

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### EXPLORATION OF THE BRUNEAU COUNTRY

Number 502

1973

The Bruneau River was discovered in mid-November, 1811, by Ramsay Crooks and a party of nineteen fur hunters on their way down the south side of Snake River headed for Astoria. They had a long walk ahead of them, so they did not take time to explore the Bruneau at all. But a few years later, Donald Mackenzie and a band of trappers working for the North West Company of Montreal returned from the lower Columbia to the Snake country. Between 1818 and 1820, one of Mackenzie's French Canadian trappers--Baptiste Bruneau of Three Rivers, Quebec, explored the area and the river has been identified with him ever since.

Exploration of the Bruneau country continued in 1826 when Peter Skene Ogden brought Donald Mackenzie's brigade of Snake country trappers that way. Now in service for the Hudson's Bay Company, these fur hunters had to look in some pretty unlikely places to find any more beaver. Bruneau River represented about the only unsearched area anywhere around. Coming down along Snake River on an old Indian trail (later used as an emigrant road on the south side of the Snake) Ogden camped on the lower Bruneau on May 27. After sending a detachment down Bruneau River to an Indian camp on the Snake River to obtain a guide, he set out to explore the upper Bruneau. Assured by his Bruneau Shoshoni guide that he would take them "to a river of Beaver," Ogden set out at sunrise after a rainy night. On May 28,

he commenced ascending the Stream for 6 miles the River fine and well wooded when perpendicular Cut Rock prevented us from approaching it and we continued on till late in the afternoon when we reach'd a large Fork but with cut rocks on both sides and it was with some difficulty we found a place to descend and encamp many of our horses greatly fatigued they had certainly a hilly road and Stoney-- . . . we certainly travelled over a barren Country this day, not even a bird or the track of an animal to be seen 1 Beaver this day so much in favour of discovering Bruneaus River.

On May 29, after camping at the junction of the east fork with the Bruneau (T10S, R7E) he continued upstream above the canyon

without being able to descend from the cut rocks until the afternoon when we succeeded in descending and Forging it and altho deep water all was safe accross and we encamped our horses greatly fatigued and already many of them with swelld sides, but provisions are becoming scarce and we must continue on without delay in quest of Beaver if not

horses will again be Kill'd I verily believe a more wretched country Christian--Indian or Brute ever travell'd over or probably ever will

Again, his man found only one beaver that day. The next day turned out still worse. His trappers, reaching the upper river near the mountains, managed to turn up three beaver. But the road got worse:

if we had cause to complain of bad roads yesterday we had still more so this day continued hill and gully covered with Stones and by the time we reach'd our encampment many were limping and others could scarcely crawl, we made several attempts to reach the River but could not succeed, and it becoming late we encamped on the hills, from appearances we are now fast approaching the Mountain and as far as the eye can reach nothing is to be seen but cut rocks on both sides of the river

After examining the Bruneau, Ogden's trappers concluded that until a fire had driven them out, beaver had been plentiful. Now his Indian guide explained that his hunters would have to cross the mountains to another river if they were to find beaver. He was right. Having reached the mountains, Ogden's "Trappers started in quest of Beaver but returned without success, hunters were in the Mountains in quest of Deer but did not see the track of one what a wretched Country"

On June 1, Ogden expected to cross the mountains to the unexplored Humboldt. But to his surprise, his guide was

determined we shall travel over hills Gullies and Rocks for some days yet and certainly he did not disappoint us this day in one hill we were two hours in descending and ascending, we cross over the main Branch of Bruneau River also two large Forks which discharge into it and at the latter we are encamped again, this day the three Streams we crossed we saw nothing as far as the eye could reach but high cut rocks and the Main Branch one continued rapid and Cascade certainly not a country of Beaver the Mountains are Still well covered with snow altho if this fine weather should continue it will soon melt

At this point, Ogden's trappers encountered the leader of a Bannock band that had wiped out John Reid's Boise River post at the beginning of 1814 and had followed up with three more such encounters in 1824 and 1825. Yet Ogden's "Guide appeared to be at a loss," so the trappers set out with the Bannock leader on June 2, toward his camp to the west. Ogden did not gain too much: he reported that

this exchange did not give us a better road, hills and Gullies covered with Stones and rocks until the Afternoon when we reached our guides Tent and still as far as the eye can reach we can see nothing but hills and gullies we cross'd over three fine forks again this day with sufficient wood and water for Beaver but not a vestige to be seen

After Ogden's men reached the Bannock camp, the Indians confirmed what the Bruneau Shoshoni had explained already: that a three-day excursion to the Humboldt would bring them into the previously promised beaver country, but that the trip should not be attempted directly

across the mountains south of the Bruneau. (Ogden at this point concluded that he would go explore the Humboldt, but wait until his next annual expedition when he could attempt the trip from the Klamath country to the west. That is exactly what he did.) The next day he set out with a Bannock guide, for otherwise

we did not proceed more than 1 mile than we had a hill to ascend which occupied us an hour and two in descending when we reach'd a fine large Stream well wooded which with some difficulty we cross'd, here however we had some work ere we could reach terra firma having a swamp to cross we were obliged to unload the horses carrying the property on the Mens backs who were sinking to their middles in mud and mire and after all we had some difficulty to cross the Horse with merely their saddles, it was 2 P.M. ere all was safe accross and we encamped, when I sent men with their Traps to examine the upper and lower part of this Stream those who descended sett a few Traps very crowded but those who proceeded upwards met with no success

From what he could see of the surrounding country, Ogden presumed that he had reached Wickahoney Creek (or another of the headwaters of Jack's Creek which flows into the Bruneau through Little Valley), although his southward direction of travel suggests he may have misjudged his location. In any event, his men finally found four more beaver. But unexpected snow impeded travel there on June 4. Ogden's

Men were obliged to light a fire on the road, it continued Snowing and blowing untill the evening, on our road we Stopp'd at an Indian Camp of Snakes and traded some roots from them and from their looks I presume they have had nothing else to subsist on for more starving wretched looking beings I have never beheld in fact reduced to skin and Bones indeed for some time I was at a loss to discover if they were dead or alive nor would I believe it that human beings could be reduced so low without ceasing to exist Still they appeared happy and contented, and long may they continue so, they had a band of fine fat horses, but would [not] part with one.

Short of provisions, Ogden's trappers were disappointed to find that they were in; the upper Bruneau country in the wrong season to hunt deer. They saw an antelope the next day, but travel continued to be rough even after the snow finally turned to rain. Worse still, Ogden finally figured that his Bannock guide didn't know the country any better than his earlier guide. On June 6, when a foot of snow fell, his men could not move at all. Still disappointed in his practically-fruitless search for beaver, Ogden reported that in his Bruneau exploration, he had

suffered privations to me greater than I ever endured before independent of anxiety of mind which all more or less Keenly feel who visit this barren Country, can it be otherwise surrounded on all sides by danger and obstacles, many and some not easily overcome . . .

When he finally managed to cross to the upper Owyhee drainage the next day, in spite of another snow storm, he felt that he had seen more of the Bruneau country than he really needed to.

Ogden avoided any more Bruneau trapping expeditions after 1826, but in the summer of 1828 he came down the south side of Snake River again. He had more trouble with the Bruneau River on July 2, when he found

the water too high to ford, and we were obliged to raft it, and with the exception of mine, all reached the opposite side in safety. Unfortunately when half way across, the rope of mine broke, and down the stream I went; fortunately it grounded when within a few yards of a strong rapid. I had a most narrow escape and the Company also, having ten packs of beaver on it, and after all it was with some difficulty they were secured. Our lodges are in a wretched state for rafting with, and as the country is destitute of wood we have no other substitute.

After Ogden's exploration, John Work brought the Snake expedition back across the upper Bruneau, May 29, 1831. But he found that fur hunting there had not improved, and when he came back to the Snake country in 1832, he stayed farther north. By that time, fur hunters had pretty well explored the Bruneau but had found little or nothing to interest them. Emigrant wagons followed Ogden's route down Snake River across the Bruneau after 1842, but white occupation of the region was delayed until after the gold rush of 1862-1864 which brought settlement to southwestern Idaho.

*Publications--450 N. 4th Street, Boise, ID 83702--208-334-3428*