

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

HENRY HARMON SPALDING'S WAGON ROUTE FROM GREEN RIVER TO FORT HALL, JULY 18-AUGUST 3, 1836

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When Henry Harmon Spalding decided to participate in a western Indian mission in 1836, his father-in-law, Levi Hart of Holland Patent, New York, decided to contribute a wagon to that enterprise. Since he gained an appointment to serve an Osage people of southeastern Kansas, Hart's wagon was an appropriate addition to Spalding's equipment. Then in February, 1836, Marcus Whitman talked Henry and Eliza Spalding into changing his destination to Idaho's Nez Perce applicants instead. By that time, Spalding already was on his way with his wagon to later Kansas, so he ended up using it to get to what then was a foreign land of Oregon instead. Very few wagons had crossed into that land from Missouri at all by that time, although B.L.E. Bonneville had taken some as far as upper Green River in present northwestern Wyoming. Joining a fur trade supply company that summer, Whitman and Spalding reached Bonneville's wagon outpost a little west of modern Daniel in July. There they had to arrange to go onward with their wagon.

After he had built a modest outpost for his trapping enterprise near Daniel, he learned that winters there were too severe for an intelligent beaver hunter to settle there. So he went on to establish a better base on Salmon River in present Idaho. Aware that he could not drive his wagons over an existing trapper's route from upper Green River to Jackson Hole and Teton Valley (Pierre's Hole), he left them at his abandoned Green River camp. When Whitman and Spalding arrived there to meet their Nez Perce friends who wanted them to come to Idaho's Clearwater country, they faced a problem. Aware that they could not get their wagon over their applicants' direct Nez Perce route, they decided upon another option.

Thomas McKay and John McLeod were about to return from their Green River fur trade rendezvous to Fort Hall and Fort Boise. They had bought out a Hudson's Bay Company supply expedition from Fort Vancouver, and could escort Whitman and Spalding back toward that Columbia River supply base. Then Spalding could come on to present Idaho to establish his Nez Perce mission. That was exactly what Spalding did. But he still had problems with his wagon, which he preferred to take on to his Clearwater mission.

Setting out with his Hudson's Bay Company escort, July 18, he got ten miles without any great difficulty. Then after a

day's rest, his trapping band had to go "over many steep & high mountains" southwest of Daniel, Wyoming. Three more days of less difficult travel brought them to another eight-mile strenuous mountain crossing, July 24. They faced still worse obstacles a day later: their trail went along steep side hills between two mountains, where their wagon tipped over twice after getting stuck in a creek. Whitman had a very difficult time getting it out, and everyone could see that substantial improvements (eventually provided by F. W. Lander) were needed for a practical wagon route there. Descending into Star Valley, they had level going for a while, but upon entering future Idaho, they had a difficult time crossing a high ridge, July 28, that gave them access to upper Blackfoot River. Having an axle tree break did not help them on that segment of their drive.

Their remaining trip to Fort Hall proved tedious but involved no difficult obstacles. While their expedition camped near China Hat, July 30, Marcus and Narcissa Whitman took a ten-mile horseback ride to see one of Idaho's primary fur trade era attractions: Soda Springs. They thought that long side trip was worthwhile, but then they had to ride ten miles back to their camp, so they had a tiring day. They had a good enough natural wagon road until they reached Fort Hall, August 3. From there on, they had still greater difficulties on their way to Thomas McKay's outpost at Fort Boise. Having succeeded in getting their wagon that far--actually clear across later southern Idaho over a route that Whitman later succeeded in making into Idaho's primary Oregon Trail segment west of Fort Hall--they deposited their vehicle there for many years of local use. Actually, they had been unable to get it up a difficult grade above upper Salmon Falls in Hagerman Valley, so they had to leave their wagon box (which could be replaced) there, and take both sets of wheels as a cart as far as Fort Boise. Early wagon drivers in Idaho thus learned that they needed improvements to create a practical road.

(This information has not been edited.)

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