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REFERENCE SERIES

EMIGRANT ROADS AT RAFT RIVER JUNCTION

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When they reached Raft River, early westbound emigrants had to decide whether they wanted to settle in California (then part of Mexico) or in western Oregon, which belonged to no nation until 1846. Emigrants already had taken their wagons hundreds of miles across Oregon which they had entered at South Pass in what now is Wyoming. But in 1840, frontier farmers did not know how to raise crops in Oregon's arid plains until they reached Willamette Valley and other lower Columbia areas. California offered a much greater attraction, but until 1842, when Joseph B. Chiles found a practical route for wagons to get there, that possibility remained elusive. Although a convenient road over California's Sierra Nevada mountain range still was needed, Joseph R. Walker could show emigrants how to get there via Walker pass. In 1843, Chiles arranged to have Walker guide a California emigrant party up Raft River through Granite Pass (an option that Chiles had picked out), while he went to search for a possible road from Fort Boise to northern California.

Joseph B. Chiles and Joseph R. Walker got strong support for their California Trail route at Fort Hall, where Hudson's Bay Company fur trade management did not encourage settlers to go to Willamette Valley. That area was expected to become a United States possession whenever British authorities might agree to an international boundary that would settle that issue. But Richard Grant, a newcomer who took over Fort Hall when westbound emigrant wagons began to reach his post after 1840, found it hard to believe that anyone would want to take a wagon from Snake River to Willamette Valley. Wagons could not traverse his fur trade route, and although emigrants might find a way to get past some barriers, others were exceedingly difficult--particularly those west of The Dalles. But he had learned that California offered wonderful opportunities and was trying to arrange to go settle there himself. So he promoted California enthusiastically. Then when Joseph Applegate came back to Fort Hall in 1846 to lead emigrant wagons up Raft River and along a Nevada route to southern Oregon, Grant endorsed that possibility. So from 1846 on, Raft River offered access to western Oregon as well as to California.

Aside from other attractions, Raft River's California and Applegate Trail route led to a fabulous geological display at City of Rocks. Wagons that went that way passed within only a mile or two of that feature, so many emigrants stopped long

enough to go examine that marvel of nature. They had seen interesting rock spectacles during their long trip West, but City of Rocks had distinctive features that were truly amazing. They still attract visitors to an area that became a National Reserve (combining a National Historic Landmark and a National Natural Landmark) in 1988.

Emigrants who continued westward down Snake River toward Willamette Valley also came past significant features. Aside from those who managed to follow a special, but direct, British alternate route past Shoshone Falls, they missed Snake River's outstanding attraction. But farther on, they profited from access to John C. Fremont's Fishing Falls before coming past Salmon Falls in Hagerman Valley. At both of those Shoshoni Indian centers, they could trade for salmon and gain some welcome variety in their food stock. They had a north side option for a road where overgrazing had not become so much of a problem. That alternate became an important stage road after a series of gold rushes brought settlers to southern Idaho after 1862. Conditions for long wagon trips improved in some ways after stage stations and towns grew up along Oregon Trail segments. New sources for groceries, hay, and grain made emigrant wagon travel a lot less hazardous. So many families moving long distances continued to rely upon covered wagons until early twentieth-century automobiles helped to make such trips obsolete.

(This information has not been edited.)