

# BURNT WAGON BASIN HISTORIC SITE

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"One most beautiful evening in the last of August (1862) we came to where our old wagon irons now are laying overlooking what is now known as Long Valley, now filled with many beautiful prosperous homes, it is here it dawned on me that we had reached our jumping off place, and must abandon our wagons and take to our oxen backs."

The remains of the "old wagon irons" as described above by Dunham Wright, became one of Central Idaho's early historic sites. Wright, a western pioneer, retold his early experiences in a letter to John G. York of Cambridge, Idaho in the 1920's. The wagons left behind by Wright and his party were located in a high mountain meadow on the ridgeline of the West Mountains, west of Cascade Reservoir. The area became known to early settlers as "Burnt Wagon Basin." Wright's story of his trip to the gold fields is a story of early Idaho.

"Yes, I am the boy you are looking for to tell you of those old wagons. I am one of seven others that left them wagons on that old Mountain overlooking what is now called Long Valley Idaho," wrote Wright.

In 1862, Wright, a young man of twenty, started for the Florence gold fields. At the Snake River ferry ten miles above Old Fort Hall he joined a wagon train of nearly 300 wagons heading west. Hoping to conserve strength and water, the party started their forty mile desert crossing to Lost River at night, arriving at 3 o'clock the next day. As Wright remembered, they buried a man at this first stop, rested and watered the animals.

"Indians were on all sides of us making hostile demonstrations, we moved that evening and night up to the mountains fifteen miles farther on, here we organized and buried another man.

"Had to have a working crew as we were making road. (We) had to have a guard before, one behind, and one on either side of the train(.) We made the road through big and little Camas prairie and entered the old Oregon Trail at the massacre grounds of 1852(.) Here lay in circular shape the great quantity of wagon irons and many bones of human and brute scattered thru the tall rye grass; many human skulls [sic] were on the ground(.) One man picked one (and) put (it) in his wagon, which made me shudder[sic], as he picked it up the tall grass had grown through the eye holes(.) I told him I would as leave put a rattle snake in my wagon."

The train followed the Oregon Trail near a point where Middleton is located on the Boise River. There the wagon train split. Wright and his party with fifteen wagons continued west to old Fort Boise on the Snake River. At the river crossing another man drowned and two wagons, each with four yoke of oxen drifted downstream in the rapid water. The oxen broke out of their harness, and the wagon boxes drifted to one shore and the oxen the other. Contents of the wagons were soaked. Wright remembers, "Everything got wet(.) I remember there was a great sack of dried apples thoroughly soaked(.) They were turned out on a quilt to dry and in less than an hour there was a wagon box full covering half an acre of ground."

The work party constructed a road to Payette and then to Weiser. At this point the members of the train became lost, wandering around for two weeks until one of the crew ran across Brownlee Ferry on the Snake River. Brownlee, the owner of the ferry, came into their camp and offered to let them all cross free in exchange for the construction of a road to and from his ferry.

At Brownlee the party split again. Wright and the following men continued north to the gold fields: Mr. Briggs, Edwin Morgan, Absolom George, John Leland, D.A. Johnson, N.W. Earl, and John Swisher. Wright remembered, "While camped here we picked a bag of dried sarvis berries (serviceberry, Amelanchier alnifolia) that later came in like a big nugget in a gone up claim."

The eight started north with three wagons. The first day they left a wagon after having to cut trees and roll rocks out of the trail. They "went down mountain slopes so steep it seemed the wagons would upset endways on the oxen, (even) with a great tree dragging behind the wagon."

The party climbed the slopes along the Little Weiser River, coming to the ridge of the West Mountains. Looking down the steep, forested slope they decided to abandon the wagons.

"One of the men in our party was a carpenter and had with him a few tools(.) Here (we) camped for two weeks cutting up wagons(.) making saddles, taking our wagon canvases for cinches and all other necessary straps(.) In the mean time teaching our oxen the new duty they were soon to be called on to perform.

"Everything in readiness we took a long last sorrowful look at our old wagons that we had mutilated, leaving chains, trunks, and all other paraphernalia [sic] that could not well go on oxen backs(.) Had not gone over a mile when a little pony we had with us loaded with what little flour we had rolled down the mountain side and (was) brought up standing in a little blue lake..."

The party made their way slowly down the mountain to "the most beautiful tall grass I have ever seen." In parting the grass to cross a creek they stepped on a yellow jacket nest, creating "the greatest stampede the world has ever known for the size of it." The effects were disastrous and spectacular.

"Eight big steers going bucking, spiking, bawling tails in the air, tinware rattling, like a chaviri [sic], they turned their packs underneath them and trampled our bedding and wearing apparel into strings and tinware into a cocked hat(.) The whole thing looked as though it had passed through a terrible cyclone."

After re-packing what was left they headed north again.

"We camped at Payette Lakes for three weeks trying to find a way out(.) The Indian trail had the pictures of men made on peeled trees with red paint and an arrow left sticking in them(.) This did not appeal to us."

Wright gathered together his shredded blankets and set out to look for a trail or some sign of smoke from a friendly campfire.

(I) went to the summit of the highest mountain at the head of Payette Lake, stay(ed) all night and nearly froze to see if I could detect smoke from a burning camp, but all to no avail. A twenty year old boy lost in the heart of the Rockies more than 60 years ago laying down at night with nothing but the broad canopy of heaven for a covering, and look(ing) to the stars and moon for company [for they were the only things that I had ever seen before], while the gentle moaning of the breeze in ...great forest tree tops (tried) to lull me into to dreamland, and yet there was no sleep... Away in the depths of the night the great savage timber wolfe in the distance would put in his long lonesome, mournful howl which sent cold chills up my back to cool my gold fever, never to return(.) ...When the sarvis berries straight became our only diet(,) we took to the war trail and made a safe landing on the big Salmon River."

The remains of the old wagons left behind by Wright and his party were carried away and re-used by early settlers in the area. The only evidence marking the historic site is a concrete marker reading, "BURNT WAGONS-DUNHAM WRIGHT-1862".

To access Burnt Wagon Basin from the west side of Cascade Reservoir, take Forest Service Road 422 to its intersection with Forest Service Road 435. Turn west on Forest Service Road 435 (West Mountain Road) and go uphill approximately seven miles to the intersection of Forest Service Roads 435 (Boise National Forest) and Forest Service Road 835 (Payette National Forest). This intersection at the top of the ridge marks the boundary of the two Forests. At this point, an unnumbered road (4-wheel drive only) turns north following the ridgeline. The Burnt Wagon Basin marker is located 4.4 miles north of the intersection. A concrete marker indicating the location is adjacent to and east of the ridgeline road.

The view from the mountain ridgeline is spectacular. To the east is a broad overview of Cascade Reservoir and Long Valley; to the west lies the headwaters of the Little Weiser drainage and Indian Mountain Lookout. Hikers can reach Burnt Wagon Basin from Long Valley using the Arling Trail (Forest Service Trail #116).

It is not difficult to envision Wright and his party in August of 1862 camped on the high mountain meadow. In a draw west of the marker a small spring surfaces, the headwaters of the Little Weiser River. Stands of spruce and pine create islands of trees along the ridgeline. Grass and low, gray sage cover the hillsides. This new country was open, there for them to see; Hubbard Ridge stretching north, the Salmon River country ahead of them. "We took one last sorrowful look at our old wagons we had mutilated." They were leaving a bit of their past behind. This is the story of Burnt Wagon Basin, an Idaho story, a part of Idaho's pioneer heritage.

R. 1 E.

R. 2 E.

R. 3 E.

R. 4 E.

T. 17 N.

T. 16 N.

T. 15 N.

14 N.

T. 13 N.

