

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

HUDSPETH'S CUTOFF

Number 290

August 1964

Hudspeth's Cutoff came into use in 1849 as a gold rush route to California. Traffic on the regular California Trail had been coming along a northward arc to Fort Hall before turning southwest toward Humboldt River, which runs through northern Nevada. Hoping to save time and to get ahead in the race to the mines, a large Missouri party led by Benoni M. Hudspeth and John J. Myers proceeded directly westward from Soda Springs and Sheep Rock, July 19, in search of a short route to the Humboldt. This company of about 250 people--many of them women and children--rode in 70 wagons. In Hudspeth, they had an able captain; in Myers, a competent guide. (Myers, an experienced mountain man, apparently had come over the original California Trail in 1843; both Hudspeth and Myers had been with Fremont to California in 1845, and had served in the California battalion in 1846.) These leaders did a brilliant job of searching out a passable route from the hills east of Raft River to rejoin the regular California Trail, July 24, "they were almost thunder struck" to find they had not reached the Humboldt at all. In fact, they were only about 80 miles west of Fort Hall. Their saving of something like 25 miles would have been more substantial if much of their time had not been dissipated in crossing four difficult north-south ridges. Problems on the cutoff arose also from scarcity of water in some stretches--particularly from the eastern end of Bull Canyon to Twin Springs near the head of southward flowing Rock Creek. Later parties had to travel all day and perhaps half the night to make it to water there. William H. Wagner, an army surveyor, measured this waterless distance in 1859 as 22 1/4 miles. That made an exceptionally long day's trip out of the dry stretch.

From the day that Hudspeth's group opened the new 110 mile route, most of the traffic to California--and some of the Oregon traffic as well--followed the cutoff. Elijah Farnham, who took the new trail only the day after Hudspeth's party had opened it, noted that it already had carried traffic enough "so it looks like an old road of a great deal of travel." General P. F. Smith, who recommended, October 7, 1848, against establishing a permanent United States military post at Fort Hall, noted that most of the emigrant traffic (which such a fort was intended to protect) already was using Hudspeth's Cutoff instead. From then on, Hudspeth's route served, for practical purposes, as the main

California Trail for the northern traffic. Oregon-bound emigrants who used the southern Applegate route also tended to take the new trail. Whether or not it was much of a cutoff, measured in time or in energy, Hudspeth's route at least became the generally accepted one. But after the emigrant roads fell into disuse, modern highways followed very little of the Hudspeth route. On that account, a trip over present-day roads which generally approximate the whole cutoff runs about 125 miles in length.

For additional material on Hudspeth's Cutoff, consult George R. Stewart, The California Trail (New York, 1962), 223, 250-253; Dale Morgan, The Overland Diary of James A. Pritchard (Denver, 1959), 144, 159-160; Georgia W. Read and Ruth Gaines, Gold Rush (New York, 1949), 620, 692; Irene D. Paden, Wake of the Prairie Schooner (New York, 1943), 308-322. A detailed map of Hudspeth's Cutoff is available from the Idaho State Highway Department.