Overlanders in the Cosmic Landscape of the Snake River Region

Idaho State Historical Society, # 73-221.289/a

For overland migrants, vertical landscapes, such as City of Rocks, broke the monotony of the seemingly endless horizontal plains of the Snake River region.

Tourists BY Necessity

By Peter G. Boag

Architect Christian Norberg-Schultz has identified three types of landscapes: romantic, classical and cosmic. The latter of these geographer John A. Jackle characterizes as "infinite extensions of monotonous plain embraced by encircling vaults of sky. . . . They want for visual surprise and mystery. They are too easily known. . . . *Infinity* is a word that characterizes such places." Landscape visualization theory aside, overlander Esther Belle Hanna was more down to earth when she described Idaho's Snake River Plain on July 28, 1853, as "the most desolate and barren region on our whole route, & extends 150 or a thousand miles." Hanna's words betray her feelings that the Snake River Plain was a landscape of infinity; they also disclose that overlanders drew from a descriptive lexicon when characterizing the region.

The Snake River Plain arguably provided the most difficult set of circumstances that mid-19th-century migrants encountered on the journey west. Overlanders came to the region—a broad, open desert—during the summer when conditions were at their warmest and driest. And by the 1850s this section of the trail west had acquired a reputation as the most dangerous. For instance, Jared Fox, an 1852 migrant, noted on entering the plains:

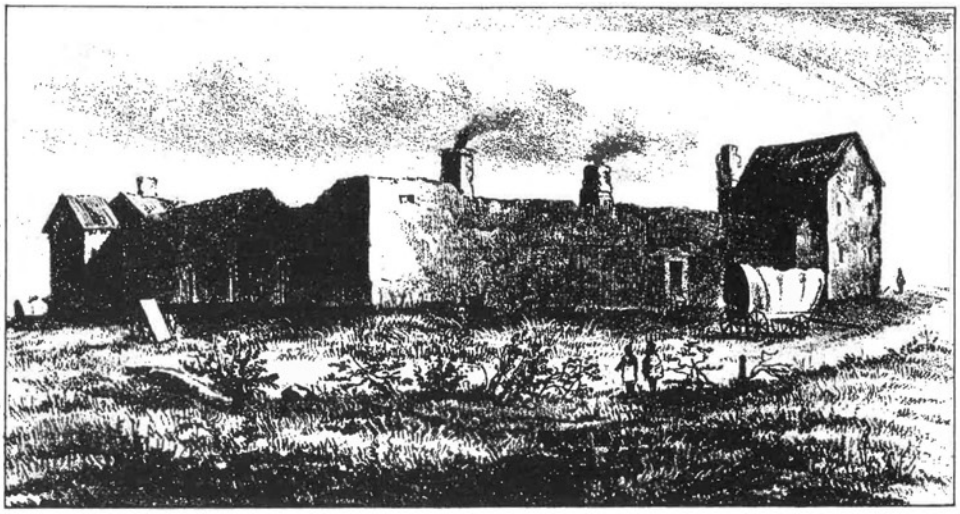
> Now *we come to the digger Indians & it is expected some of us will get rob[b]ed or killed. . . . We are cautioned to go in large trains. Now calls for patience, vigilance, courage, by night & by day. It is said that we are liable to have a ball or arrow at every crook & turn or rock or bush we come to. . . .*

Those traveling all the way to Oregon endured about 450 miles and one month of the Snake River Plain. Those heading

Overland Trail 150 YEARS

to California turned off about a third of the way through.

Circumstances of travel were not the only difficulties overlanders needed to overcome on the Snake River Plain. The monotonous scenery itself proved another formidable obstacle. Upon entering the region in the east overlanders' moods were usually cheerful. Emigrants found the landscape inviting for a number of reasons. First, for those heading to Oregon, the entrance onto the Snake River Plain signified, in a way, the last leg of the journey. The travelers realized



March of the Regiments, King County Library

American entrepreneur Nathaniel Wyeth built Fort Hall in 1834 near where the Oregon Trail later entered the Snake River Plain. By the time overlanders came West, the Hudson's Bay Company owned Fort Hall, and it became an important rest stop for weary pioneers.

they were now in the Columbia River region. Edward Evans Parrish announced on September 12, 1844:

> *To-day we passed over the divide between the waters of Bear River and those of Lewis [Snake] River. We are now drinking not only western waters, but the waters of the Columbia or Lewis River.*

Declared P. V. Crawford in 1851, "Here, north and west, an extensive sandy ridge plain opens out to view and here we begin to descend Snake river, whose waters we follow to our destination." Another reason for relatively pleasant outlooks was that this place—the junction of the Rocky Mountains, Columbia Plateau and Great Basin regions—provided varied and even refreshing scenery. George Belshaw related in 1853, "then we came out of the mountains and into a fine little val[l]ey . . . this is the Val[l]ey of Snake or Lewis river fork of Columbia plenty of snow to Our left all Day."

Amelia Hadley proclaimed in 1851, "Struck a beautiful pla[i]n which is called snake river valley." Narcissa Whitman related in 1835, "We have been in the mountains so long find the scenery of this valley very greatful to the eye. . . ."

As overlanders proceeded across the Snake River Plain, however, the monotonous nature of the scenery overwhelmed them. Visualization theorists inform us that when perceptual stimulus falls below a certain threshold, thereby failing to excite awareness, the sensing system becomes habituated. Both simple and complex landscapes can invite loss of acuity and result in the interpretation of a landscape as boring. This explains much about the overlanders' reactions to the Snake River Plain as they moved across it.

Within a few days of their initially positive responses, the above-mentioned informants, for example, responded quite differently. Amelia Hadley declared, "It seems the nearer we approach Oregon the worse roads we have, and a worse more rough looking country." And George Belshaw proclaimed, "The country here is very poor nothing but wild sage and Rocks soil good for nothing." Other overlanders agreed.

Esther Belle Hanna noted, "The country all along presents the most barren appearance nothing but sage. Hundreds and thousands of acres with no vestage of anything but this hateful weed." Maria Belshaw recorded, "Nothing but dust, rocks and sage brush and dead cattle." Amelia Knight responded, "As far as the eye can reach it is nothing but a sandy desert, covered with wild sage brush, dried up with the heat."

George Taylor declared, "General Appearance of the Country Covered with Sand and Sage Brush Inhabited with frogs Lizards and Indians." Abigail Scott lamented, "The country barren and sterile in the extreme." Her father Tucker echoed, "The country all around extremely barren." Jared Fox confided, "But a general thing it is a barren country." And P. V. Crawford noted, "The country here is extremely barren," adding the ultimate insult, "not even sage."

There is indication that some mid-19th-century Americans undertook the westward overland migration for purposes of adventure. In general, however, potential migrants did not undertake the trip lightly. Once on the trails west, however, adventure abounded. The late John D. Unruh, Jr., termed the "overland pilgrimage . . . nothing less than the discovery of a fantastic new nation," especially its scenery.

According to John A. Jackle, sightseeing is a search for stimulating views, an endeavor that is the antithesis of work and "represents a breaking of usual social ties and thus gives a sense of psychological freedom. . . . Tourists seek to escape from environments seen as mundane, to escape the drudgery of everyday places." The individual searches for both prospect (beautiful views) and refuge. Because of the forbidding and monotonous nature of the general Snake River

landscape, overlanders became tourists by necessity, searching for favorable prospect and refuge as relief.

As overlanders' eyes scanned the immense horizon of the Snake River Plain they searched for that which could relieve the monotony—especially those elements of landscape that provided vertical relief, such as distant mountains. Overlanders typically referred to "the three buttes" and the Tetons, the former rising directly from the plains, the latter bounding the eastern horizon. Abigail Scott declared:

> *Off the N.E. in the distance was plainly visible the three Tetons with their lofty* (snow capped) *summits reared high above all the surrounding mountains, and at the same time the three Buttes were visible in a N.W. direction from us presenting a truly romantic and poetical appearance.*

Esther Belle Hanna noted, "We have a delightful view, off to our right are the 3 [Tetons] . . . 151 miles distant." Margaret Frink related in 1850, "Fifty miles distant, northwest, the 'Three Buttes' rise high and bold out of the lava plain, and can be seen for a long distance." And Giles Isham wrote in 1849, "You see the three tetons North West of Fort Hall noted land marks of the mountaineers. . . ."

Waterfalls and the canyon of the Snake River were other vertical elements of the landscape that attracted overlanders' aching eyes. In 1853 George Taylor remarked "Above Salmon Falls on the North Side of the River there is some Perpendicular water falls of Over one thousand feet in heighth the Most Beautiful A Person Could Imagine."

In 1847 James Raynor disclosed, "A drive of five miles brought us to the falls, which are grand. The water falls 38 feet. . . ." William Watson declared in 1849:

> *Here are the greatest natural curiosities that I ever saw; the first one boiling out of the top of a bluff pouring down some two hundred feet, looking very beautiful. Within one mile below are ten more gushing out of the side of precipitous bluffs, one of them gushing out in a thousand different places, presenting some of the wildest grandeur. . . .*

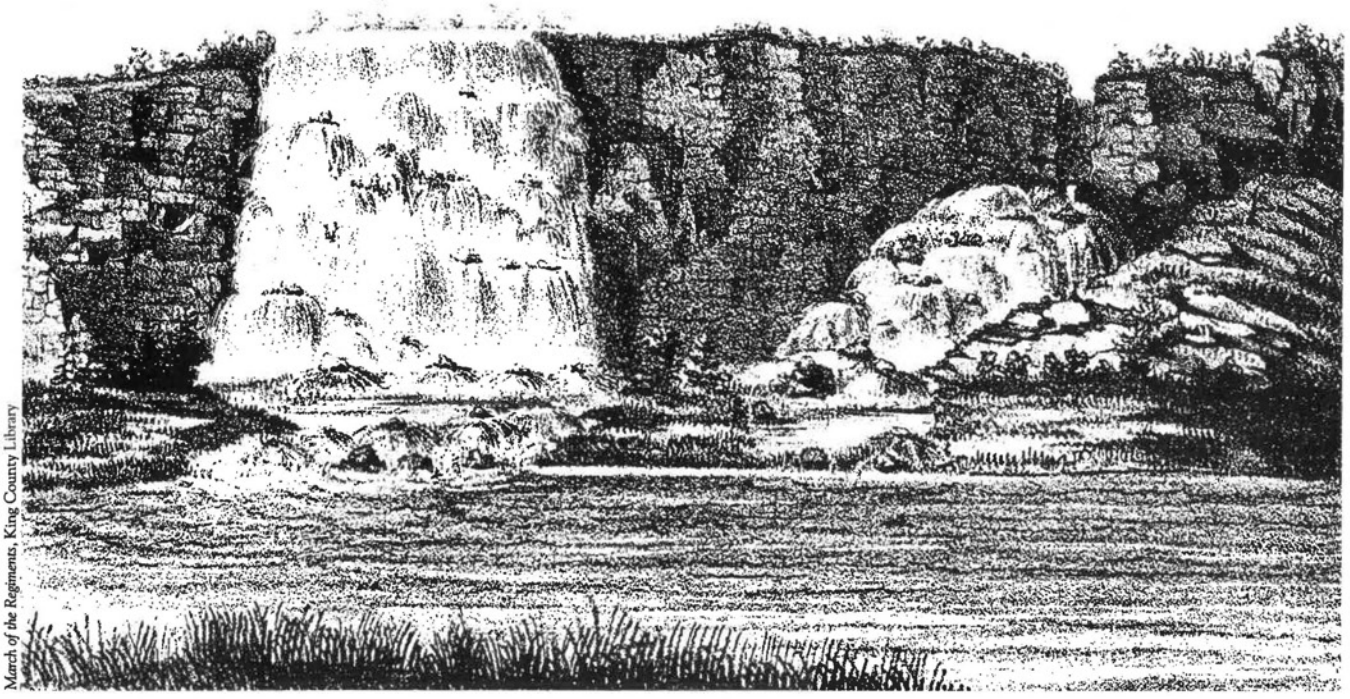
Abigail Scott related in 1852, "A beautiful spring gushes out from the bank in plain sight on the other side of the river and tumbles over the rocks. . . . These bluffs are at least one thousand feet high . . . " and "To day saw several bluffs on the other side of the river. Some of these have a fall . . . of four or five hundred feet." And in 1853 Rebecca Ketcham noted:

> *A beautiful waterfall on the opposite side of the river coming right out of the mountain about half way up. Looked at it through the spy glass. Mr. Gray thought the bank on the opposite side 1,000 or 1,200 feet high.*

Whereas the infinite horizontal of the Snake River Plain produced boredom in overlanders, vertical landscapes—mountains, canyon walls, and waterfalls—provided prospects worthy of positive comment. These elements of Snake River scenery also granted overlanders refuge, or at least the possibility thereof. Rebecca Ketcham related:

> *A long distance from the opposite shore the streams sink in the ground and are not seen till they come pouring out of the rock*

Thousand Springs, issuing from the basalt canyon walls of the Snake River, was among the more curious landscape features overlanders chanced upon. Emigrants often remarked how the sight refreshed drooping spirits.



March of the Regiments, King County Library

precipice into the river. How I did wish I could be there to see them more closely.

Maria Belshaw proclaimed of one waterfall, "It was a splendid sight of the west, especially for us while traveling through this dreary country." Esther Belle Hanna similarly enthused:

The falls here are very pretty falling over about 12 feet, there is a succession of them several miles down the river. We are now on the bank close by them, how I wish I could draw, what a beautiful picture I could make.

And while sitting on the bank near American Falls, Abigail Scott wrote in 1852, "I love this spot as It corresponds with my feelings."

The landscape feature known as City of Rocks, which borders the southern reaches of the Snake River region and lies along the route to California and southern Oregon, provided overlanders with refuge and a form of prospect best described as vista—a scene that is bounded or enframed. City of Rocks proved one of the most popular sights on the westward journey. In 1850 James Bennett noted that "hundreds of names are inscribed" there. And of all the individual sights in the Snake River region, overlanders spilled the most ink on City of Rocks in their journals. In 1849 Bernard Reid responded:

There were sphynxes and statues of every size, and haystacks and wigwams and castles, and towers, and pyramids and cones and projecting turrets and canopies, and leaning columns . . . a thousand varieties of fantastic shapes. The dell is bounded on the south by an immense wall on which rise at intervals tall conical towers of bare rock. Through this wall we passed by a grand gateway guarded on either side by one of those gigantic watch towers. I call them the "Pillars of Hercules."

Four days later Elisha Douglass Perkins declared:

Piles of white & brown rocks of all shapes and sizes . . . . Camped against a huge rock standing entirely isolated from its fellows & being nearly perpendicular for 100 feet in height. We are in a valley filled with just such immense detached pieces. Some are conical in their shape looking like huge loaves of white sugar others are composed of 3 or 4 pieces on top of the other & looking as though a child could push them over and send their huge masses thundering below. Near & just above us is another great Syrian mass on top of which are several hawk's nests & the birds have been whistling at us all the Evening. This again must have been once in a state of great excitement & commotion far exceeding even that usually attending the eve of our presidential elections. How these masses became broken off & sent into the valley below or piled one upon another to the height of 100 to 200 feet I leave to others to determine.

March of the Regiments, King County Library

Margaret Frink wrote a year later:

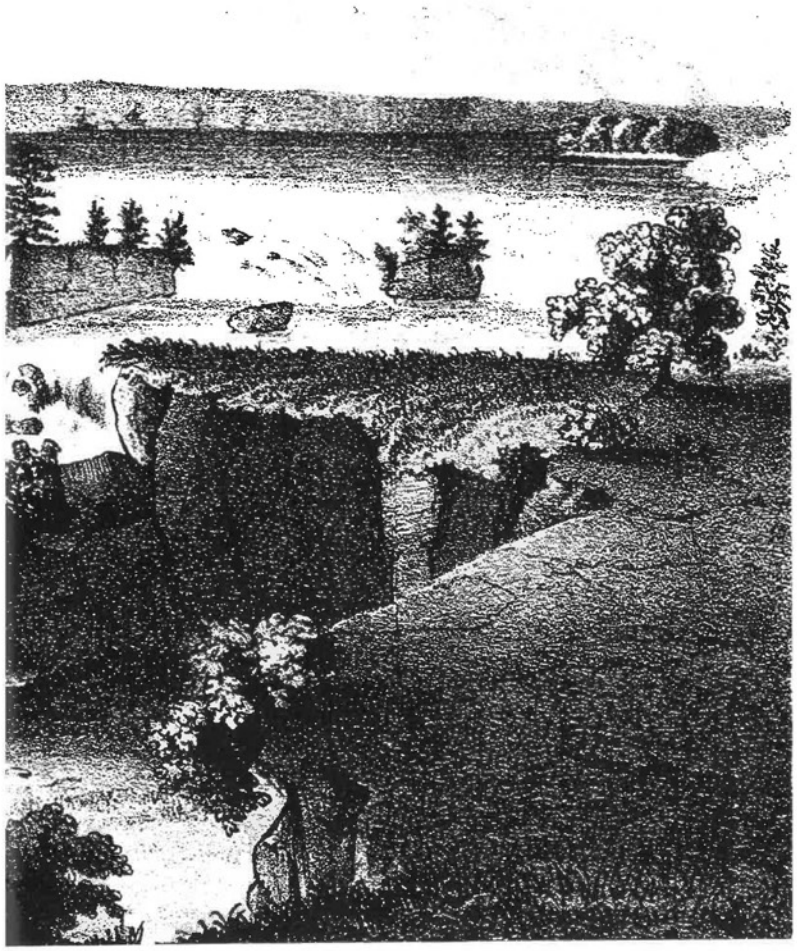
During the forenoon we passed through a stone village composed of huge, isolated rocks of various and singular shapes, some resembling cottages, others steeples and domes. It is called the "City of Rocks," but I think the name "Pyramid City" more suitable. It is a sublime, strange, and wonderful scene—one of nature's most interesting works.

The same year John Steele reported:

Here were pyramids of white granite that would rival the world renowned wonders of the Nile; rocks in the form of castles with chimes and turrets, spires rising probably five hundred feet, and nicely balanced on the point of some of them large pieces of granite. Altogether the picturesque grouping, the wild mountain background, the clear, cold streams and flower-decked meadows, presented a scene over which one would delight to linger, yet find it difficult to describe.

And in 1857 Helen Carpenter recorded:

On this level, and the hills which encircled it, were the most beautiful and wonderful white rocks that we ever saw. This is known as the City [of] rocks and certainly bears a striking



This 1849 sketch depicts American Falls, the first falls overlanders encountered on the Snake River. The novelty of it encouraged emigrants to linger, often risking life and limb on slippery rocks in search of better views.

resemblance to a city. To be sure it was a good deal out of the usual, for the large and small houses were curiously intermingled and set at all angles, but it only made the place more charming. There was everything one could imagine from a dog house to a church and courthouse. While the stock was being cared for the women and children wandered off to enjoy the sights of the city. When they returned to camp a stern and well merited reprimand awaited them. "How could you do such a thing? Did not you know there might be an Indian behind every rock?" etc. etc. We were so spellbound with the beauty and strangeness of it all that no thought of Indians entered our heads. Some of us, at least, are too young and thoughtless for our surroundings. The older ones did not forget to make all the possible arrangements they could for the safety of the camp.

Quaint wonderlands such as City of Rocks allowed emigrants to forget the troubles of overland travels and offered their eyes relief. Those who visited the City of Rocks, however, did so only because this landscape lay directly on the route to California and southern Oregon. In a sense, those who marveled there were accidental tourists.

Overlanders who best fit the definition of sightseers and tourists were those who deliberately took time out of their westward journey to search for unusual scenery. An excellent example of an overlander who became a tourist by purpose was Rebecca Ketcham, who originated in Ithaca, New York, and joined William H. Gray's wagon train for Oregon in the spring of 1853.

Ketcham was unusual in a couple of ways. First, she traveled as a single female. Second, she went to great lengths to see the sights of the Snake River region. For example, one evening after dinner, while encamped on the eastern edge of the Snake River Plain, Ketcham announced that she "could not resist the inclination" to "see the view." She started for the top of a high mountain and found the journey was "far beyond any hills I had gone up or down before. I think I went all of half a mile strait up."

When she reached her destination she felt "disappointed, for it was so smoky I could not see distinctly at all." But she also reported, "I think the view must be splendid if seen when the air is clear. However, I could see the blue outline of two of the three Tetons at least 64 miles from us, and the vast place between us."

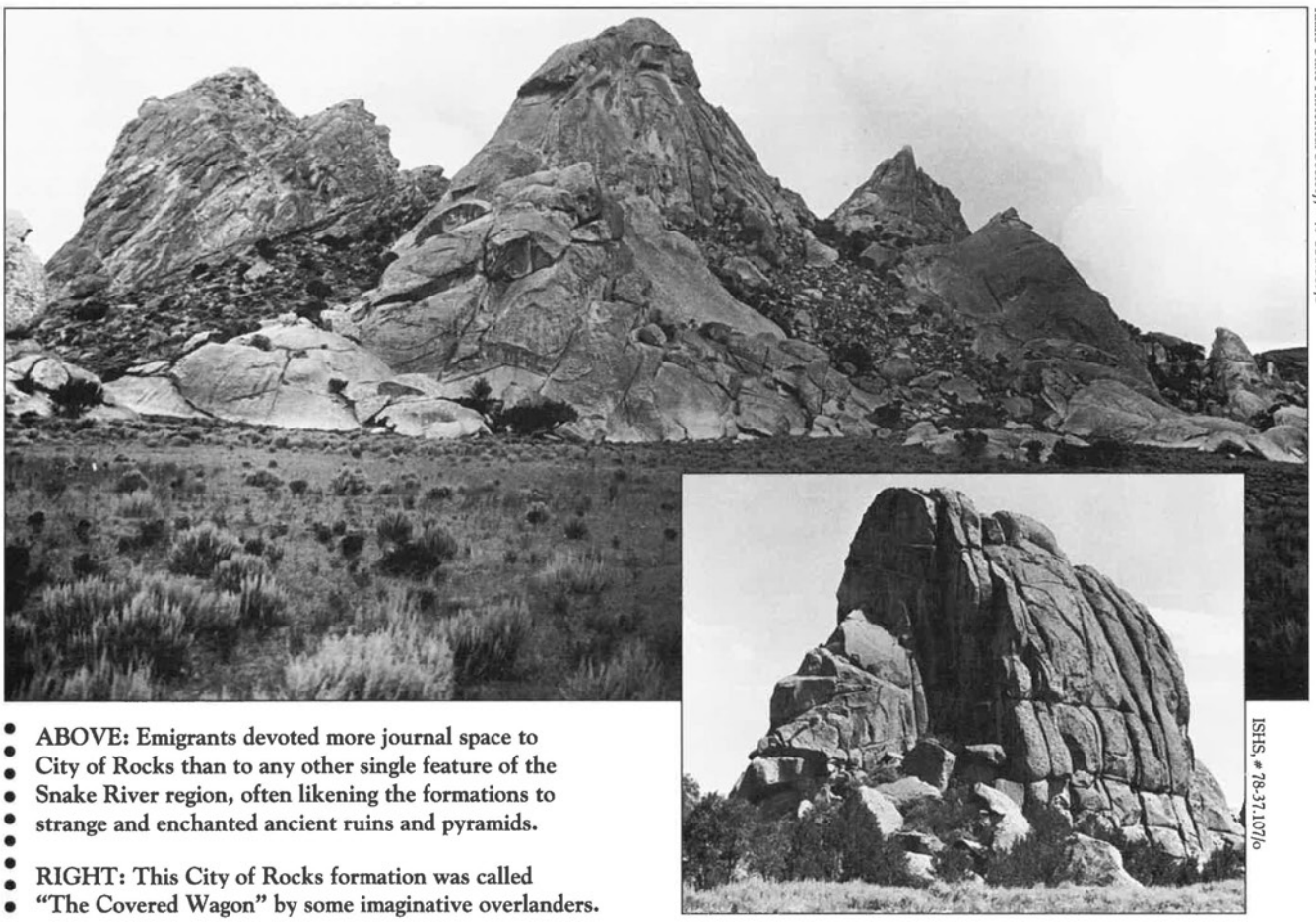
A few days later, when her wagon train came within two miles of American Falls, Ketcham declared, "Of course we all wanted to get as good a view as possible," and she "jumped out and ran ahead of the rest." Once the others arrived she and a friend walked an additional "half mile to see" the falls "from all points."

There are other examples of tourists by purpose. A year before Ketcham visited American Falls, Polly Coon "and several others went down to the shore & climbed upon the rocks which jutted over the foaming waters looking down some 30 feet. . . ." About sunset on July 7, 1849, in the Raft River area, James Pritchard found his "way to the top of one of the nearest peaks, from the top of which I had a most spacious view of the surrounding country." A year later, in the same vicinity, John Steele and Thomas Hunt

set out to ascend Pilot Peak. . . . Through a ravine we worked our way above pine and fir, where cliff towered upon cliff; at times we crept around a projecting point, we seemed suspended in mid-air, and from the dizzy height hardly dared to look into the awful abyss below.

In general, migrants' positive responses to Snake River landscapes were reserved for vistas rather than panoramic scenes, for it was the expansive scene that generally proved boring. The exceptions to this rule come from those individuals—Rebecca Ketcham, John Steele, James Pritchard, James Bennett and the like—who took precious time and energy away from an arduous trip purposely to seek out panoramas, usually from a mountaintop on the periphery of the Snake River Plain.

Distancing themselves from the mundane level of the



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ABOVE: Emigrants devoted more journal space to City of Rocks than to any other single feature of the Snake River region, often likening the formations to strange and enchanted ancient ruins and pyramids.

RIGHT: This City of Rocks formation was called "The Covered Wagon" by some imaginative overlanders.

cosmic landscape, these individuals described the aesthetic significance of "the vast place," "the wild grandeur of the interior," the "spacious view," and "the grand and beautiful scenery." Their compatriots—such as Amelia Hadley, George and Maria Belshaw, Amelia Knight, George Taylor, P. V. Crawford, and Esther Belle Hanna—who stuck closer to the beaten track, concluded of the general setting: "same scenery prevails," "desolate as ever," "barren waste," and "the most desolate and barren region on our whole route, & extends 150 or a thousand miles."

When these individuals commented positively on landscape in the Snake River region it was of particularly unusual features they chanced upon directly on the route. These elements of landscape included waterfalls, springs, a single mountain peak, and especially City of Rocks. All of these are specific features. They offered prospects we would call vistas rather than panoramas, and they provided relief from the dreary country of the Snake River. They did not, however, change these overlanders' convictions about the whole of the Snake River Plain. When overlanders reached the western edge of the region their opinions remained staunch. In 1853 Esther Belle Hanna confided, "Saw Fort Boise this morning. . . . The whole of the route in this distance has been one continuous desert. . . . No one can imagine the barren and desolate appearance of this part of the country unless he could see it." At the same place, but a year earlier, Jared Fox claimed, "The country is yet barren," and Cecelia Adams, "Country looks about as desolate as ever."

For mid-19th-century emigrants the Snake River Plain proved one of the most demanding segments of their journey west. Part of the adversity was due to the monotonous aesthetic quality of the general landscape. For relief overlanders searched the horizon for unusual prospects, typically vistas that offered vertical elements; or else they looked for singular landscapes such as City of Rocks.

Both vertical vistas and uncommon scenes provided refuge for aching eyes. Occasionally, emigrants purposely scaled mountain peaks to behold panoramas from vantage points above the level of the plains, in the process breaking the routine of monotonous landscape perception. Emigrants usually chanced upon scenes, but sometimes they sought them out. Whether tourists by accident or tourists by purpose, overland trail migrants who traveled through the cosmic landscape of the Snake River became tourists by necessity.

Peter G. Boag, a Portland native, is Assistant Professor of History at Idaho State University where he teaches western American and environmental history. He is the author of Environment and Experience: Settlement Culture in 19th-Century Oregon *(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).*

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***COVER:** Most famous for his photographs documenting the logging industry in the early part of the 20th century, Darius Kinsey was also an avid landscape photographer. He produced many scenic views such as this one, taken in 1928, of Table Mountain reflected in Terminal Lake at the end of the Mount Baker Highway. See related story beginning on page 7. (Courtesy of the Whatcom Museum of History and Art, #10299a, Darius Kinsey Collection)*