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EMIGRANT ROADS IN IDAHO

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California and Oregon emigrants who crossed Idaho followed natural roads selected for their use by fur trappers who had adapted traditional Indian routes for that purpose. Some of Idaho's best and most direct routes had natural obstructions that did not accommodate emigrant wagons, and others crossed desert stretches that slower emigrant caravans found more troublesome than faster pack trains did. When emigrants reached Fort Hall in 1842, they left their wagons there because of problems farther west that Henry Harmon Spalding had noticed in 1836 when he took his wagon to Fort Boise. Joe Meek, William Craig, and Robert Newell had disregarded Hudson's Bay Company advice and taken a wagon west from Fort Boise across a difficult Blue Mountain passage in 1840, but when they got through, they concurred that their venture was a mistake. But Marcus Whitman (who had induced Spalding to bring his wagon to Fort Boise in 1836) thought that a road could be found across southern Idaho in 1843, when he came out with a large Oregon Trail migration that year. At Fort Hall, Richard Grant (who managed Hudson's Bay Company operations there) explained, quite accurately, that wagons could not negotiate his fur trade route to Fort Boise, but that an alternate (such as Whitman's 1836 route--running south rather than north of Snake River west of American Falls or Bonanza Bar--no doubt could be found. He allowed that no one with any sense would engage in such an enterprise, but he soon developed a substantial supply business--particularly in reconditioned oxen--for those who did. He already had a larger second-hand used wagon lot than he needed at Fort Hall, but used oxen turned into a profitable business as emigrant traffic increased.

Fortunately for emigrants to California and Oregon, Idaho's geological structure favored westbound traffic. Basin and range formations featured a series of fault-bloc ridges that had gradual westbound ascents and steep descents that were excessively forbidding for return wagon traffic. Idaho's

emigrant roads provided sort of a one-way gate that discouraged anyone from coming back. By chaining to trees and using other braking devices, wagons could be lowered over steep hills that otherwise would have formed an impassible barrier. This problem afflicted California traffic more than Oregon emigrants who could cross a broad Snake River plain with less formidable (although often difficult) obstructions.

Regardless of where they traveled, emigrant wagons required a passable direct route (preferably level and decent) and the availability of water, grass, and fuel. Even small stretches of unnecessary distance were objectionable because at an extremely slow oxen rate of about two miles an hour, even a fairly short diversion might take an extra day or two. (For long trips to Oregon or California, oxen could keep going long after horses would wear out; pack mules also did better than horses, but oxen had to be relied upon for major trips. People could walk to Idaho or Oregon faster than wagons could go, and more than a few did, although they had supply problems that usually forced them to accompany a slow ox train.) Within the constraints of supply and a passable road, emigrant guides provided routes that often diverge from modern highways, which have more design flexibility but also utilize less direct routes in order to serve inhabited areas.

Emigrant roads typically followed a slightly weaving course with natural landmarks to guide wagon drivers on their westward journey. Except in places where local terrain forced a narrow passage, they normally consisted of a number of parallel lanes, eight or more being common. Packed by heavy traffic that came year after year, and fertilized by hundreds of thousands of oxen and other livestock, they often can be observed across fields that have been cultivated for decades, especially during some seasons when vegetation varies along their routes. Other stretches that never have been disturbed by later traffic or farming have been covered or blown away by prevailing winds. Sometimes in only a few years, tracks that remained conspicuous for a century have disappeared in places not otherwise affected by damaging agents. In other areas, erosion has deepened impressions to a depth of from two to six feet, and two-track wagon remnants are still extant, carved into rocky stretches encountered by the emigrants.

Springs, inscription rocks, campgrounds, and spectacular geological formations provide many features of historic interest

along emigrant roads, and a few trading posts, stage stations, or similar cultural sites are important. Some trees with chain and rope marks from emigrant use still can be identified, and rust stains of wagon tires upon softer rocks (but generally not rocks beyond iron on a scale of hardness) frequently mark and identify trail routes. Occasional emigrant graves can be found, and a few battle sites have been recovered. Stream crossings, including fords and ferry sites, were important in many emigrant road areas. Archaeological deposits, frequently including ox shoes or wagon parts, and less often consisting of abandoned furniture, weapons, or other possessions, can be found almost anywhere, but occur more frequently at stream crossings or campgrounds.

A large share of California's gold rush, which led to state admission in 1850, crossed part of southern Idaho on an emigrant road. Most of Oregon's early population--enough to justify state admission in 1859, arrived as Oregon Trail emigrants who crossed southern Idaho. Before 1860 almost all emigrants traveling through Idaho were trying to reach California and western Oregon destinations. But shortly after 1860, many of them returned to Idaho during a series of spectacular gold rushes. Emigrant wagons continued to roll across Idaho in large numbers after 1860, and even after rail construction diverted a lot of freight and passenger traffic to fast, comfortable trains, emigrant wagons continued to transport families to new homelands. Shortly after 1900, cars began to replace emigrant wagons and, within a little more than a decade, a new state highway system (often utilizing established routes) began to displace old emigrant wagon roads. With that transition, emigrant wagons began to disappear from city streets in Oregon Trail communities such as Parma, Caldwell, Boise, Twin Falls, Burley, and American Falls. But public interest in old emigrant wagon roads, that provided pioneer settlers for Idaho as well as for California and Oregon, has not diminished. Designation of Oregon and California routes across Idaho as National Historic Trails attest to Congressional interest in their significance.