



A TRAIL INTO THE PAST: "EXPERIENCE THE OREGON TRAIL"



This trail will take you back in time to experience some of the conditions the emigrants faced as they crossed this expansive continent. This was the largest peacetime migration in the history of the world. The first migration of wagons through this area occurred in 1843 and the peak use of the Oregon Trail was in the 1850's. Emigrants continued to use the trail heavily into the 1860's.

This guide to "Experience the Oregon Trail" is similar to some of the guide books that emigrants purchased which described landmarks and provided information to help them make the journey across the country. Like the emigrants, read ahead so you know what to anticipate when you travel the trail. The quotations are from journals written by the emigrants and soldiers who were here.

The text of this brochure should be read as you travel along the Emigrant Trail. A trail map is provided on the last page. A watch is helpful but not essential. If you intend to travel this trail by horseback, refer to the equestrian information on the last page. To retain the historic nature of this trail, bicycles and other vehicles are prohibited.

Before hiking, be sure to read the cautions on the trail head exhibit and on the last page of this brochure; the U.S. Cavalry might not be along this month to rescue you!

1. Start Across the Road from the Snake River Overlook

Stop at the Register box. Emigrants likely camped and grazed their livestock on this flat. Imagine you are breaking camp and hitching the teams to the wagons for the day's journey ahead.

In making this overland journey, you

departed St. Louis, Missouri in April, and it is now July. There is no road other than the trail you are about to trudge along.

The emigrants' stiff leather shoes have no left or right; they are all built with the same shape. Imagine you have walked 1,300 miles, and have another 700 to go. Yes, that's walked! The wagons are jammed with your supplies and meager belongings.

"All who were able walked most of the time as we could easily keep pace with the train. The old people and the little tots rode." —*Martha Gay Masterson, 1851.*

The countryside is bleak; day after day the landscape is sagebrush.

"It all seemed to be a dream, and could hardly be realized. The journey was not yet accomplished by several hundred miles; ...and the route from Fort Hall to this place, of all countries for barrenness I have ever seen, it certainly exceeds any. I doubt if it can be equaled in any part of this continent." —*Major Osborne Cross, 1849.*

This is a difficult journey. The typical July temperature is 100 degrees mid-day. Seldom is water accessible that's sufficient for drinking, bathing or washing clothes.

"Heat again became oppressive, the dust stifling, and the thirst at times almost maddening. In some places we could see the water of the Snake winding through the lava gorges, but we could not reach it, as the river ran in the inaccessible depths of the canyon." —*Ezra Meeker, 1852.*

You are beginning to dread leaving this wagon camp of last night. It was so refreshing to go to the Snake River where you dipped your tired feet and carefully washed. It's a cold, fast flowing and dangerous river.

"...while watering, some of the cattle swam over the river. One of the men swam after

them, but before he got across sank to rise no more. He left a wife and three small children." —*Elizabeth Smith, 1847.*

It's good the barrels are full because water won't be available for another two days until the Snake River is again reached at the Three Island Crossing. Last night, the oxen fed well on the lush green grass by the River. Tonight the grazing will be sparse. Water is the lifeblood of this desolate country. Even waterfowl gather here because the countless springs keep ice from forming in the Snake River.

"The bank on the opposite side of the river ...looked in many places as if it were a solid mass of masonry...We came to where the water burst forth from the rocks in many places, ...and formed a very beautiful cascade in its descent to the river, making the whole scene of beauty seldom to be met with." —*Charles Preuss, 1843.*



You are in the territory of Native Americans the emigrants call the Shoshone, Bannock, and Paiute tribes.

"Here we found Indians, ready to trade salmon for anything we had to spare, but shirts were their greatest want, many of them having only what covering nature furnished." —*P.V. Crawford, 1851.*

The typical bread tastes even better with the fish. What a nice break from the salt pork, rice, and beans.

Matters between the emigrants and Indians have not always remained peaceful over the years.

"One 1851 emigrant who was missing a horse, presumably to Indian thievery, resolved to kill the next Indian he saw. He did—shooting from behind a rock an unsuspecting Indian who was busy spearing salmon in the Snake River." —*John Unruh*.

Journals do not mention any emigrants were attacked here. The Wagon Master says the United States Cavalry occasionally patrols and protects travelers along the Oregon Trail, but there are too few soldiers for the tremendous number of miles.

"Some of the soldiers came to our camp and talked to us about the country through which we were passing, and told us about the different Indian tribes we would encounter and advised us to treat them kindly."

—*Martha Gay Masterson, 1851.*



The emigrants are shooting and scaring away game, and are fouling water holes. Hostilities are growing between the emigrants and the Indians. At a U.S. Cavalry encampment called Camp Reed established for a short time about five miles upriver and south of Salmon Falls Creek, orders advise:

"In your efforts to clear that section of country of Indians and protect the travel, it would be well to remember, that sharp and hard chasing is the most effective means that can be employed. Do not permit yourself to be impressed upon by any exhibition of friendliness on the part of the Indians in your vicinity. There are no friendly Indians there. Drive them all off from the road entirely, and pursue and hunt them to their hiding places." —*Lt. Col. Jno M. Drake to Lt. Currey, Commanding Officer, Camp Reed, August 22 and September 10, 1865 (Note: Lt. Curry and 20 soldiers in a search and destroy campaign*

killed three Indians, captured three others, destroyed six fisheries and drove the remaining, frightened Indians into the hills).

This order is not consistent with many journal entries that say the Indians here are peaceful.

"Most of the soldiers were recruits with little training... [who] earn \$15 a month. For the troopers, the day began with reveille at 3 a.m. By 4:30 they were mounted and ready to march." —*Major Osborne Cross, 1849.*



Many men are joining the Army to get paid to come west, and some are tempted to join the emigrants even though the risk is great.

"Private William Huston, Company E, First Oregon Cavalry, deserted on the night of the 26th—he was shot and killed the next morning by the party sent after him." —*Dispatch from Lt. Currey, Commanding Officer of Camp Reed, to Lt. Col. Jno M. Drake, July 31, 1865.*

Fort Hall which you passed more than a week ago, and Fort Boise four days to the West weren't built by the military. They are fur trading posts, and the demand of beaver pelts for hats is dwindling so the "Forts" may not remain open.

Most of the wagons head up the ridge to the north. The Snake River on the other side of that ridge deeply carved its course to form the "Devil's Backbone," barely wide enough for a team of oxen; no one rides in the wagon unless necessary. Surviving that trail segment, a difficult climb for the wagons along the ridge to the top of the plateau remains. You are going up the adjacent canyon to avoid their dust.

"On approaching these bluffs one would suppose that it would be impossible ever to get over them; but, on the contrary, we find that there are ravines and gorges which, after winding about them for some time, bring us to the top, where the bluffs disappear, and we find ourselves traveling over apparently a level country." —*Major Osborne Cross, 1849.*

...Well, enough jawin'.

2. Let's Get Movin', Says the Wagon Master

The trail heads west up the canyon. Notice the canyon is quiet as you trudge along, except for the noise made by the people you may be with, the creak of the wagons, the bellowing of livestock, and clanking of their chain rigging behind and in front of you.

"I did not realize until today how great was the tide of emigration. The [wagon] trains passed our camp like the flow of a river...Some have mules, others horses, but the greatest number have oxen..." —*Lodisa Frizel, 1850.*

"Here was a moving mass of humanity and dumb brutes, at times mixed in inextricable confusion, a hundred feet wide or more." —*Ezra Meeker, 1852.*

After walking for about fifteen minutes, be sure to follow the trail into the **first canyon to the right**. Your livestock can't handle extra miles with no water ahead tonight.

You'll begin to notice some distinct layers in the slopes. You might wonder how these layers got here. The Wagon Master says the light colored, continuous layer looks like the volcanic ash that comes from about 300 miles to the northeast. It must have blown here after a volcano erupted. Watch how these layers change as you continue up the canyon.

Surveyors mapped some of this country before your wagons rolled through here. Not only that, they found fossil bones many places in the west. Experts say they can tell a lot about ancient animals from their fossil bones. These scientists say the soil layers here look like they were deposited by repeated floods over hundreds of thousands of years flowing into the ancient Lake Idaho to the west. The Lake eventually drained and helped carve out Hells Canyon to the Columbia River. Hard to figure things that far back; it's tough enough to remember what day it is.

You'll see some areas on the slopes that don't grow any vegetation. You know it's terribly hot, but there are shrubs elsewhere—how come? It's a complicated story.

Some say that the earth is constantly changing. Rock deep in the earth gets so hot that it melts. This molten "lava" rises with intense heat and seeps out of cracks in the earth's crust to flow across the landscape. It cools into "basalt" that you saw as the dark rocks of the canyon farther back up the Snake River. 'Round here, they call the low, rocky volcanoes "buttes" and there's a bunch of them.

"...A dreary, sandy plain...was of volcanic formation and a solid mass of basalt."

—Major Osborne Cross, 1849.

One of the school teachers on this wagon train says that one of these lava flows blocked the Snake River and formed what they call McKinney Lake. The waters backed up and left clay deposits called Yahoo (now that's either Ya hoo, or Yey hoo, depending on who you listen to) named after the Gulch near last night's camp. The clay holds the water so tightly that plants have a hard time getting their roots to make the soil particles let go of the moisture—so there isn't much vegetation. There you have your answer.

More recently, the huge Lake Bonneville overflowed its bank, causing a flood that lasted about eight weeks and carved out the deep Snake River Canyon that made it so hard to get water on this journey. The Great Salt Lake is what's left and it's only about twenty percent the size of the original Bonneville.

What about the animals? Bet you haven't seen many critters since you started hiking. Wagons and their noise might scare 'em off, but mostly they only come out at night—they're nocturnal. In the late summer when it's so hot, some go into a partial hibernation state called estivation to reserve their body moisture. You probably wish you could rest in the heat of the day too. Better drink some water; you might need it more than you think. When you feel really thirsty, it's too late. If you're startin' to get a headache, you waited much too long. Take it easy on yourself. You have a long way to go.

Birds are probably a bit more plentiful. Hawks and even golden eagles hunt the rodents out here. Burrowing owls live in the ground in some locations. You might also see a raven or a magpie. Quail or sage grouse might be about. Song birds are common. Sometimes the migrating waterfowl can be seen flying high above.

3. Start Climbing the Grade (Have you read ahead?)

You're about an hour from where you started, and the trail starts to climb more steeply out of the canyon after crossing a deep gully. Another dreaded grade—but hopefully the livestock will last. If not, you have no way to carry the food you have left for the next two months journey across more rivers and through rugged mountains. As you rise up this slope, look over your shoulder at the endless stretch of sagebrush you've already crossed.



"I felt tired and weary...It tries the soul...O the luxury of a house. That this journey is tiresome, no one will doubt, that it is perilous, the deaths of many testify, and the heart has a thousand misgivings and the mind is tortured with anxiety, and often as I pass the fresh made graves, I have glanced at the side boards of the waggon, not knowing how soon it might serve as a coffin for some one of us..."

—Lodisa Frizzell, 1850.

The animals are pulling so hard to get the

wagons up these slopes. Their hooves dig the soil more deeply than wheels. This makes the trail look like a U-shaped trough in some places.

"Our oxen were very poor and weak. Teams were doubled to enable them to get them up hills. We cast out everything we could spare."

—Martha Gay Masterson, 1851.

If you look to your right across the canyon to the highest ridge, you might see the path most of the wagons take going up to the top of this bluff. Others take a more gradual slope around the far side of that ridge.

You're nearly at the top now. Just keep putting one foot in front of the other.

4. At the High Point, Rest a Spell

Once you reach the high point of the climb out of the canyon, the trail gradually goes down into the upper end of a gully. You might want to pause and rest. The goin' will be easy now until you camp at nightfall. Travel, travel, travel! That's the only way you'll make it to Oregon.

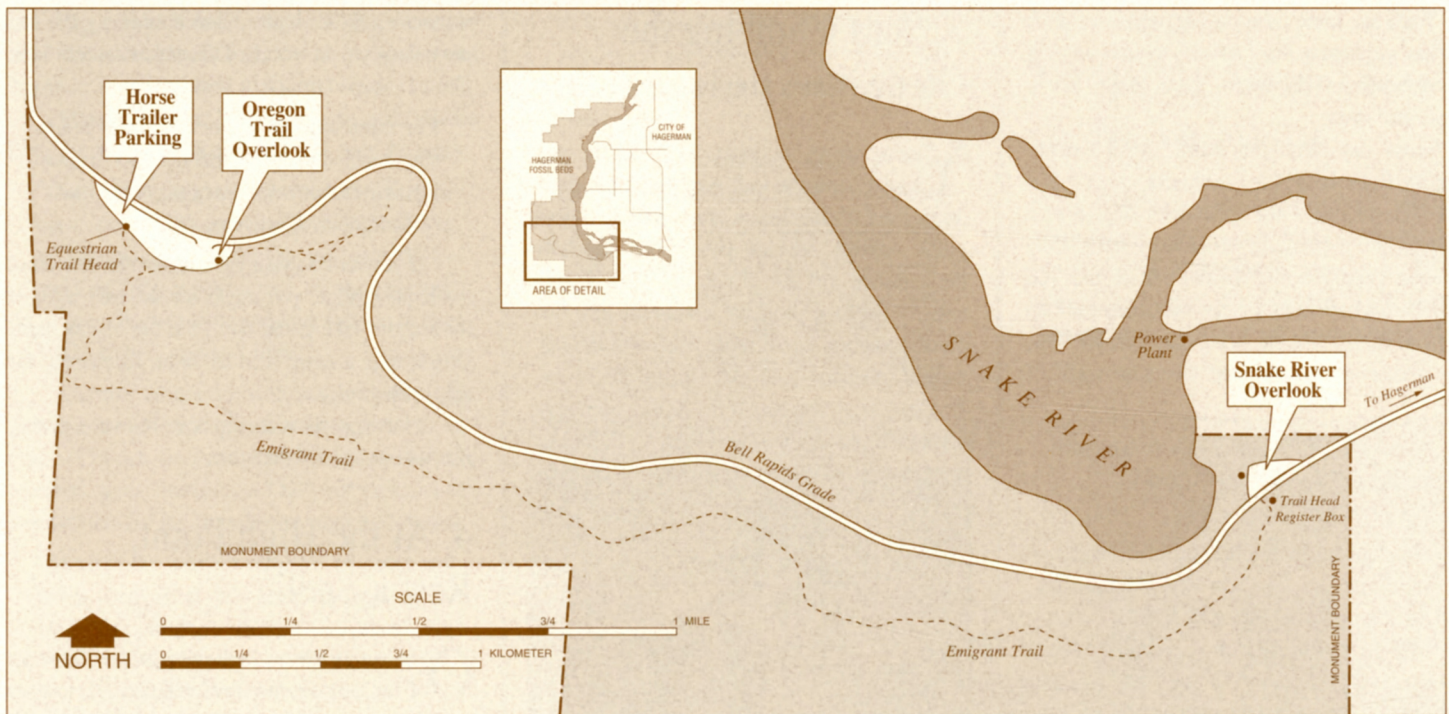
The plateau ahead isn't always a hospitable place, especially in thunderstorms:

"Those on top of the hill got the full benefit...of a norther in all its fury. Wagon covers were torn to pieces...Clouds of dust [were] so thick that the wagons were completely enveloped." —Major Osborne Cross, 1849.

After you pass the gully the trail continues along the bluff to your right. There are some wonderful views along the remaining one half mile to the parking lot at the Oregon Trail Overlook where you hopefully arranged to have a vehicle waiting. If you do not have a vehicle there and need to return where you started, you could turn around at this high point in the trail and save yourself a mile of travel.



The National Park Service hopes you enjoy this interpretive trail and that you experience some sense of what the Oregon Trail journey might have been like. This trail and brochure were made possible by American Airlines with a generous grant from their "Miles for Trails" program through the National Park Foundation.



Basic Information and Words of Caution (Also See Trail Head Sign)

From the trail head across from the Snake River Overlook, it is about three miles one way to the end of this trail at the top of the bluff. To go only three miles, you will need two vehicles. Park one vehicle at the top of the grade at the Oregon Trail Overlook parking lot and return to the trail head. If you have only one vehicle, you will have to return along the same trail, making the trip six miles.

The trail surface is soft in places. Wear sturdy shoes for hiking. There is a vertical rise of about 500 feet, mostly toward the end. If you tire excessively before you reach the top of the bluff, you should probably return back down the canyon.

Please, stay on the trail and **do not** go cross country. All travel is restricted to designated trails to protect the fossils. Remember, take only photographs. Do not pick flowers, other vegetation, or collect rocks or fossils. These are protected for the enjoyment of this and future generations.

Be prepared for sudden weather changes,

such as thunderstorms or high winds. You can chill very quickly. There are no restrooms or water anywhere along the trail. Carry what you need.

There are rattlesnakes and scorpions in the Monument. They will leave if you give them the chance. Because they are part of the natural environment that the National Park Service is protecting, you must not kill them. If you are bitten or stung, stay calm, and have someone get help. There are also ticks, so check your clothing periodically and your body when you have completed the hike. Staying on the trail will help minimize these risks.



A Special Message for Equestrians

If you travel the trail on horseback, horse trailers cannot use the Snake River Overlook parking lot; there is insufficient room. Horseback riders **must** start this trip near the **Oregon Trail Overlook** at the top of the bluff. Please park in the dirt west of the gravel area. Please be sure your horses have been eating Certified Weed

Free hay or cubes, as required by all of the National lands in Idaho. This will help prevent the introduction of noxious weeds in the Monument.

To get the full benefit of the wagon journal quotes in this brochure, ride down the trail from west to east until you reach the Register box near the **Snake River Overlook**. Then read the numbered segments of this brochure as you make the **return trip**.

THE EMIGRANT TRAIL



For additional information contact:

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