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THE CALIFORNIA TRAIL IN IDAHO

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Thousands of restless emigrants crossed southeastern Idaho on their way to California over a road that has seen little or no use for the greater part of a century. This thoroughfare--the California Trail--carried a much larger total volume of traffic than did the Oregon Trail, which came into use at the same time, and which for part of its course through Idaho followed the same route. Although the California Trail had a number of alternatives, all of them came together in Idaho except for Hastings' terribly unsatisfactory cutoff over the salt flats west of Salt Lake. One of the most notable landmarks on the California Trail, in fact, was the City of Rocks in southern Idaho not far from the final junction of the major California routes.

Plans made in 1840 by the Western Emigration Society, a large Missouri organization, to depart in a long caravan for California led to the eventual opening of the California Trail. When the time came to leave, John Bidwell was the only one of the 500 members who actually showed up. But he was joined by a substantial number of others who had heard of the venture. When the resulting Bidwell-Bartleson party reached the bend of Bear River in Idaho, however, half of the sixty-two member group chose to open the Oregon Trail instead. The ones who turned south for California, moreover, did not manage to get their wagons very much farther, and completed their trip with great difficulty. But two years later, wagons crossed all of the Idaho portion of the California Trail--probably over a route selected by members of the original party returning east in 1842 to find a practical road. And finally in 1844, wagons traversed the trail all the way to California. Mormons coming eastward from California to Salt Lake in 1848 found an alternate route from the City of Rocks (in later Idaho) to the newly-established Latter-Day Saint communities in Utah, and the next year that route served westbound traffic--a portion of the forty-niners--as well. Other impatient forty-niners opened Hudspeth's cutoff across the southeastern Idaho that same season. Thus with the gold rush, the California Trail reached its full development.

Through 1848, emigration on the Oregon and California Trails through Idaho had gone predominantly to Oregon; by the time they reached Fort Hall--or Raft River at the latest--aspiring pioneers of the Pacific Coast had had to decide which to choose, and there had been considerable rivalry between the two. Agents for Oregon and for California had been coming to Fort Hall to try to divert settlers their way; and when it looked as if California might claim the easier route, attempts were made to get Oregon emigrants to use the California Trail through Idaho and then to turn north to Oregon over the Applegate Trail, which opened in 1846.

Stamped to the new gold fields in 1849, some 22,500 expectant miners sped over the California Trail. The road continued to get heavy use, and in the following eight years, the total had risen to an estimated 165,000. (Traffic volume during and following the Civil War is hard to ascertain; but even after transcontinental railway service left the California Trail obsolete in 1869, emigrants in covered wagons continued to pour over the Oregon and California Trails.) No other emigrant wilderness road of similar length in the United States came anywhere near matching the record of the California Trail. And since later stage and freight lines could not make much use of large parts of the Idaho segment of the California Trail, tracks remaining today are the marks that thousands of covered wagons gouged into the ground.

Additional information may be found in George R. Stewart, The California Trail (1962); Dale L. Morgan, ed., The Overland Diary of James A. Pritchard from Kentucky to California in 1849 (1959); G. W. Read and R. P. Gaines, eds., Gold Rush (1944); David M. Potter, ed., Trail to California (1945, 1962); Irene D. Paden, Wake of the Prairie Schooner (1943) and Prairie Schooner Detours (1949); and Jay Monaghan, Overland Trail (1947).

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