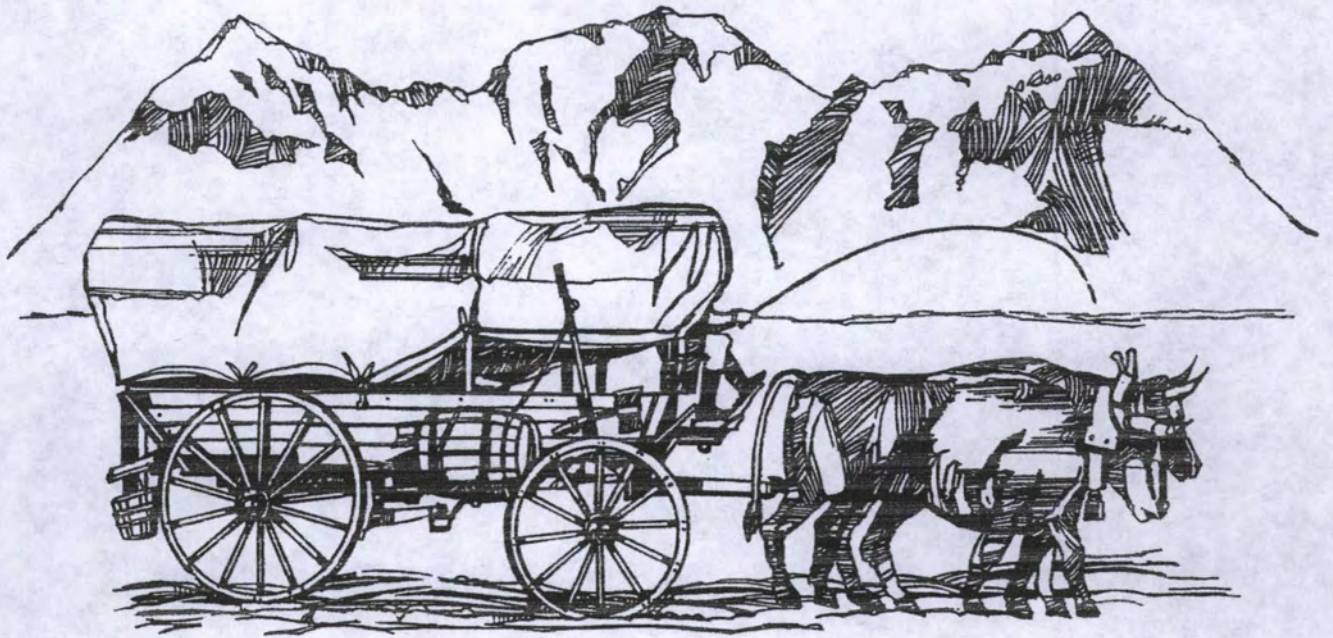


WAGON TRAILS TO THE PAYETTE NATIONAL FOREST

By  
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### AUTHOR'S NOTE:

The Oregon Trail, words of dreams and heartache. I grew up hearing the stories of ancestors who were Oregon Trail pioneers.

On a golden autumn day my Mother and I stood beside the small log cabin where she was born. The Oregon Trail ran across the low hills in front of us, a stone's throw from the cabin door.

Beside the cabin wall a wheel from an emigrant wagon lay forgotten in the dust. The spokes of eastern oak had dried in the western sun. As the years went by they loosened from the hub and fell away. The old trail in front of us had been plowed under, but the stories and the dreams remained, a part of Idaho's heritage.

### THE EARLY TRAILS AND THEIR HISTORY

In the earliest of times physical features of the land provided the map travelers followed across southern Idaho. Before they had modern names, the Three Tetons on Idaho's eastern border, the Snake River, the Malad River, and the Boise, Payette, and Weiser Rivers on the west side of the state, were landmarks used as guides.

Native Americans, Idaho's first citizens, traveled across the land sharing the trails with migrating herds of buffalo, creating a network of roads across the Snake River Plain. The dog and later the horse trailing a travois carried the Indian families' possessions, deepening the trails in their passage.

Idaho explorers, Lewis and Clark, followed ancient travel routes. Crossing into eastern Idaho on August 13, 1805, Lewis wrote, "We set out very early on the Indian road which still led us through an open country in a westerly direction" (Thwaites 1959:v.2, p.337).

"Indian roads" were used by early trappers and traders as they looked for beaver in the drainages of the Snake and Salmon Rivers. Mountain man Peregrine Herne wrote in the 1830's, "My camp was...at the foot of a narrow rugged path, worn by hunter and war-parties of Indians (Herne 1855:16).

Mountain men brought the first wagons across the plains. In 1830 William Sublette and his company of eighty-one took ten wagons from St. Louis to the Rocky Mountains. According to Morgan, "The experiment worked out very well; as the country was open and level, the chief obstructions were ravines and creeks, the banks of which required cutting down...Sublette drove along twelve head of cattle and a milk cow." Eight of the cows were killed for food, but, "the remaining cattle and the cow went on to the Wind River rendezvous--the first cattle ever seen in the Northern Rockies" (Morgan 1953: 316). Although Sublette could have continued north and west, his journey west ended at the Wind River in Wyoming.

It would be Capt. B.L.E. Bonneville who drove wagons over the Continental Divide in 1832 (ibid.).

## WAGON TRAILS TO THE PAYETTE NATIONAL FOREST

In 1836 Dr. Marcus Whitman and missionary Henry Harmon Spaulding brought the first wagons to Fort Hall. After starting west across the Snake River Plain they found the trails used by the Indians and the fur traders impassable for their wagons. In an effort to transport his supplies Whitman cut one wagon down to a two-wheeled cart and made his way to Fort Boise at the confluence of the Boise and the Snake River.

It would be 1840 before the wagons left by Whitman and Spaulding at Fort Hall were delivered to the Columbia River by mountain men, Joe Meek and Robert Newell. It was Newell who convinced Meek to try what appeared impossible. According to Victor, "The Doctor's idea of finding a passable wagon road over the lava plains and the heavily timbered mountains lying between Fort Hall and the Columbia River, seemed to Newell not so wild a one as it was generally pronounced to be in the mountains". (Victor 1870:264).

According to Victor, Newell said persuasively to Meek,

"Well, you can drive one of the wagons, and take your family and traps along...I'll play the leader, and look over the train. Craig (Wm.) will go also, so we shall be quite a party." Thus it was settled. Thus Oregon began to receive her first real emigrants, who were neither fur-traders nor missionaries, but true frontiersmen--real border men (Victor 1870:265).

As the fur trade diminished mountain men were often hired as guides, or at least consulted about the best routes. Only a fool would pass up a meeting with anyone who could offer information about what lay ahead.

One of those meetings took place near Soda Springs (called Beer Springs) on August 28, 1839 when mountain man Joe Meek met "Oregon bound" Thomas J. Farnham and his party:

...the swarthy old trapper approached myself and my men. He was no less a personage than the bear killer [Joe] Meek...He accosted me with "Good Morning, how are ye? Stranger in the mountains, eh?"...On hearing we were traveling to the Columbia River, he informed us that we might go down with the Nezierces [sic] (Nez Perce) Indians...These Indians would leave their hunting grounds [at Salmon Falls] for their homes about ten days from that date...

He [Meek] came to the mountains many years ago...Bidding us good morning and wheeling away to the day's ride, he said, "Keep your eyes shining for the Blackfeet. They are about the 'Beer Springs'"...So saying he spurred his weary animal to a trot and was soon hidden among the underbrush of the intervalles (Farnham 1843:65-66).

## THE OREGON TRAIL

Wagon traffic increased crossing the Plains, however, most travelers traveled through Idaho, their destination California or Oregon.

## WAGON TRAILS TO THE PAYETTE NATIONAL FOREST

One Indiana family crossed southern Idaho in 1847. The grandson of John S. Hunt remembered his family's preparations for the journey:

(They) spent the Fall and Winter of 1846 preparing for their trip across the plains. They built two strong wagons, smoked plenty of bacon, ran enough maple sugar to last for the six months' trip, gathered ten bushels of hickory nuts, ordered two good buffalo guns to be made by a gunsmith at Abington, visited the various relatives in Wayne County, Indiana, and on March 5, 1847, they started on the long toilsome and dangerous trip for Oregon (Lockley n.d.:4-5).

A Weiser pioneer, Mary Ellen Todd Applegate, traveled with her family to Oregon in 1852 by wagon. Later, she and her husband, John Applegate, would return to Idaho and settle on a homestead a few miles north of Weiser on Monroe Creek. The story of her family's travels across the Plains provides unique glimpses of life on the Oregon Trail. Like the Hunt family, the preparation began long before they left Arkansas. Mary Ellen told the story:

We certainly were a very busy family. You see, father had to trade for eight suitable oxen and other stock; also a large strong wagon, having bows, canvas cover and all. Then he would need a tent, harness, saddle, bridle, gun, and various tools. He must procure suitable provisions, and many other things for such a long journey. Father had to make ox yokes, and their bows and pins for all the oxen. He also had to make a heavy driving whip, ...handles and many other contrivances. Then Mother not only had to see to the spinning, but knitting, weaving of strong cloth and making it up into suitable clothing. Not only soap making, but butter must be made and carefully packed in jars for use on the way. All sorts of provisions must be wrapped and neatly packed to best advantage...There were all sorts of things: flour, corn meal, sugar, dried fruit, sorghum molasses, butter, lard, and other things in jug and jars, well wrapped bacon and hams, some vegetables, home-made soap, stock salt, rosin, tar, medicine, for both man and beast, extra bedding and clothing, and other equipment...there were so many things that just must go...it reminded me of birds building a nest (Hixon 1973:8-9).

Father made a grub box with a lid, and that sat in front of the wagon and there was a place at the end of this box for the Dutch oven, coffee pot, and kettle to be placed after they were snugly packed in a sack. There was an outside box attached to the front of the wagon bed for halters, hobbles, ropes, axe, shovel, hammer, chains, bells and other things. Then there was a rack for the gun in the front (ibid:9).

The Todds, like other immigrant pioneers, started west early in the spring. At the beginning of their trip they were able to travel between ten to fifteen miles a day. Later, Mary Ellen would recall,

## WAGON TRAILS TO THE PAYETTE NATIONAL FOREST

they became more efficient travelers, able to speed up "to sixteen and even seventeen miles a day, and there was one day that we made twenty miles" (Hixon 1973:20).

The weather often determined their progress. Traveling exposed in a sea a grass "...the wind just whistled and shrieked, whipping our wagon cover until the wagon fairly trembled... Even when it was rainy the oxen tried to keep plodding ahead, but we had several large storms, when the rain peppered through our wagon sheets for a little while, and we felt like drowned rats," (Hixon 1973:11).

Fuel was often scarce and they learned to gather wood along the way, and finally to use "buffalo chips" for cooking fires. Mary Ellen remembered chores never seemed to end:

While the evening meal was under way they were each doing various things that had to be done--tires to be reset, wheels to be taken off and soaked over night to keep them from falling to wrack, others to be greased, brake blocks to be built and tightened up, whip lashes to be spliced out and many other things (Hixon 1973:22-23).

The "cholera zone" intensified as the number of travelers and their animals polluted waterways. Illness and death added sadness and fear to memories of the Oregon Trail. Coming along the trail in 1862 Jane Gould wrote:

There is the grave of a woman here, the tire of a wagon is bent up and put up for a head and foot stone, her name and age is filed upon it (Gould 1981:19).

In September, the Todd's like most emigrants, passed through southern Idaho. Mary Ellen would remember, "Yes, we crossed above the Snake river slides across from Weiser Flat...I think that I must surely have looked over across the Snake River at Indian Mountain" (Hixon 1973:39).

### IDAHO SETTLERS

Many wagons crossed the Snake River on Rueben Olds' Ferry. After gold had been discovered in Idaho in 1860, the emigration to Oregon often returned to Idaho's gold fields. Realizing the potential, Rueben Olds purchased a trading store at Farewell Bend, and built a ferry on the Snake River in 1863 (Derig 1987:18).

Derig notes, "Olds Ferry not only made crossing the River easier, but it turned the tide of immigration through Weiser Valley" (ibid.)

Weiser pioneer, Judge Frank Harris noted:

The first permanent settlers on the Weiser, were William and Nancy Logan, and the latter's brother J.N. (Norm) Harris. Logan and his future wife, Nancy were fleeing from the wrath of her parents...They came by way of Burnt River and struck (the) Snake River where Olds Ferry was later established...he (Logan) decided that here would be a good place to start a road house, as soon as the ferry was in...(Harris 1940:33).

## WAGON TRAILS TO THE PAYETTE NATIONAL FOREST

The road house of the Logans provided to be a profitable business as their charges for accommodations were in proportion to those of the ferryman (Olds). The Logans continued to run the business a few years when they disposed of it and took a ranch about three miles up the Weiser River (Harris 1940:34).

In later years Nancy Logan would point out their supply wagon was the first in the Weiser area, and their son the first white child born in Washington County in 1864 (Harris 1940:34).

The 1860's were the beginnings of settlement in the Idaho. Governor W. J. McConnell in his book Early History of Idaho points out, "In those days the nation was in the throes of civil war" (McConnell 1913:183). Many families emigrated west to escape the war. McConnell adds this insight:

During the summer of 1863 large wagon trains of emigrants from Missouri and Arkansas arrived in Idaho. They consisted of entire families of men, women and children, and would have been a desirable acquisition to the population of any country. They had abandoned their former homes to escape the terrors of guerrilla warfare, which was epidemic in those states at the time. As a rule they brought with them good teams and wagons and such household goods as were portable. Their advent marked the arrival of the first featherbeds in the territory. They also brought a new element which made the mountains look more attractive...a bevy of girls...Other trains quickly followed the first, and a camp was established on the river bank (Boise River)...These fathers grim had guns...so every vow made on that river bank was kept...Many of the immigrants of that year located in Boise valley, while a few crossed the divide to Payette (McConnell 1913:189-191).

Another wagon train coming to Idaho from Missouri was one led by Tilford Lindsay in 1881. In a diary kept by Emily Fletcher Towell she notes Lindsay had traveled west before and was familiar with the route (Towell 1881:1). The wagons left Mercer County, Missouri on May 11, 1881 and arrived on Idaho's eastern border in July. Towell noted the railroad had reach Bear Lake in southeastern Idaho by that date.

The Lindsay train traveled through southern Idaho looking for prospective homesites. After they reached the Boise valley she noted, "This is near the mines, consequently, every place where there was room enough for a hut and a little garden spot was occupied (ibid:14).

The Lindsay train moved north, crossing the Payette River, and looking for land. On August 11, 1881 they found the place to rebuild their lives and their homes:

Driving over hill and dale we reached Dixie Valley and from there we drove to Middle Valley. Middle Valley was a very fertile little valley, nestling among the sage hills. The Weiser River wended its way, peacefully through the little

## WAGON TRAILS TO THE PAYETTE NATIONAL FOREST

valley. Great promises were held forth to the weary travelers. Nearly all of the little band decided to stay in Middle Valley. Others took land in Salubria, Indian and other valleys.

There were new hopes, aspirations and ambitions as there was much work to be done. Homes to be made. At last the long journey with its hardships and heartaches was over (Towell 1881:15).

Idaho was settled by pioneers who traveled over the most important road to the west, the Oregon Trail. Looking for homes many of them moved north across the Weiser River into the Lower, Middle and Upper Valleys. They built cabins, started farms, ranches, and raised families. Many residents living in the area today are ancestors of those brave pioneers.

### CONCLUSION

Mother and I stood by the front door of the cabin, watching the autumn light shade a deeper gold across the hills. My Grandmother's hands had planted the lilac by the gate and a yellow rose beside the back step. My Grandfather plowed the fields around us, his sweat mixing with the soil; memories not to be forgotten.

Today the cabin walls and the wagon wheels are turning to dust; fleeting reminders of an early time when there was "so far to go, and so much to be done."

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WAGON TRAILS TO THE PAYETTE NATIONAL FOREST

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