

SPRING ISSUE

2017



CALIFORNIA TRAIL HERITAGE ALLIANCE

THE Wagon Tongue



Water on the Trail

Here in Northern Nevada, we are experiencing a very wet spring. Our rivers are overflowing, in some areas, flooding is occurring, our temperatures are cooler and the mountains still haven't shed the snow. Small creeks are running that haven't seen water in years. As I have travelled around northern Nevada and Idaho, there are even small streams running along the highways. We are thankful for the water, being that we are usually in a state of drought but it leads to thoughts of how our emigrants dealt with the water on the trail during the spring season.

Most trains started in the springtime in order to get over the Sierra Nevada before the snow fell. The major rivers that they had to cross were the Platte, Sweetwater, Green, Bear, Snake, Humboldt, Truckee, and Carson Rivers. However, most of these rivers wouldn't be reached until summer. Most spring traveling was along the North and South Platte Rivers and their tributaries.

So as I reviewed emigrant diaries, I wanted to see how the weather affected them in the spring and how they dealt with river crossings. The followings are accountings of their experiences. Some are whimsical and others dangerous.

Jacob Wright Harlan wrote:

"It rained and stormed most of the way coming up the Platte river. One incident occurred with two of my men one night while rain was pouring down. They slept together in our tent. Bill said to Tom, "I saw it rain in Missouri one time as it is "raining now, and when the rain was over the "ground was all covered with little fishes." Tom swore he was a liar, and with that they sprung out of bed and were pounding each other, when my brother awoke me and said Tom and Bill were fighting. I cried out to them, and they stopped and went back to bed. That is the only difficulty I had with any of them during the trip. I believe Bill told the truth, as I have read and heard of small fishes, frogs, and other things coming down with the rain. These could not have grown in the air. I believe they must have been scooped up from ponds or water-courses by some water-spout or whirlwind, and then let fall upon the earth."

In Spring of 1841, General John Bidwell recalled in his book, Echoes of the Past About California:

"On the Platte River, on the afternoon of one of the hottest days we experienced on the plains, we had a taste of a cyclone; first came a terrific shower, followed by a fall of hail to the depth of four inches, some of the stones being as large as a turkey's egg, and the next day a waterspout—an angry, huge, whirling cloud column, which seemed to draw its water from the Platte River—passed within a quarter of a mile behind us. We stopped

(continued on page 3)



The Little Things: Small but Indispensable Wagon Parts

by Tim Burns,
Education technician at the California Trail Interpretive Center.

You may have heard the expression, “for want of a nail.” But how about “for want of a pin?”

In the original expression, an entire kingdom is lost because a messenger’s horse threw a shoe because of the lack of a nail. Similarly, without these small but vital metal pins, a prairie schooner is “run aground,” so to speak.

First, the linchpin, which holds the wagon wheel on the axle. The wooden wagon wheel is a surprisingly complex piece of engineering. On many wagons, the entire assembly is held on the axle by the linchpin, which fits through a hole in the end of the axle.

Not only does this small pin -- about the size of a man’s finger -- hold the wheel on securely during travel, it is also relatively simple to remove, with the proper tools. This facilitates wheel maintenance and the regular application of lubricating grease to the axle. Without this grease, the wheel could seize up on the axle, making the wagon difficult or even impossible to move.

Next, the king pin, which is about a foot long, is the pivot point on which the front wheels are able to turn, independently of the wagon box. This allows the wagon to be steered, which is essential for maneuvering over rugged terrain. It was also one of the pieces connecting the bolster -- a wooden support for the wagon box -- to the axle.

The queen pin allows the wagon tongue to be adjusted to fit the height of the animals pulling the wagon. It also holds the wagon tongue to the fifth wheel assembly, another complicated structure that distributes the force of the animals pulling the wagon.

Finally, there is the coupling pin, which connects the front and back parts of the reach, the part of the undercarriage connecting the two axles together. This distributes the pulling force of the draft animals across the entire undercarriage, preventing undue stress to the front axle. Axles were prone to occasionally breaking on the trail anyway, but without the reach system, it would undoubtedly have been much more common.

Like most machines, the wagon is made of many complex pieces that serve vital functions. Remove one of these pieces, and the entire thing falls apart. Sometimes the little things hold everything together.

Primary source for this article was the *Emigrant Wagon In-Service Training* material by Frank Tortorich, supplemented by the chapter ‘Jumping Off’ in Will Bagley’s *Overland West Volume I: So Rugged and Mountainous*.

Old musical stanza found in 1850 diary of D. A. Shaw. Anyone know the song?

*“I soon shall be in 'Frisco And then I'll look all round, And when I see the gold lumps there,
I'll pick'em off the ground
I'll scrape the mountains clean, my boys, I'll drain the rivers dry,
A pocket full of rocks bring home, So brother don't you cry.
O, California, That's the land for me, I'm bound for San Francisco With my wash bowl on my knee.”*

Water on the Trail (continued from page 1)

and braced ourselves against our wagons to keep them from being overturned. Had it struck us it would doubtless have demolished us..”

Weather played a major factor in travel and how far the emigrants travelled each day.



Platte River, Wyoming

“Though favoured with a fine day, as night came in black heavy clouds and floating masses of watery vapour gave indication of a storm, which burst upon us just as we sat to supper, blowing a hurricane, and teeming down torrents of rain. It was perfectly useless to attempt pitching our tents, as they would be blown down; besides, the ground was running over with water, so that we could not sleep on it. We therefore took shelter in our waggons; and though I was thoroughly soaked when my guard was relieved, I went to sleep in my wet clothes, in a position not very conducive to repose, and awoke in the morning without any symptom of cold or sickness.....” - William Kelly, April 1849

Luzena S. Wilson travelled in 1849 with her husband and child to California and later dictated to her daughter of her experiences on the trip. She addressed how dangerous crossing rivers could be:

“The Platte was the first great water-course we crossed. It is a peculiar, wide, shallow stream, with a quicksand bed. With the wagon-bed on blocks twelve or fourteen inches thick to raise it out of the water, some of the men astride of the oxen, some of them wading waist-deep, and all goading the poor beasts to keep them moving, we started across, The water poured into the wagon in spite of our precautions and floated off some of our few movables; but we landed safely on the other side, and turned to see the team behind us stop in mid-stream. The frantic driver shouted, whipped, belabored the stubborn animals in vain, and the treacherous sand gave way under their feet. They sank slowly, gradually, but surely. They went out of sight inch by inch, and the water rose over the moaning beasts. Without a struggle they disappeared beneath the surface. In a little while the broad South Platte swept on its way, sunny, sparkling, placid, without a ripple to mark where a lonely man parted with all his fortune.”

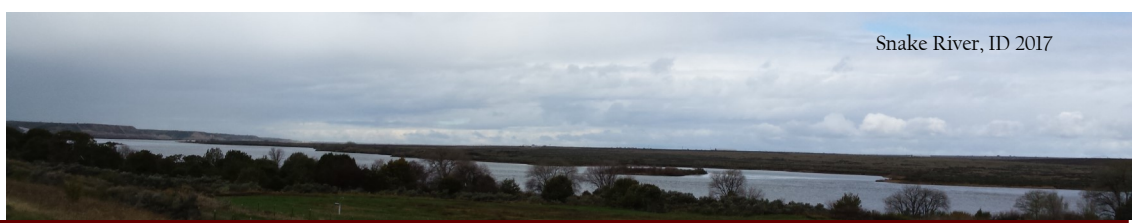
In 1850, emigrant James Abbey wrote in his daily diary:

“Tuesday, May 14th .--Cooked our breakfast this morning with grass and was ready to start by six o'clock. At eight o'clock met a mule team from Fort Laramie with the mail, bound for Fort Leavenworth. They report upwards of three thousand wagons ahead of us. We nooned today on the banks of the Platte. . . . About the middle of the afternoon we met six ox teams from Scott's Bluffs. They had been out on a trading expedition since August last, and were just on their return to the States. At four o'clock we stopped and pitched our tents for the night on the bank of the Platte. Our route for the entire day has been up the valley of the Platte, frequently near its banks. The river here still maintains its expansive breadth, presenting itself four miles wide, but very shallow. In several places I saw men fording it, the water not being more than eighteen inches deep. The bed of the river is composed of quicksand and is constantly changing by the action of the current. The banks of the Platte are low, not being more than five feet above the present stage of water. Traveled to-day fourteen miles.”

“If the Platte's water was bad, at least it was always there. Many emigrants would wistfully remember the Platt on waterless stretches of the trail in months ahead..... Without question, the Platte River Road was the easiest stretch of the journey west.” as noted in Hard Road West by Keith H. Meldahl.



Shoshone Falls, ID 2017



Snake River, ID 2017





CALIFORNIA TRAIL INTERPRETATIVE CENTER STAFF

Spring Staffing Changes at the California Trail Interpretive Center

Spring is a time for new beginnings.

Connie Jacobs began serving as Trail Center Manager starting April 10. Connie was the former manager of the Upper Missouri River Breaks Interpretive Center, a BLM site, located on the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument, in Montana.

Alex Rose is serving as supervisory park ranger. He has served for three years at the CTIC as a park ranger. Prior to that, he served as an interpreter for the National Historic Trails Interpretive Center in Casper, Wyoming.

Other staffing changes: Through our partners, the Great Basin Institute and the Southern Nevada Conservancy, we have hired three seasonal staff members that will join our staff on May 20:

- Jens Camp, a GBI employee, and a Native American Studies graduate from Arizona State, served at this site last summer, and he is returning. He will focus on interpreting Native American history and providing demonstrations in our Shoshone Summer Camp. I look forward to seeing him present programs on how to start fires with a hand drill.
- Dinna Frost, CTIC volunteer of the year for 2016, was hired as a SNC interpreter.
- Jordan Thomas, from Winnemucca, a recent graduate of Utah Valley University, will serve as a SNC interpreter. She grew up near the Trail, and she is excited to have the opportunity to serve at this site.
- Tim Burns, an education technician for the Nevada Outdoor School, has been serving at the CTIC since February. Tim is a former CTIC volunteer and resides in Spring Creek.

by Alex Rose





Fateful Fight at Iron Point

Iron Point is a sandy hill on the south side of the Humboldt River, a few miles from Golconda. This sandy slope figures strongly in the ordeals of the Donner Party. Having used the Hastings Cutoff, they regained the traditional California Trail eight miles west of present Elko, (the site of today's California Trail Interpretive Center,) on September 26, 1846. They were last on the 1846 trail and their provisions were perilously low.

Anger between families and individuals surfaced at Iron Point. On a sandy hill with rocks atop the ridge, a Trails West rail marker identifies the hill as the probable site of the fatal fight between James Reed and John Snyder.

On October 5, Reed wrote one word in his diary, "Still." Reed was a man of snap judgment and an informal leader by force of personality. The other member of the altercation, John Snyder, was a young teamster for the Graves family.

Snyder was leading or driving a team of the Graves family up the sandy slope. It apparently became entangled with Reed's team and wagon. Different memories give different pictures of the event. Snyder apparently began to beat his oxen with a whip handle. Reed tried to intervene and Snyder, in frustration, turned on him. He cut Reed's forehead with his whip. Reed pulled out his knife. Snyder may have lashed him a second time, but Reed stabbed Snyder in the chest. The young teamster died a few minutes later.

The Donner Party had split into two groups while traveling along the Humboldt. The group at Iron Point trailed the other half of the company. Apparently, the Donner brothers were in the leading group, several miles west, perhaps near Golconda. Those members who witnessed the fight formed a council to decide what to do. Reed was said to have used his knife in self-defense, and some members of the party believed that Snyder had provoked Reed. Others disliked Reed. In the dilemma of being in a land without law and justice, not yet a part of the United States, some emigrants wanted Reed hanged. There was to be no hanging but Reed was banished from the group. He kept his horse and rode toward California, no doubt visiting the Donner brothers as he passed them. The stunning events at Iron Point weakened an already struggling train. They lost the services of Reed, a capable man, and Snyder, a youthful worker.

To visit Iron Point, use the I-80 exit 194 at Golconda. Turn toward Golconda and turn right at stop sign, toward Midas. After 5 miles, turn right onto dirt road just before a bridge crossing the Humboldt River. Travel along the south side of the river, beside and over portions of the original 1868 Central Pacific rail bed. After 1.5 miles, find a Trails West rail marker on right, on top of railroad berm. This is a good turn around point for low-clearance vehicles. After 4.5 more miles, find a Trails West rail marker on the left. California Trail ruts, (the south road), are visible climbing over Iron Point to the right (northwest.) This slope is the site of the altercation. At this point, the trail's north road is 3 miles northeast, across the visible second railroad tracks. This dirt road requires high-clearance vehicle and possibly 4-wheel drive. DO NOT travel if at all wet.

This article is an edited excerpt from *Bloodshed, Crosses and Graves: Explore the California Trail through Battle Mountain, Nevada* by Charles Greenhaw and Larry Hyslop.



CALIFORNIA TRAIL

HERITAGE ALLIANCE



On The Move!

An amazing board is what I say! Many different individuals working on different projects add up to the California Trail Heritage Alliance getting a lot done. Here is a quick rundown on what is happening:

Highway Signage: NDOT is set to place two highway signs 6' x 19' on east and west bound lanes of I-80 promoting the California Trail Interpretive Center at the Hunter exit in 3 miles. Jeff Williams, Kerry Aguirre and Kevin Lee (NDPT) were instrumental in getting the signs constructed and placed.

Trail Days Promotion: Two new billboards are up – one in West Wendover and the other in Battle Mountain specifically advertising Trail Days, June 3 and 4. In early May, 30 second spots will begin airing on KVIE, a PBS station in Central California, promoting Trail Days. KUNR, public radio based in Reno will also begin playing promotional ads for Trail Days.

Bike Path: Preliminary work by Larry Hyslop with NDOT and others suggests that it will be possible to establish a bike path from Elko to the California Trail Interpretive Center entirely within the NDOT right of way. Jamie Borino, the new NDOT Bike and Pedestrian Contact in Carson City is looking at dates he can come to Elko to work with us.

Artist in Residence Program: Bailey Billington has done a super job in putting together the Artist in Residence Program with support from Blaine Benedict, Duane Jones and Walt Goddard. It will launch in April with artists expected to be in residence in July and/or August at the Trail Center. This is an exciting first for the Alliance.

Grants: Blaine Benedict successfully sought a \$10,000 grant from Union Pacific Railroad to support educational programs at the Trail Center. Helen has submitted a great request to the National Environmental Education Foundation for capacity Building – the results will be available in June.

Pioneer Dinner Theater: This new fundraiser, chaired by Bailey Billington in conjunction with Dinna Frost from the Trail Center features a theatrical performance of “Quilters” with a special Dutch Oven Dinner prepared by Duane Jones. The event is now scheduled for June 16 and 17 in the evening.

Interpretive Signage in the downtown Elko Corridor: Walt Goddard is exploring the possibility of a system of interpretive signs about the California Trail in the downtown Elko corridor.

With the efforts described above and others, we continue to work to live our mission to enhance the California Trail Experience for our community, the visiting public and future generations.

-Helen Hankins, President

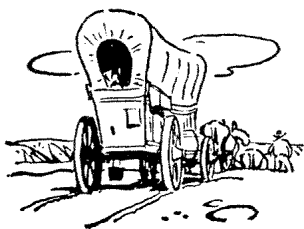
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Join Today! - Membership Application

Join your friends and neighbors and become a supporter of the California Trail Interpretive Center! Every membership supports the California Trail Interpretive Center and Trail preservation. When you join other enthusiasts to become a member, or renew your membership, you directly support interpretation, education, and special events at the California Trail Interpretive Center, and help preserve the Trail and its history for the benefit of current and future generations.

Annual Memberships: _____ New _____ Renewal

Name: _____ Address: _____

City/ST/Zip: _____

Email: _____

All members receive the informative electronic newsletter, electronic updates about special events and activities and a 10% discount at the California Trail Interpretive Center store. Invitations to one or more special events are extended to the membership levels above the Nancy Kelsey level.

Level	Lucinda Duncan	Nancy Kelsey	Virginia Reed	Elizabeth Townsend	Sarah Winnemucca
	Individual	Family	Supporter	Partner	Lifetime
Special Events)			1	2	3
Cost	\$25	\$50	\$75	\$100	\$200

*Special Events may include presentations, workshops, tours, exhibit previews or other activities. Individuals who choose to make a donation equal to or greater than \$250 will receive recognition, if desired, on the Donor Wall in the California Trail Interpretive Center

PAYMENT: _____ Check _____ Visa _____ MC _____ Amount \$ _____

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Make Check Payable to: **California Trail Heritage Alliance, 530 Idaho St., Elko NV 89801**

DONOR WALL

IN ADDITION TO BECOMING A MEMBER OF THE CALIFORNIA TRAIL HERITAGE ALLIANCE, INDIVIDUALS OR BUSINESSES MAY ALSO MAKE A DONATION TO THE CALIFORNIA TRAIL HERITAGE ALLIANCE FOR THOSE DONATIONS GREATER THAN \$250.00, THE DONOR CAN CHOOSE TO BE PUBLICLY RECOGNIZED ON THE DONOR WALL AT THE CALIFORNIA TRAIL INTERPRETIVE CENTER. RECOGNITION LEVELS ARE AS FOLLOWS:

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Pioneer	\$250.00 to \$499.99
Trail Blazer	\$500.00 to \$2,499.99
Wagon Master	\$2,500.00 to \$4,999.99
Empire Building	\$5,000.00 or Greater

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