

# Oregon Trail in Idaho

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The Oregon Trail, an important part of American history, is also a part of the history of Idaho, and some historians think of it as an event rather than a place. It may be useful to understand the background of why this part of the country was used for so important an event.

## Idaho before the Oregon Trail

In 1803 President Thomas Jefferson purchased Louisiana from the French and used the U.S. Army to investigate the new land which extended to the Pacific Ocean, including what is now Idaho. A party of 50, under the command of Captains (actually Lieutenants [Bakeless, 1964]) Lewis and Clark was organized to explore the new country to the Pacific, and to return.

In the spring of 1804 they began the trip from St. Louis, Missouri, and arrived at what is now Idaho late in the summer of 1805. They crossed the continental divide near the drainage of Salmon River, and, after determining that they could not continue westward along this route, they followed the Clearwater drainage west to the Snake River; here they took canoes down the Snake and Columbia Rivers to the Pacific coast, arriving late in 1805.

They returned to St. Louis in 1806, along the same general route. They had determined that it was possible to cross the continent by this route, but there was a great mountain barrier which would have to be conquered. The details of their trip can be found in their journals (Lewis and Clark, 1814).

## The Fur Trade and the Mountain Men

In 1810, after Lewis and Clark returned to St. Louis, enterprising, well-organized businessmen (as well as unorganized adventurers) entered the scene. A party from St. Louis, under the leadership of Andrew Henry, entered Idaho from Montana and proceeded southward into the Snake River drainage. They spent the winter at Fort Henry and "trapped the country" before returning to St. Louis in 1811. Some of the party went to the "Spanish country," toward the south, and became the first Americans who were on part of the Oregon Trail. As Henry and the rest of his party were on their way back eastward to St. Louis, they encountered another party coming westward—the Hunt party.

Wilson Price Hunt was the leader of a group of 55 in the employ of John Jacob Astor who envisioned a fur business based on the Pacific coast of Oregon. Hunt and his party crossed the continental divide on horses and descended the drainage of Snake River to Fort Henry. Here they constructed canoes and continued down the Snake to a bit west of what is now Burley. Here they encountered a canyon with rapids and waterfalls (now called the Caldron Linn) which

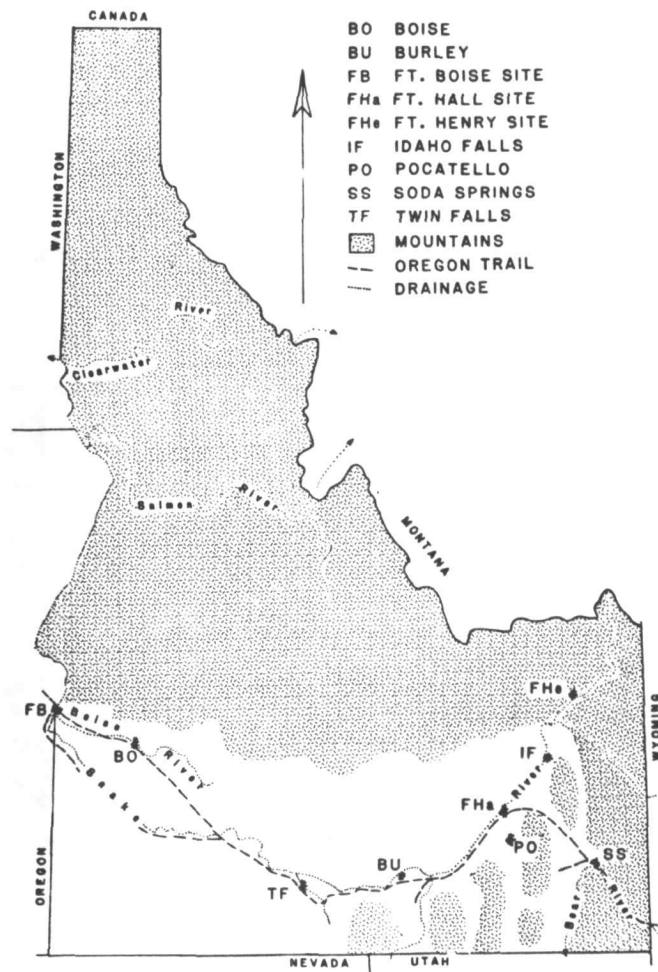
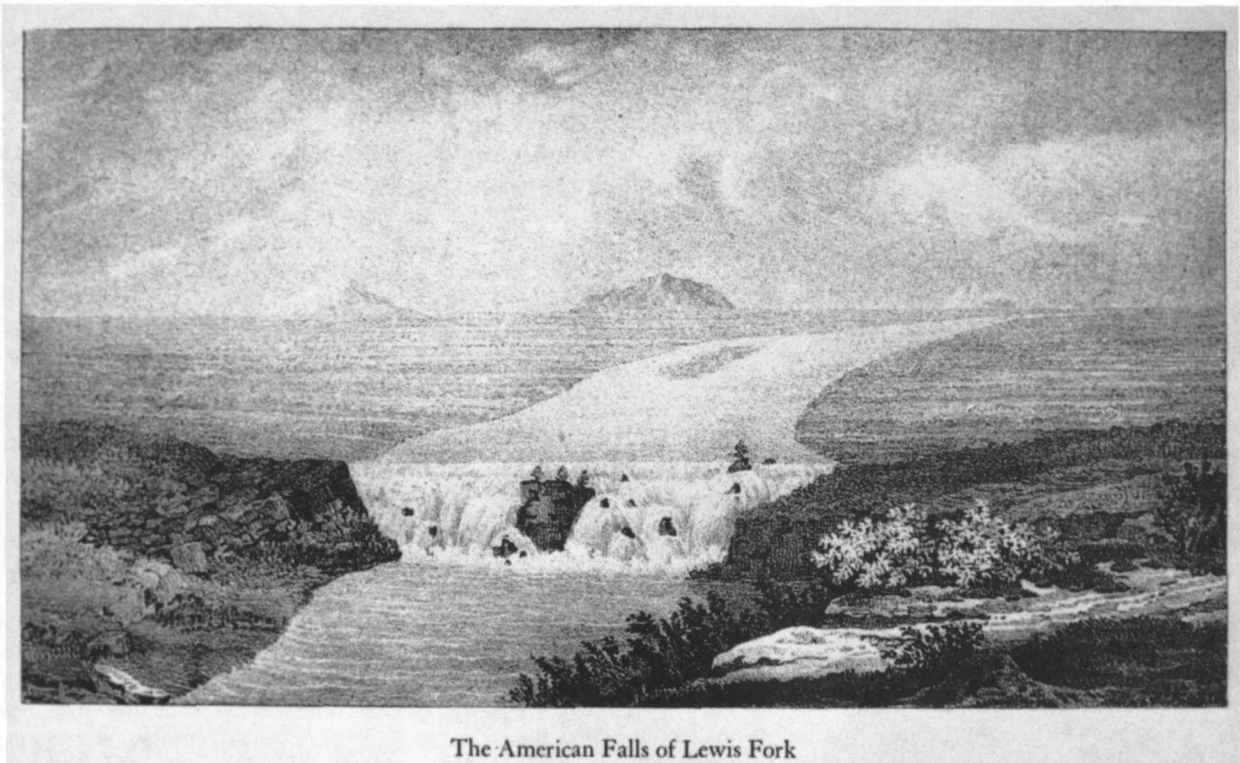


Fig. 1. Index map.

took the life of one of his men. Hunt and his party were obliged to continue westward along the river by foot and with a few ponies they bought from the Indians. They followed the Snake River west, beyond what is now Twin Falls, where they were advised by Indians to turn northwest to the Boise River. They followed the Boise River to the Snake River, then turned northward, into the mountains into what is now Hells Canyon. There they backtracked, into Oregon and ultimately to the coast. He makes no mention of the forage other than to comment on the general starvation of the inhabitants of the region (including his own party); they ate their horses and dogs as needed. Only flax-seed being eaten by Indians and a reference to eating rose-bush fruits is mentioned. Was his lack of comment about the range due to his indifference, to his lack of knowledge about it, to his preoccupation with survival, or what? We do not know. Hunt and his party are the



**Fig. 2.** Lithograph of the American Falls of the Snake River, from the report of John C. Fremont (1845).

first persons of record to use part of the Oregon Trail in Idaho.

In 1812, Robert Stuart, one of Astor's party who came to Oregon by sea, led a party of 61 back to St. Louis along the route that Hunt had in part pioneered. He entered Idaho near what was later Fort Boise and traveled eastward along the southern bank of the Snake River. Stuart and his party were on horses and made good time. A few days later he comments "... during this day's march the bottoms were very extensive, covered principally with salt wood [sage brush?], except near the river, where there are some willows. . . the hills are low, of a sandy soil, and like the high bottoms, the same shrub predominates."

On August 23rd, near what would later be the place of separation of the north and south routes, he writes, "Scarce and bad indeed is the fodder of our horses—what little we can procure being generally the rankest grass, and coarse weeds...." All was not bad, however, because on the 27th, a bit west of Twin Falls he notes "... I thought it best to remain here to day, which will be of infinite advantage to our horses, as they are much in want of rest and the grass is very good. . ." On the 29th, between Twin Falls and Burley he writes, "The Indian path going by far too much to the south for our purpose, we, on leaving camp, steered E by S for 30 miles over what is (in this country) called a prairie, but Forest of worm wood [sage brush?] is more properly its name, . we again struck the main river. . ." Note the reference here to a path, suggesting a well-worn route utilized by the Indians before the white men came.

Between Burley and Pocatello he comments: "The country passed since yesterday morning has improved greatly—the sage, and its detestable relations, gradually decrease, and the soil, though parched produces provender in abundance

for our cattle [horses]. . ." Near what is now Pocatello, Idaho, Stuart departed from the Snake River to the Bear River drainage and here notes: "Along the hills are a few serviceberries, but the prime of their season is past—however wild cherries of various kinds are to be had in the greatest perfection and abundance." The details of Stuart's and Hunt's trips can be found in Rollins (1935). The account of the entire Astoria adventure of Hunt and Stuart can be found in Irving (1868).

Following the Astorians came numerous other fur trappers, the "Mountain men." These came to know the country—where the springs were located, where the water was good and bad, and the location of the passes. In later years, as the fur trade waned, they were often employed as guides for immigrant trains.

Fort Hall on the Snake River was established by Nathaniel Wyeth in 1834 as an Indian trading post and for supplying trappers; this was the first settlement of any consequence on the Oregon Trail in Idaho. The success of Fort Hall encouraged the Hudson Bay Company to establish Fort Boise a few years later on the western side of the state. There was now a mountain-free route across Idaho, containing TWO trading posts! The Oregon Trail in Idaho was in existence. Further information about the fur trade and this era can be obtained from Chittenden (1935), and the route of the trail in Idaho is on the map, Figure 1.

#### The Oregon Trail in Earliest Days

The Oregon Trail was located along the Snake River for a number of reasons. First, the route utilized by Lewis and Clark was not suitable for long lines of wagons and immigrants because of the rough topography and the lack of feed

for live stock. In the south the countryside was relatively flat, although deep canyons, tributaries of the Snake, were cut into the flat-lying lava. These deep chasms were aggravating to travelers because of the delays encountered in skirting them, and the route was by no means as straight as suggested in the map. Secondly, the trail ran along the river, so that water was generally available for man and beast. Finally, and perhaps the most important, the route usually contained sufficient feed for the livestock of the immigrants.

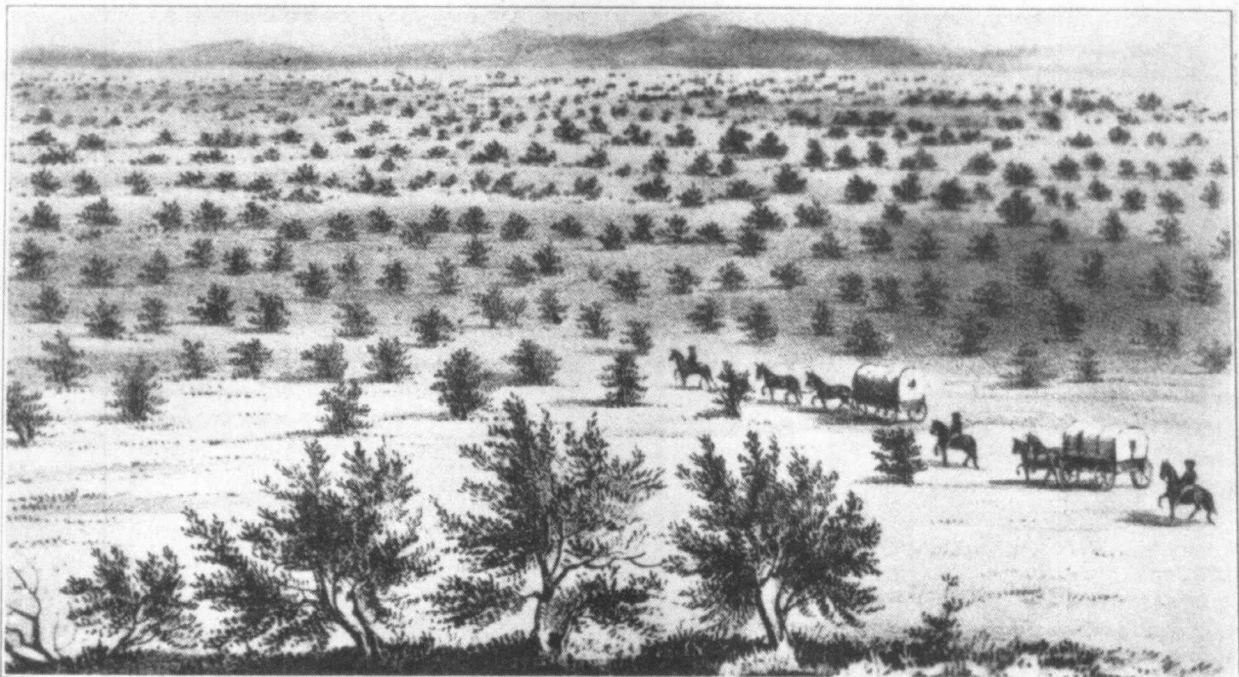
Many of the physiographic features mentioned in diaries of Oregon Trail travelers can still be seen. There are still many stretches of the original wagon road. Vegetation along the rivers has changed because of agricultural progress. Nonetheless, an approximation of the original appearance of the countryside still exists, and by reading the accounts of the early travelers we can get an idea of what they saw, and so determine what changes have occurred.

Lieut. John C. Fremont came to Idaho in 1842. He was the first trained observer who came with the distinct purpose of determining the nature of the land. Upon his arrival in Idaho, along the Bear River, Fremont notes the rich grass along the river bottoms, and while descending toward the Snake River he comments, "Covered as far as could be seen with artemisia [sage brush], the dark and ugly appearance on this plain obtained for it the name of the *sage desert*; and we were agreeably surprised, on reaching the Portneuf to see a beautiful green valley with scattered timber spread out beneath us, on which, about four miles distant, were glistening the white walls of the fort. [Fort Hall]." He goes on to say "Beyond this place, on the line of road along the *barren* valley of the Upper Columbia [Snake River], there does not occur for a distance of nearly three hundred miles to the westward, a fertile spot of ground sufficiently large to produce the necessary quantity of grain, or pasturage enough to

allow even a temporary repose to the immigrants." His report includes a lithograph of the countryside around American Falls, between Fort Hall and Burley—not unlike a lithograph of the country were it made today (Figure 2).

After crossing the Snake, and going northwestward toward Boise River, Fremont comments, "Here, the character of the vegetation was very much changed; the artemisia disappeared almost entirely, showing only at intervals towards the close of the day, and was replaced by *Purshia tridentata*, with flowering shrubs, and small fields of *Dieteria divaricata*, which gave bloom and gayety to the hills. These were everywhere covered with a fresh and green short grass, like that of the early spring. This is the fall, or second growth, the dried grass having been burnt off by the Indians; and wherever the fire has passed, the bright-green color is universal. The soil among the hills is altogether different from that of the river plain, being in so many places black, and in others sandy and gravelly, but of a firm and good character, appearing to result from the decomposition of the granite rocks, which is proceeding rapidly. In quitting for a time the artemesia (sage) through which we had been so long voyaging, and the sombre appearance of which is so discouraging, I have to remark, that I have been informed that in Mexico, wheat is grown upon the ground which produces this shrub; which, if true, relieves the soil from the character of sterility imputed to it. Be this as it may, there is no dispute about the grass, which is almost universal upon the hills and mountains, and always nutritious, even in its dry state." The adventures of Fremont can be followed in his report (1845).

In 1849, Major Osborne Cross was part of a U.S. Army regiment of dragoons with orders to assist immigrants, determine localities for military installations, and ultimately to garrison the Oregon territory to the west. He too, like Fremont, was a trained observer, and was looking at the land



ARTEMISIA PLAINS ON SNAKE RIVER



from the point of view of someone who would be using it. On July 29, 1849, he notes, just after entering Idaho on Bear River, "Grass is found in great abundance on the river where the bottoms are wide, but this year it is nearly all destroyed by the emigrants who are scattered along the river as far as the eye can see." A little farther he comments, "We are now getting to where a fine short grass was to be found on the sides of the hills and ravines. Although not very thick it was considered very nutritious, which I presume must be the case, as our animals would leave the bottoms and climb to the tops of the highest hills to hunt for it."

While at Soda Springs on August 1 Cross writes: "The valley here is finely watered. . . . Lumber can be easily obtained from the mountains on the opposite side of the [Bear] river in great quantities. . . . Wood for fuel can also be procured without much trouble immediately in the rear of the springs on the mountains. . . . The neighborhood probably produces the best pine and cedar which are met with between the Missouri [River] and the Blue Mountains [in Oregon]. Grazing about here is generally very fine, particularly in the small valley through which the stream flows, and hay could be procured from it in great quantities for winter purposes." He suggested Soda Springs as a site for a post.

On August 9th, just west of Fort Hall he comments: "Now we were to pass through a more dreary and barren country than heretofore, a small specimen of which had been before us during the day. From the bluffs [of the river] to the range of hills which runs parallel to the left bank of the river, about five miles of, the land is a poor, light, barren soil, covered with artemisia. Neither the hills nor the plains produce one stick of wood. On the opposite side of the river [toward the north] the country is a vast plain . . . there is nothing to be seen in the distant view except artemisia, which is always present to the sight, let the eye turn in any direction it may. The picture, on the whole, was anything but a pleasing one. When we reflected that we were to travel several hundred miles through a country presenting nothing more pleasing than barren hills and sterile plains, having artemisia to burn, as well as probably food for the animals, it was certainly discouraging." Figure 3 is a lithograph prepared for his report, and illustrates his dreary words well.

On the 17th, when sixteen miles from the crossing of the Snake, Cross comments, "Every day's journey brought us into a worse country, if not for ourselves, certainly for our teams. Many of our mules had been carried down into the canyon last night and the balance were driven down early this morning, after much trouble, to get water. As we had to travel sixteen miles today before either grass or water could be obtained, over an uneven country, or encamp where we would have to fare worse than last night, our march was commended. . . . Many of them [the mules] being unable to ascend the bluff [were] therefore abandoned."

On the 19th they determined that they could not cross the Snake because of the high water, so they continued along the south bank of the river, arriving at Fort Boise on the 29th. While at Fort Boise, Cross writes: "Throughout the day several mules as well as horses died, and some became so exhausted as to compel us to leave them behind. This was certainly not to be wondered at, when we bear in mind that the state of the country through which a command as large

as this had been traveling. [It was] entirely destitute, I may say, of the least subsistence for our mules and horses. As to what grazing they got since leaving the bottoms at Fort Hall . . . where the entire face of the country commences to change, it was of but little importance and barely kept them alive. Sometimes [it did] them much more injury than good. It is true that on our march each encampment would present some little difference, but in not more than one or two instances did we ever arrive at an encampment where we supposed they could be the least benefited, and I have merely spoken of the advantages of each encampment by comparison with the others since leaving Fort Hall."

The details of Cross' trip can be found, in Settle (1940).

In conclusion, we can see that while the Snake and Boise River bottoms are still green, the flat lands and sage-brush plains are succumbing to irrigation and the plow and also are becoming green. One wonders if Hunt, Stuart, Fremont, or Cross would recognize the countryside nowadays.

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### Scholarship Applications Sought

Applications are currently being solicited for the K.S. "Boots" Adams Scholarship for 1987. This Scholarship is administered by the Society for Range Management and consists of a cash award of \$1,000 and a paid summer internship on a working cattle ranch in the tallgrass prairie of Osage County, Oklahoma. The purpose of the Scholarship is to provide first hand experience in practical range and ranch management and to award outstanding university students in range management.

Applications will be accepted from students of junior standing at the time of application who are enrolled in a range management program at any university in the 17 western states of the U.S. The scholarship will be received during the student's senior year and the internship served during the summer between the junior and senior years. Applications must consist of a detailed resume, college transcripts, three letters of reference and an essay entitled "The Role of Ranching in Range Management". All applications materials must be received by November 3. Results of the scholarship competition will be announced at the SRM international meeting in February. Applications or further inquiries should be addressed to: K.S. Adams Scholarship Committee, c/o Robert L. Gillen, Department of Agronomy, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078, (405) 624-6410.