

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

ALEXANDER ROSS'S 1824 ROUTE INTO STANLEY BASIN

Number 281

September 14, 1964

Exploration of Stanley Basin, as documented in sources available 140 years later, commenced in 1824 with the Snake expedition led that year by Alexander Ross. Earlier fur hunters may have examined the area, but if they did, their exploits have gone unrecorded. That region is isolated from the rest of the early fur trade before 1824, and the chance that any trappers got in there earlier is remote indeed. In trying to find his way about the upper Salmon, Alexander Ross certainly acted as if he were entering unexplored country. Dependence upon an Indian guide and detached search parties indicate that the members of his expedition had no familiarity with the headwaters of the Salmon and with much of the Salmon River mountains as well. Ross, in his Fur Hunters of the Far West (London, 1855), noted explicitly that until 1824 even the head of Goddin's River (Big Lost River) had never been explored to its source. If he was correct, his party discovered the Trail Creek Summit leading from the head of Lost River down to upper Wood River. Furthermore, he spoke as if his 1824 expedition discovered Camas Creek and the upper South Fork of the Boise also. His claims are plausible; if they are true, his group almost certainly must have discovered Stanley Basin as well.

Aside from accounts provided by Alexander Ross, John Work's 1832 journal indicates clearly that Ross had come into Stanley Basin, at least around modern Stanley. Yet from what can be determined from Work's later journal, and from what can be reconstructed from Ross's later account, the 1830 route into Stanley Basin and along parts of the upper Salmon cannot be reconstructed with any accuracy. Until Ross's original 1824 journal is checked in detail, his exact route almost certainly will remain a mystery. His account in Fur Hunters of the Far West of his travels in the upper Salmon country can be described only as incompatible with the geography of the area. Corrections need to be made. Yet until his original journal is compared with his later account, no acceptable procedure for identifying the mistakes of the latter is likely to emerge.

Some of the places Ross specified in his Fur Hunters as on his 1824 upper Salmon route may be identified with various points in the region without too much strain. The trouble arises from their sequence. By his later description, the expedition would

seem to have followed a discontinuous route. Or, to put the matter more plausibly, Ross may not have remembered the places he had come to in their proper order. In any event, he crossed from upper Wood River to a stream he identified as the head of Salmon River. This he did near a high point on the divide which he designated Mt. Simpson. Proceeding down Salmon River to a major fork forty-seven miles from Mt. Simpson, he went up the other fork, returned to these forks, and then continued on down the Salmon. Identification of Mt. Simpson and of these forks is essential to interpreting his route as described in Fur Hunters.

Mt. Simpson has to be somewhere near Galena Summit: from its peak, he could see both Wood River and Salmon River clearly. Yet if Ross did cross Galena Summit to the head of the Salmon--a possibility practically excluded by John Work's journal--Galena Peak, nor anything east of it, will not do. But if he crossed from Gladiator Creek to Pole Creek, a route which corresponds a little better with his later description which scarcely fits the country from Galena Summit to the head of the main Salmon at all--Mt. Simpson might easily be near Galena Peak. The forks, though, are more of a problem.

Two major possibilities are available for the forks. One is Valley Creek with the main Salmon; the other is the east fork and the main Salmon. Some of his description fits one, and some the other. He had seen both: perhaps he confused them at times in his later account. If, as he says later, he came down the main Salmon and encountered a somewhat smaller fork coming in from the west, Valley Creek is indicated clearly. For this, the East Fork simply won't do: no one could have thought the East fork--which by this assumption would have to have been the main Salmon--was anywhere nearly as large as the main stream. His description of the valley of the lesser fork might work quite well for Valley Creek, but is impossible for the Salmon above the East Fork. Yet a gorge which gave him serious trouble about ten miles below his forks clearly is intended for the one about ten miles below the East Fork, since he emerged from it not far from Canoe Point. (Another gorge may be found in the same relative position to Valley Creek, but it is located wrong in relation to Canoe Point, and fits Ross's description less precisely.)

Just about any plausible interpretation of Fur Hunters and of the journal of John Work requires that Ross pass both sets of forks; in his later book, though, they apparently are treated as one even though they are many miles apart. Based on this evidence alone, any positive statement of his route can be nothing more than reckless speculation. He might have used a Pole Creek-Germania-East Fork route (which ran much more directly to Canoe Point), and then have returned to Stanley Basin via the main Salmon. Or he might have descended the main river through Stanley Basin and then turned up Valley Creek for his side trip.

To resolve the problem of which choice he made, John Work's journal indicates rather clearly that he did not do the latter.

When Work arrived at Valley Creek in Stanley Basin, he noted that he had reached the point at which Alexander Ross had turned back and descended the Salmon. Those who were along both with Alexander Ross in 1824 and with John Work in 1832 did not recognize the country--or even realize they were on the head of Salmon River--until they reached Ross's turn-a-round near the forks of Valley Creek, which they did remember clearly. Ross, therefore, could hardly have ascended the Salmon above that point in Stanley Basin or his men would not have responded to the country in the way that they did eight years later. Some of Ross's men may have ranged farther in 1824, but if they did, they seemed to have been absent from the 1832 expedition.

To be any more precise than this in defining Ross's 1824 route, his original journals must be consulted. Since parts of his 1824 journal published in the Oregon Historical Quarterly (1913) do not help much on this point, the complete original manuscript journal must be used. Until this is done, any statement concerning his Stanley Basin route must remain vague at best.

(Prepared before Reference Series Number 86)

Excerpts from Reference Series Number 86:

September 18: This entry marks his discovery of Stanley Basin. He continued up Wood River to Horse Creek which he followed up a mile to a point that his trail ascended another mile to his governor's punchbowl. Then he crossed to Rainbow Creek. (A later highway grade also leaves Horse Creek where he did, but contours to another summit (Galena Summit) two miles southwest of his crossing.) He followed a much shorter and slightly lower route. Mount Simpson (e. 9,483) is almost a mile north of Galena Peak (e. 9,225), and is about a mile from his governor's punchbowl. Proceeding west and north of Pole Creek, he camped on Taylor Creek, which he followed a day later to Salmon River. His course and distance (six miles west and four miles north) correspond reasonably well with that rather difficult terrain.

19: On his way to a narrow Salmon River passage just above Redfish Lake's outlet, he got a glimpse of Pettit Lake. That is better than present highway traffic can do. His fourteen miles distance is more reasonable than his September 20 mileage of ten miles north and eight miles west to Stanley. If his apparently imaginary eight miles west is omitted, his distance corresponds pretty well with geography there.