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THREE ISLAND FORD

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A more formidable barrier than any other major ford on an emigrant road to Oregon or California, Three Island Crossing got a great deal of attention before Gus P. Glenn accommodated traffic with a ferry at an upstream site near there in 1869. Prior to Glenn's service, large numbers of emigrant wagons could not cross there at all. But anyone who failed had a longer, more difficult trip through a worse desert before reaching a point across from Fort Boise. There, they rejoined their regular Oregon Trail route to continue on westward past Vale without having to cross Snake River again. Each of those crossings caused considerable difficulty, but they were worth making because they offered access to a far superior route for wagon traffic. Local Indians had developed an eighteenth century trail from Glenns Ferry past Boise and Parma when they got horses from New Mexico to make travel easier. Some emigrant wagon drivers had used an alternate crossing farther upstream above Thousand Springs as early as 1852, and M. E. Payne installed a ferry there to compete with Glenn's ferry in 1870. But Payne's north side alternate included a steep grade at King Hill that made it less attractive. In any case, during high water, Glenn's ferry diverted any emigrant wagon drivers who could afford to pay his charges after 1869. So Three Island Crossing had its primary period fo traffic only for twenty-six years from 1843 to 1869.

Access to Three Island Crossing for westbound traffic always was awkward. A circuitous route up to a high bench directly above it had to be employed, both by wagons that crossed there, as well as by those that could not ford that river obstacle. Only two islands actually were used to facilitate crossing three channels of Snake River there. In more recent years--presumably since 1890, at least--a larger downstream island can be seen there, and no doubt that view of Three Islands from a long, steep access grade accounts for its more recent name. (River channels shift often enough that after a century or more has gone by, identification of earlier stream courses necessarily becomes dubious.) An Idaho state park has facilities that interpret Oregon Trail history there, and special events each year recognize how important this route (and its local surface evidence) is to this area's heritage.

(This information has not been edited.)

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