



NATURE'S SETTING

Remnants of the original grass and shrub communities encountered by the Oregon Trail emigrants at Keeney Pass can still be seen. In the bottom of the draw, the tall giant wildrye grass and basin big sagebrush occupies deep soils. Today, annual species such as cheatgrass and tumbled mustard have replaced many of these native plants.

Rising out of the drainage to the east, across Lytle Boulevard, a native upland plant community consists of Wyoming big sagebrush, numerous grasses, and herbaceous forbs. Scattered shrubs of bitterbrush, rabbitbrush, spiny hopsage, and purple sage also dot this area. In May, flowers of red Indian paintbrush, yellow Oregon sunshine, and blue sand penstemon brighten the landscape.

As you walk up the footpath, note the crested wheatgrass on the hillslope to your left. A native of Russia, it was seeded here in the 1960's to restore vegetative cover and help prevent erosion. It is favored as a nutritional feed by cattle and certain wildlife species.

The Oregon Trail pioneers saw less wildlife here, in contrast to what they observed during their travels through forests and wetlands along their way. A welcome sight may have been mule deer or antelope in small scattered groups. Black-tailed jackrabbits, badgers, and coyotes were the main species commonly encountered by the weary travelers. The non-native chukar partridge and pheasant seen here today were not introduced until the 20th century.

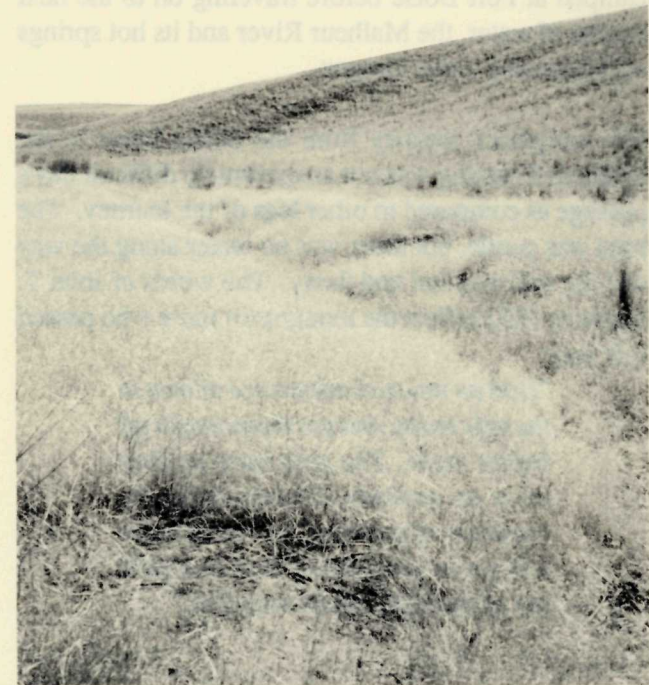


VALE DISTRICT OFFICE
100 OREGON STREET
VALE, OR 97918
(503) 473-3144



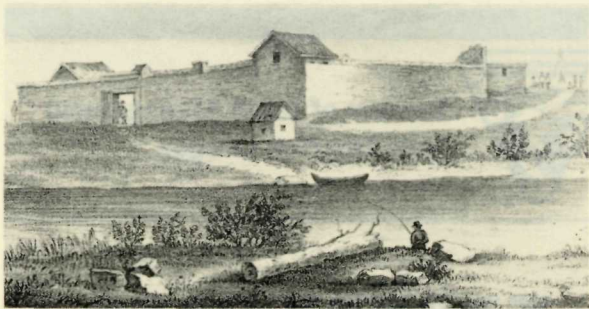
Bureau of Land Management
Vale District, Oregon

KEENEY PASS on the NATIONAL HISTORIC OREGON TRAIL



Jonathan Keeney led the life of an adventurous pioneer. In 1831, at the age of 19, he left Missouri to explore the Rocky Mountains with a company of men. Shortly after, he joined Jim Bridger of the American Fur Company and traveled throughout the west trapping and trading. In 1846, after returning to Missouri, Keeney took his family and headed across the plains, serving as a guide to the wagons which accompanied them. In the following years, he traveled several different places, practicing such professions as gold panning and cattle driving.

Keeney came to eastern Oregon, and in 1863, established a ferry along the Snake River just above the site where Fort Boise stood. In fall of the same year, he acquired some land and built a wayside inn at the site of present day Vale. Although no rooms were rented, the log cabin provided a place for travelers to rest. The inn was later sold to Louis B. Rinehart. In 1872, Rinehart replaced the log structure with a stone house which became known as the Vale Inn and was a gathering place for social activities. The stone house still stands today, and can be visited in the town of Vale.



View of Fort Boise' on Snake River, Oregon Historical Society, Neg. # 23244A

A DAY'S JOURNEY

A one-third mile walk to the overlook of the Keeney Pass footpath provides an excellent panorama of one day's journey for the Oregon Trail emigrants. Their day typically began at Fort Boise on the Snake River and ended fifteen miles north at the Malheur River. Fort Boise, built in 1834 and initially supervised by the Hudson's Bay Company as a trading post, served to provide the emigrants with a few supplies and a place to make wagon repairs. It was there that the wagons forded the Snake River. Upon crossing the river, the emigrants took their first steps in a frontier which later became the State of Oregon in 1859. Many rested and camped at Fort Boise before traveling on to the next source of water, the Malheur River and its hot springs at present day Vale, Oregon.

The emigrants' journey from the Snake River to the Malheur Crossing was not an extremely difficult day's passage as compared to other legs of the journey. The pass was gentle, but there was no water along the way and the trail was hot and dusty. The words of John T. Kerns in 1852 reflect the thoughts of those who passed this way:

"Had an unusual allowance of dust to the mile today, but got the most of it off before night...The girls have as dirty faces as anybody...Thanks be to the rewarder of troubles, 460 more miles will get us dirty-faced boys and girls out of this dirty faced kingdom."

Through these tired words one can still sense the optimism which lies behind them. The majority of their trip was over, but the end was not yet in sight. To the emigrants, it was just another day and they were that much closer to their final destination.

The hot springs at the Malheur Crossing provided the opportunity to bathe and wash clothes at the end of the long day's travel. There was also suitable water for the cattle and oxen. Some might stay for an extra day to better rest themselves and their livestock, yet, the need to move on was still critical.

Still ahead of them lay one of the most torturous portions of their journey...the Blue Mountains. The threat of an early snowfall and the need to build a winter's shelter at journey's end pushed the emigrants on to their destination and the beginning of a new life in western Oregon.



*Camp Scene - Crossing the Plains
1843-1859*

THE OREGON TRAIL

From 1843, when the first wagon train traveled the entire distance of the Oregon Trail, emigrants came to the West in search of a new and better way of living. Tales relayed by fur-traders and trappers of the fertile lands in the unknown wilderness encouraged the great migration and, in turn, national expansion. As an added incentive, the Donation Land Law was passed in 1850. This law, which applied specifically to the Oregon Territory, granted 640 acres of land to married couples who had resided for four years in the new land.

Of the estimated 315,000 emigrants who crossed the plains between 1843 and 1860, approximately 65,000 settled in Oregon. In order to preserve this part of our nation's heritage, Congress designated the 2,000 mile trail as the National Historic Oregon Trail in 1978. Today the trail is marked on public lands by concrete pillars and dark brown posts.