

History: Retracing the Oregon-California Trail

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A picture story of the Oregon-California Trail was presented by Chuck Lucas on August 28th. Ninety-eight per cent of the 225 photographic slides were taken on site as he recently followed the route of the Oregon Trail from Independence, Missouri into Idaho; the California Trail from Fort Hall, Idaho to the Humboldt and Carson Sinks; and on over Carson Pass to the Sacramento Valley. The pictures were taken generally at the same time of year the pioneers would have reached each location in their trek across plains, desert and mountains to reach their "promised land" – CALIFORNIA.



Commencing with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and exploration parties sent out by the U.S. Government, the narrative moved on to the 1810-1824 age of the mountain men, who both trapped for the fur trade and scouted such places as Coulter's Hell (Yellowstone Park).

The discovery of the South Pass (Wyoming) in October 1812 blazed the way for further exploration as well as the great wagon migration to come.

From the early 1840's to the late 1860's, the Oregon Trail saw the greatest mass movement of humans, animals, and equipment in civilized history. As many as 13,000 travelers moved over the road in a single season. In spite of dust storms, tornadoes, quicksand, flood waters, Indian raids, accidents, sickness and death (graves still remain along the way) – on those portions of the trail not now covered by highways or development are clearly discernible since not one blade of grass is growing where the wagon wheels compacted the earth.

The usual method of forming a westbound wagon party was to advertise in eastern newspapers a year in advance that, for instance, a wagon train would be leaving Sapling Grove, Missouri the following May 15th. Everyone interested would gather at that location with household goods, animals, supplies and other equipment. No one really knew where they were going – just “west” – and many came ill equipped. One of the early day prevailing rumors had the Great Salt Lake draining into the Sacramento River. As a result, some of the adventurers planned to float west down the river, packing oars, sails, even collapsible boats into their wagons.

Moving out from Independence, the wagons followed the Santa Fe Trail for 40 miles into Kansas where a crude sign reading “Oregon Road” pointed to the west. At Ash Hollow they met the Platte River which followed the Nebraska sand hills to Chimney Rock and Scotts Bluff. Thirty-five miles west of Scotts Bluff, at the eastern edge of Wyoming, was the Cold Spring Campground where the travelers rested before pushing on 12 miles to Ft. Laramie where they could get wagons repaired and reprovisioned. They had traveled 642 miles, but they were still 1442 miles from Sutter’s Fort.

Reaching Ledger Cliff the first night out for Fr. Laramie, the travelers carved names and camping dates into the soft sandstone. In this area are ruts cut into the trail by the ironed-tired wagon wheels. The Platte River was forded again and again and finally the wagons reached the Sweetwater where Independence Rock, rising 150 feet into the air and 600 yards long, served as a trail marker for a campsite with plenty of grass and water. The name of the rock came from its discovery on July 4, 1821, and the travelers’ timetable predicted their arrival at that point on the 4th of July. Here, too, they carved their names before moving on to Split Rock which could be seen for 15 miles in either direction.

After clearing the steep slope of the 7550 ft. summit of South Pass, the road branches. To the right was the more direct

route to Fort Hall on the Snake River. From there, the trail followed the north bank for Oregon; the south bank for California. Register Rock, which also still bears the inscription of the weary travelers, was the last campground on the Snake before the trail turned southward into Nevada to follow the Humboldt River for 200 miles across the Nevada wastes before reaching the Humboldt Sink. Water was rationed, animals fell by the wayside, various items of furniture, pianos, anything not necessary, even wagons, were abandoned in the desert flats. The emigrants regrouped at the Lower Carson. Some moved on via Truckee Meadows over Donner Pass and an equal number followed the Carson River, passing near Ft. Churchill and present Dayton, Nevada. They were less than 125 miles from Sutter's Fort, but ahead loomed the sheer granite eastern face of the Sierra Nevada.

The trail went southwest into the Canyon near present day Woodfords. The steep rocky terrain of Carson Canyon accounted for the heaviest stock losses of the entire trip. Through Faith, Hope and Charity Valleys they plodded, up the slope near Red Lake, and on to the gap behind Caples Lake which must be reached no later than October 1st to escape the perils of early winter. And, on the other side – after six months of all but scratching their way by their fingernails – were the oak covered foothills of the western Sierra slope and just ahead, their destination – the Sacramento Valley.