

Oregon Central Military Wagon Road

Willamette National Forest

History

In 1864, a group of investors from the Eugene-Springfield area formed the Oregon Central Military Wagon Road Company for the purpose of building a road through the Cascades. As a land grant road, the company would receive alternating parcels of land on each side of the road as payment for road construction. The road was to link the upper Willamette Valley with the southern and eastern portions of the state. Although the road was used for a variety of reasons, the initial emphasis was on furnishing cattle to the mining areas in eastern Oregon. By the 1870's, cattle continued to be driven east to stock herds in south-eastern Oregon or to railheads such as Winnemucca, Nevada.

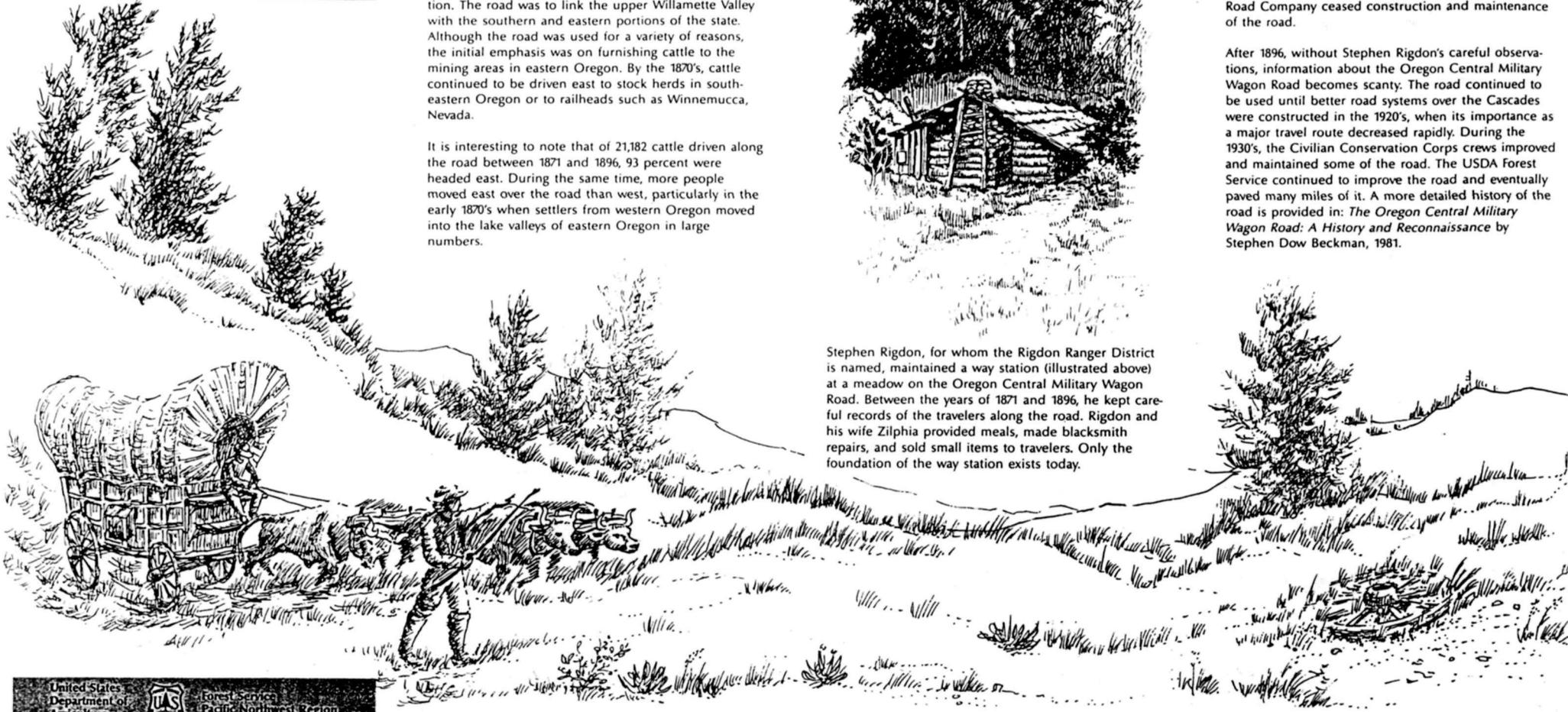
It is interesting to note that of 21,182 cattle driven along the road between 1871 and 1896, 93 percent were headed east. During the same time, more people moved east over the road than west, particularly in the early 1870's when settlers from western Oregon moved into the lake valleys of eastern Oregon in large numbers.



Stephen Rigdon, for whom the Rigdon Ranger District is named, maintained a way station (illustrated above) at a meadow on the Oregon Central Military Wagon Road. Between the years of 1871 and 1896, he kept careful records of the travelers along the road. Rigdon and his wife Zilphia provided meals, made blacksmith repairs, and sold small items to travelers. Only the foundation of the way station exists today.

Road surveys started in 1864 and construction of the road began in 1865. One of the first segments was built by 75 American Indians from the Siletz Reservation under the guidance of Indian Agent Benjamin Simpson. Simpson received \$26,000 to build the 46 miles from Butte Disappointment to Pine Opening. By 1868, most of the road from Eugene to Klamath Marsh was completed. In 1870, the Oregon Central Military Wagon Road Company ceased construction and maintenance of the road.

After 1896, without Stephen Rigdon's careful observations, information about the Oregon Central Military Wagon Road becomes scanty. The road continued to be used until better road systems over the Cascades were constructed in the 1920's, when its importance as a major travel route decreased rapidly. During the 1930's, the Civilian Conservation Corps crews improved and maintained some of the road. The USDA Forest Service continued to improve the road and eventually paved many miles of it. A more detailed history of the road is provided in: *The Oregon Central Military Wagon Road: A History and Reconnaissance* by Stephen Dow Beckman, 1981.



Location

The Oregon Central Military Wagon Road stretches from Eugene to southeastern Oregon and crosses four National Forests (Willamette, Deschutes, Winema and Fremont), but this brochure is concerned only with the segment located on the Rigdon Ranger District. This portion of the road covers approximately 33 miles along the Middle Fork of the Willamette River from the boundary of the Rigdon District at Oakridge to the Beaver Creek area. At this point, it heads northward, crosses the Cascade Divide, and enters the Deschutes National Forest.

Points of Interest

Several areas that are of historical interest are located on the Rigdon Ranger District segment of the wagon road. These areas are indicated on the accompanying map.

Sand Prairie

Part of the Oregon Central Military Wagon Road lies beneath Hills Creek Reservoir and then emerges in the present day Sand Prairie Campground. An interpretive sign is located at the entrance of the campground.



Rigdon Meadows

Stephen Rigdon's way station was located in the meadows that bear his name. The meadows were also used extensively by American Indians, early settlers, the Civilian Conservation Corps, and the Forest Service. This long period of human occupation is evidenced by rock foundations, metal debris, and Indian sites in the area.

A short, well-preserved 1/2-mile section of the road is available for hiking to the east of Rigdon Meadows. The trailhead is located near the Oregon Central Military Wagon Road sign at the entrance to Sacandaga Campground.

Indigo Springs

Indigo Springs, another developed Forest Service recreation site, is the location of a well-defined portion of the road. The beginning of this 1/2-mile segment is marked by an Oregon Central Military Wagon Road sign on the east side of Indigo Creek.



Beaver Creek

Another well-defined portion of the road with visible wagon wheel ruts is located near Beaver Creek. Surrounding stumps are evidence that trees were cut down to ground level to allow passage of the wagons.

Alpine Lake

A small section of the road is located next to Alpine Lake. This segment includes carved grooves where wagon wheels have cut into exposed bedrock. The location is marked by an Oregon Central Military Wagon Road sign on Forest Service Road 2154380.

PLEASE NOTE: A recently completed management plan for the Oregon Central Military Wagon Road emphasizes enhancement of its historical and interpretive values for public enjoyment. The Oregon Military Central Wagon Road is protected by the Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979. Your cooperation in preserving these valuable cultural resources by not disturbing them or collecting cultural remains is appreciated.

For further information, please contact the Rigdon Ranger District, 49098 Salmon Creek Road, Oakridge, OR 97463; phone 782-2283.

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