

The Oregon Trail in Idaho

Number 50

By 1840, settlement of the United States was pushing up against the barrier of the permanent Indian country--mainly a plains area thought to be mostly the great American desert--and westward pressure was sufficient to lead some of the more enterprising frontiersmen to migrate to the Oregon country. The route they followed had been developed over the years by fur hunters, and in 1836 a wagon belonging to a missionary (Henry Harmon Spalding) had gone over the later Oregon Trail across the Snake River country to Fort Boise, where it had arrived as a cart. Then a group of expansionists from Peoria had come out to examine the feasibility of an Oregon Trail in 1839; two years later, a regular emigrant party (part of a California group that was diverted to Oregon) came through. Another Oregon-bound company made the trip in 1842, and the next season a great migration of some 800 took wagons past Fort Boise and over the Blue Mountains to the Columbia. Several parties came in 1844, and the 1845 migration brought an additional 3,000 settlers to Oregon.

When early emigrants on the Oregon Trail crossed the land that now is Idaho, they already were in Oregon, which at that time extended west from the Continental Divide. But almost all of them naturally failed to perceive the possibility for farming the arid Snake River valley, and their destination was the abundantly watered Willamette Valley to the west. The part of the trail they traversed through Idaho generally was a hard one, although two Hudson's Bay Company fur trade posts--Fort Hall and Fort Boise--served as welcome oases. Other Idaho landmarks on the Oregon Trail include Soda Springs (one of the astonishing natural attractions on the entire trip), Salmon Falls (where fish could be obtained from the local Indians), Snake River crossing near present Glenn's Ferry, and the hot springs east of later Mountain Home. Those who could not get across Snake River had to travel the more difficult route opened in 1842 down the south side, but they also found hot springs to marvel at when they passed Givens Springs.

A number of alternate routes (see map) soon were available to travelers on the Oregon Trail, and one of them (Applegate's) bypassed the western Snake River and Blue Mountain section by using the California Trail into western Nevada and then turning northward into Oregon. Local variations in parts of the trail--especially around Fort Hall--made for a literal maze of Oregon Trails in places, and the many later modifications in freight and stage roads contributed still more to the confusion of traces of old trails which now survive.

Friction with the Indians in the Snake country made the trail somewhat dangerous following the Ward massacre of 1854. Fort Boise and Fort Hall had to be abandoned, but military escorts were supposed to meet and to guard emigrants on the trail. Unfortunately, the system did not always work, especially in 1860 when the Otter party met disaster. A fight at Massacre Rocks in 1862, however, pretty well wound up that kind of hazard on the Oregon Trail: white settlement came to the Snake country immediately after that, and from then on, Indian hostilities were directed mostly against stages, freighters, and settlers, instead of against emigrants.

Much of the Idaho portion of the main Oregon Trail continued in use as a stage and freight route, as well as an emigrant road, after 1862. And with transcontinental railway service available along the general route at the beginning of 1884, the road reverted largely to an emigrant route, since passenger and freight traffic began to shift to the railroad. Covered wagons, though, continued to haul emigrants westward over the Oregon Trail for years after the coming of the railroad, and from 1862 on, hosts of Idaho, as well as of Oregon and Washington settlers, arrived in their new Pacific Northwest home communities that way.

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

Additional material may be found in W. J. Ghent, The Road to Oregon (1929), and in Irene D. Paden, Wake of the Prairie Schooner (1943). Also refer to Jay Monaghan, The Overland Trail (1947).

Idaho State Historical Society • Idaho State Archives • 2205 Old Penitentiary Road • Boise, ID 83712
Phone: (208) 334-2620 • Fax: (208) 334-2626 • For more information, visit
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