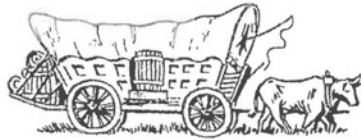


The OVERLAND TRAIL

By Greg MacGregor



Courtesy of Greg MacGregor



Trail depression through the 14th fairway, Soda Springs Country Club, Idaho.

THE CALIFORNIA/OREGON TRAIL is that 2,000-mile-long trace across the country by which an estimated 300,000 to 500,000 emigrants traveled to California and Oregon between 1841 and 1869. The trail began at several jumping-off points—Independence or St. Joseph, Missouri, or Council Bluffs, Iowa—converged quickly, and then followed one river system after another until it terminated in either the Sacramento Valley, California, or the Willamette Valley in Oregon. The California and Oregon Trails (along with the Mormon Trail) diverged at a point just north of the Great Salt Lake.

Traveling 10 to 15 miles per day, pioneers usually made the crossing in five or six months. The overlanders timed their departure for early April or May, just after the spring thaw, when there was usually enough grass on the prairies for the draft animals to eat.

The overland trail followed major and minor river systems—a necessity for the draft animals. It began along the Blue River in Kansas and then switched to the gateway to the Rocky Mountains West—the Platte and North Platte rivers. This gently uphill path along the riverway headed in a nearly straight line across Nebraska and half of Wyoming. In Wyoming travelers shifted to the Sweetwater, which can be followed almost to the Continental Divide. This historic point, at the south end of the Wind River mountain range, called South Pass, is almost flat grassland, even though it is 7,000 feet above sea level. So wide and gentle is South Pass that most emigrants could not detect its summit across the crest of the Rocky Mountains.

Once beyond the pass, travelers encountered real desert terrain for the first time. This high desert section of the trail headed south-

Historic Traces in the Contemporary Landscape—A Photo Essay

west, crossing the Big Sandy and Green rivers and following the Blacks Fork River into Fort Bridger, Wyoming. At this point the settlers bound for California and Oregon continued on the main trail northwestward, while the Mormon contingent headed due west down the nearest canyon into the Salt Lake Valley.

DIVERTING NORTH FROM Fort Bridger, travelers could take advantage of yet another river system, up the Bear Valley and around the northern end of the Wasatch Mountains of Utah, an easy way off the high desert plateau that eventually connected with the Snake River near present-day Pocatello, Idaho. California-bound emigrants considered this “detour” northwestward into Idaho a delay and a nuisance. At least two “cutoffs” were available to the foolish or impatient, but they rarely saved time.

About 30 miles west of Pocatello, at an unremarkable spot near where the Raft River (now dry) met the Snake, the California trail diverged southwestward to join the Humboldt River near Wells, Nevada, while the Oregon track continued along the banks of the Snake River across Idaho, passing through present-day Boise. At the Idaho-Oregon border the Snake River was abandoned as it turned north into impassable Hells Canyon. The trail then joined the Burnt River and followed it to the base of the Blue Mountains in La Grande, Oregon, where the crossing had to be made before the onset of snow in late October.

After crossing the Blues, travelers passed through Pendleton, Oregon, over a series of minor creek systems, and finally arrived at The Dalles, where the rest of the trip was made by a series of raft floats and portages down the Columbia River to the official destina-

tion, Oregon City. The Barlow toll road, once completed, offered an alternate route across the shoulder of Mount Hood.

Photographing the Overland Trail

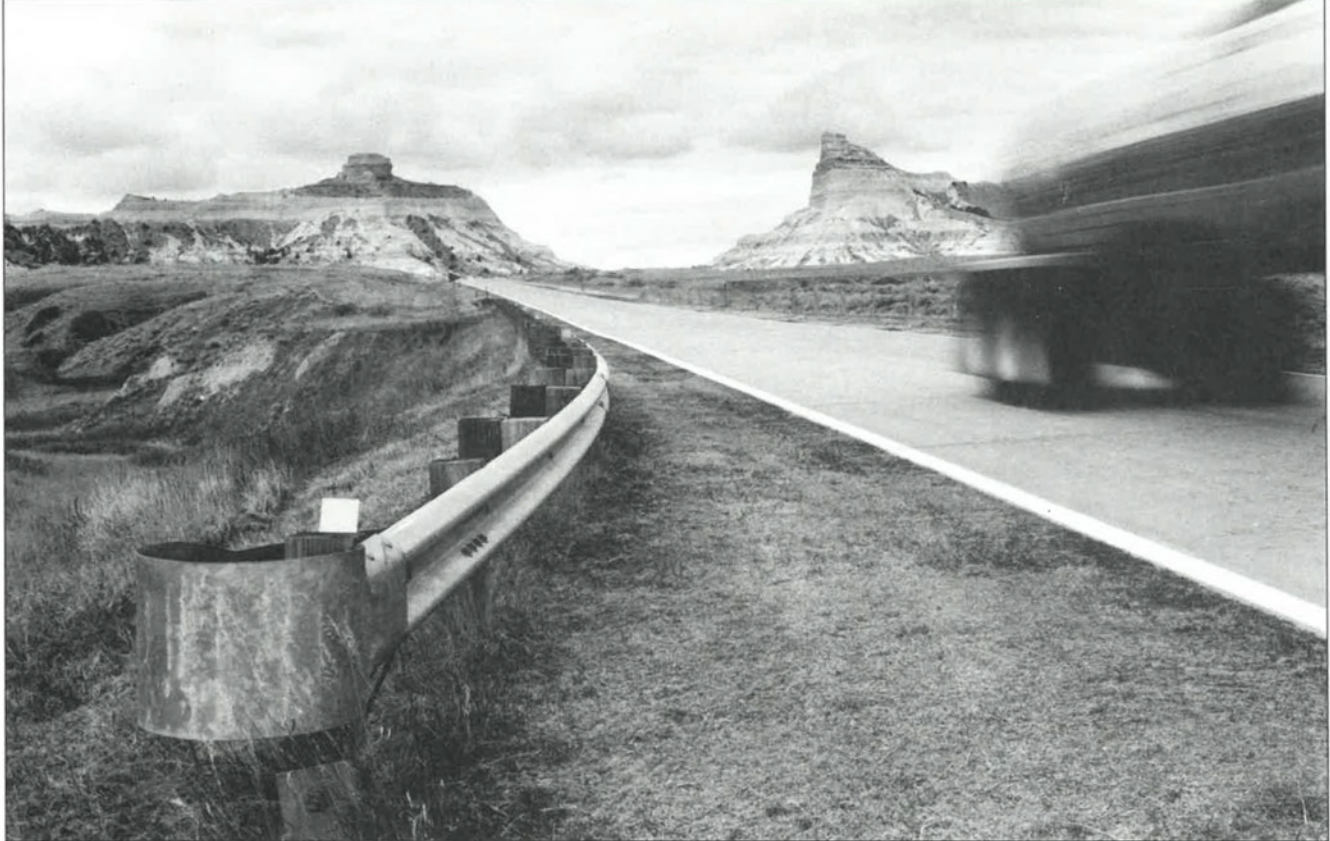
FOR THE PAST 15 YEARS I have been traveling and photographing in the Great Basin area, that 1,000-mile stretch of land between the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevadas. It takes its name from the fact that the region acts as a giant water sink. Rivers in the Great Basin never make it to the ocean, terminating instead in inland lakes such as the Great Salt Lake or just soaking into the ground and disappearing into huge marshes.

While driving the region’s highways between widely separate destinations, I often wondered where the road I was traveling would penetrate that far distant yet steadily approaching mountain range. One has time to ponder such matters when visibility is over 100 miles. Almost always my guess was wrong, for just as the road seemed headed for a sheer wall, the river I was following would make a surprise turn and course through a previously invisible passage, dragging the road with it.

My thoughts gradually turned to curiosity about who discovered the first passageway into the Far West. How did they ever find an even remotely efficient route across a continent whose mountain ranges are always perpendicular to the direction of travel? Once while cresting a pass in eastern Nevada on an exceptionally clear day I counted nine mountain ranges between me and California. Later, consulting a satellite relief map, I discovered there were actually twelve (I just couldn’t see the complete 350 miles across Nevada). Despite this uncooperative geography, a relatively flat and nearly straight-line route some 2,000 miles long was indeed



Courtesy of Greg MacGregor



Courtesy of Greg MacGregor

ABOVE: On trail, approaching Mitchell Pass, Scottsbluff, Nebraska.

RIGHT: Trail emerging from house foundation, Oregon Trails Heights subdivision, Boise, Idaho.

OPPOSITE: Independence Landing, beginning of the California, Oregon, Mormon and Santa Fe trails, Independence, Missouri.



Courtesy of Greg MacGregor

ON EXHIBIT

"THE OREGON IMMIGRANT Trail, 1841-1870" is an exhibition of 60 contemporary Oregon Trail photographs by Greg MacGregor. The pictures are accompanied by well-researched historical and present-day information about the site of each photo as well as excerpts from pioneer diaries.

This exhibition is on view at the Washington State Historical Society (206/593-2830) through June 18, 1995. The next venue for this traveling exhibition is the National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center (503/523-1843) in Baker City, Oregon, August 1 through December 1, 1995. "The Oregon Immigrant Trail" is available to venues throughout the region.

MacGregor also has a book forthcoming (University of New Mexico Press, spring 1996) that will contain many of the images from this exhibition.

found by early trappers and settlers. My initial curiosity turned into an obsession to locate and photograph this route.

It took about a year to locate the original trail. No one I talked to knew about such history-minded groups as Trails West or the Oregon-California Trails Association, who for the past decade had been mapping, marking and keeping alive the folklore and history of the emigrant trails. A library search turned up nothing. Undaunted, I began examining republished emigrant diaries, along with their crude maps, and attempted to locate the route based on written descriptions. This simply did not work—it was too easy to miss a location by 50 feet because land features had been altered or the sagebrush was too high.

Two useful sources finally materialized. A modern guidebook to the trail, initially overlooked in my research, told how to find the

required me to follow the track and make new photographs, no matter how boring the landscape might be. Just to add visual interest and scale to the images I soon began to focus on places where the historic trail intersected with artifacts of contemporary society. It became my approach to photograph these intersections for the ideas they presented as well as for their graphic potential.

THE ROMANTIC INTERPRETATION of landscape, often found in both paintings and photographs, has never interested me, and I do not use that approach in my work. The land in the West was used to scratch out a living on a large or small scale by whatever scheme people could invent. In arid climates the evidence of these efforts is slow to heal, and it soon became obvious to me that the scars of the trail and the overlay of modern culture that has replaced it would be a more potent record and perhaps a truer statement of the meaning and current condition of the overland trail.

All of my photographs were made standing directly in the ruts of the trail or looking straight at where they used to be. It was sometimes tempting to wander off the track to capture a spectacular image, but I resisted. The maps of the trail are very specific, and I followed them whether they led under concrete, through cities or into water. Even when the historic track was invisible I often found a granite trail site marker erected by the local historical society or Daughters of the American Revolution. Small towns remember their history, and the placing of the markers was carefully thought out. It seems people have always been interested in this trail, marking it with everything from hand-painted signs to bronze plaques.

I worked the trail in sections, usually in ten-day stints. Some days I could travel 200 miles, others only 50 because I stopped to talk to a rancher about a section through his land. The conversation often led to a personal tour. Many times traces of the old trail gave out and it became passable only on bicycle, especially when a ranching fence without a gate crossed the track. Other times the trail just ended. In these cases I backtracked to the main highway and began another probe farther west. Since cattle were often in or near the viewfinder of the camera, my biggest job was to convince suspicious ranchers that I was not an advance man for sophisticated cattle rustlers who needed photographs of their future booty.

The overland trail now passes through U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management preserves, factory and corporate yards, private ranches, small and large cities, and is much of the time under concrete highway.

Most restricted sites were made accessible after I explained the nature of my project. I encountered the most difficult access when the trail passed through Indian reservations, such as that of the Shoshone-Bannock tribe near Fort Hall, Idaho. Perhaps these Native Americans have not forgotten the consequences of letting the first white men pass through their country.

Greg MacGregor is Professor of Photography at California State University, Hayward.



Courtesy of Greg MacGregor

Ascent into the Blue Mountains, Gekler and Fourth streets, La Grande, Oregon

trail and follow it, mostly by using paved roads and the family automobile. Second, I discovered that on the detailed maps of the U.S. Geological Survey there is, indeed, often a small dirt track labeled “Emigrant Trail.”

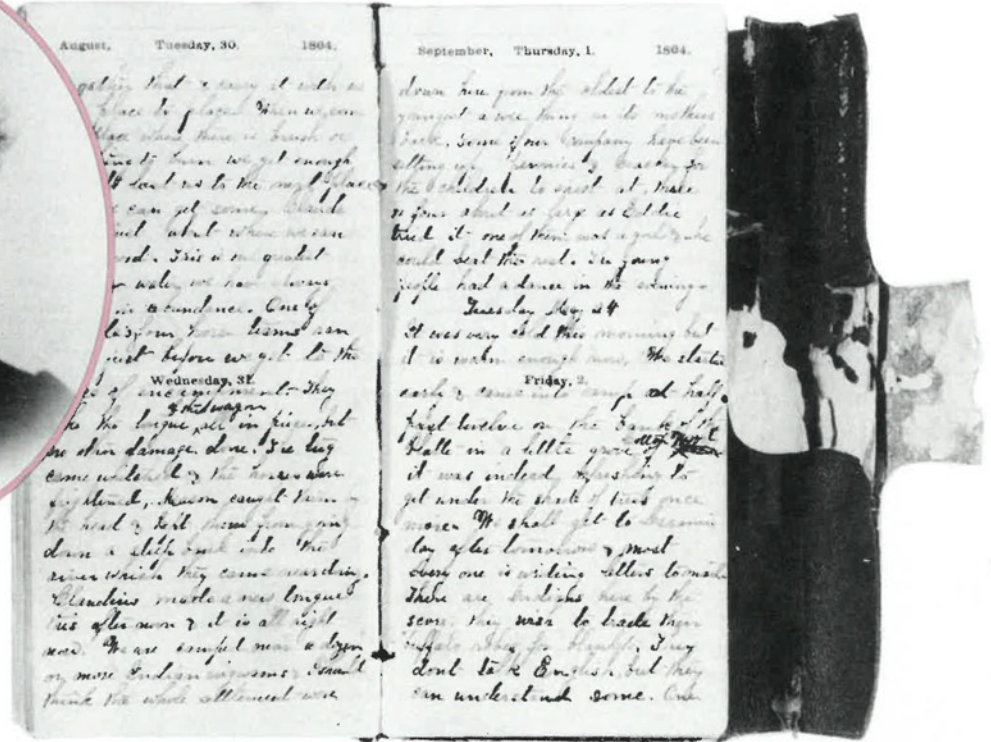
The problems unique to photography in desert areas were not unfamiliar to me, but some new ones did emerge. My methodology



FROM THE COLLECTION



The Overland Trail Diary of Phebe Abbott Carlton



Lured by her aunt's glowing descriptions of Port Townsend, 21-year-old Phebe Abbott left Rockton, Illinois in company with her family on March 18, 1864, bound for Washington Territory via the Oregon Trail. Despite increased settlement along the entire length of the trail, it was still a slow, difficult crossing. In a 178-page diary recently acquired by WSHS's Special Collections, Phebe diligently recorded her thoughts and the activities of daily life on the overland trail.

- ❖ **April 20** [Grove City, Iowa] Went to hear preaching at the schoolhouse three miles. It didn't amount to much. The minister did a great deal of hollering and made some very bold assertions, some doubt as to the truth of them. The singing was excruciating.
- ❖ **May 14** [Platte River, Nebraska] We had buffalo steak for breakfast which Claude gave us. It was very sweet and tasted very much like beef steak only better.
- ❖ **May 15** Some of us young people went to the top of the bluff to see the sun set. An artist pen should sketch the scene spread before us. A hundred white tents and wagons dotted the green valley at our feet and the beautiful boiling spring in their midst, in the distance the Platte River winding in and out among its numerous islands having

for its background high bluffs. The shadows darkening upon them except their tops which glowed with the last rays of the setting sun. A young man in the train came near committing suicide by taking Opium but it was soon discovered that all was not right with him and upon questioning him, he confessed that he was tired of living and had taken the poison to put an end to his existence. He had written out the disposition of all his effects and left it in a book, but the men are in hopes to keep him in the world a while longer by keeping him in constant exercise and using proper remedies.

- ❖ **June 4** We started out in high spirits this morning, with sight of Independence Rock in prospect. . . . Claude said we must go five miles farther to get good feed, so what we saw of the rock we must see quickly. We were disappointed for we had anticipated spending hours wandering over and around it, reading the thousands of names carved into the solid rock.

On August 2, 1864, after a trip of 121 days, the party arrived in Marysville, California, where they stayed with friends and rested. After a few days they journeyed to San Francisco by stagecoach and then boarded a ship for Port Townsend.

Acquisition of this diary was made possible by the Reno Odlin Memorial Fund and the Friends of the WSHS Library.

COLUMBIA

The Magazine of Northwest History

A quarterly publication of the
Washington State Historical Society

VOLUME NINE, NUMBER TWO

David L. Nicandri, *Executive Editor*
Christina Orange, *Managing Editor*
Robert C. Carriker, *Book Review Editor*
Carolyn Simonson, *Copy Editor*
Taran Blessing, *Editorial Assistant*
Craig A. Tyler, *Editorial Assistant*
Christopher Lee, *Business Manager*
Marie De Long, *Circulation Manager*
Joan Martin, *Membership Secretary*

CONTRIBUTORS

Richard Frederick, Elaine Miller,
Edward Nolan, Joy Werlink

FOUNDING EDITOR

John McClelland, Jr.

OFFICERS

President: David Lamb, *Hoquiam*
Vice-President: Robert C. Carriker, *Spokane*
Vice-President: Joe Taller, *Olympia*
Treasurer: David R. Edwards, *Tacoma*
Secretary/Director: David L. Nicandri

EX OFFICIO TRUSTEES

Mike Lowry, *Governor*
Daniel K. Grimm, *State Treasurer*
Ralph Munro, *Secretary of State*

BOARD OF TRUSTEES

David Ammons, *Olympia*
Judith A. Billings, *Olympia*
Robert Blethen, *Seattle*
Charlotte Chalker, *Tacoma*
Robert A. Clark, *Spokane*
Arthur Dwelley, *Tenino*
Brian Ebersole, *Tacoma*
Charles Fowler, *Olympia*
F. Daniel Frost, *Kennewick*
Jean Gardner, *Seattle*
Kelso Gillenwater, *Tacoma*
Kathryn W. Haley, *Tacoma*
John Hewitt, Jr., *Tacoma*
Ruth Kirk, *Lacey*
Charles LeWarne, *Edmonds*
William W. Philip, *Tacoma*
Doris Pieroth, *Seattle*
Thomas L. Purce, *Olympia*
James B. Rhoads, *Bellingham*
Kent D. Richards, *Ellensburg*
Lewis O. Saum, *Seattle*
David H. Stratton, *Pullman*
Michael S. Sullivan, *Tacoma*
Paul F. Thomas III, *Woodinville*
Charles Twining, *Federal Way*
Peter von Reichbauer, *Dash Point*
George H. Weyerhaeuser, *Tacoma*
Elizabeth A. Willis, *Seattle*
Shirley Winsley, *Tacoma*

Columbia (ISSN: 0892-3094) is published quarterly by the Washington State Historical Society, 315 N. Stadium Way, Tacoma, WA 98403; 206/593-2830. Entire contents © 1995 by the Washington State Historical Society. All rights reserved. Nothing may be reprinted in whole or in part without written permission from the publisher. All articles appearing in this journal are abstracted and indexed in *Historical Abstracts* and *America: History and Life*. Editorial contributions: All unsolicited manuscripts and photographs submitted must include return postage (in stamps) and suitable packaging to ensure their safe return. Although reasonable care will be taken with materials received, no responsibility can be assumed for unsolicited materials, including photographs. Book reviews: Address all review copies and related communications to Robert C. Carriker, Dept. of History, Gonzaga University, Spokane, WA 99258. Postmaster: Please send address changes to *Columbia*, 315 N. Stadium Way, Tacoma, WA 98403.

♻️ PRINTED ON RECYCLED PAPER

COLUMBIA

THE MAGAZINE OF NORTHWEST HISTORY ■ SUMMER 1995

From the Editor 2

History Commentary 3

The university press bandwagon rolls on into a "brave new world."

By Keith C. Petersen

The Glorious Fourth 4

Independence Day festivities on the Oregon Trail.

By Jacqueline Williams

The Overland Trail 9

Historic traces in the modern American landscape—a photo essay.

By Greg MacGregor

From the Collection 13

The diary of an 1860s overland trail emigrant.

The First Death of Horse Racing 14

Big Brother wrote "blue laws" in 1909.

By Paul Spitzer

The Desert Years 21

Drought and depression took an enormous toll on wheat farmers in eastern Washington's Big Bend country.

By Edward C. Whitley

Swing the Door Wide 26

The World War II economy opened the job market for blacks in the Pacific Northwest.

By Quintard Taylor

A Victorian Odyssey 33

The tragic tale of two Spokane women who gambled for high stakes and lost more than they bargained for.

By Linda Lawrence Hunt

Shipwreck & Promises 41

One set of historic events from two very different perspectives.

By Robert E. Steiner

Correspondence/Additional Reading 45

Columbia Reviews 46

Recent books of interest in Northwest history.

Edited by Robert C. Carriker

COVER: During the quarter century when horse race gambling lay outside the law, horses ran and several tracks, such as Puyallup's, remained open. The termination of legal gambling in 1909 meant that these horses ran for the exercise—at least ostensibly. (Special Collections, Washington State Historical Society) See story starting on page 14.