the 1850 Nevada City Road from Bear Valley, all in eighteen maps. Other than the trail extensions, the only significant difference in the third edition was Graydon’s conviction that Weddell’s trail route via the Alder-Trout Creek roundabout, through the modern Tahoe Donner Subdivision, was a later wagon road never used by emigrants.

Graydon wrote that “Every trail historian I have talked to questions the likelihood of wagon trains having taken the

out-of-the-way, roundabout detour to the lake.” He had traced the origins for this roundabout route and found “no first-hand historical evidence of this route being used by emigrants.”<sup>12</sup> Graydon was convinced that the trail route took a direct southwest direction into what became the town of Truckee. With that trail modification, Graydon’s final edition summed up the published trail knowledge, as of the early 1990s, from Verdi to the Sierra summit, and beyond.

In June 1991, the California state legislature again tasked the Department of Parks and Recreation with conducting a study of the Truckee Trail route (called “Donner Party Trail”). The purpose was to determine the feasibility of preserving the trail “from the Nevada State Line to Johnson’s Rancho,” 128 miles in length. This was intended to be a “multi-agency” effort. Like the 1949 effort, nothing became of the feasibility study, which concluded that the “magnitude of the task of acquiring and managing the entire trail is beyond the scope of this department’s resources.” It was “recommended that responsibility for preservation of all or portions of the remainder of the trail be assumed by the affected federal and local agencies.” In short, the state withdrew from preserving emigrant trails, beyond its plans for extending the Donner Memorial State Park at Truckee.<sup>13</sup>

However, of interest for trail mapping was an inclusion in the state feasibility study of OCTA’s newly developed “Trail Classification System,” consisting of the five trail classes that would become widely used in mapping emigrant trails. For the first time, a public agency utilized this trail-classification scheme by authorizing its application to the study’s concluding seven trail maps.<sup>14</sup>

9 See Harold Curran, *Fearful Crossing: The Central Overland Trail through Nevada* (Las Vegas: Nevada Publications, 1982; first rev. ed., 1987.)

10 See Charles K. Graydon, *Trail of the First Wagons over the Sierra Nevada* (Gerald, Mo.: The Patrice Press, 1986).

11 Graydon’s red-lined trails on the USGS 7.5 minute series topographic maps did not distinguish the condition of the trail segments, whether they were in original condition, used by modern vehicles, now destroyed, or known only approximately. In another five years, that kind of trail classification would come into use as a means of determining the desirable level of trail preservation.

12 Graydon, *Trail of the First Wagons*, 35. Author’s note: I received a letter in November of 1990 from Chuck Graydon that contained “a draft for a possible OJ article,” titled “Location of the Last Donner Family Campsite and the Emigrant Trail Nearby.” In this draft, Graydon advanced the arguments against the Alder-Trout creeks’ dogleg that would appear in his third edition. Graydon attributed the visible remains of this dogleg trail to later logging activities.

13 See the *Feasibility Study: Truckee Route (Donner Party Trail). A Portion of the California Emigrant Trail*. Prepared by State Park System Planning Section, Department of Parks and Recreation, Sacramento, June 1991.

14 The trail classification scheme was an integral part of OCTA’s *Mapping Emigrant Trails Manual (MET Manual)* that was introduced in a Preliminary Edition of 1991. The MET Manual also established research principles, methods, and guidelines for locating and verifying emigrant wagon trails. It would go through four more revised editions until a complete expansion in the current Fifth Edition of 2014. Author’s note: For the 1991 state feasibility study, acting on behalf of OCTA, I provided the trail classifications and trail mapping (see pages 3–4 in the study), which at that time was based on Chuck Graydon’s mapping.

## emigrant trail classification categories

**CLASS 1 UNALTERED TRAIL** The trail segment retains the essence of its original character and shows no evidence of having been substantially altered by motor vehicles or by modern road improvements. There is visible evidence of the original trail in the form of depressions, ruts, swales, tracks, scarring, vegetative differences, rock alignments along the trailside, and eroded trail features.

**CLASS 2 USED TRAIL** The trail retains the essence of its original character but shows past or present use by motor vehicles, typically as a two-track road overlaying the original wagon trail. There is little or no evidence of having been altered permanently by modern road improvements, such as widening, blading, grading, crowning, or graveling.

**CLASS 3 VERIFIED TRAIL** The trail route is accurately located and verified from written, cartographic, artifact, geomorphic, and/or wagon wheel impact evidence (as rust, grooved, or polished rocks). But due to subsequent weathering, vegetative succession, rodent surface digging, or logging, trail traces will not be visible on the surface.

**CLASS 4 ALTERED TRAIL** The trail location is verified but elements of its original condition have been permanently altered, primarily by road construction, such as widening, blading, grading, crowning, graveling, or paving. In some cases, the original trail has been permanently altered by underground cables and pipelines.

**CLASS 5 APPROXIMATE TRAIL** The trail is either so obliterated or unverifiable that its location is known only approximately. In many cases, trail segments have been destroyed entirely by development, such as highways, structures, agriculture, utility corridors or inundated beneath reservoirs. In other cases, natural causes have removed any remains of a trail.



See OCTA, *Mapping Emigrant Trails Manual*, 5th ed., June 2014, Part A, 18–21.

AT THE TIME CHUCK GRAYDON WAS WORKING ON *Trail of the First Wagons over the Sierra Nevada*, a retired aerospace electrical engineer from southern California, Don Wiggins, relocated to Reno, Nevada, in 1985. He soon joined the Nevada Historical Society and became a docent. Leading tours for the historical society, he enlivened them with emigrant diary accounts of what was thought to be the Truckee Trail in the Reno-Sparks area. Wiggins began noticing incongruities between what he was reading and seeing, which led him into trail research. It was during this period that he joined the Oregon California Trail Association in 1989, at the urging of well-known historian John Townley at the Nevada Historical Society.

Living in northwestern Reno, Wiggins took morning hikes in the nearby foothills where he could see Dog Valley, about five to six miles distant, just inside California. Reading emigrant diary accounts covering this area, and surveying the terrain, he began questioning conventional thinking that emigrants in wagons made it all the way up the steep-sided canyon of South Branch Creek to reach the descent into Dog Valley.<sup>15</sup> Also, in reading these diaries, Wiggins saw that emigrant parties made their last crossing of the Truckee River farther along the river than accepted thinking maintained. Diary descriptions, according to Wiggins, indicated they “made a sharp turn to the right, or northward” in the vicinity of present Crystal Peak Park, rather than continuing westward before turning toward the South Branch Creek.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Wiggins’s thinking was running counter to well-regarded trail sources. The Nevada Emigrant Trail Marking Committee Guide of 1975, *The Overland Emigrant Trail to California*, page 15, held that the trail to the First Summit “lies generally parallel to or under the present Dog Valley dirt road.” About one and one-half miles up the South Branch Canyon, the NETMC had placed a T rail marker at a now closed, small Forest Service campground where a spring is located. The NETMC guide further elaborated that “The campground was a natural resting place for the emigrants in their struggle to the first summit just above Dog Valley.” However, there is no known description of any emigrant stopping at this location for resting or water. The only emigrant account quoted in the NETMC guide for this campground location is a brief, unnamed, one: “Climbed a mountain side and descended into a beautiful oval valley.” In his *Trail of the First Wagons over the Sierra Nevada* of 1986, page 23, Graydon stated that “the original trail kept on or closer to the dry creek bed to avoid the steep side slope.” Graydon further elaborated, “Fill from the road grading has made the creek bed much narrower than it originally was and several floods have completely altered it.” He provided no emigrant accounts for this route to the First Summit.

<sup>16</sup> From Wiggins’s initial research on the Truckee Trail where it entered California, he continued to Roller Pass and Stephens Pass at the summit of the Sierra Nevada, and beyond. In the wake of his trail research, Wiggins left a series of notes, reports, and investigations, from 1996 to 1999, totaling sixty-eight pages and four maps, that laid out the results of his research and the methods

Wiggins continued his search for remains of the emigrant route heading to the First Summit above Dog Valley. For him, emigrant diary accounts kept indicating the trail didn't follow all the way up the often steep-walled canyon of the South Branch Creek. Then the devastating Crystal Peak Fire in 1994 revealed on-the-ground evidence of trail remains. These Wiggins regarded as confirming his interpretation of diary descriptions on the ascending route along the South Branch Canyon to the First Summit, where the trail descended into Dog Valley. As Wiggins later wrote:

Most have assumed that the trail continued directly up the canyon until reaching First Summit. . . . This canyon is relatively straight, narrow, and rocky, with a gradual ascent and some nearly V-shaped sections to pass through. Passages in the diaries do not match this description of the trail leading to First Summit. The trail is described [in diaries] as being on ridges, winding, rocky, with ascending and descending elevations, passing through a thick forest, and also very steep in places.<sup>17</sup>

By this time in his trail investigations, Wiggins had created a research tool that would lead him to question most of the conventional thinking on the routes of the Truckee Trail inside California. He began by gathering together as many emigrant diary accounts as possible that described in any way the trail segment being investigated. Descriptions, for example, could include references to springs, rock formations, creek crossings, rocky trail segments, ridges, ravines, and any distances or directions recorded in diaries. Then he would look for similarities and discrepancies among the various descriptions, arranging them—really, as clues—in some kind of sequential order that would reveal the course, direction, and location of the trail segment under investigation. Taking these eyewitness clues

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used to reach his conclusions. Although never published or made available, Wiggins's research papers have been compiled by Don Buck in a coil-bound booklet as *Notes, Reports, and Investigations on the Truckee Trail in California, from the Last Crossing of the Truckee River to Roller Pass and Stephens Pass* (1996 to 1999). They form the basis of the narrative that follows about Wiggins's role in Truckee Trail research. As his papers reveal, Wiggins would make good use of a general rule in the MET Manual: "the closer in time the evidence is in relation to the trail under investigation, the more reliable that evidence becomes." This established the primacy of emigrant diaries, those eyewitness accounts of trail location, over all other types of later trail evidence. On the last crossing of the Truckee River, see Wiggins, "Report on the Truckee Trail: Verdi to Second Summit" (Nov. 1999), 1. Trails West placed a T rail marker in Crystal Peak Park to identify where the trail turned north to Dog Valley.

17 Wiggins, "Report on the Truckee Trail: Verdi to Second Summit," 2.

into the field showed Wiggins where to look for trail remains, topographic features, and route directions.<sup>18</sup>

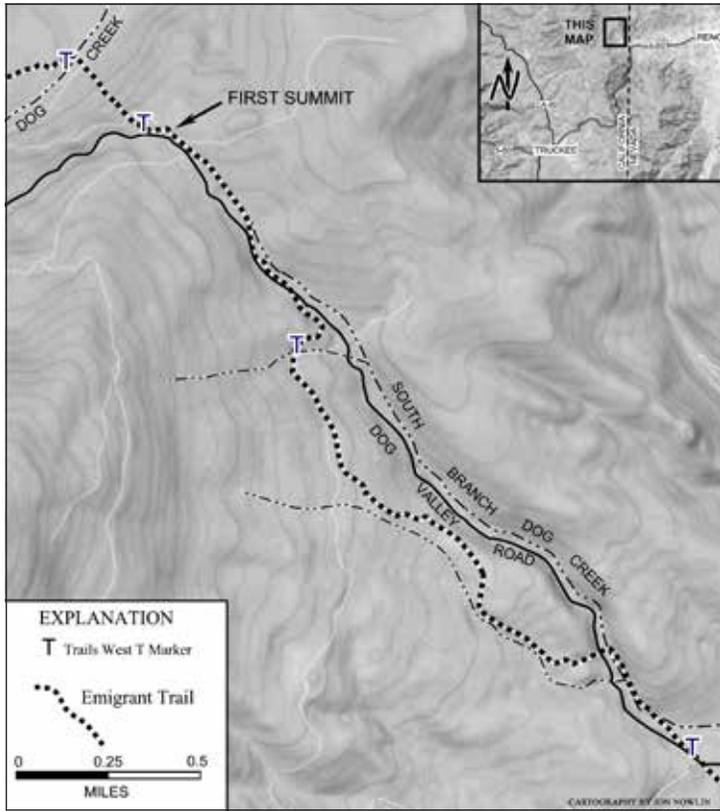
Another important feature of this composite clue method was dealing with the bedeviling problem of distinguishing between an original emigrant trail segment and a later wagon road. Wiggins realized he faced a daunting task of separating the emigrant trail remains from the widespread later lumber and freight wagon roads on both sides of the South Creek Canyon. This trail verification process led him to coping with probabilities. In developing this more systematic verification method, he had a way to attain a higher degree of probability.<sup>19</sup>

Using the methods of trail verification he had developed, along with ten diagnostic emigrant accounts, Wiggins located a trail ascending to the First Summit by way of a short ravine or gully to the left, now quite eroded, about three-tenths mile up South Branch Canyon. At the base of this gully, in the dry creek bottom, is evidence of wagon-road building turning left, now mostly covered by the driving road and dense vegetation. As Wiggins worked it out, this gully took wagons to a ridge on the left where they stayed for one and one-half miles. On this ridge, emigrant diaries described physical features of the trail that are apparent today, such as inclining to one side (sideling) at one location on the ridge, winding, passing over elevations or tables, a small spring draining from the left across the trail, and then passing around to the east over an elevated level. The trail then descends gradually from this elevated level toward the upper end of the canyon, where it begins a half-mile gradual climb to the First Summit (on the right of the existing county Dog Valley Road).

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18 Author's note: I provided Larry Schmidt, a retired Forest Service physical scientist and fellow member of Trails West and OSTA, with the Wiggins investigative report and my own related materials on the route to the First Summit. In a detailed e-mail response of May 14, 2017, Schmidt pointed out the weakness "in seizing on a few words in a narrative and implying more meaning than was intended by an author." For example, Schmidt found that the references to ascending to the First Summit through a "ravine" in the diary accounts of Bryant, Godfrey, and Wistar could refer to travel up the canyon of the South Branch paralleling the present Dog Valley road (the conventional thinking) just as well as accessing the side of the adjacent ridge to bypass the steep part of the canyon as Wiggins contended. For Schmidt, who had studied the area in the 1970s for a proposed watershed project, "The extraordinary level of logging, utility corridor, and transportation route activity in this area makes reaching a definitive conclusion [on the trail route] unlikely." Schmidt cautioned that "the hypothesis proffered by Wiggins still remains possible but unproven at this point."

19 Author's note: In post-Crystal Peak Fire correspondence with me, Wiggins discussed the difficulty of sorting out the emigrant trail from the numerous later wagon roads on both sides of South Creek Canyon that had resulted from the post-Virginia City logging and freighting activity, and possibly early automobile use.



MAP 1. BY JON NOWLIN.

At the First Summit, the trail made a steep descent into luxuriant Dog Valley and quickly turned southwest, where Wiggins found a quarter-mile segment of original trail still remaining.<sup>20</sup>

After nooning or camping in Dog Valley, emigrants left the valley in an ascending wide draw for about two miles to what is known as the Second Summit. This summit became

a transportation hub, where later roads merged—the Henness Pass Toll Road, Dutch Flat–Donner Lake Wagon Road (henceforth DF-DLWR), and the early automobile Lincoln Highway and Victory Highway. From the Second Summit, the emigrant trail descended another two miles southwest into Hoke Valley.<sup>21</sup>

From Hoke Valley to the Little Truckee River, Wiggins acknowledged that the original emigrant route was difficult to determine, largely due to the modern Stampede Reservoir blocking a complete survey. Graydon had the emigrant route from Hoke Valley going more southwest through the present reservoir bottom to its outlet, near where the Little Truckee River had turned east to south. Although admitting emigrant mileages recorded in their diaries “are subjective and sometimes imprecise,” Wiggins concluded that “the sheer weight of the diary evidence points to a route other than Graydon’s route based on mileage alone.” For Wiggins, this meant a more direct southerly route, generally along the corridor of a pipeline, to the Little Truckee River just south of its outlet from the reservoir.<sup>22</sup>

Wiggins next surveyed the trail route from the Little Truckee River, below the reservoir dam, to Russel Valley. Established thinking on this trail segment, based on Weddell’s maps, Rhoads’s tree blazes, and Graydon’s mapping, held that upon reaching the Little Truckee River (now under the reservoir near the dam), the Truckee Trail continued below the dam two and one-half miles southward. As Graydon described the route, “an old trailbed is seen running south close along the east side of the river with an old railroad bed, abandoned in 1914, on its left.” After paralleling the river southward, Graydon had the trail fording the Little Truckee, whereupon it “proceeded south-southwest up and over an eroded saddle” into the east end of Russel Valley (near where the valley now enters the northwestern end of Boca Reservoir).<sup>23</sup>

Using sixteen emigrant diary accounts that had useful descriptions for this area, Wiggins determined that “emigrants did not follow the Little Truckee River [southward]. They crossed it and traveled over ‘undulating country’ about 4 or 5 miles to reach the next valley with water and grass” [i.e.,

20 Wiggins, “Report on the Truckee Trail: Verdi to Second Summit,” 2–5. Trails West has placed three T rail markers on Wiggins’s designated trail route, from the beginning of South Creek Canyon to the descent into Dog Valley. For a published hiking guide to this trail route to the First Summit, with diary explanations and trail photos, see Charles H. Dodd and Don Wiggins, *A Trail Sleuthing Experience on the South Branch Canyon Segment of the Truckee Trail. Finding the Trail Where the Emigrants Themselves Said It Was* (Chilcoot, Calif.: 19th Century Publications, 2002).

21 At the Second Summit road hub, the NETMC placed a T rail marker. Also, Trails West has placed T rail markers where the emigrant trail enters the Second Summit and enters Hoke Valley, the latter near where the original 1852 Henness Pass Road branched westward. Wiggins found remains of the Henness Pass Road west of this marker.

22 Wiggins, “Notes on the Hoke Valley Route of the Truckee Trail from Second Summit to the Little Truckee River,” 5.

23 Graydon, *Trail of the First Wagons over the Sierra Nevada*, 28 and Map 2.



Dashed white line shows the trail route leaving the rocky South Branch ravine and turning left (west) onto a ridge, described by emigrants, for one and one-half miles, heading toward the First Summit. PHOTO BY CHRIS WRAY.

Russel Valley]. This illustrates a reoccurring problem a trail sleuth encounters: how to distinguish between an original emigrant trail and a later wagon road. In five pages of “Supporting Analysis,” Wiggins arrived at his conclusion based on distances traveled, type of terrain crossed, descriptions of the valley arrived at, and the entrance to this valley. His diary evidence pointed to the trail crossing the Little Truckee River about a quarter-mile south from the river outlet of the Stamped Dam. Then the trail wound west and south for about four miles over some hilly country into the center of Russel Valley.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Wiggins, “Notes on the Little Truckee River to Russel Valley,” 1–5. Author’s note: In searching along this trail route, Wiggins and I found a three-tenths-mile trail segment leading south into Russel Valley, where the swale was cut off by the gas pipeline mentioned previously, heading to the Little Truckee River. Where Wiggins’s trail route crossed the river below the dam, Trails West placed a T rail marker. In August 2017, about 250 yards west of this river crossing, an archeology team and Chris Wray located remains of old wagon ruts ascending southwest on the proposed Wiggins’s route. To verify this find, further trail sleuthing is needed.

Leading southwest out of Russel Valley are several possible narrow draws through which emigrants could have traveled to continue their journey of four miles to Prosser Creek (now under a reservoir). Two of these draws, having old dirt roads heading southwest, are the best possible wagon outlets from Russel Valley. As Wiggins noted, emigrant diarists do not indicate which of these draws they used to exit the valley. The eastern most draw has a Rhoads tree blaze at its entrance, which would best fit a trail entering the valley from its eastern end, as Rhoads and Graydon showed it. The westernmost draw would best fit a trail entering the valley at its center, where emigrants would have turned to the right to exit the valley. Having the



Looking south on the Graydon-Rhoads designated trail that parallels the Little Truckee River on the right, south of present Stampede Reservoir dam. PHOTO BY CHRIS WRAY.

trail entering the center of Russel Valley, Wiggins opted for the western draw exit which lined up with trail traces along the route to Prosser Creek. However, Wiggins admitted this draw “is the best guess as to the location of the emigrant road” leaving Russel Valley. Upon leaving the draw, the emigrant trail, now heading south, is evident for two and one-half miles until disappearing in the present Prosser Creek Reservoir.<sup>25</sup>

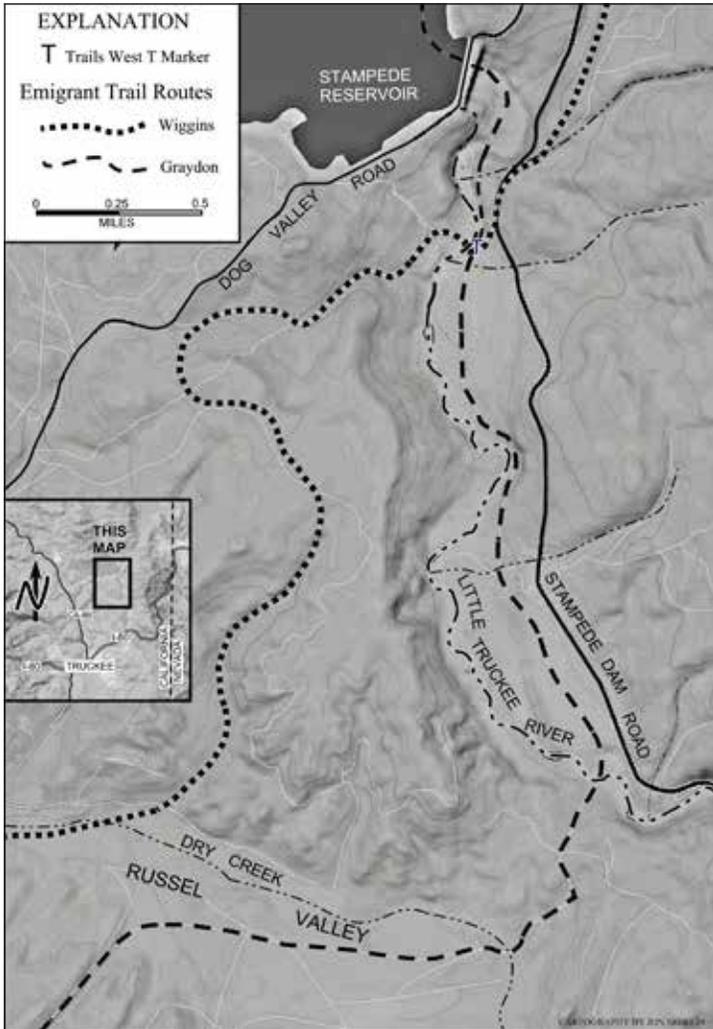
The next segment of the Truckee Trail that came under Don Wiggins’s investigative eye was the route from Prosser Creek to

25 Wiggins, “Notes on the Truckee Trail To and Leaving Russel Valley.” Trails West placed a T rail marker at the beginning of the western-most draw. Both of the possible draws leaving Russel Valley rejoin in one and eight-tenths miles, where Trails West placed a T rail marker.

the Truckee River valley east of present Truckee town. At the time, the best thinking of the trail route in this area was shown in Chuck Graydon’s 1994 (third) edition of *Trail of the First Wagons over the Sierra Nevada*. After crossing Prosser Creek, Graydon had the trail turning southwest directly toward the eastern end of present Truckee town, along the corridor of the old Dog Valley Road (now Prosser Dam Road), where it dropped into the Truckee River valley at the old cemetery. This was also the route of the later DF-DLWR.<sup>26</sup>

However, Wiggins contended that “Little evidence is presented in the 1996 edition of Graydon’s book to support the emigrant use of this route between Prosser Creek and the Truckee River.” In the diary accounts for 1845 to 1850, Wiggins uncovered too many descriptions and mileages that didn’t fit Graydon’s trail route. This led to another detailed investigative

26 See the hand-drawn map in Graydon, *Trail of the First Wagons over the Sierra Nevada*, 3rd ed., 34.



MAP 2. BY JON NOWLIN.

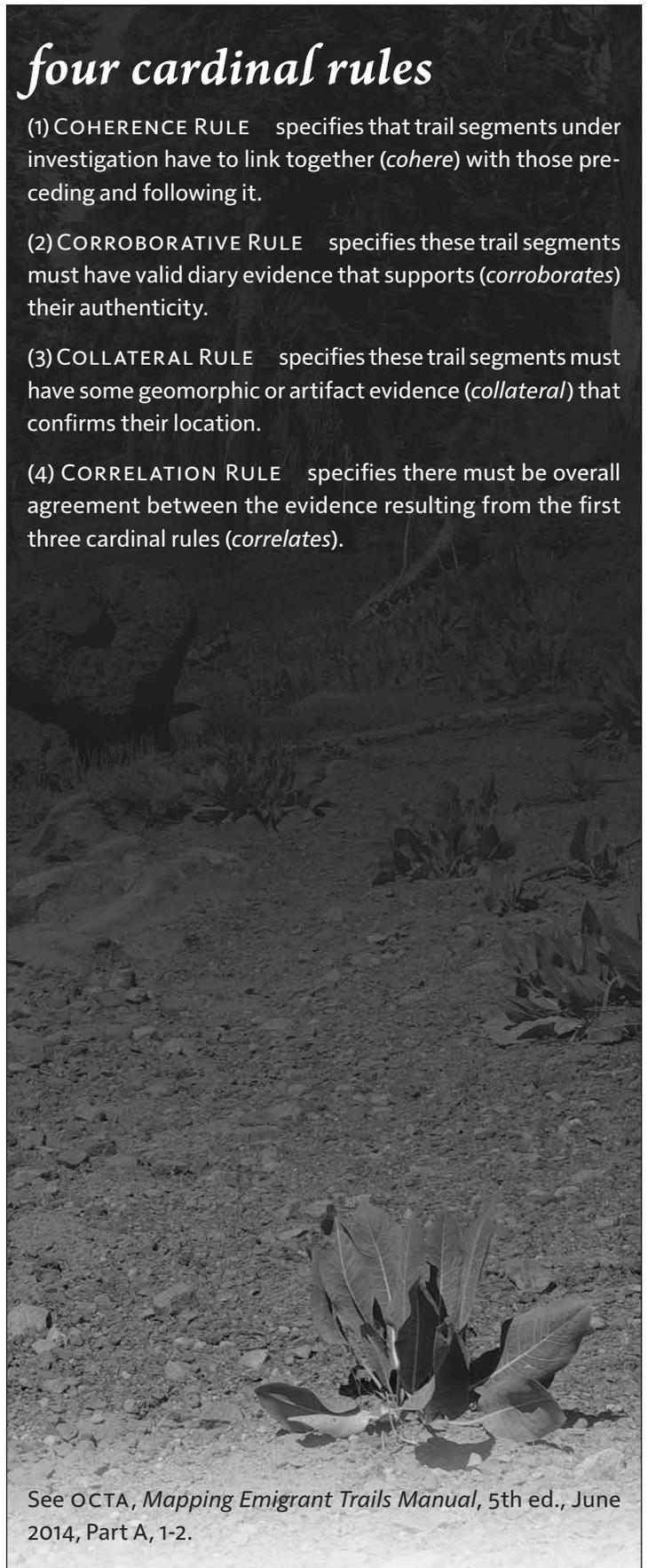
report, of eleven pages and two maps. In these Wiggins relied not only on emigrant diary evidence but also noted the use of the “Four Cardinal Rules” of trail verification (see sidebar) explained in OCTA’s MET manual.<sup>27</sup>

First, Wiggins compiled mileages that emigrant diarists recorded after descending to the Truckee River valley and then turning right (west) to the crossing of Donner Creek. (From Donner Creek, the outlet of Donner Lake, emigrants turned southwest up Coldstream Valley toward the summit.) These emigrant mileages showed that they dropped into the Truckee

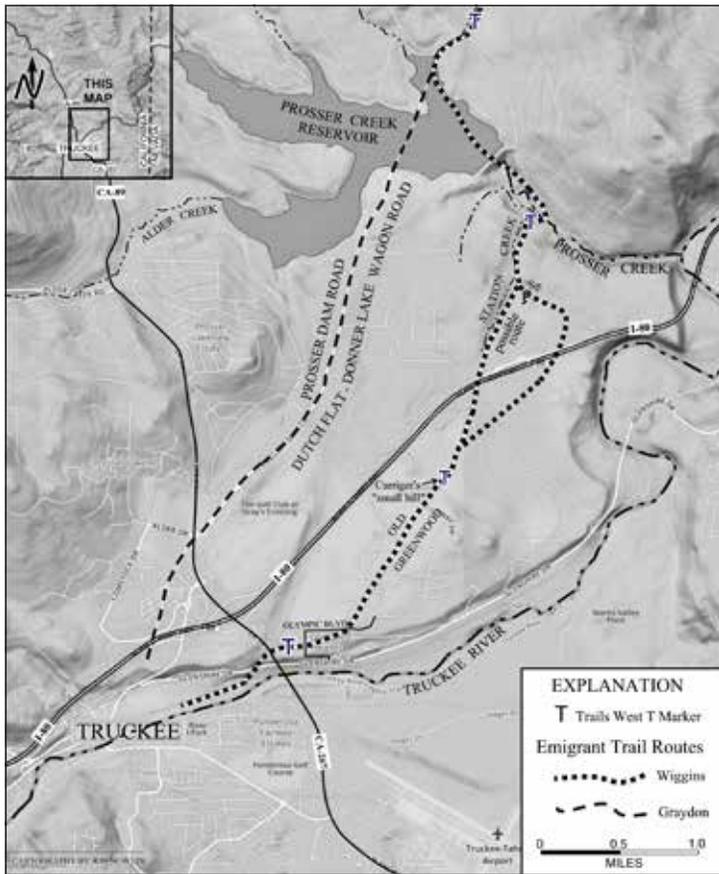
<sup>27</sup> Wiggins, “An Investigation of Emigrant Trails in Section 1 (T 17 N–R 16 E): Old Greenwood Resort, east of Truckee, between I-80 and Truckee River,” (June 1999), 4.

## four cardinal rules

- (1) COHERENCE RULE specifies that trail segments under investigation have to link together (*cohere*) with those preceding and following it.
- (2) CORROBORATIVE RULE specifies these trail segments must have valid diary evidence that supports (*corroborates*) their authenticity.
- (3) COLLATERAL RULE specifies these trail segments must have some geomorphic or artifact evidence (*collateral*) that confirms their location.
- (4) CORRELATION RULE specifies there must be overall agreement between the evidence resulting from the first three cardinal rules (*correlates*).



See OCTA, *Mapping Emigrant Trails Manual*, 5th ed., June 2014, Part A, 1-2.



MAP 3. BY JON NOWLIN.

River valley east of present Truckee town rather than at the town as Graydon indicated.<sup>28</sup>

Next, Wiggins noticed that a particularly descriptive diarist, August Burbank (1849), recorded crossing Prosser Creek, then going a half-mile where he “passed a fine Spring” on the left before “we ascended again” to reach the Truckee River valley. This description implied that after crossing Prosser Creek, Burbank was traveling in a ravine before “ascending again.” Another diarist, Nicholas Carriger (1846), recorded succinctly “crossing a small hill” before reaching the Truckee River valley. Both of these accounts didn’t fit Graydon’s route which, as Wiggins noted, “was relatively level and did not cross a hill of any description.”<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 5.  
<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 6.

An on-the-ground search revealed a narrow valley branching southerly off Prosser Creek (below the present reservoir dam), through which Station Creek drained northeast into Prosser Creek. In this Station Creek valley, Wiggins came upon “a dim, but unmistakable, short section of an old wagon road . . . in pristine condition. It appeared to have been used only by wagon traffic and later by animals.” Where this trail could have climbed southeast out of Station Creek in the east branch of the valley, “a fine spring was bubbling away, matching Burbank’s description.” Also, “an old wagon road was found leading away from the spring to the heights above.” However, Wiggins cautioned, “Although in pristine condition, this section of road may have been used by other than emigrants.”<sup>30</sup>

More field checking led Wiggins to the south side of Interstate 80 into a planned resort development, now named Old Greenwood, where there was a quarter-mile-long swale, heading southwest, to a small hill. For Wiggins, this conformed to the one Nicholas Carriger had recounted crossing in 1846. Wiggins described this hill as “actually a narrow, short ridge running in about a NW/SW direction and appears as a small hill when approached from the direction of Station Creek.” Also, “a well defined wagon swale (or ruts) was found going over the hill.”<sup>31</sup>

Continuing southwest one and one-quarter miles, through the Old Greenwood resort and a small housing development off Olympic Boulevard, led Wiggins to “a pristine, rock-lined trail, of wagon road width running east and west on a hill-side slope leading directly to the descent site” into the Truckee River valley (close to present SR 267). This descent was over three-quarters mile east of where Graydon had the trail descending into the valley.<sup>32</sup>

For Wiggins, these three trail landmarks—the swale leading to and over the small hill in the resort, and the rock-lined trace descending to the Truckee River valley—“are all mutually supportive with no contradicting evidence. Therefore, it is concluded, to a high degree of probability, that this was the

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 7. Trails West placed a T rail marker at the beginning of this pristine trail segment in the valley of Station Creek.  
<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 9. Trails West placed a T rail marker on the swale in the Old Greenwood resort. A recent field check found dense sagebrush growth in this swale, making it difficult to see and follow along a resort hiking path. The same growth condition applies to the ascent and descent of the small hill west of the marker, where the trail has been identified with a few low rock cairns. (The existing resort path onto this hill or ridge is not the trail.)  
<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 8–9. Trails West placed a T rail marker on this rock-lined trail dropping into the valley of the Truckee River east of Truckee town. A recent field check found dense sagebrush growth now covering much of the trail under the forest canopy.



exclusive route of the original emigrant trail from 1845 through at least 1849.”<sup>33</sup>

DON WIGGINS NEXT TURNED HIS INVESTIGATION TO where emigrants surmounted the Sierra Nevada crest south of Donner Pass. It had long been trail dogma that there were two passes emigrants used, one over “Coldstream Pass,” between Donner Peak and Mount Judah, and the other one mile south over “Roller Pass,” between Mount Judah and Mount Lincoln. Chuck Graydon provided the best exposition for these two passes in 1986.<sup>34</sup> True to form, Wiggins put this dual-hypoth-

33 Ibid., p.11. Wiggins noted on pages 10–11 that these “three supporting segments of the trail, described above, satisfy the Coherence Rule of the MET Manual.”

34 Graydon, *Trail of the First Wagons over the Sierra Nevada*, 42–47. Weddell had constructed a rock monument at Coldstream Pass and later the NETMC placed a T rail marker at this pass.

Looking south on the Wiggins designated trail in the narrow valley of Station Creek, south of present Prosser Reservoir dam. PHOTO BY CHRIS WRAY.

esis to the test. The outcome was another exhaustive investigation, first a detailed “Interim Report” completed in November 1996 and then a “Final Report” in February 1999.<sup>35</sup>

Initially, Wiggins delved into the trail literature to find where the two-passes hypothesis over the summit south of Donner Pass had taken hold in publications. Peter Weddell, of

35 Wiggins, “Investigation of Emigrant Trails Over Passes South of Donner Pass,” which includes a fourteen-page “Interim Report,” dated November 1996; a four-page “Coldstream Pass Vs. Roller Pass: A Final Report,” dated February 1999, and “Excerpts From Primary Documents,” of eight pages.



Trail beginning its steep ascent to Roller Pass.  
PHOTO BY CHRIS WRAY.

course, was the one who first championed “Coldstream Pass.” Only near the end of his life did he acknowledge a “southern route,” which he labeled on his last October 1951 map and which became known as “Roller Pass” (Weddell did not mark this route with his signs). Wiggins searched emigrant trail publications that had any detail on where the Truckee Trail passed over the Sierra summit. He came up with one by trail researcher and author Irene Paden (1949) and another by historian George Stewart (1962), both of whom only described one emigrant route south of Donner Pass, the one that became known as “Roller Pass.”<sup>36</sup>

So, where did the two-passes hypothesis first gain credence in any publication? Wiggins’s search turned up a likely answer in an unlikely publication, Ruth Hermann’s *The Paiutes of Pyramid Lake*, published in 1972. In chapter three, “Chief Truckee Guides Emigrants West,” Hermann devoted nine pages to explaining how and when the first pass south of Donner Pass was opened in September of 1846, between Mount Judah and Mount Lincoln (i.e., Roller Pass). She quoted from emigrant participants Joseph Aram and Nicholas Carriger, and then quoted extensively from the excellent description of Forty-niner Elisha Douglas Perkins of how his party ascended Roller Pass.<sup>37</sup>

Following this documented discussion, Hermann abruptly asserted, without any emigrant references or footnotes, that in the same month and year (September 1846 after the opening of Roller Pass) “other emigrants stamped out a new, easier trail to the northwest.” She went on to identify this new pass as “a trail over the summit between the two peaks [Donner Peak and Mount Judah].” Hermann then stated that this new pass “provided another more favorable road for the forty-niners,” and went on to describe it as “usually crammed with emigrants rushing West.” The only verification she presented were two maps on following pages, one created by P. M. Weddell (corrected to 1951) and the other by Earl E. Rhoads made in 1958 but based on Weddell’s map.<sup>38</sup>

In a 1979 article by E. W. Harris in the *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, Wiggins provided an example of how Ruth Hermann’s undocumented second-pass hypothesis came to be

accepted as fact. As Hermann had done, Harris first described in some detail, using 1846 emigrant accounts, how Roller Pass was opened. Then he went on to quote from Hermann’s *The Paiutes of Pyramid Lake* on the establishment of the pass between Donner Peak and Mount Judah. Harris further elaborated: “This route over the pass was still easier for wagons and was most used by emigrants, including the Forty-Niners thereafter.” The only other documentation or supporting evidence Harris used for the establishment of Coldstream Pass and its subsequent use was P. M. Weddell’s map “reproduced” in Hermann’s book.<sup>39</sup>

TRACKING DOWN THE ORIGINS OF COLDSTREAM PASS, which lacked any verification other than Weddell’s maps, brought Wiggins back to the earliest sources available, emigrant diaries and the General Land Office (GLO) cadastral survey plat of this area. Along the section lines surveyed in the GLO plat dated to 1865–66 (south of Donner Lake and Donner Pass), only one trail is shown and it is labeled “Old Emigrant Road.” This emigrant road route goes right over what is now called “Roller Pass” (in the middle of Sec. 28). The surveyor found no wagon road north of this designated “Old Emigrant Road” that would even approximate the route to and over Coldstream Pass (in the eastern middle of Sec. 21). Therefore, up to 1866 the GLO surveyor could find no evidence of a wagon road to and over the pass between Donner Peak and Mount Judah. However, he was able to find evidence of an emigrant wagon road going all the way to and over the pass between Mount Judah and Mount Lincoln.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, if the Coldstream Pass received the majority of emigrant wagon travel, as some proponents claimed, the physical features of this wagon

36 Irene D. Paden, “Facts About the Blazing of the Gold Trail, Including a Few Never Before Published,” in *Rushing for Gold*, ed. by John Walton Caughy (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1949), 3–12; and George R. Stewart, *The California Trail: An Epic with Many Heroes* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, Inc., 1962), 175–77 and 268.

37 Ruth Hermann, *The Paiutes of Pyramid Lake. A Narrative Concerning a Western Nevada Indian Tribe* (San Jose, Calif.: Harlan-Young Press, 1972), 65–73.

38 *Ibid.*, 73–75 and maps on 76 and 77.

39 E. W. Harris, “The Early Emigrant Pass Between Mt. Judah and Mt. Lincoln,” *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 37. Harris was a University of Nevada–Reno professor and member of the NETMC.

40 See the GLO plat for T-17-N/R-15-E, Mount Diablo Meridian, section lines surveyed by J. E. Freeman in 1866. The westward expansion of the United States, including the railroads, necessitated the government surveying and dividing the western lands in a coherent, uniform format. For this purpose, the government General Land Office (precursor to the Bureau of Land Management) surveyed western land boundaries in a grid system of townships, six-square-miles each, which were then subdivided into thirty-six sections of one-square-mile each. Each of these sections resulted in plats or maps drawn to scale by draftsmen, based on surveyor notebooks that recorded human and natural features along section-line boundaries. These GLO plats showed what the surveyor saw on the ground along section lines or nearby, including emigrant trails and wagon roads. On the California Trail and its branches in Nevada and California, a common phrase surveyors used to designate an original emigrant trail was “Old Emigrant Road.”

road should have been more apparent to the GLO surveyor in 1866 than those of Roller Pass. But they weren't.

The perplexing issue Wiggins faced was the fact that Weddell had located and marked a well-developed wagon road ascending to and descending from Coldstream Pass. The GLO plat had shown no wagon road at Coldstream Pass up to 1866. Nonetheless, could it have been an emigrant wagon road as Weddell and others affirmed? To find an answer, Wiggins turned to those eye-witness accounts of travel: emigrant diaries, journals, and reminiscences.

Canvassing more than ninety emigrant accounts covering the years 1846 through 1855 for his "Final Report," Wiggins concluded that all emigrant descriptions that were at all diagnostic pointed to Roller Pass. These diagnostic characteristics were as follows: references to the 1846 windlass (or roller) that the first users had made to ascend straight up to the pass, a small meadow area at the foot of the pass, descriptions of the alternate switchback trail to the right of the original trail, reaching a ledge at the top, steepness of both routes requiring double-triple teaming (or more), and the overall steepness and difficulty of the ascent. Wiggins determined none of these characteristics were applicable to Coldstream Pass.<sup>41</sup>

Two more important characteristics of travel would have been diagnostic of an emigrant route over Coldstream Pass. Wiggins pointed out that if this pass existed as an emigrant route, diarists would have recorded passing Lake Mary upon descending to Summit Valley, and Weddell had marked his trail descending right to Lake Mary. However, Wiggins found "No post-1846 diary keeper ever recorded seeing a lake along the down hill road to Summit Valley."<sup>42</sup>

For Wiggins, therefore, "Absolutely no primary evidence was found to indicate Coldstream Pass was ever used as an emigrant route. Any speculation that Coldstream Pass was an early emigrant route appears to be based entirely on P. M. Weddell's dedicated, but undocumented work."<sup>43</sup>

Although Wiggins did not note this, had there been coexisting passes over the summit south of Donner Pass, some emigrant diarists, especially those writing detailed accounts, would have commented on the existence of two pass routes and having

to make a decision about which one to take. Emigrants typically made such comments elsewhere when confronted with choices at forks in the trail. Other than describing the two connected routes ascending Roller Pass, no emigrants mentioned or described in their diary accounts any trail fork or a second pass option for the area between Donner Peak and Mount Lincoln.<sup>44</sup>

WHILE WIGGINS WAS UNDERTAKING HIS TRUCKEE Trail research described above, Olive Newell of Auburn, California, was also collecting numerous emigrant diary accounts on the Truckee Trail. This resulted in the publication in 1997 of *Tail of the Elephant: The Emigrant Experience on the Truckee Route of the California Trail, 1844–1854*. Newell accumulated an impressive number of emigrant accounts to illustrate sections of the California Trail and especially the Truckee Trail in Nevada and California. For her brief maps and trail descriptions in California, Newell relied on Chuck Graydon, "whose published maps of the trail through Tahoe National Forest were invaluable." However, her purpose was not to use emigrant descriptions to verify where a trail segment existed, as Wiggins was doing. Newell wanted to bring alive, as her subtitle stated, "the emigrant experience." Nonetheless, her diary quotes are often cited in verifying sections of the Truckee Trail.<sup>45</sup>

The majority of diary accounts Newell quoted in her book that related to the Sierra crest ascent described Roller Pass. However, when she came to supporting accounts that described Coldstream Pass, only a few were used and these were not convincing. For example, she misinterpreted the wordy Charles Darwin 1849 diary, leaving out an important part, by her insertion of a note that he was referring to Donner Peak, though admitting he had gone over Roller Pass. This interpretation is very confusing until one reads the complete account where Darwin describes climbing Mount Judah the evening before his party ascended Roller Pass. Newell followed his account with those of two diarists who were traveling together in 1849,

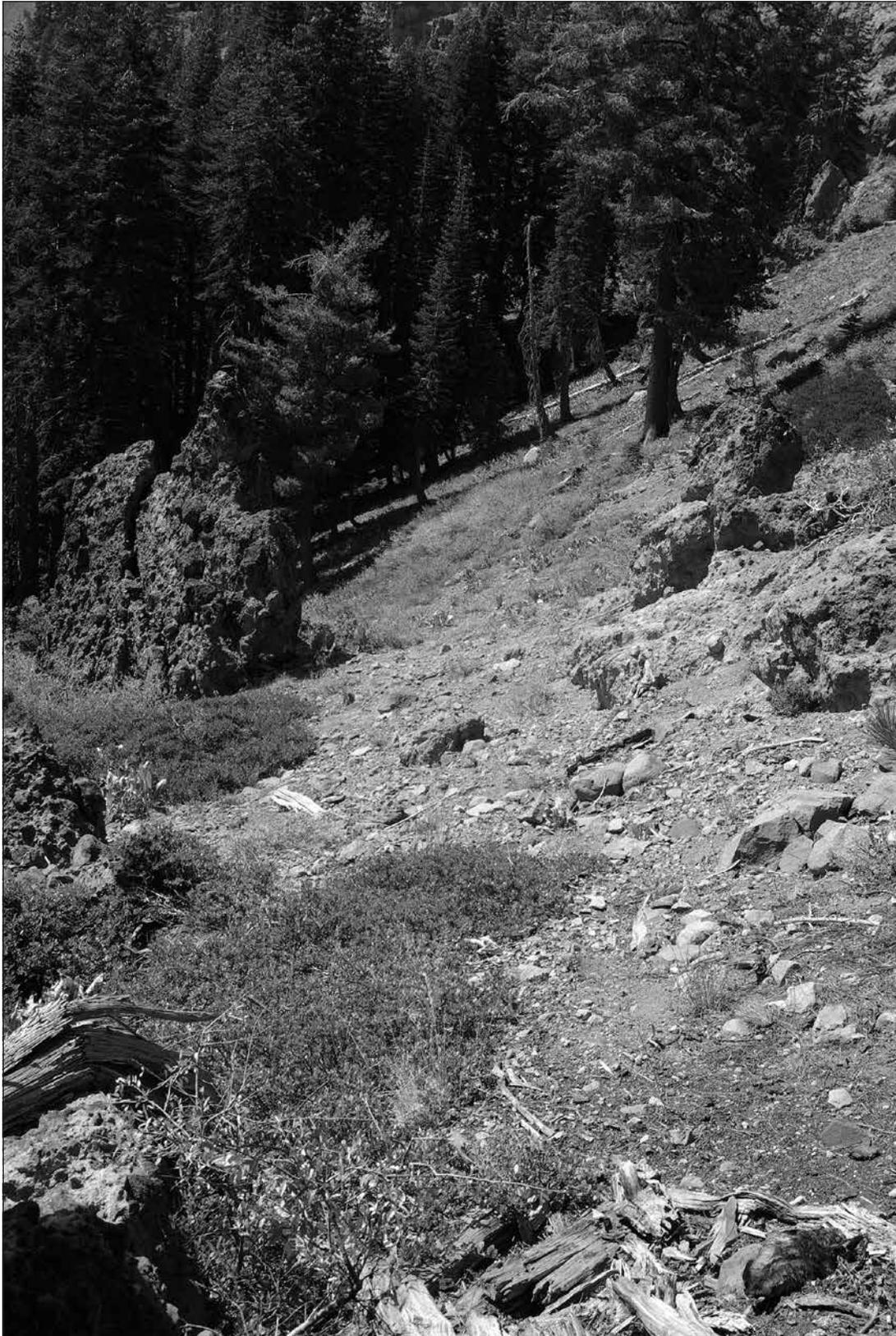
41 Wiggins, "Coldstream Pass Vs. Roller Pass: A Final Report" (February 1999), 1–2. In "Excerpts From Primary Documents, 1–8," Wiggins included thirty emigrant diagnostic accounts from 1846 to 1855 that describe in various ways the ascent to and over Roller Pass.

42 Ibid., 2.

43 Ibid., 4.

44 Author's note: After reviewing Don Wiggins's analysis of the two-passes hypothesis, I made this observation, based on his diary research and my mapping elsewhere. Such a trail fork would have been located in Emigrant Canyon about two miles west of Coldstream Valley. At this hypothetical fork, the Roller Pass branch would have extended westerly for three-quarters mile to the base of the pass and the Coldstream Pass branch would have extended northwesterly about one mile to the base of the pass.

45 Olive Newell, *Tail of the Elephant. The Emigrant Experience on the Truckee Route of the California Trail 1844–1852* (Nevada City, Calif.: Nevada County Historical Society, 1997), xiv. In her book, Newell used the earlier Weddell map that only showed the trail between Donner Peak and Mt. Judah (p. 166–67).



Looking downhill (southwest) on the Roller Pass switchback beginning its ascent to the summit at the south end of Mt. Judah. PHOTO BY CHRIS WRAY.



The Roller Pass switchback has reached a ledge on the summit at the south end of Mt. Judah, and turned left (southwest), gradually descending toward the pass in the upper left of the photo. PHOTO BY CHRIS WRAY.

John Elza Armstrong and John Edwin Banks. Newell stated, hesitatingly, that both “gave some evidence of taking the Coldstream route.” Actually the Banks account is a good description of the tough ascent to Roller Pass (some of which Newell left out) and Armstrong’s account even references both the original route and the adjacent one to the right, which also ascends Roller Pass.<sup>46</sup>

Newell concluded her Sierra crossing with a long diary description by Eliza Ann McAuley, dated September 14, 1852,

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 197–98. Author’s note: This exposition of Newell’s use of emigrant diary accounts is by Don Buck.

who had described the ascent as “very steep and rough” where they had to double team, the common practice ascending Roller Pass. What attracted Newell to the McAuley account was the statement by McAuley that she and members of her family “climbed one of the highest peaks near the road, and were well repaid for our trouble by the splendid view.” Newell interpreted this to mean they climbed Donner Peak a mile north of Roller Pass rather than Mount Judah just to the right (north) of Roller Pass. Accordingly, for Newell that meant the McAuley wagon party used Coldstream Pass. Actually, McAuley’s account is a good description of Roller Pass.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 200. Don Wiggins used the Armstrong-Banks and McAuley accounts in support of the Roller Pass route. Author’s note: After reviewing Newell’s attempts to find diary evidence for Coldstream Pass, it appeared that she struggled to fit diary accounts into a preconceived trail location rather than letting those past eyewitness accounts take one to where they actually were. Also, Bert Wiley, in *The Overland Emigrant Trail in California*, discussed

One of the perplexing questions about the two-passes hypothesis is the commonly held view that Coldstream Pass was a much easier pass to ascend than Roller Pass. This led to the subjective thinking that over time emigrants would have gravitated to using Coldstream Pass. For example, Harold Curran in his *Fearful Crossing* matter-of-factly wrote that the difficulty of ascending the last section of Roller Pass “soon led to the discovery of another pass to the north, by Donner Peak. This [Coldstream] pass was easier than the other two [Roller or Donner Pass], a gradual ascent to the summit without any particularly difficult sections.”<sup>48</sup>

Having hiked to and over both passes several times, this author can report that the actual ascent from the base of each pass differs considerably. Roller Pass is much steeper, requiring double teaming, while the Coldstream Pass ascent is more gradual, minimizing the need for double-teams. However, the route leading to the base of each pass also differs, but in the opposite way. The mile-long hike from Emigrant Canyon to the base of Coldstream Pass is much steeper and rugged than the shorter drive to the small meadow at the base of Roller Pass. Now, what does this lead to?

In his Summer 2017 *Overland Journal* article, Rob Davis explained how the most efficient movement corridors can be modeled between two geographic locations using elevation and hydrologic data from the USGS. In addition to overall distance between those two points, he modeled three costs associated with moving across terrain, (1) slope, (2) how rugged the terrain is, and (3) an emigrant’s reluctance to venture too far from a water source, all prime factors in where emigrants laid down wagon trails. Davis’s primary examples and research are with emigrant trails in Wyoming but he has an interest in the Truckee Trail. Applying the corridor modeling to the Donner Pass region, Davis modeled the cost of moving across terrain between a point where the trails split east of the passes, then to a point where they converged on the west side of the passes. Davis’s model found “a least-cost corridor following Coldstream Canyon, Emigrant

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previously, wrote: “By 1849, hundreds of wagons were using the Roller Pass; so many that they had to wait their turn to cross the summit of the Sierras. So, another pass was opened. This was between Mount Judah and Donner Peak.” The evidence Wiley presented for the opening and use of this other pass were the diaries of John Steele (1850) and Eliza Ann McAuley (1852), primarily because in both cases the diarists climbed adjacent peaks after reaching the summit, which, for Wiley, had to be Donner Peak. See pp. 24–26. The diary descriptions of both Steele and McAuley demonstrate their respective wagon parties used Roller Pass.

48 Curran, *Fearful Crossing*, 173. A few years earlier, Bert Wiley stated much the same occurrence as noted in the previous footnote.

Canyon, over Roller Pass, and then to Lake Van Norden” (i.e., Summit Valley). This means that the most topographically efficient route of travel was to and over Roller Pass.<sup>49</sup>

Davis’s modeling is supported by what is known about the discovery and opening of Roller Pass in September of 1846. The two accounts describing this event were both written afterwards, as the reminiscence of Joseph Aram and the memoir of Margaret Hecox. Both accounts describe members of their wagon party spending several days searching north and south of present Donner Pass for a better crossing of the summit. This search would have included both the pass between Donner Peak and Mount Judah, and the pass between Mount Judah and Mount Lincoln. Once these explorers decided where to cross with wagons, both accounts describe the hardships making it over what became known as Roller Pass. Presumably, they found the pass between Mount Judah and Mount Lincoln the best option, despite its steep ascent. This suggests the pass between Donner Peak and Mount Judah was, overall, a more difficult pass than Roller Pass.<sup>50</sup>

Although the evidence presented by Wiggins and the author questions the use of Coldstream Pass as an emigrant route, as discussed above, there are physical remains of an old wagon road leading to this pass and the descent to Lake Mary. This is the route Peter Weddell had found and signed. To date, there is no conclusive evidence about the origins of this later wagon road. Possibly it resulted from the extensive logging activity in this area during the 1870s and ’80s. During this period, there was a logging operation at the western end of Coldstream Valley, near the Horseshoe Bend, which could account for the old wagon road, but that is speculative.<sup>51</sup>

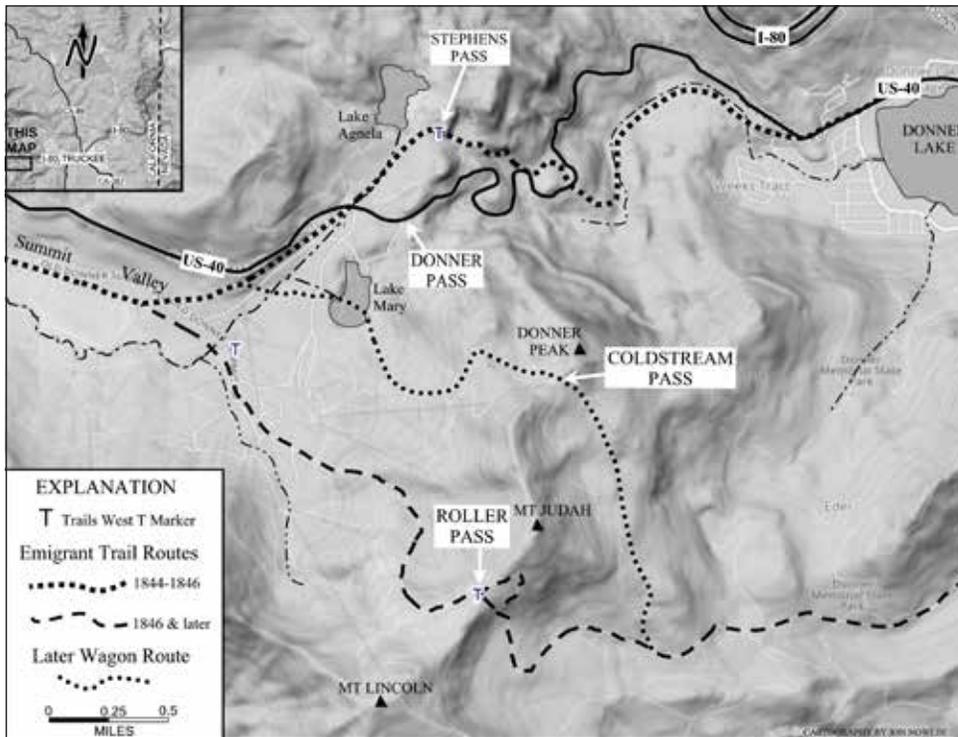
Another possibility offered is that the Coldstream Pass route was opened and used in 1867–68 by builders of the Central Pacific Railroad (CPR) to transport locomotive and railroad

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49 Robert E. Davis, “Using Spatial Analysis of Emigrant Trails to Predict Likely Corridors Where Emigrants May Have Traveled,” *Overland Journal* 35, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 53. Upon retirement from the Marine Corps, Davis obtained a graduate degree in Geographic Information Systems (GIS) from the University of Arizona, where he developed this spatial-analysis modeling of emigrant trails and the terrain they crossed.

50 See “Reminiscences of Captain Joseph Aram,” in Colonel James Tompkins Watson, *Across the Continent in a Caravan: Recollections of a Journey from New York through the Western Wilderness and over the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific in 1846* (Fairfield, Wash.: Ye Galleon Press, n.d.), 16; and *California Caravan: The 1846 Overland Trail Memoir of Margaret M. Hecox* (San Jose, Calif.: Harlan-Young Press, 1966), 41.

51 See Dick Wilson, *Sawdust Trails in the Truckee Basin: A History of Lumbering Operations 1856–1936* (Nevada City, Calif.: Nevada County Historical Society, 1992), 29–30 and Appendix A, no. 120, p. 80.



MAP 4. BY JON NOWLIN.

parts over the crest. This would have been to avoid the often traffic-clogged Dutch Flat–Donner Lake Wagon Road (DF-DLWR) which, ironically, had been constructed for that purpose.<sup>52</sup>

THIS COVERAGE OF RECENT TRAIL RESEARCH CONCLUDES with an examination of what is known about the earliest emigrant summit crossing in the Donner Pass region, from 1844 to September 1846. George Stewart undertook the first serious search for the route that the first emigrants used in 1844 to cross the Sierra crest at Donner Pass. While Stewart provided a rich narrative of the event, he admitted in 1953 that after twenty years of scrambling up and down Donner Pass he was unable “to discover traces of the old road.” There was too much disturbance of the terrain. As Stewart wrote, “The trouble is that the construction of the railroad and more recent roads, to say nothing of

pole lines, has changed the face of things.” Stewart’s fruitless search had been along the route of the DF-DLWR.<sup>53</sup>

More than three decades later in 1986, Chuck Graydon wrote much the same. After all the construction of roads, pre- and post-automobile, and underground cables and pipelines, he concluded “there is little remaining physical evidence that can be positively identified as the original crossing.” This lamentable condition led Graydon, like others, to believe “that the Dutch Flat–Donner Lake Wagon Road [of 1864] initially followed the old trail toward the pass.” This assumption had trail searchers looking for evidence of the original trail on the south side of present U.S. Highway 40, heading to a V-shaped gap now blocked by the famous China Wall that supported the original CPR tracks just east of the summit.<sup>54</sup>

That was the situation in the mid-1990s, when Wiggins turned his investigative efforts to determining where the emigrants of 1844 to 1846 found a way over the Sierra crest in the Donner Pass area. It was well established that this early route went along the north shoreline of Donner Lake and then continued generally westward over a gradually rising, relatively flat forested area for a good mile. However, the next mile, ascending nearly 1,000 feet to the summit, had puzzled previous trail searchers. Wiggins noted that “no information has been found to suggest that anyone has been able, or even tried, to hypothesize a feasible route over that entire last mile to the summit, except the default route over the Dutch Flat Road.” He went on, “This investigation attempts to do that.”<sup>55</sup>

Because of the short period this early route was used and the limited number of emigrants using it then, Wiggins found only

52 For this interpretation, see William Oudegeest, *Walking Through Donner Summit History* (Sacramento, Calif.: I Street Press, 2015), 94–96. Oudegeest admitted, however, “We don’t know if that scenario is true.” Also, Bert Wiley wrote on page 11 in his *Overland Emigrant Trail in California*, with no attestation, that Coldstream Pass, opened in 1849, “was used during the construction of the Central Pacific Railroad to move equipment from Van Norden on the west to Donner Lake on the east. At least a locomotive was taken over the pass by laying rails temporarily in front of it and moving the engine ahead. This operation left a scar that to this day can still be followed.”

53 George R. Stewart, *The Opening of the California Trail* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953), 102n, 36.

54 Graydon, *Trail of the First Wagons over the Sierra Nevada*, 39–40. In 1868, Chinese workers on the CPR constructed a massive wall, fitted with debris stones and using no mortar, to fill the ravine near the summit. This “wall” provided support for the railroad bed. The China Wall stands today, much as it did 150 years ago.

55 Wiggins, “Investigation of the Emigrant Route over Donner Summit” (Jan. 1998), 1. Also, David E. Palmer, in *A Walking Tour of Donner Pass* (privately published, 2002), 10, utilized this “Investigation” paper of Wiggins.



Remains of the trail ascending to Stephens Pass.  
PHOTO BY CHRIS WRAY.

four firsthand accounts (diaries) and six later recorded accounts (recollections or later interviews) that described this route. Typical of these emigrant accounts were descriptions of near-vertical rock benches at numerous places in the ascent, interspersed with open spaces between. Wiggins characterized them “like some sort of a stepladder, or somewhat level for a ways, then a step upward.” Emigrants described piling rocks along the base of these benches or cliffs to facilitate pulling wagons over them. It was a laborious effort, taking two or more days.<sup>56</sup>

Wiggins quoted from two accounts on the 1845 passage that provide a glimpse into how they made it to the top. David Hudson later described in some detail how they got over the tiered rock benches:

when we came to benches of rocks six and eight feet, straight up and down we would unyoke our oxen, drive them round to some low place, get them above the bench yoke up the oxen. In the mean time some of us would cut some long poles strong enough to bear up the wagons and lay them up on the rocks. Then take enough chains to reach back to the wagons, hitch

to the end of the tounge, and pull the wagon up, in this way we reached the top of the mountain.<sup>57</sup>

William Ide’s biographer recounted, in an interview four years after the event, how they managed to make it over that last mile to the summit, which took them two days:

Mr. Ide found on the line of the ascent several abrupt pitches, between which there were comparative level spaces, for several rods distance, where the team might stand to draw up at least an empty wagon. Accordingly he went to work . . . removing

<sup>56</sup> Wiggins, “Investigation,” 3.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 4. Quoted in Charles Kelly and Dale L. Morgan, *Old Greenwood. The Story of Caleb Greenwood: Trapper, Pathfinder, and Early Pioneer* (Georgetown, Calif.: The Talisman Press, rev. ed., 1965), 153. A similar description is in a letter of William L. Todd to his father, dated April 17, 1846, which describes his small company’s travail in surmounting Stephens Pass in late September 1845: “it was one continued jumping from one rocky cliff to another. We would have to roll over this big rock, and then over that; . . . then we had to lift our wagons by main force up to the top of a ledge of rocks that it was impossible for us to reduce, bridge or roll our wagons over, and in several places, we had to run our wagons round with handspikes, and heave them up to the top, where our cattle had previously been taken. Three days were passed in this vexatious way.” Quoted in Kelly and Morgan, *Old Greenwood*, 176–77.



Looking down the trail ascending to Stephens Pass, showing emigrant rock work. PHOTO BY CHRIS WRAY.

rocks, trees, etc., and grading a path 6 or 7 feet wide, up the several steep pitches and levels to the summit.<sup>58</sup>

Wiggins regarded these two emigrant accounts descriptive enough to characterize a unique terrain leading to the summit. He then examined the topography of the DF-DLWR in this area. In some detail, generalized here, Wiggins mentally reconstructed the DF-DLWR route prior to its construction and found a much different terrain than emigrants described. There was a box canyon fifteen feet deep with vertical sides and face that “road builders filled in building a rock wall,” thereby allowing DF-DLWR traffic to drive over it. Also, there were several locations where road construction involved blasting and filling. Nearing the summit, emigrants of 1844–46 would have faced “climbing up an inclined granite slope for some hundreds of yards with wagons.” For Wiggins, “Besides the obvious physical problems in bringing wagons along the route of the DFR before the road was constructed, this entire route doesn’t fit emigrant descriptions.”<sup>59</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Wiggins, “Investigation,” 4. Quoted in *A Biographical Sketch of the Life of William B. Ide* (Glorieta, NM: The Rio Grande Press, Inc., 1967), reprint of original edition by Simeon Ide, 1880, 38.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 5–6.

Those emigrant descriptions that Wiggins characterized showed the kind of terrain emigrants had to overcome to reach the summit, but they did not reveal the summit location. Wiggins came across a good clue in the well-known 1846 accounts of journalist Edwin Bryant, in *What I Saw in California*. Upon reaching the summit and briefly resting their mules, Bryant recorded, “A mile brought us to a small dimple on the top of the mountain, in the centre of which is a miniature lake, surrounded by green grass.” This is a clear reference to the original Lake Mary (now enlarged). Backtracking one mile to the Sierra crest puts Bryant’s party just southeast of Lake Angela (now enlarged), between recently named George R. Stewart Peak and Mount Stephens. The distance from Lake Mary to Donner Pass, where the old CPR and DF-DLWR crossed, is about four-tenths mile, which rules it out as the early emigrant route over the crest.<sup>60</sup>

This detailed research led Wiggins to two conclusions. First, that the route of the 1864 DF-DLWR, south of present historic U.S. 40, could not have been the route of the original emigrant ascent to the summit. Second, that the route emigrants used to reach the summit during 1844 through 1846 was on the north

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.



Emigrant log ramp remains  
nearing the summit of  
Stephens Pass. PHOTO BY  
CHRIS WRAY.

side of present U.S. 40, and it reached the summit four-tenths mile north of Donner Pass, between Stewart Peak and Mount Stephens. Wiggins ended his investigation of the first emigrant route over the summit by writing, “It seems appropriate that George R. Stewart Peak and Mt. Stephens both look down on the emigrants’ final ascent on the summit.”<sup>61</sup>

Despite not finding trail remains, Wiggins was convinced that the original emigrant route of 1844–46 went over what is now called Stephens Pass, north of U.S. 40. He concluded that “no physical trail evidence remains.” Nonetheless, he felt assured that “all significant trail descriptions left by the emigrants that actually crossed here can be found along sections of this route.”<sup>62</sup>

61 Ibid., 8. Trails West placed a T rail marker designating “Stephens Pass” at this location between Stewart Peak and Mount Stephens.

62 Ibid. Author’s note: The GLO plat covering the Donner Pass area, referred to previously in footnote 40, was of no use to Wiggins and later to Chris Wray for identifying or authenticating this route to Stephens Pass. The surveyor only recorded the DF-DLWR along the southern end of Section 16. Because GLO surveyors were restricted to recording findings along sections lines, it’s unlikely the surveyor would have recorded any trail north of the DF-DLWR, along the route to the summit that Wiggins had hypothesized and Wray had located later. This is because the identified segment of the Stephens Pass route leading to the summit goes through the center of Section 16, inside the north-south section lines, and therefore would not have been recorded by the surveyor. Also, two other factors worked against GLO surveyors

THAT’S WHERE TRAIL KNOWLEDGE IN THE DONNER Pass area remained for more than a decade, until a new trail researcher, Chris Wray, became intrigued by where the early emigrants had crossed the Sierra summit in the Donner Pass area.<sup>63</sup> What caught Wray’s eye was the state of knowledge

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recording this Stephens Pass route. First, the GLO survey took place two decades after the Stephens Pass route, such as it was, had been abandoned. Second, it has been estimated that no more than seventy to seventy-five wagons were hauled over this route during its brief lifespan, thereby not leaving a conventional wagon imprint over such rocky terrain.

63 Chris Wray is a recognized local historian in San Diego County. His *The Historic Backcountry: A Geographic Guide to the Historic Places of the San Diego County Mountains and the Colorado Desert* (La Mesa, Calif.: Tierra Blanca Books, third ed., 2011) has a strong focus on the Southern Emigrant Trail to San Diego. Wray also has an interest in the Truckee Trail, which he acquired after buying in 1989 Chuck Graydon’s *Trail of the First Wagons over the Sierra Nevada*. This led Wray to exploring the Truckee Trail that Graydon had laid out. After recording the *Southern Emigrant Trail* for the Anza-Borrego State Park, Wray returned to the Truckee Trail in the Truckee-Donner Pass area. Subsequently, under contract with the Truckee Ranger District, he began to update the inventory of the various emigrant trails within the Tahoe National Forest. Author’s note: For this purpose, I passed on to Wray the research papers of Don Wiggins, which proved helpful in Wray’s investigations of the emigrant routes in the Donner Pass area during the summers of 2011 and 2012. I accompanied Wray on two surveys during this period. These investigations led in 2013 to Wray’s *Emigrant Road Building Evidence on Donner Pass*, an 86-page CD-ROM displaying vivid photos of trail remains with extensive annotations, all recorded with GPS coordinates.

about the Stephens Pass route. He realized that “Don Wiggins was on the right track with his research for the pass crossing.” However, for Wray, “It became obvious that what the speculated Stephens Pass route needed was detailed field work to determine if any possible emigrant road features, especially the type described in the journals from 1845, still exist on the slope.”<sup>64</sup>

With that task in mind, “In the summers of 2011 and 2012 a detailed exploration of this north side was undertaken.” But first Wray investigated the corridor of the DF-DLWR leading to the summit at Donner Pass and came to the same conclusion, for the same reasons, that Wiggins previously had. Emigrant accounts “describe climbing up rocks, going across levels of dirt, and then jumping up more rock levels. The main pass does not offer that type of terrain.”<sup>65</sup>

In a series of full-page color photographs, with detailed explanations and GPS coordinates, Wray charted a very plausible trail route leading up to and around the well-known landmark of a modern private cabin (where U.S. 40 bends from south to west heading to the summit). From this landmark, the trail ascends the stepladder-like terrain for three-quarters mile to Stephens Pass. Partway up this route, Wray saw evidence of rock clearing, some wagon wheel rock rust, visible worn passages, rocks set aside and filled in at the base of small ledges as ramps, rock-lined chutes, and an impressive log that remains placed as a ramp for wagon wheels to roll over. At the upper end of this log ramp are “carefully placed rocks used to create a small ramp so wagon wheels could be driven off the log.” As Wray commented:

When the Ide Party of 1845 worked to improve the Stephens-Townsend route over the pass [of the previous year], their journals describe how the men cut trees and used the logs to create ramps where wagons could be driven either over rock pitches, or along a steep side slope to gain access to the areas above. The log seen here appears to be the remains of just such a type of log ramp.<sup>66</sup>

64 Wray, *Emigrant Road Building Evidence on Donner Pass*, 5–6.

65 *Ibid.*, 12 and 9.

66 *Ibid.*, 58, with accompanying photos on pp. 58–63.

Above this log ramp, where the Stephens Pass route crosses the present Pacific Crest Trail (PCT), Wray noted “the wagon route becomes more difficult to locate.”<sup>67</sup> He has identified the probable route beyond the PCT, heading northwest to the summit. It goes by a small, seasonal pond, just above the PCT, and then ascends a series of rock chutes to benches, winding to the top of the pass in open passageways, to where a Trails West T rail marker is located.<sup>68</sup> Further field work is in progress to verify this last leg of the ascent to Stephens Pass.<sup>69</sup>

CHRIS WRAY’S INVESTIGATIONS BRING TO A CLOSE the story of the last half-century of trail research and mapping in the Truckee-Donner Pass area.<sup>70</sup> Surely, more will follow. By whom and when, and employing what kind of new technology, is the unknown. At this time, however, a clear outcome has emerged: The importance of a structured use of emigrant trail descriptions found in emigrant narratives and the application of this evidence to on-the-ground searches for trail remains. So far, these investigative principles and methods are the most effective way to verify when trail remains are actually emigrant in origins.<sup>71</sup> 

67 *Ibid.*, 67.

68 *Ibid.*, 68–74 and 76–82.

69 During 2016–17, John Grebenkemper searched the Stephens Pass area with trained dogs, certified by the Institute for Canine Forensics, for human remains of “Starved Camp,” associated with the Second Relief effort for the Donner Party survivors in early 1847. See the accompanying article “Starved Camp of the Donner Party.” While preparing his article, Grebenkemper contacted the author to point out two emigrant accounts listed in Olive Newell’s *Tail of the Elephant* that described a lake upon reaching the summit. William Todd (for 1845 on p. 173) in a letter, mentioned attaining the summit “at the lake on the top.” And Daniel Rhoads (for 1846 on p. 179) recounting later, “On top of the mountain is a lake.” Newell attributed both lake references to Lake Mary, which is on the western downside of the summit. As Grebenkemper pointed out, only Lake Angela is at the top of the summit close to Stephens Pass, thereby further supporting the Stephens Pass route worked out by Wiggins and Wray.

70 Author’s note: In emigrant trail research of the type discussed in this article, rarely will there be unequivocal proof arrived at or mutually agreed upon. As noted in the first page of OCTA’s current MET manual, “All too often the exact location of an emigrant trail segment cannot be verified with absolute certainty.” The goal, however, is to “strive for a higher degree of probability by utilizing all the available evidence and following accepted procedures,” p. A-1.

71 This use of emigrant accounts and related field investigation techniques is best explained in the current (fifth) edition of OCTA’s MET manual.

BY KENNETH L. ALFORD

# Captain Medorem Crawford's 1862 Military Escort Emigration Report



*Introduction* THE MENTION OF U.S. ARMY CAVALRY SERVICE DURING the American Civil War generally brings to mind images of the war's eastern theaters. Many soldiers, though, served with distinction on the western trails. Captain Medorem Crawford (1819–1891) was one of them.

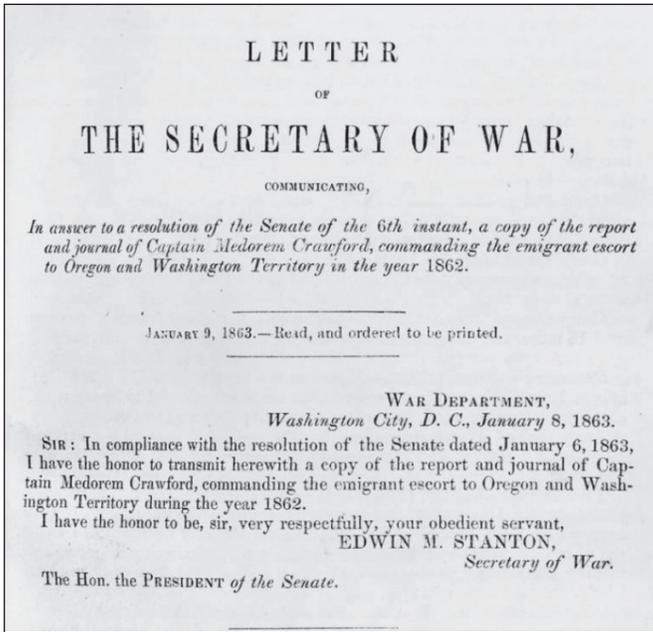
Crawford, born in June 1819, left his native New York and immigrated to Oregon in 1842, as one of Oregon's early pioneers. He settled in the Willamette Valley, married,<sup>1</sup> and served several terms in the Provisional Legislature, which met while Oregon was waiting to receive territorial status. In 1861, as the Civil War began, Crawford traveled to visit his father in New York. While in the East, he was “taken into government service and made [an] assistant to Captain Maynadier, U.S.A., who commanded [an] emigrant escort” company. The following year, in 1862, he traveled east again, was promoted to captain and was ordered “to organize, arm and equip one hundred men” to assist and protect emigrants on the Oregon Trail.<sup>2</sup>

At the end of his 1862 escort duty on the trail, Captain Crawford sent a report, which follows, to Brigadier General Benjamin Alvord (U.S. Volunteers), who commanded the District of Oregon in the Department of the Pacific. His report illustrates how the Civil War changed overland travel as the federal government's role expanded, and it demonstrates that the war did not deter people from moving west. His report also confirms that some aspects of human nature are predictably constant—emigrants frequently tried to take too many possessions with them (and were forced to leave them along the trail), did not adequately provision themselves, relied too heavily on hearsay and faulty information, and quarreled with other emigrants. Crawford's report also comments on growing conflicts between Native Americans and emigrants that in some ways culminated a few months later, in January 1863, with the Bear River Massacre (near present-day Preston, Idaho).

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<sup>1</sup> Medorem Crawford married Adalene Brown in 1843. Their first child, Medorem Jr., was “the first male child of American parentage born on the west side of the Willamette River.” Appointed to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1862, Medorem Jr. graduated in 1867 [Cullum No. 2202] and retired in 1908 as a brigadier general. See H. O. Lang, *History of the Willamette Valley* (Portland: Geo. H. Hines, 1885), 608; and *Register of Graduates and Former Cadets* (West Point, N.Y.: Association of Graduates, 1990), 290.

<sup>2</sup> Lang, *History of the Willamette Valley*, 608.



FAR LEFT The document cover and order to print Captain Crawford's report on the U.S. Emigrant Escort Service, 1861-1864, authorized by Secretary of War Edwin N. Stanton. Captain Crawford commanded the Oregon Volunteers from 1862 to 1864. COURTESY OF IAN BRABNER, RARE BOOKS, MANUSCRIPTS, EPHEMERA, WILMINGTON, DELAWARE.

ABOVE Medorem Crawford (1819-1891). COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR.

OPPOSITE Military Post and City of Walla-Walla, 1862. Fort Walla Walla, Washington Territory, was established in 1856, and rebuilt three times. This finely rendered image of the third Fort Walla Walla, by landscape artist and engraver Gustav Solon, includes the fort and some of the town of Walla Walla. In June 1862 components of an Oregon volunteer force led by Capt. Medorem Crawford arrived and then disbanded at the fort. The volunteers had three-year enlistments, and upon completion of their service, they were to receive a \$100 bonus and 160 acres of land. COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, FORT WALLA WALLA MUSEUM, WASHINGTON.

## DOCUMENT

JUNE 16-OCTOBER 30, 1862.—

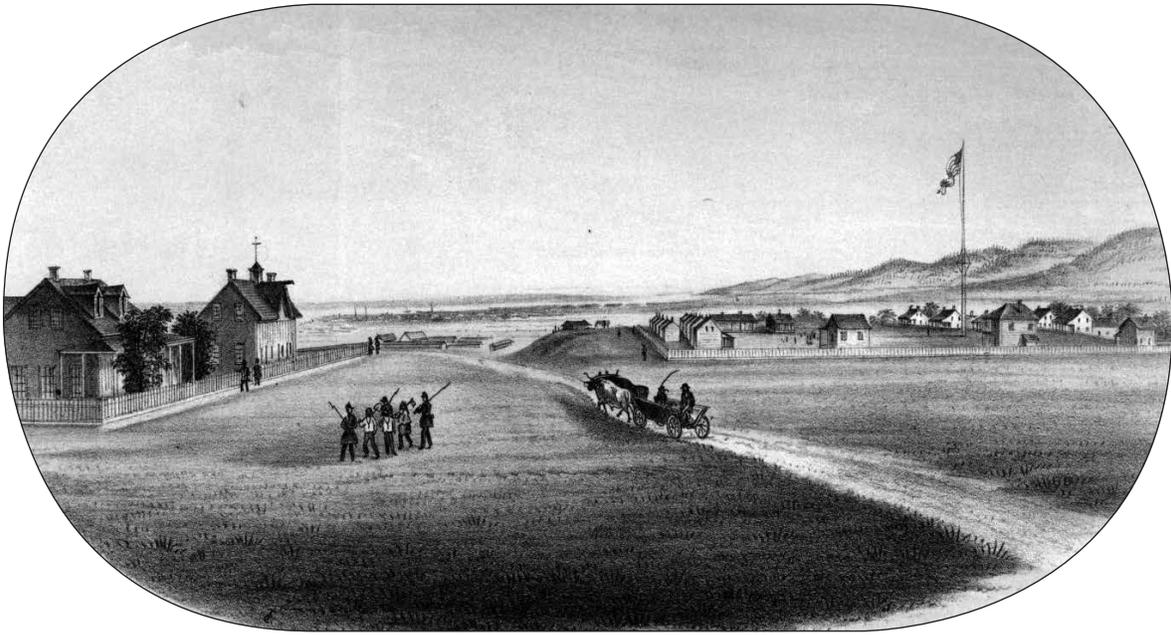
Emigrant road expedition from  
Omaha, Nebr. Ter., to Portland, Oreg.  
*Report of Capt. Medorem Crawford,*  
*U. S. Army, Assistant Quartermaster.*

PORTLAND, OREG., *October 30, 1862.*

SIR: The duty of conducting an escort for the protection of emigrants to Oregon, &c., having been assigned me by the Secretary of War, and having performed that service, I deem it my duty, as it is certainly my pleasure, to comply with your request by reporting to you the principal incidents of my trip.

Having organized my company, procured my transportation and provisions, I left Omaha, Nebr. Ter., on the 16th of June. My company consisted of fifty mounted men, armed with rifles and revolvers, who were instructed in the duties of sentinels and drilled in the simpler evolutions of cavalry tactics. Our route lay on the north side of and immediately along the Platte River, up the Sweetwater, over the Lander road to near Fort Hall, and from thence on the south side of Snake River to Walla Walla. The movement westward was very large. Emigrants to Oregon, Washington Territory, California, Salt Lake, and Denver were on this road. Some had started in April, and were consequently

several hundred miles in advance of the rear portion of the emigration. Feeling it to be my duty to protect the rear, I did not hasten on the first part of the trip, but urged upon the emigrants whom I fell in with as I proceeded the necessity of husbanding the strength of their teams so as to be able to perform the journey over the barren deserts of Snake River, the necessity for which my last year's experience had taught me. I soon found that a large proportion of the emigrants had started for the Salmon River mines under the very erroneous impression as to the locality of them. A guide of the route had been published and extensively circulated on the frontier, representing those mines as being within 180 miles of Fort Hall, not giving the locality of the road, but saying—good grass and plenty of water all the way. Under this impression many emigrants had overloaded their wagons and taxed their teams beyond their strength, and so positive were they that they could reach the mines without going down Snake River that many of them disregarded my counsel to dispense with comparatively useless articles with which they were encumbered. The result was that as soon as we left the Platte Valley and encountered the heavy sand and hills their teams and wagons began to fail. They then found it necessary to do what I had advised long before, dispense with heavy and useless articles, but unfortunately it was too late to save many of their teams. From this point to Powder



River article after article of furniture and wagon after wagon were left along, and scarcely a camp was left without some evidence of property abandoned. The large number of teams which were ahead of us had cut up the road to such an extent that the dust was very deep and its alkaline properties fatal to cattle. There were over forty head of dead cattle between the Owyhee and Malheur Rivers, a distance of sixteen miles, and we found the proportion nearly as great at other points along Snake River. The first evidence of Indian depredations we saw was a grave at the crossing of New Fork of Green River. From the inscription placed over it we learned that Patrick Moran, of Missouri, was killed by Indians on the 18th of July and two men wounded. We passed this place August 11, about three weeks after, at which time no Indians were to be seen. The next grave was on La Barge Creek, in the Bear River Mountains, on the head-board of which was the following:

Opened by Kavanagh's train on the 27th of July, 1862. The body of a man found too badly decayed for removal. One shot in the temple and an arrow shot. Supposed to have been killed by Indians.

On the 25th day of August we passed the graves of the following persons: One unknown man found by Captain Glenn's party August 13. He had been shot in the back of the head with

buckshot. Three miles farther there were five graves, side by side, of persons supposed to have been killed by Indians. Rufus C. Mitchell, N. Howie, James Steel, David Whitmer, and Frank Sessions were the names inscribed over them. This was in the vicinity of Fort Hall, and happened on the 9th of August, we passing on the 25th. We learned from the ferryman that while these five men were slain by the Indians twenty armed men from the same train stood upon a hill near by and made no attempt to rescue their comrades. There are strong reasons for believing that white men bore a part in this massacre. Between Fort Hall and Raft River we found four graves of men supposed to have been killed by Indians on the 9th of August. After crossing Raft River we found the grave of a Miss Adams, who was shot on the 9th and died on the 12th. We passed here August 31, twenty-two days after the fight. About the same time a Mr. Phillips left his train to go fishing, alone and unarmed, and was taken by Indians, and is supposed to have been killed. This happened near Goose Creek. It will be seen that the number killed, of which we have positive information, is about fifteen. No emigrants have at any time been troubled by Indians while in the vicinity of my company, but from the disposition shown toward the advance parties it is easy to see that the later and weaker parties would have been easily cut off had it not been for the protection afforded them by the Government. Near old

Fort Hall a ferry had been established, and many emigrants had crossed in pursuit of the mines. Some went to Fort Lemhi, others to the Deer Lodge Prairie, while others kept down the north side of Snake River and recrossed the stream at Boisé. From what was told me I am satisfied that many were induced to cross at Fort Hall by the representations of these ferrymen, which turned out unreliable. About twenty wagons which had crossed and met a returning party, were induced to recross and join those who were already under my escort. At this point I had 125 wagons of emigrants under my charge, and I found many of their teams so weak that they could not travel over ten miles per day, others being able to proceed faster; and in order to give protection to all, I divided my company, placing the advance party in charge of my principal assistant, Mr. Le Roy Crawford, while I remained with the rear and weaker party. From this point my journey was extremely slow. Many of the emigrants were short of provisions, which deficiency I had to supply. Others had difficulties among themselves which I was obliged to settle. The grass was very scarce, and their stock would scatter during the night, so that frequently my men would spend hours in looking after them in the morning. We cured their sick, fed their destitute, hunted, and in some instances drove their teams, mended their wagons, hauled their goods, settled their disputes, and kept them moving. Two men died and one was drowned in Snake River. With these exceptions every man, woman, and child that had traveled in my vicinity reached the settlements in safety. From the best information in my possession I estimate the emigration to Oregon and Washington this year at 10,000 souls, about two-fifths of whom I think crossed Snake River at the Fort Hall Ferry. From my own observation I am satisfied that a better road for emigrants may be found on the north side of Snake River than the one on the south side, but the precise point at which that river should be crossed I am not prepared to decide. I know there is a good road from near Salmon Falls to Boisé, having traveled down on that route in the year 1842, but as to the character of the country above that point on the north side, I have no reliable information. The recent discoveries of gold on Boisé River will doubtless attract large parties from the States next season, and a road on the north side will be very necessary. Should such be the case, and large numbers of emigrants with families flock to that country, I fear that unless some protection is furnished by the Government the Indians will make an indiscriminate slaughter,

I have the honor to be, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

MEDOREM CRAWFORD,  
*Captain and Assistant Quartermaster.*  
Brigadier-General ALVORD,  
*U.S. Army.*

SOURCE: *The War of the Rebellion: a Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series 1, Volume 50, Part 1, pages 153–155.<sup>3</sup>

#### POSTSCRIPT

Captain Crawford's unit disbanded at Walla Walla, in present-day Washington state, in October 1862. The following year (on February 10, 1863), General Alvord informed Headquarters, Department of the Pacific, that "It is expected Capt. Medorem Crawford, assistant quartermaster, will be ordered to return east to bring out another escort to emigrants"—which he subsequently completed.<sup>4</sup> Besides the 1862 report (above), Medorem Crawford appears several additional times within *The War of the Rebellion* records.<sup>5</sup>

Following his final escort trail duty in 1863, Captain Crawford resigned his army commission. He lived the remainder of his life in Oregon, serving first as a "collector of internal revenue" and then as "appraiser of merchandise for the port of Portland."<sup>6</sup> In retirement, he was actively involved with the Oregon Pioneer Association, serving as its president from 1878 to 1881.<sup>7</sup> Crawford died in Dayton, Oregon, the day after Christmas in 1891.<sup>8</sup>

Medorem Crawford's papers (1.5 linear feet, primarily diaries and account books from 1842 to 1891) are housed at the University of Oregon Libraries, Special Collections and University Archives in Eugene, Oregon. 

3 This report is also published as record OR-105 in *Utah and the American Civil War*, Kenneth L. Alford, ed. (Norman, Okla.: Arthur H. Clark, 2017), 184–85.

4 U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1880–1901), Series 1, Volume 50, Part 2, 308–10.

5 In the federally published *War of the Rebellion* records, Crawford appears in Series 1, Volume 50, Part 1 on pages 153–55, 156, 157, 167, 214, 219–21, 308–10, 953, and 956; he is also mentioned on pages 43, 154, 173, 309, 416, 429, 464, 631, 675, 746, 764, and 851 in Series 1, Volume 50, Part 2.

6 Lang, *History of the Willamette Valley*, 608–609.

7 Oregon Pioneer Association, *Transactions of the 40th Annual Reunion* (Portland: Chausse-Prudhomme Co. 1915), 559.

8 Howard McKinley Corning, ed., *Dictionary of Oregon History* (Portland: Binford & Mort Publishing, 1989), 66.

# Starved Camp of the Donner Party

✧ ON MARCH 4TH OF 1847, SEVENTEEN MEMBERS OF THE DONNER PARTY ARRIVED AT A CAMP NEAR TODAY'S DONNER SUMMIT. THEY HAD BEEN RESCUED FROM THEIR WINTER CABINS BY THE SECOND RELIEF, SO NAMED BECAUSE IT WAS THE SECOND SEARCH EFFORT SENT OUT FROM SUTTER'S FORT IN THE VALLEY, AND LED BY JAMES REED.

The Second Relief left the Lake camps with seventeen survivors. It took them three days to travel the six miles up to the pass that had stopped the Donner party four months earlier. They were now nearly out of food, and a winter storm was brewing on the summit. The next ten days would test their endurance and will to survive in the high Sierra with no shelter from a ferocious storm. In his diary, James Reed would call this place Starved Camp.

The exact location of Starved Camp was lost as soon as the last survivor was taken from the camp. Reed's diary provides clues, but they could fit many places on the west side of the pass. This paper describes the search for Starved Camp.

## STARVED CAMP

James Reed and the Second Relief took three adults and fourteen children from the cabins, departing on March 2. Several diarists wrote accounts of the experience, and there is some conflict between the authors over the exact dates, but all agree in the general facts. For dates, I've used Reed's diary:

Notice was given in all of the camps that we would start on our return to Sutter's early the next day. About the middle of the day we started, taking with us all who were able to travel. In a short time we reached Donner Lake. Traveling on ice a short distance, we made camp on the eastern side. Here were several small springs; in the water were many small fish. The next day we traveled up to the head of the Lake on the ice, making camp here for the night. . . .

The next morning we proceeded up the mountain and in the evening came to one of the camping places of the party [the First Relief] we had met in Bear Valley.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> James F. Reed, *Pacific Union Press*, April 1871, in Kristin Johnson, *Unfortunate Emigrants: Narratives of the Donner Party* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1996), 198–99.

This project would not have been possible without the assistance of Donald Buck, Chris Wray, and the many volunteers from Trails West who determined this wagon route over Donner Summit. Volunteers from the Institute of Canine Forensics included Adela Morris with her dog Jasper, Barbara Pence with Bailey, Lynne Angeloro with Berkeley, Lynne Engelbert with Piper, and Jerrold Christensen, who was Field Coordinator on several of the trips.

By this point only James Reed, William McCutchen, Hiram Miller, and Brit Greenwood of the Second Relief were assisting the seventeen emigrants in the difficult climb to the summit. McCutchen wrote:

We arrived at this camp about 3 o'clock in the afternoon; this camp was under the peak at the head of the Yuba River. The Glen [Glover] party had made it when returning from the Donner party. Every thing necessary for building a fire on the snow was here. A storm commenced this night and continued until about noon on the third day. The second night Mr. Reed became snow blind and chilled through; he had overexerted himself in securing shelter for the party. Now there was only Mr. Miller and myself who were able to do anything; the rest of the men were disheartened, and would not use any exertion; in fact they gave up all hope, and in despair, some of them commenced praying. I d—d them, telling them it was not time to pray but to get up, stir themselves and get wood, for it was a matter of life and death to us in a few minutes. The fire was nearly out; the snow in falling off the trees had nearly extinguished it before discovered; it was only rekindled by the exertion of Mr. Miller and myself. After we got the fire started I was so chilled that in getting warm I burned the back out of my shirts, having four on me; only discovering the mishap by the scorching of my skin.

On the third day about noon, the snow ceased falling, and it was agreed that all who were able should leave, all the provisions being consumed the day before. The day after our arrival at this camp Mr. Reed divided the remaining flour. A spoonful as each person's share, "young and old," and it was four days in all before we got anything [further] to eat. . . .

All who were able started to leave, except Mr. Brien [Breen] and family. He said that if they had to die he would sooner die in camp than on the way; he was repeatedly urged to come, but positively refused. . . .

Before leaving, we did everything in our power for those who had to remain, cutting and leaving wood enough to last several days.<sup>2</sup>

James Reed and the other three members of the Second Relief left, taking with them Solomon Hook, Patty Reed, and Tommy Reed. Those left at Starved Camp included the two adults and five children of the Breen family; Elizabeth Graves and her four children; and Mary Donner and Isaac Donner. Elizabeth Graves (age forty-five), her son Franklin (age five), and Isaac Donner (also age five) would all be dead when the Third Relief reached this camp seven days later. Oregon pioneer Jesse Quinn Thornton, who interviewed Donner survivors shortly after the rescue, wrote:

The next day, at 4 o'clock, they arrived at the camp of those whom Mr. Reed had been compelled to leave. The fire at the Starved Camp had melted the snow down to the ground, and the hole thus made was about twelve or fifteen feet in diameter, and twenty-four feet deep. As the snow had continued to melt, they made steps by which they ascended and descended.

The picture of distress which was here presented, was shocking indeed. And yet Patrick Brinn [Breen] and his wife seemed not in any degree to realize the extent of their peril, or that they were in peril at all. They were found lying down sunning themselves, and evincing no concern for the future. They had consumed the two children of Jacob Donner. Mrs. Graves' body was lying there with almost all the flesh cut away from her arms and limbs. Her breasts were cut off, and her heart and liver taken out, and were all being boiled in a pot then on the fire.<sup>3</sup>

The eleven surviving members at Starved Camp were led to safety by several of the members of the Third Relief.

#### LOCATION OF STARVED CAMP

The location of Starved Camp was quickly lost to history. Several historians speculated about where it was. C. F. McGlashan placed it "somewhere near the lower end of Summit Valley," about three miles from Donner Pass.<sup>4</sup> George Stewart stated

2 William McCutchen, *Pacific Rural Press*, April 1, 1871, in Johnson, *Unfortunate Emigrants*, 205–206.

3 J. Quinn Thornton, *Oregon and California in 1848*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1849), 220–21.

4 C.F. McGlashan, *History of the Donner Party: A Tragedy of the Sierra* (San Francisco: A. L. Bancroft, 1881), 170.

that they camped at the “head of the Yuba.”<sup>5</sup> Joseph King placed the camp “in the Summit Valley close to the head of the Yuba River and just south of today’s villages of Norden and Soda Springs.”<sup>6</sup> The headwaters of the Yuba are today’s Lake Angela, about one-half mile north of Graydon’s route of the original emigrant wagon road.<sup>7</sup> The possible locations span three miles, from lower Summit Valley to near the pass. That distance needed to be narrowed if we were to have any chance to locate Starved Camp.

The camp, we concluded, would likely be along the emigrant wagon road in use in 1846. Most of the members of the relief parties were emigrants who had passed over Donner Summit. They would likely back track the wagon road to avoid the steep cliffs on the east side of the pass.

The diaries kept by some members of the First and Second Relief provide significant clues to the location of Starved Camp. On February 18, the First Relief stopped to camp before descending to the camps at Donner Lake. R. P. Tucker, of the First Relief, wrote on February 18, “Travelled 8 miles and camped on head of Juba on the Pass we suppose the snow to be 30 foot deep—”<sup>8</sup>

They were camped near the head of the Yuba River on the

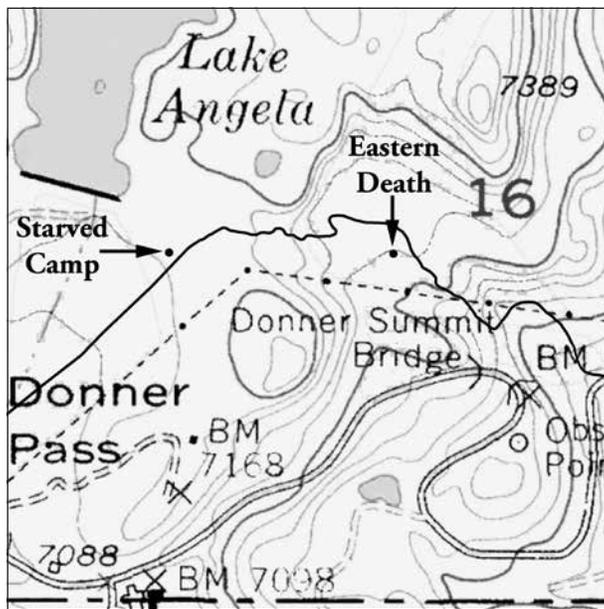
pass. On March 4, the Second Relief began the climb from the western end of Donner Lake to the summit. Reed’s diary of March 4th said “I mouved [moved] camp and after a [deleted: great] fatiguing day arriv[e]d at the praire [prairie] now Starved

Camp at the head of Juba it was made by the other Compy [company] who had passed in but a few days previous.”<sup>9</sup>

Both of the relief parties used the same camp near the head of the Yuba River. This camp is “on the Pass,” which implies that it is near where the wagon road used in 1846 crossed over the pass before descending into Summit Valley.

Historian and trail researcher Donald Buck, in a separate article in this issue, has described the recent research into the establishment of the wagon road over Donner Summit in 1844–46.<sup>10</sup> The contributions of several trail historians have reconstructed the path of this wagon route and show it crossed a pass between Stewart Peak and Mount Stephens, which they named Stephens Pass. This is a little south of modern Lake Angela, which is the head of the Yuba River. Their trail reconstruction suggests that Starved Camp would be located

near this pass. Donald Buck and Chris Wray provided me with a map of this wagon route.



Starved Camp.  
MAP BY JOHN GREBENKEMPER.

5 George R. Stewart, *Ordeal By Hunger* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 223.  
6 Joseph A. King, *Winter of Entrapment* (Toronto: P. D. Meany Company, 1992), 83.  
7 Charles K. Graydon, *Trail of the First Wagons over the Sierra Nevada* (St. Louis: The Patrice Press, 1986), 36–37.  
8 R. P. Tucker, First Relief Diary, in Dale Morgan, *Overland in 1846* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 1:332.

9 James F. Reed, Second Relief Diary, in Dale Morgan, *Overland in 1846* (University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 1:347.  
10 Donald Buck, “Development of Emigrant Trail Research in the Post-Weddell Era in the Truckee-Donner Pass Region of California,” *Overland Journal* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 50–72 (in this issue).

## THE CANINE SEARCH

The forensic canines associated with the Institute for Canine Forensics have been discussed in several previous articles in *Overland Journal*.<sup>11,12</sup> These dogs only detect the scent from human decomposition, and have found human burials that have been radiocarbon dated as 9,000 years old. Three of the five dogs on this Sierra search also participated in a National Geographic expedition in the summer of 2017 to look for the remains of Amelia Earhart on a South Pacific island.<sup>13</sup>

The remains of three people who died at Starved Camp had been partially eaten and were left on the snow when the last survivors were taken out. Animal activity would dismember the bodies and scatter body parts over a wide area. This factor significantly reduces the intensity of the human decomposition scent and makes detection more difficult.

Based on the diary descriptions and trail research, the search area was defined as an area of about ten acres on the west side of Stephens Pass. The search was conducted on November 15, 2016, as the first major snowstorm of the winter was approaching. The wind and chilly conditions provided a sample of what it must have been like at Starved Camp in 1847. It did not take long for the first dog to detect the scent of human decomposition. Over the course of the next few hours all five dogs alerted to decomposition scent. The alerts were primarily concentrated in the first grove of trees

west of the pass. We were eventually forced to terminate the search in the early afternoon as the first few snowflakes were filling the air.

During 2017 we made four more searches to fill in some of the areas we had not covered due to our early retreat in November. These eventually resulted in a total of twenty-two alerts in or near the grove of trees. The scattered alerts over a distance of one hundred meters are typical of what we see when a person is not buried and the body dismembered by animal activity.

While the dog alerts tell us that one or more people died in this area, there is no way to determine who died. However, the First and Second Relief diaries contained many clues about the location of Starved Camp. As we have already discussed, the camp is located near the head of the Yuba River at the pass. The location of the canine alerts was in the first grove of trees west of the pass and just south of modern Lake Angela, which, as noted, forms the source of the Yuba River.

The entries in the Second Relief diary provide other detailed information about the location. James Reed wrote on March 6, "At daylight I discovered the Storm to Slack by hushing as it ware entirely [deleted: up] for a few minutes and then it would burst forth with such fury that I felt often alarmed for the safety of the people on acct of the tall timber that surrounded us."<sup>14</sup>

The camp was located in tall trees, just as the dog alerts had



Kayle alert at Starved Camp.  
PHOTO BY JOHN GREBENKEMPER.

11 John Grebenkemper, Kristin Johnson, and Adela Morris, "Locating the Grave of John Snyder," *Overland Journal* 30, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 92–108.

12 John Grebenkemper and Kristin Johnson, "Forensic Canine Search for the Donner Family Winter Camps," *Overland Journal* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 64–89.

13 <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/amelia-earhart-search/>.

14 James F. Reed, Second Relief Diary, in Morgan, *Overland in 1846*, 1:349.

indicated that the scent was primarily contained in a grove of trees. Reed continued,

[Mar 6th] the location of our camp [deleted: is] a bleak point under the summit of the great California Range about 1000 feet. Consequently our altitude about 8300 above the Sea with a small Prarie [Prairie] on our south and west about 3 miles in length & one in breadth here the snow and wind had full sweep this Camp was used by the other party that had passed out of the mountain<sup>15</sup>

Reed stated again that the camp was located at the same place as the First Relief camp. The prairie that lies to the southwest can only describe the meadows in Summit Valley. The beginning of these meadows is one and a half miles from Starved Camp on a southwest heading. The highest nearby mountains rise 1,200 feet above the camp. Reed's diary description fits the location that the dogs found with scattered human decomposition scent. While we did not find any physical evidence that links this location to the Donner Party, there is substantial circumstantial evidence that suggests this is Starved Camp.

#### THE EASTERN DEATH LOCATION

In August 2017 I met Donald Buck and Chris Wray at Donner Summit to walk the emigrant wagon route to Stephens Pass. Accompanying me was Barbara Pence and her ICF-certified dog, Bailey. We followed the wagon route to where it crosses the Pacific Crest Trail. Bailey and my dog, Kayle, alerted to human decomposition scent near the junction of the wagon road and the Pacific Crest Trail.

This was a completely unexpected set of alerts. We eventually had eight alerts scattered over about thirty meters. The scattered alerts again indicate one or more people had died and were not buried. The alerts were primarily in a grove of trees within a narrow valley. Was this another death associated with the Donner party? we wondered.

The first diary reference to a body found near the pass occurs in September 1847, in the diary kept by Levi Hancock, a returning member of the Mormon Battalion, which crossed the Sierra on the route back to Utah:

I stopped [by] the place where the men ate each other [Donner Group]. This day the boys said they saw one man lying on the plain up about one mile above us in a hollow. [It] was the most horrible sight, my informant says, he ever saw.<sup>16</sup>

Hancock was near the Donner Lake camps when he made this entry. The location the dogs found was in a narrow valley that could be called a hollow. The exact location in Hancock's diary is unclear, but is somewhere above the Donner camps.

THE WAGON ROAD OVER DONNER SUMMIT WAS RARELY used after 1846. The wagon traffic diverted to Roller Pass, which was considered easier to scale. In September 1849 Elisha Lewis had camped in Summit Valley after taking Roller Pass. Using Bryant's description, Lewis backtracked to Donner Lake and then followed the Donner Pass wagon route back to Summit Valley. He found evidence of the modifications made to the route to allow wagons to reach the summit. He also found snowshoes and a skeleton. The eastern location the dogs found is just above where rocks had been rolled, making a passage for wagons described in Lewis's diary entry.

I left camp in Summit Valley in company with several of our men to finde Briente [Bryant] Pass which is distance from the pass which we came over 2 miles North we discovered the trail nere a small lake called Truckee lake The Sun had nerely set in the western horizon as we followed the blind path which Bryent made up this rock bound mountain We wondered that it could be possible that loos[e] cattl[e] could make the ascent there being some place 8ft perpendicular whare rock had been rolled in to fill up making a passway for the wagons wheels although a very indifferent one about half way up our attention was arested and what I discovered to be a pair of snow shoes they sho[w]ed marks of the white being made with an auger and hewed out with an axe we examened them and looking a little farther we saw the caus[e] of this at once for before us lay the bones of someone who had perished in the mountains we conjectured it to be one of the downer [Donner] party several having left there winter quarters

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 1:349.

<sup>16</sup> Levi Ward Hancock, Diary Entry September 7, 1847, in Herbert A. Hancock, ed., *The Saving Sacrifice of the Mormon Battalion* (Utah: Bystander at Large Productions, 2000).

which was nere the above named lake and was never heard of again it is supposed they perished in the mountains we took the skull and continued our march toward the summit and arrived at that place as daylight was disappearing got to camp 8 oclock we related our discoveries and showed the skull which we brought with us the conversations for the evening respecting the sufferings of the Downer Party<sup>17</sup>

The description is clearly of the emigrant wagon route used to cross Donner Pass. There is no mention of this body in emigrant diaries prior to 1846, and the use of snowshoes made with auger and axe is clearly reminiscent of the construction of snowshoes by the Donner Party. It is unlikely that these were snowshoes constructed by the Paiutes, given the description of the tools used to make them. That leaves a Donner Party member as the most likely to have built them, since the body was first seen in 1847 and near the wagon road in 1849.

There were only two Donner Party members who disappeared in the snow in this area. Charles Stanton collapsed in the snow three or four days after crossing the pass. There is no way he could have traveled back over the pass to this area.

The other possibility is John Denton. The First Relief left the camps near Donner Lake on February 22 and camped somewhere along Donner Lake. On the next day, they made the difficult climb up to the top of the pass. While R. P. Tucker's diary entry doesn't state where they camped, it would likely have been the same camp that they used on the way to Donner Lake because the camping platform would already have been prepared. On the third day they traveled into Summit Valley. According to Tucker,

[Feb 24th] We had travelled about two miles when one man gave out (John Denton) I waited for him some time but in vain he could go no further I made him a fire and chopped some wood for him when I very unwillingly left him telling him he should soon have assistance but I am afraid he would not live to see it travelled 7 miles and camp<sup>18</sup>

The Second Relief found John Denton's body, but made no mention of where his body was found. He was only a few miles from the pass and it is possible that after a little rest, he was able to walk back toward the camps at Donner Lake, but collapsed and died shortly after crossing the pass. A later account by one of the survivors said that "The party who followed in our trail from California [Second Relief] found his dead body a few days after we had left him, partially eaten by wolves."<sup>19</sup>

*I waited for him some time  
but in vain  
he could go no further  
I made him a fire and  
chopped some wood for him when  
I very unwillingly left him  
telling him he should soon have assistance*

James Reed, too, described finding Denton's body. He wrote, in a letter dated July 2, 1847, "John Denton left with the first company; he gave out on the way. I found him dead, covered him with a counterpane, and buried him in the snow, in the wildest of the wild portions of the earth."<sup>20</sup>

It is impossible to know if these dog alerts are the death location of John Denton. It is unlikely that Denton was carrying anything that could provide physical evidence to his presence. However, recent advances in forensic science now make it possible to recover DNA from the soil where people have decomposed without burial.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps someday in the future we will be able to determine who died here. 

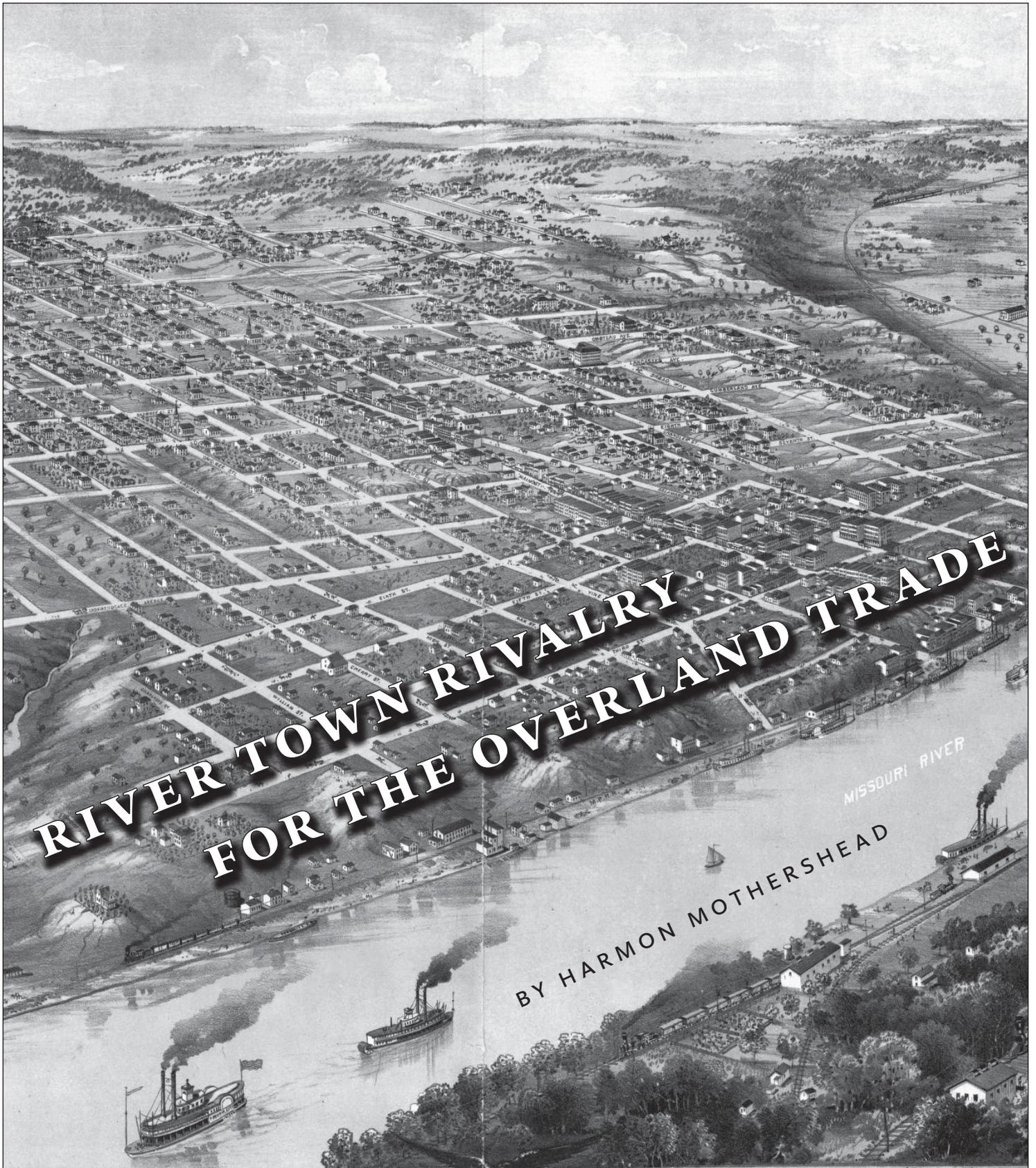
17 Elisha Lewis, Diary Entry 1849, in Olive Newell, *Tail of the Elephant* (Nevada City, Calif.: Nevada County Historical Society, 1997), 180.

18 R. P. Tucker, First Relief Diary, in Morgan, *Overland in 1846*, 1:333.

19 Daniel Rhodes dictated to H. H. Bancroft in 1873, in Morgan, *Overland in 1846*, 1:329.

20 James Reed to Gersham Keyes, July 2, 1847; Morgan, *Overland in 1846*, 1:304.

21 Viviane Slon et al., "Neandertal and Denisovan DNA from Pleistocene Sediments," *Science*, 10.1126/science.aam9695 (2017).



**RIVER TOWN RIVALRY  
FOR THE OVERLAND TRADE**

BY HARMON MOTHERSHEAD

MISSOURI RIVER

**KANSAS CITY**

JANUARY MISSOURI 1889

- 1. PUBLIC SCHOOL
- 2. CHRISTIAN COLLEGE
- 3. ST. TERESA ACADEMY
- 4. COURT HOUSE
- 5. MARKET HOUSE
- 6. TURNERS HALL
- 7. CITY GAS WORKS
- 8. RAILWAY DEPOT
- 9. N.E. ST. JAC. R.W. DEPOT
- 10. CAMERON BRANCH OFFICE
- 11. STATE LINE DEPOT
- 12. HARLEM

- 13. UNION
- 14. CONVENT
- 15. CATHEDRAL
- 16. ST. BAPTIST
- 17. METHODIST
- 18. METHODIST SOUTH
- 19. ST. O.S.
- 20. P.P.O.S. (PRESBYTERIAN)
- 21. ST. PETER'S
- 22. ST. EDWARDS
- 23. EPISCOPAL
- 24. EVANGELICAL
- 25. LUTHERAN

# the 175th anniversary of the Oregon Trail 1843–2018

*OCTA's celebration of the 175th Anniversary of the Oregon Trail (1843–2018) continues in this issue. In our second article in the series, author Harmon Mothershead digs into Missouri River town histories during the emigrant era. Emigrants starting west from eastern states would “outfit” in those towns, and then cross the Missouri River. Once on the other side, they would feel “officially” on their way west. These “jumping-off towns” along the river competed vigorously for their dollars, with merchants hoping to prosper from the sale of wagons, food, and supplies, and fares for carrying them across the water. Author Harmon Mothershead writes about the factors involved in suddenly having to make so many decisions under changing circumstances. Dr. Mothershead gave his article as a talk during the first OCTA Convention, held in Independence in 1983. Overland Journal published it in Volume 7, no. 2 (Summer 1989). We gladly share it again, three and one-half decades later.*

NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA WITNESSED A westward exodus. Two-thirds of the nation was acquired in the first half of the century, and people poured westward to possess it. Prior to the development of railroads, civilization and commerce moved west along the great rivers—down the Ohio and up the Missouri. The Missouri, more than rivers the westward travelers had previously encountered, was unpredictable and unmanageable. For some three hundred miles the overlander could move west along this great waterway, but at the point where the river assumed its northward course the emigrant was thrust out onto the Great Plains. At some practical point along the river, generally described as the head of navigation, the emigrant took to an overland trail. Most travelers who kept journals began their accounts with the crossing of the Missouri River. It was the demarcation line.

It was at the head of navigation that the Pacific-bound emigrant prepared for his monumental journey. River towns competed for the outfitting trade and, not unlike cow towns and

mining towns, suffered from boom and bust cycles. These landings, ports, and towns moved with the development of trade and the extension of settlement along the Missouri River. St. Louis, at the mouth of the river, was the chief port on the Missouri and the headquarters for the traders of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. Fort Osage, established in 1808, was a government factory for trading with the Indians until the factory system was abolished in 1822. The settlement of the country along the lower Missouri and the decline of the fur trade pushed the headquarters for that trade up the river to Robidoux's Landing at Blacksnake Hills (present-day St. Joseph), where it remained. The 1837 Platte Purchase established St. Joseph as the major supply and trading center for that northwest farming country as well as for the reservation Indians who had been forced across the Missouri River west into Kansas.

The headquarters for the Santa Fe trade was originally Old Franklin; but it continued to move up the river to Boonville, Lexington, and finally, by 1844, to Independence. Until the advent of the railroad, Independence remained the head of the Santa Fe trade but began to share the spotlight with Westport and the fledgling town of Kansas (now Kansas City), Missouri.<sup>1</sup>

Beginning in the early 1840s, Independence became the prime jumping-off point for the Oregon Trail, and beginning in 1849 it shared traffic in the early years of the California gold

ON THE PREVIOUS PAGE Bird's-eye view of Kansas City, Missouri, January 1869. A. Ruger and A. C. Christy, Merchant's Lithographing Company, Ruger and Stoner, Madison, Wisc. The town of Kansas, renamed Kansas City, thrived with emigrant trade during the 1840s. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS GEOGRAPHY AND MAP DIVISION WASHINGTON, D.C. DIGITAL ID: [HTTP://HDL.LOC.GOV/LOC.GMD/G4164K.PM004280](http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/G4164K.PM004280).

<sup>1</sup> Theodore Brown and Lyle W. Dorsett, *K.C.: A History of Kansas City, Missouri* (Boulder: Pruett Publishing Co., 1978), 4–5.



MAP OF THE MISSOURI RIVER TOWNS  
COURTESY OF THE OVERLAND JOURNAL PRODUCTION OFFICE.

rush. For the next twenty years, from the mid-1840s until the eve of the Civil War, Independence and St. Joseph remained major outfitting points for the far west traveler, trader, and emigrant. Other locations did develop: Westport, Liberty, and Weston in Missouri; Atchison, Kansas; Council Bluffs, Iowa; and Omaha, Nebraska. The latter two towns, across the river from each other, shared the bulk of the late-period trade.

The military and Indian trade of the 1840s replaced the fur trade of previous years and offered new opportunities for the river towns. Independence, as the eastern terminus of trade for the vast territory acquired by the Mexican War of 1845, experienced great possibilities for growth.

The California gold rush of 1849–1853 generated the sharpest rivalry for the overland trade. The outfitting trade reflected the immediacy, the fever, and the opportunistic nature of the gold rush itself. St. Louis became a third party, with St. Joseph and Independence, in the competition for the trade. St. Louis had a dual role. It was an outfitter and supplier for the overland gold rusher and also the supply base for both of the upriver rivals. The progression of travelers up the river should be kept

in mind. They came to St. Louis first, then to Independence, and then to St. Joseph. Much of the rivalry resulted from this flow of river traffic. St. Louis merchants had only one chance to sell supplies to the overland traveler, and they squeezed all they could from him. They portrayed the upriver locations, closer to the point of departure, as being inhospitable, expensive, and poorly provisioned.

Each town based its claim as the ideal outfitting point on one or more of three conditions: availability, quality, and prices of supplies; ferries and accommodations; and the best road to South Pass. Occasionally such unexpected events as the outbreak of cholera gave rival towns additional opportunities to undermine each other.

Although the *St. Louis Daily Missouri Republican* carried advertisements directed toward the emigrant trade in January

# WHAT I SAW IN CALIFORNIA:

BEING THE

## JOURNAL OF A TOUR,

BY THE EMIGRANT ROUTE AND SOUTH PASS OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS, ACROSS THE CONTINENT OF NORTH AMERICA, THE GREAT DESERT BASIN, AND THROUGH CALIFORNIA,

IN THE YEARS 1846, 1847.

"ALL WHICH I SAW, AND PART OF WHICH I WAS."—*Dryden*.

BY

EDWIN BRYANT,

LATE ALCALDE OF ST. FRANCISCO.

FOURTH EDITION.

WITH

AN APPENDIX,

CONTAINING

ACCOUNTS OF THE GOLD MINES, VARIOUS ROUTES, OUTFIT, ETC., ETC.

NEW-YORK :

D. APPLETON & COMPANY, 200 BROADWAY.

PHILADELPHIA :

GEO. S. APPLETON, 164 CHESNUT-STREET.

MDCCLXIX.

Emigrants had many reasons to gamble on starting over in the West, including free land in Oregon. Announcement of a gold discovery in California suddenly upped the stakes. Shown here is the title page of Edwin Bryant's book, *What I Saw in California* (1849), in which the author recommended Independence and St. Joseph, Missouri, as two of the most popular launching spots for outfitting and crossing the Missouri.

and February of 1849, the majority of the advertisers during those months were jewelers, book dealers, smelters, food suppliers, and other merchants who wished to attract the local trade. By March, however, advertising began to be directed toward the California trade. These ads were consistently grouped in the right-hand column of the first or second page. The March 6 edition provided a heading entitled "For California," for a page-length column advertising mules, oxen, harnesses, wagons, outfits, pumps, foodstuffs, medical supplies, legal advice, and all the goods and services the overland traveler might need.<sup>2</sup> This list eventually expanded to include "California Beds" (folding cots), arms, insurance, portable grinding mills, brass and iron wire, Indian trade goods, gold-washing machines, baling of dry goods (service), manufacturing of any tool necessary for defense or mining, outfits (gear and clothing), boots and shoes, coaches and caskets. The column retained its position on the first page throughout March, April, and most of May. During the months of the greatest interest, no traveler or would-be traveler could help noticing the "advantages" that St. Louis merchants had to offer.

St. Louis, located near the juncture of the Ohio/Mississippi/Missouri river system, did not overlook the significance of the steam packet trade, which supplied both merchandise and emigrants to the trail-head towns upriver. As such, St. Louis was in a role of "kingmaker," and early in the season of 1849 the paper carried a number of articles promoting Independence as the best jumping-off place.

The *Republican* of January 9, 1849, printed an article by Edwin Bryant that had appeared originally in the *Louisville Courier*.<sup>3</sup> Bryant, author of *What I Saw in California*, had originally gone west with the Donner-Reed Party in 1846. The article's introductory paragraph informed the reader of the availability of all necessary items at St. Louis and at other points along the Missouri River. Bryant advised travelers to take the "route via Independence or St. Joseph, Mo. to Ft. Laramie, South Pass, the sink of Marys River, the old route." The lightest wagon that could carry 2,500 pounds for five or six men was recommended. Provisions necessary per man were listed as: "150 lbs of flour, 150 lbs of bacon, 16 lbs of coffee, 30 lbs of sugar, also a small quantity of rice, 50 to 75 lbs of crackers, dried peaches &c., keg of lard, salt and pepper &c.," and "such other luxuries of light weight as the person outfitting choses to purchase." A table of distances to California via both Oregon and Santa Fe was included.

2 St. Louis, Missouri *Daily Republican* (hereinafter cited as *Republican*), March 6, 1849.

3 *Ibid.*, January 9, 1849.

The edition of the paper with Bryant's article sold out; and, to meet the demand for directions to California, the *Republican* printed a letter from the Independence *Expositor*, written by Col. William Gilpin, dated Jackson County, Missouri, January 8, 1849. The letter lauded Independence as the ideal outfitting point. It had been the "emporium of the commerce of the prairies" for twenty years, and possessed "indisputable and peculiar advantages over all other starting off places along the river." Not only was it on the banks of the Missouri River, "but *beyond* that river—just where the Indian line divides the populous and timbered country from the expansive and open prairies." Because of the river's northward turn, it was the "extreme available landing for steamers toward the west." Besides its geographical advantage it had an "unlimited abundance" of supplies, and its long tenure as a commercial city had established a large number of skilled tradesmen. Gilpin's letter also contained a "List of Necessities."

#### Transportation

Large wagon	\$100
Oxen, \$40 per yoke	\$160
or mules at \$60	\$480
Harness	\$ 60
Extra tools and repairs	\$ 25

#### Provisions

Flour at \$2.00 per cwt	150 lbs each
Bacon at \$2.50 per cwt	75 lbs each
Coffee at 8 cents per lb	20 lbs each
Sugar at 6 cents per lb	50 lbs each

#### Mess

Skillets, oven and frying pans of iron  
Kettles, cups &c. of tin

#### D.S.

Mackinaw blankets at \$10 to \$16 per pair  
A small assortment of Indian goods

The expense of a single traveler under the second head may be thus averaged:

Riding Horse	\$ 60
Two mules at \$60	\$120
Saddle, bridle, and spurs	\$ 12
Two pack saddle \$4	\$ 8

The letter concluded with:

Other points higher up the Missouri, such as Weston, St. Joseph, and the Mormon settlement near Council Bluffs, have occasionally been selected by emigrating parties. The places have all the disadvantages of being on the eastern bank of the Missouri, and as yet far behind Independence in the abundance, adaptation, and cheapness of supplies.<sup>4</sup>

The *Republican* canvassed the ability of the upper country to supply the needs of emigrants. The impression in St. Louis had been that supplies were limited and this had forced St. Louis prices up, but the canvass revealed that Independence and Jackson County could supply all necessary provisions. Mules, oxen and other supplies were readily available at prices comparable to those in St. Louis.

Westport could also supply everything necessary: mules, oxen, flour, bacon, sweet corn, hominy, all at about St. Louis prices.<sup>5</sup>

As a result of these inquiries and sensing the magnitude of the movement and the competition for trade, the paper's editors sent a correspondent upriver to the outfitting posts. His reports, under the name "California," appeared in the paper two or three times weekly during the last three weeks of April. "California" was, in general, an unimaginative and disappointing observer and reporter, as much concerned about his own comforts as with his assignment. In St. Joseph he found "a gross and unpardonable remissness on the part of the landlords to provide for his comfort and sustenance."<sup>6</sup> Not only did he complain of the lack of lodging and accommodations, but also that "very little material other than that of procuring a register of the various companies is afforded a reporter upon which to base his communications." Even the many "accidental shootings: were kept quiet by local merchants and not subjects for reporting." California did, on one occasion, visit one of the local gambling establishments in Independence to see what the "doings of the tiger" were all about.<sup>7</sup>

Writing from St. Joseph on April 2, "California" discovered that the "immense emigration" to California gave impetus to Independence, Westport, Weston, and St. Joseph. Every lodging was full, and people were camping out. Some emigrants had

4 "Highly Important to Emigrants—Overland Route to California," *Republican*, January 25, 1849.

5 *Republican*, March 19 and 20, 1849.

6 *Ibid.*, April 25, 1849.

7 *Ibid.*, April 25 and May 1, 1849.

arrived by boat, others overland; some were fully outfitted, others not at all. Prices, quantity, and quality of mules, oxen, and other goods were comparable among the four places. Wagon manufacture was limited in St. Joseph, but Independence “had one of the finest wagon making facilities of any of the western communities.”<sup>8</sup> California advised his readers, however, that those who outfitted in St. Louis were certainly better off.<sup>9</sup>

St. Joseph entered the competition with a number of editorials in the weekly *St. Joseph Gazette* in February and March of 1849. An editorial entitled “Important to California Emigrants” compared Independence and St. Joseph and offered endorsements for St. Joseph from such western travelers as Col. William Gilpin, Cmdr. Robert F. Stockton, Maj. Archibald Gillespie, Gen. Stephen Watts Kearny, Representative Willard P. Hall, Capt. Miles Goodyear, Maj. Joseph L. Meek, and Maj. Moses Harris (also known as “Black Harris”), all of whom had traveled the route in 1847–1848. The newspaper assumed that the Mormons would outfit in St. Joseph, a logical conclusion considering the fact that only a few years before they had been driven from Independence; but the majority of Mormons left from Kaneshville.<sup>10</sup>

Editorials in the next two issues of the *Gazette* further attempted to establish St. Joseph as the ideal jumping-off place. Selecting “The Best Starting Place” was the immediate and most important decision that California and Oregon-bound emigrants must make. There were three principal things to consider in the choice: “First, the ease and facility of access to the places, from the different portions of our common country in the west, which will make up the great tide of emigration across the Rocky Mountains—second, the means of procuring a complete outfit—and thirdly, the comparative distance from the different points proposed . . . to the junction of the common route.” Claimants for the designation of the best starting point were Weston, Independence, and St. Joseph.

The *Gazette* stated that it was an “established and well-known fact” that three-fourths to four-fifths of the emigrants of the past four years had come from north of the thirty-ninth parallel, and St. Joseph was obviously closer by thirty to fifty miles than the other two places for those travelers arriving overland from the East. The 1848 census had given St. Joseph a population advantage over the other places—fifth in the state—and

the town could also offer more in the way of supplies to the emigrants. There were nineteen dry goods stores, two or three of which offered everything an emigrant could want. In addition there was a large amount of bacon, two flour mills, three drug stores, “Saddlers, Shoemakers, Wagon makers, Tanners, Blacksmiths, Cord-wainers, Carpenters, Tailors, Gunsmiths and all other mechanics, who for industry, skill and promptitude and business, cannot be surpassed.” There were two ferries, three large hotels, and bounties of agricultural products from the surrounding country.

The *Gazette* asserted that St. Joseph offered a distinct advantage in comparative distance to Grand Island, where all roads converged. Travelers from Weston had to travel thirty miles before connecting with the St. Joseph road, thus making the trip from St. Joseph thirty miles shorter than the trip from Weston. Independence had its own route, but it was “crooked and circuitous having the Kansas River, and many other large streams,” which made it longer by some ninety miles, or six days travel. Anyone weighing all the facts could easily see the “fallacy” of Mr. Gilpin’s reasoning in advocating Independence as a starting point.<sup>11</sup> The *Independence Expositor* in 1847 had denounced the St. Joseph road as “almost impassible” for wagons, while the Independence route was level and beautiful.<sup>12</sup>

A third *Gazette* editorial recognized the growing significance of the competition:

While Lexington and Independence are urging themselves into notice, as the most advantageous points at which companies enroute for the gold regions, or other parts of California should assemble, it is deemed but justice to the emigrants—as much depends upon a prosperous beginning—that he should know that St. Joseph possesses advantages unequalled by any other point upon the Eastern border of our state.<sup>13</sup>

The writer, from his “own personal experience,” attested that goods could be purchased as reasonably in St. Joseph as in Lexington or Independence; that St. Joseph was many miles nearer to the destination; that its route was not only shorter but superior because there were no major rivers or streams to

8 Ibid., March 10, 1849.

9 Ibid., April 12, 1849.

10 *St. Joseph Gazette* (hereinafter *Gazette*), February 16, 1849.

11 *Gazette*, March 2, 1849. The term “Grand Island” is used here because it was the name of a huge island in the Platte River, near the head of which stood Fort Kearny. So, in effect, the terms Grand Island and Fort Kearney became somewhat synonymous for reference purposes.

12 John D. Unruh, *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840–1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 70.

13 *Gazette*, March 9, 1849.



FORT LARAMIE, UTAH TERRITORY, CA. 1853

N.d., artist unknown. Reaching Fort Laramie, some eight hundred miles from the Missouri River, was a welcome milestone for emigrants. There they could rest, clean up, repair wagons, and reprovision before continuing on. The fort began as a fur-trading post, became a log stockade, and was variously rebuilt and renamed during its existence, finally as an army post. It was abandoned by the military in 1890. COURTESY OF THE AMERICAN HERITAGE CENTER, UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING, LARAMIE. SEE WWW.WYOMINGHIST.ORG.

cross except Wolf River; and that the river bottoms provided free, excellent grazing for cattle during the weeks of encampment. In conclusion, he could “but express the candid opinion that St. Joseph is to the California route what Independence is to the Santa Fe route,” and that all emigrants to California should start from St. Joseph while those to Santa Fe should choose Independence.<sup>14</sup>

April 1849 was the gathering time, and St. Joseph was the gathering place. A company of 250 California-bound emigrants arrived by steamer about the first of April. They brought with them “some 70 wagons, between 80 and 90 head of mules, and nearly 100 tons of merchandise,” and were as well organized and equipped as possible. There were “congregated thousands” in the town outfitting and organizing prior to the departure for California. Even the rains of the previous week could not dampen the spirit or slow the pace of preparation. Seven steamers crowded with emigrants, oxen, mules, wagons and equipment arrived in the week of April 6 to 13. A large number of persons were reported “coming across by land from the Mississippi river, besides considerable numbers of oxen and mules purchased there for the use of the emigrants who are not here and who are to arrive.”<sup>15</sup>

A number of companies had already left by the middle of the month, but every new boat that arrived was “crowded with California emigrants.” Many had been “most grossly imposed upon in St. Louis and other places, by false representation made to them in relation to the prices of supplies in this place. The majority of the emigrants, from statements made to them in St. Louis, purchased the principal portions of their outfit there.” The *Gazette* notified its readers that the emigrants could have bought their supplies up to ten percent cheaper in St. Joseph and also saved the cost of transport. The weekly review of markets in St. Joseph and St. Louis would seem to indicate some truth to the statement. All the *Gazette* desired was for the “emigrants to satisfy themselves fully upon this subject,” so that, in the future, they could be wary of “tales circulated by interested speculators.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., April 6, 13, and 20, 1849.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., April 20, 1849.

Late April saw the town in full swing. During the week prior to April 26, approximately 1,200 emigrants arrived in St. Joseph “by land and water.” Large numbers that had been there had left. Some three-hundred wagons had crossed at Duncan’s ferry a few miles above St. Joseph, double that number at St. Joseph, in addition to several hundred at ferries between St. Joseph and the Council Bluffs. There were thousands still camped on the river above St. Joseph, and hundreds still in the city. The *Gazette* had “received several communications from California emigrants relative to the advantages of St. Joseph, as a place of departure for emigrants.”<sup>17</sup> One well-written but pointed communique was published from a “Hoosier Emigrant”:

Mr. Editor—On arriving at this point, I was no little surprised to find myself in the fourth town in Missouri. Misrepresentation, the legitimate child of envy, had induced me to mark St. Joseph in my mind, in brief moments, thus: A small pent up, out post, inhabited sparsely, by the lowest order of the genus homo. A stranger in this section of country, you can well imagine my surprise when I first set foot within this infant city—a place destined to be no mean rival, in commercial transactions with St. Louis and Cincinnati.

Emigrants are told at many points along the Mississippi and Missouri rivers, that St. Joseph is the last place to start from for California and Oregon. If spoken in keen irony, it is truly *the last* place for getting up an outfit preparatory to starting across the plains. Other places have been tried *first* and are now being abandoned; and St. Joseph will soon be *the last* and ONLY point from which emigrants with the light of experience before them, will think of making up their line of march.

This note is not written for the purpose of whetting the quill-drivers blade, and seeking the blood of innocence, as found coursing through the veins of *disinterested* scribbles at other points, but to call the attention of emigrants to the facts, *as they are* in contrast with the represented state of affairs, as [to] the eligibility of St. Joseph. I am, myself, one of those who will shortly leave this point, perhaps to never again cast an eye upon it. My destination is California. My home is in Indiana, to which, if life and health be spared, I shall return. Hence, having no interest in the prosperity of the citizens of this place, more than those of any other within this Union, I feel that I can claim, with a clear conscience, to be totally impartial in advising emigrants in future, to disregard all the idle tales of

agents, runners and interested persons, tending to disparage the advantages of this point—to make this town their place of rendezvous, where they will find plenty of such articles as they may wish, and at fairer prices than other more assuming *cities* on the line of march from an eastern home to the western plains.<sup>18</sup>

This one letter, more than any other item so far discovered, provides evidence of the rivalry that logically existed. The common practice of merchants, business houses, and commission men was to send runners and/or agents to meet boats, caravans or campers and announce the advantages of their particular firm. It was not difficult to imagine a boy or hanger-on around the levee in St. Louis meeting the emigrants and crying, “Buy your mules from Brown and Brown. Mules are not available at Independence or St. Joseph, and the few that are, are of poor quality and high priced.” Joseph McCoy sent riders out from Abilene to bring trail herds into his city in the 1860s, and lodging establishments in western cities sent runners to meet trains in the 1870s. This method of attracting business proved to be very effective.

Credence may be provided to the “Hoosier Emigrant” by this brief quote from the Independence *Expositor*, which appeared in the *Gazette* on May 4: “We learn from a gentleman who has just returned from St. Joseph, that there are at that place as many emigrants as the ferry will be able to cross, from now until the first of July, they having but one flat, and making two trips a day.”

The *Gazette*, upon reprinting the above item, informed the *Expositor* that “This is one of the many thousand lies you have told about St. Joseph and its facilities to accommodate the emigrants.”<sup>19</sup>

THE MOST DISTURBING CAMPAIGN, ACCORDING TO THE *St. Joseph Adventure*, was the handbill circulated by *Independence* merchants, which the *Adventure* termed “lying handbills and slanderous reports.” An Independence agent was located in St. Louis to provide the prospective overlanders with “information on the subject of outfitting and traveling to California.” The rumors and lies provided by these “hard lying” agents and “runners” frequently provided material for editorials and comments by the *Gazette*’s editors. The *Gazette* also denounced the St. Louis press for its support of Independence

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., April 26, 1849.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., April 26, 1849.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., May 4, 1849.

and its misrepresentation of prices, conditions, disease, and accommodations at St. Joseph. In short, the *Gazette* believed an unfair campaign was waged by the Independence–St. Louis connection.<sup>20</sup>

Earlier the *Gazette* had published some estimates on the numbers (1,200) of emigrants in St. Joseph, adding that a large number that had been encamped there had already crossed the river and left for California. “Up to Thursday near three hundred wagons had crossed the Missouri river at Duncan’s Ferry, four miles above town, while more than double that number had crossed at the different ferries between this place and the Bluffs.”<sup>21</sup>

Two weeks later the estimates were updated: 1,200 wagons had crossed at St. Joseph; 600 at Duncan’s Ferry; 500 at Bon-town (six miles above St. Joseph); 550 at Savannah Landing; and 1,500 at ferries between Savannah and the Bluffs; for a total of 4,350 wagons. Each wagon averaged four men and four yoke of oxen, which placed about 17,440 men and 38,000 oxen or mules on the plains thus far. Adding 200 pack mules to the 4,350 wagons would create a moving train some 55 miles in length.<sup>22</sup>

“California” had already predicted that St. Joseph might have the largest number of crossings. In one of his more perceptive correspondences from St. Joseph, he stated on April 21: “From what I have been able to ascertain there appears to be a greater number of emigrants rendezvousing at this point than at Independence.” Although such was not anticipated by the businessmen of the community, the “arrangements of the merchants to meet any demand that might be presented are ample to the extreme.”<sup>23</sup>

ONE OF THE GREAT MEDICAL SCOURGES OF THE nineteenth century was cholera. Little was known of its cause or cure. It resided in every community, town, port, and city at one time or another. It traveled with every boat, caravan, and wagon train. It sat at every campfire and selected its victims without prejudice to wealth, health, age, or gender. Although deadly, it is unlikely that cholera was ever a serious deterrent to westward migration. It did become the subject of great concern

to the competing towns in the summer and early fall of 1849. Each town made light of its own number of cases and deaths but warned the emigrants of the “epidemics” that existed in other towns. Cholera was a serious problem in St. Louis. The *Republican* carried weekly reports of the number of interments from all causes, with a separate number for cholera victims. “California” reported from Independence that there were “a few cases of sickness here—some two or three deaths within the past week supposed to be cholera. We hear that the *cholera and small pox prevail* to some extent in St. Joseph.” At that same time St. Louis was reporting 135 deaths from the previous week with 78 from cholera.<sup>24</sup>

A week later “California” reported that cholera was “still prevalent at Kansas and Independence and both places were nearly deserted.” The situation, he said, had worsened. Independence was gloomy, its streets and businesses abandoned, and emigrants had moved on hastily because of the cholera. Fifty-four deaths had occurred that week, and townspeople had left the town and fled to the country. Kansas was nearly “depopulate since thirteen persons had died there Friday and Saturday.” Westport had been spared the epidemic so far. California did not report on St. Joseph. He reported Independence as still being deserted because of cholera at the end of May.<sup>25</sup>

St. Joseph reported only five cases of cholera in the city during the month of May. A Mr. Gilmore of Buchanan County, who had started for California but turned back after about 140 miles, estimated that at least 200 persons had died in the trains from cholera.<sup>26</sup> Cholera was heavy aboard river steamers. Some boats were not allowed to dock at St. Joseph and other ports. Others were reported as sending burial parties ashore. However, by August the epidemic had run its course, and Independence, Kansas, and vicinities were back in full swing.

All these claims and counterclaims seem to indicate that the main rivalry in Missouri in the period 1849–50 was between Independence and St. Joseph. Each town promoted its own advantages, both real and perceived, over the others. St. Joseph’s advantages—real advantages—were its northerly location on the river, which shortened the journey not only in miles but, more significantly, in days traveled, and its comparatively easy

20 Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 70.

21 *Gazette*, May 4, 1849.

22 *Ibid.*, May 18, 1849.

23 *Republican*, April 25, 1849.

24 *Republican*, May 5 and 9, 1849.

25 *Ibid.*, May 17 and 29, 1849.

26 *Gazette*, May 25 and June 1, 1849.

trail—compared, that is, with Independence. Independence’s advantages were the fact that it was the recognized outfitting and commercial terminus for the Santa Fe Trail, and that it was located on the western—actually southern—side of the Missouri River. The latter gave emigrants the advantage of not having to depend on ferries to cross the river. This was offset somewhat by the necessity of crossing the Kansas River and a number of other streams, which in flood season were as uncontrollable as the Missouri.

The number of emigrants gathered at St. Joseph and Independence absorbed most of the energy and materials available in both. The one exception to this generalization may have been the surplus of mules and oxen reported by St. Louis papers. The curious argument by correspondent “California,” that mules were in such supply that emigrants could buy cheaply, but often in doing so bought inferior quality animals, along with his report that in Parkville farmers would not sell at prices even far above those in Independence, leaves some doubt as to his grasp of the subject.<sup>27</sup>

The competition for the emigrant trade was only one of the rivalries between the river towns. Nothing makes this clearer than the fact that the same towns and papers, as soon as the bulk of the emigrants were on their way, turned to the coverage and discussion of railroads and the obvious advantages each town had to offer as a major location on proposed routes. In fact, the *St. Joseph Gazette* became so involved with the political issues of the summer that it was unable to publish the list of emigrants and emigrant companies as promised. The *St. Louis Daily Missouri Republican* was at least partially destroyed by the great levee fire of that summer and was out of business for a week. We can assume that if “California’s” reporting is accurate, Independence residents would have been out of the city because of the cholera epidemic and probably would not have been involved in overland trade issues but rather in matters surrounding the railroads, the slavery question, admission of California to the Union, and other issues ultimately resulting in the Compromise of 1850. St. Joseph also had an interest in these matters, but Independence may have perceived that it had more at stake than St. Joseph because it was more oriented toward the south than St. Joseph was.

Early in 1850, editorials carried updated figures and facts of

the previous spring. According to the *Gazette*, St. Joseph was still the best starting place for the same reasons, only now there were more people to testify as to its supremacy. Expectations were high and conditions in St. Joseph had improved, with new ferries and new crossings, better preparation by the merchants, an increased population, and new accommodations were available.

Trade and travel did increase in 1850 but it did not meet expectations. Clues appeared as soon as the wagon trains were on the prairies. St. Joseph’s Brown, Lyon and Smith had laid in their fall and winter supplies. They had “on hand any quantity of dry goods, good goods, seasonable goods and decidedly as cheap goods” as could be had in St. Joseph. Another merchant, Sommerville, had “Enormous piles of dry goods, boxes &c piled about his door.”<sup>28</sup> St. Joseph had become more a point of departure for families rather than an outfitting point for overland traders and gold-seekers.<sup>29</sup> The decline was even more noticeable in 1851. St. Joseph became the bargain spot.

Persons in the country wishing cheap goods will find St. Joseph the best market in the upper country. We feel safe in saying that the price of goods in this place are lower, at present, than they have been for a long time. Bedford & Craig and Armor & Perry are selling off their large stocks of goods at cost, and other merchants in the place are anxious to close out their stock of goods. We say to all who want bargains, come to St. Joseph.<sup>30</sup>

By the late 1860s the overland migrations had greatly decreased. The railroads would soon provide comfort, style, and safety for the western traveler, and the river towns were obliged to find new industries. Independence was eclipsed by Kansas City. Omaha became the headquarters of the Union Pacific Railroad. St. Joseph became a major wholesaler for the West and Midwest. Kansas City, Omaha, and St. Joseph, with their stockyards and slaughter houses, all remained prominent in western trade, politics, and economics. Many of the river towns fell prey to the meandering and frequently changing course of the Missouri River. Some disappeared entirely, others became local trading centers. 

<sup>28</sup> *Gazette*, April 25, 1850.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, August 31, 1851.

<sup>27</sup> *Republican*, April 7, 1849.

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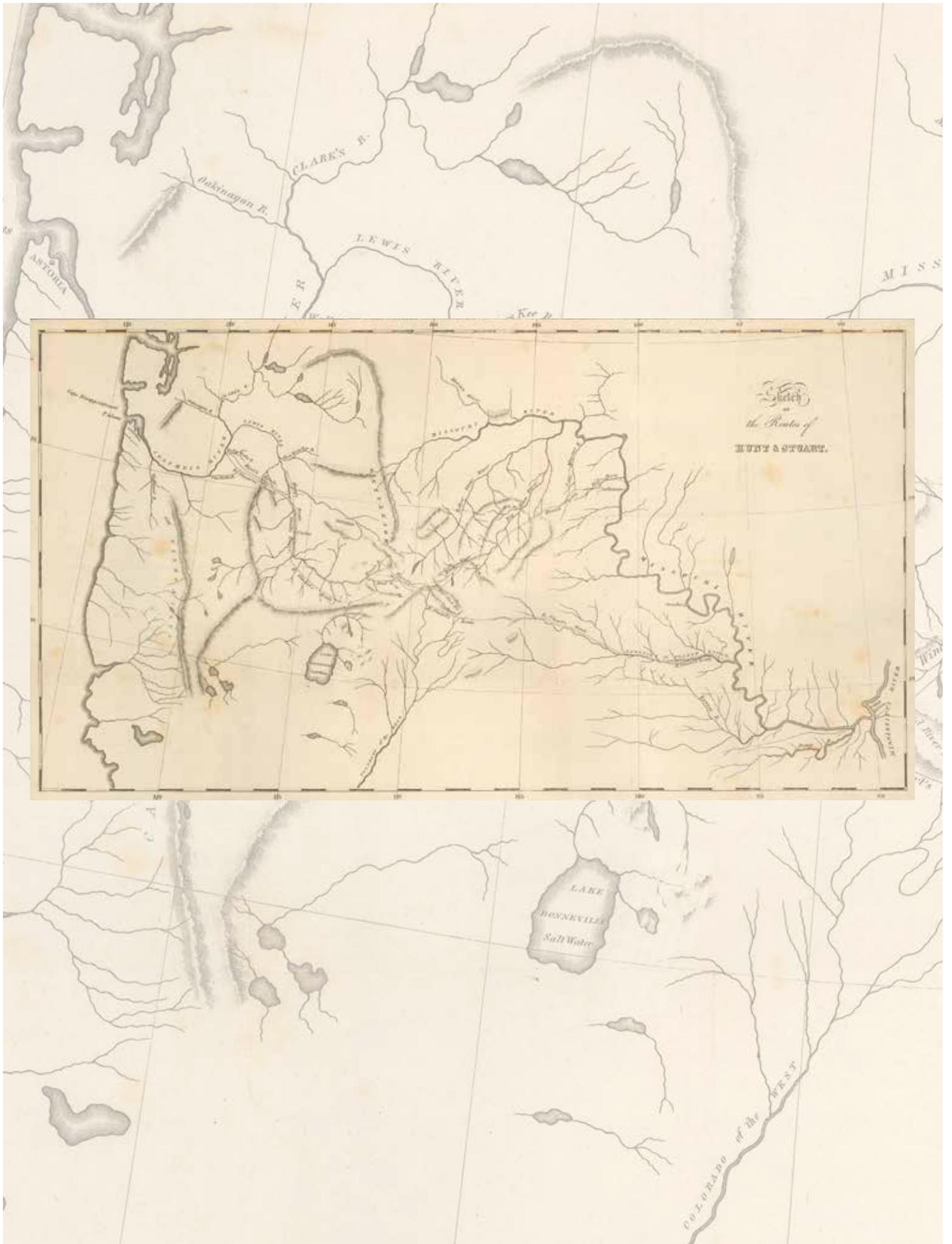
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