

Crossing A River When There Isn't Any Bridge

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Idaho has over 2,000 lakes and 93,000 miles of rivers and streams

How would you cross one of Idaho's wide rivers without a bridge? Pioneers often faced this challenge. Not only did



Crossing the Snake River by ferry at Knut Uhrlaub Ranch near Thousand Springs. Sept. 10, 1912. ISHS 73-221.43/A

they have to get across themselves, but they had to get their horses, cows, sheep, wagons, and stagecoaches safely across too.

The first thing you might try would be to find a shallow place in the river where you and your animals could wade across. Such a place was called a ford. Without a ford, only the strongest animals could cross by swimming, and this was very dangerous. Many drowned in the attempt. It was especially hard to cross a river when the water was high. After a storm or when snow was melting in the spring, the rivers often swell becoming raging torrents and nothing could get across alive.

GLOSSARY

Raging torrents: overwhelmingly swift stream; fast water

Ford: a shallow part of a body of water, crossable without a boat

Ferry: to move or carry across the water from one point to another (verb)

Ferryboat: a boat used to transport people/things (noun)



Rosevear Ferry, Snake River

Built by Ernest Eicholz for J. Rosevear in the spring of 1890. This is currently the location of the Glens Ferry railroad pump. Photo: ISHS #GR 62-50.42.

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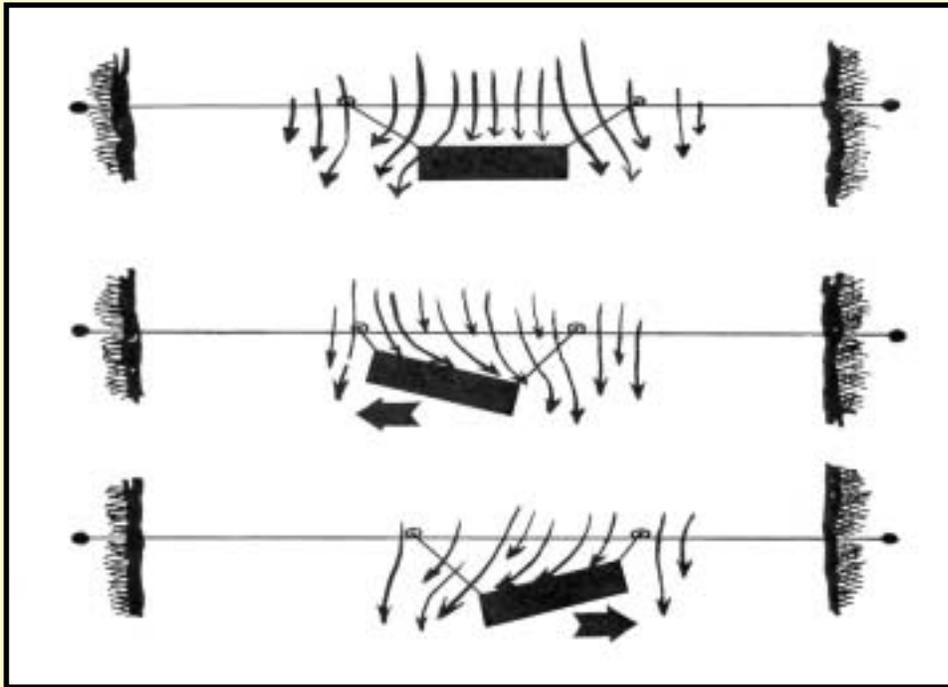
In addition to transportation, rivers provide electricity, water for crops, and food

Why not build bridges? Rivers like the Snake, the Salmon, and the Clearwater were usually much too wide or deep for bridge making with the tools and materials that the pioneers had with them. In addition, people passing through were usually in a hurry to get where they were going before winter snows caught them. They just did not have time to stop and build a bridge.

The solution to the problem on almost all of Idaho's big rivers was to build

ferryboats. To keep the ferries from drifting downstream, they were attached to cables strung across the river which were tied to trees or anchored into the banks with sunken logs. Without any engines, what do you suppose supplied the power to move these ferries across the rivers? In fact, the job was done without horses pulling, or without the ferrymen even having to work very hard.

Can you figure out how they did it?



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