



# Scotts Bluff *National Monument*

N E B R A S K A

# Scotts Bluff

## NATIONAL MONUMENT

*A Landmark on the Oregon Trail*



United States Department of the Interior, J. A. Krug, *Secretary*

National Park Service, Newton B. Drury, *Director*

Scotts Bluff was a landmark and a favorite campsite on the Oregon Trail, that great natural highway to the Far West. Although it was named for the mysterious fur trader, Hiram Scott, who, according to tradition, was abandoned by his companions to die here in 1828, the bluff is historically associated with the mass migration across the treeless plains between 1843 and 1869. Emigrants seeking homes in Oregon, gold in California, or a religious haven in Utah, all passed this natural promontory. Englishmen, Irishmen, Germans, and others of European nationality joined native-born Americans in the arduous journey to the "promised land." Most of the emigrants were poor in worldly goods, but all had a wealth of determination, resolute courage, and confidence in the American way of life.

This way of life, this faith in American democracy, was nurtured, tempered, and revitalized by the rigors of the Trail. Freedom of thought, freedom of action, and equality of opportunity inspired the pioneers who followed the Oregon Trail, and it was they who extended these principles of Americanism beyond the Rocky Mountains. Today, as a national monument, Scotts Bluff is a symbol of that spirit and a memorial to the covered wagon emigrants who carried it westward.

### *Early Life in the Region*

This bluff was once part of the ancient High Plains. Erosion over long periods of time has cut the surrounding valleys down to their present

*View from third tunnel, Scotts Bluff Summit Road.*



level, leaving Scotts Bluff and the adjoining hills as remnants of the unbroken plains which now lie farther to the west. These erosional islands remain because of their position between drainage lines—the last remnants to be worn away.

The North Platte Valley, of which Scotts Bluff is the dominant natural feature, has been a human migration corridor for countless centuries. Some stone artifacts found in the valley indicate an antiquity of more than 10,000 years. When white men first arrived here they found that this was a favorite hunting ground of Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe Indians, for here vast herds of buffalo came to water.

The first known white men to see the bluff were Robert Stuart and his 6 companions, bearing dispatches to John Jacob Astor from his new fur post in Oregon. They spent the winter of 1812-13 on a cottonwood island nearby. During the 1820's Scotts Bluff was frequently passed by trappers and traders when taking their beaver pelts from the Rocky Mountains to the settlements. Among the early visitors were such famous frontiersmen as William Ashley, James Bridger, and Thomas Fitzpatrick.

### *A Landmark of Western Migration*

In 1830, the fur traders Jedediah Smith, William Sublette, and David Jackson took the first

wagons over the Oregon Trail, by Scotts Bluff. The first missionary to the northwest, Jason Lee, accompanied the Wyeth expedition by this site in 1834. The wives of Marcus Whitman and Reverend Spalding were the first white women to see Scotts Bluff, in 1836. In 1841, Father De-Smet followed the Trail with the Bidwell party, the first real emigrants. Fremont's first expedition came by in 1842, and S. W. Kearny's dragoons in 1845. In 1846, Francis Parkman, the most famous of the Oregon Trail historians, met the Sioux near Scotts Bluff and was invited to a meal of dogmeat.

It was not until 1843 that the first large migration to Oregon, a vanguard of a great pioneer army, passed Scotts Bluff. On they came in their white-topped wagons, rolling toward the sunset despite the hazards of the Trail—snow, desert dust, flood, quagmire, marauding Indians, and cholera—that laid thousands in trail-side graves. In 1847, Brigham Young led the first group of his followers past Scotts Bluff on the north side of the Platte, which route later became known as the Mormon Trail. The migration boom really got under way in 1849, following the discovery of California gold. That year the American Fur Company set up a trading post 8 miles south of Scotts Bluff; while 8 miles to the west Roubidoux, a Frenchman with a Sioux wife, erected a blacksmith shop to accommodate the emigrants.

In order to avoid the obstacles imposed by

*Oregon Trail trough near Mitchell Pass, looking east.*



Scotts Bluff and its badlands, the Trail originally turned away from the river, passing to the south of Scotts Bluff, and crossing the ridge at Roubideaux Pass. However, in the early 50's, it was discovered that Mitchell Pass would accommodate wagons, and thereafter the Trail followed through what is now the national monument. Today "Scotts Bluff" refers to the one large promontory, but earlier the entire ridge, including the present day "Wildcat Hills," was frequently included in the term. Thus in emigrant journals "Scotts Bluff Pass" or "the spring at Scotts Bluff," often refers to the Roubideaux site.

### *Later History*

In 1860-61, Pony Express riders galloped through Mitchell Pass. They were followed by the first transcontinental telegraph. Dismayed by the tempo of the white men's progress, the Plains Indians went on the warpath, attacked stage coaches and emigrant trains, and burned telegraph poles. To protect lines of communication Fort Mitchell was established as an outpost of Fort Laramie in 1864. It was named after Gen. Robert B. Mitchell and located 2½ miles northwest of the present monument headquarters.

In 1865, Gen. Grenville M. Dodge surveyed the North Platte Valley through Mitchell Pass. It was considered a possible route for a transcontinental railroad, but the present route through

Cheyenne was finally selected instead. The completion of the Union Pacific in 1869 marked the decline of the Oregon Trail as a transcontinental route, although it continued in use locally for many years.

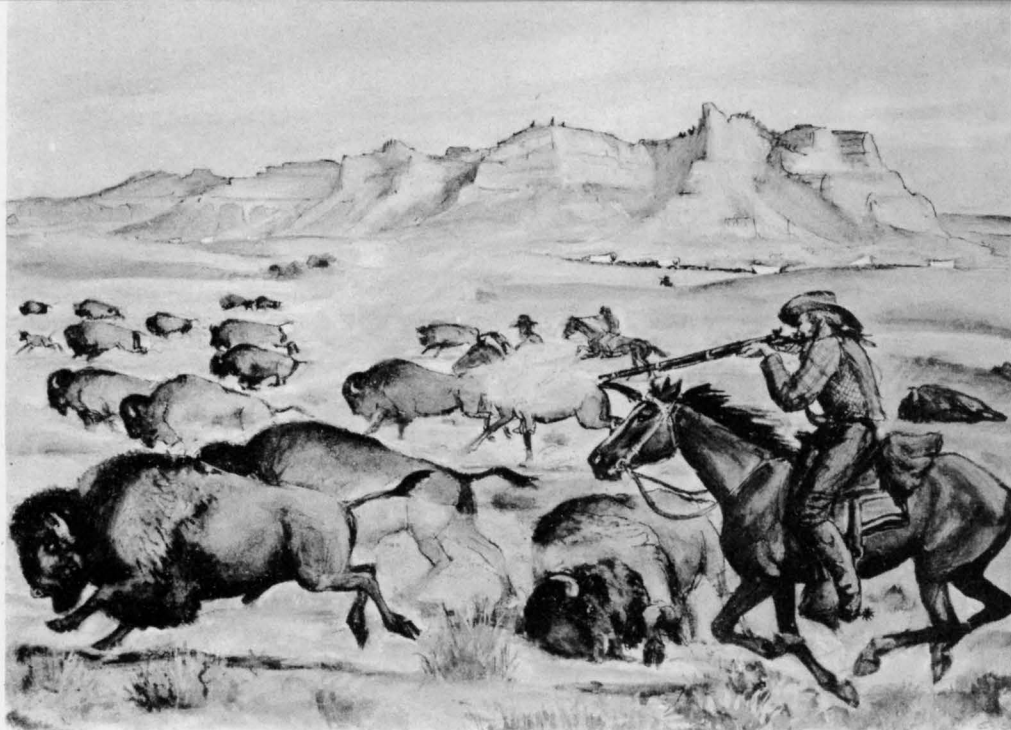
During a brief pause in Indian hostilities, from 1871 to 1873, the Red Cloud Agency was located west of Scotts Bluff near the present Nebraska-Wyoming boundary. Its removal marked the last of the "Wild Indians" in this region. During the late 70's and early 80's Scotts Bluff was the geographical center of the range cattle industry, the last great romantic episode of the frontier. The arrival of the first homesteader in the North Platte Valley, in 1885, marked the disappearance of the frontier, and Scotts Bluff, the Oregon Trail mark, remained important only as a symbol of America's past.

### *Features of Interest for Visitors*

Except for intermittent stretches of cultivation, or where modern roads have been superimposed, the trough of the old Trail, ground down by the passage of a quarter of a million emigrants, can still be traced across the continent. At Scotts Bluff it can be seen from the trans-monument highway south of the east entrance, across from the headquarters area, and through Mitchell Pass. Here are a marker and a parking area, from which point one can walk

*View from summit, looking toward city of Scotts Bluff.*





*Hunting buffalo. Water-color painting in museum.*

over the Oregon Trail for a mile along the west slope of the bluff.

Visitors are invited to inspect the museum at the headquarters area. The main wing, featuring water-color drawings, relics, and two dioramas of the buffalo hunters, tells the story of the westward migrations. A second wing contains exhibits which tell the story of the rocks and the fossils at Scotts Bluff.

There are 1.6 miles of paved road to the summit of Scotts Bluff, which offers a sweeping panorama of the North Platte Valley. At the north promontory there is an observation point that assists the visitor to trace the old Oregon Trail route. It serves also to locate historic landmarks, including Chimney Rock, 25 miles east, and Laramie Peak, 120 miles west. There is an annual automobile fee of 25 cents for the use of this road, which is collected at the gate adjoining the museum building. For those who prefer walking, there is a foot-trail from the museum to the summit.

### *The National Monument*

Scotts Bluff National Monument is a part of the National Park System and is administered

by the National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior. Established in 1919, the monument consists of 3,476.28 acres, including 1,279.83 acres of non-Federal land, adjoining the south bank of the North Platte, 3 miles from Gering, and 5 miles from the city of Scottsbluff. It is intersected by State Highway 86, the "Oregon Trail Highway," which connects with U. S. Highway 26 north of the river and U. S. Highway 30, 50 miles to the South. It is accessible also by the Burlington and Union Pacific Railroads.

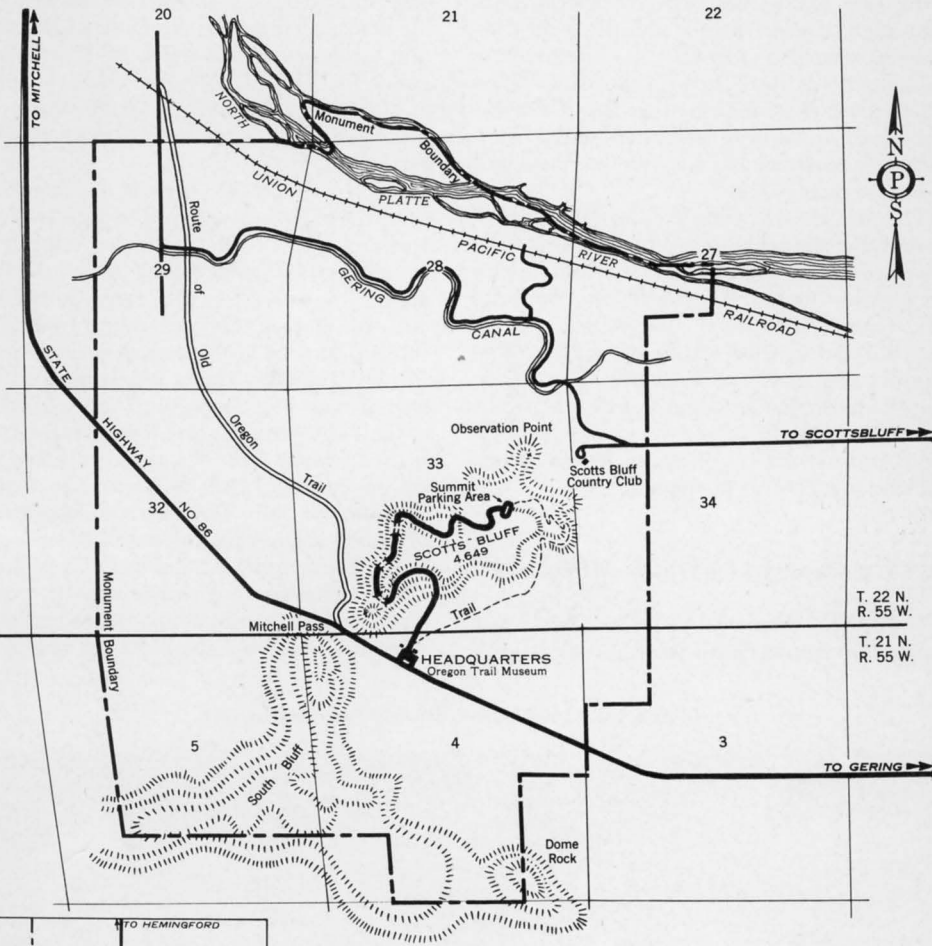
### *Regulations and Administration*

Visitors are requested to note that it is unlawful to disturb flowers, trees, or any other vegetation; to carve initials or otherwise deface structures, signs, or natural features; to throw rocks; to trap, hunt, or carry firearms; or to drive off the established roads. No picnicking facilities are provided at the monument.

Inquiries and communications should be addressed to the Custodian, Scotts Bluff National Monument, Gering, Nebr.

# SCOTTS BLUFF NATIONAL MONUMENT

## NEBRASKA



T. 22 N.  
R. 55 W.  
T. 21 N.  
R. 55 W.



VICINITY MAP

