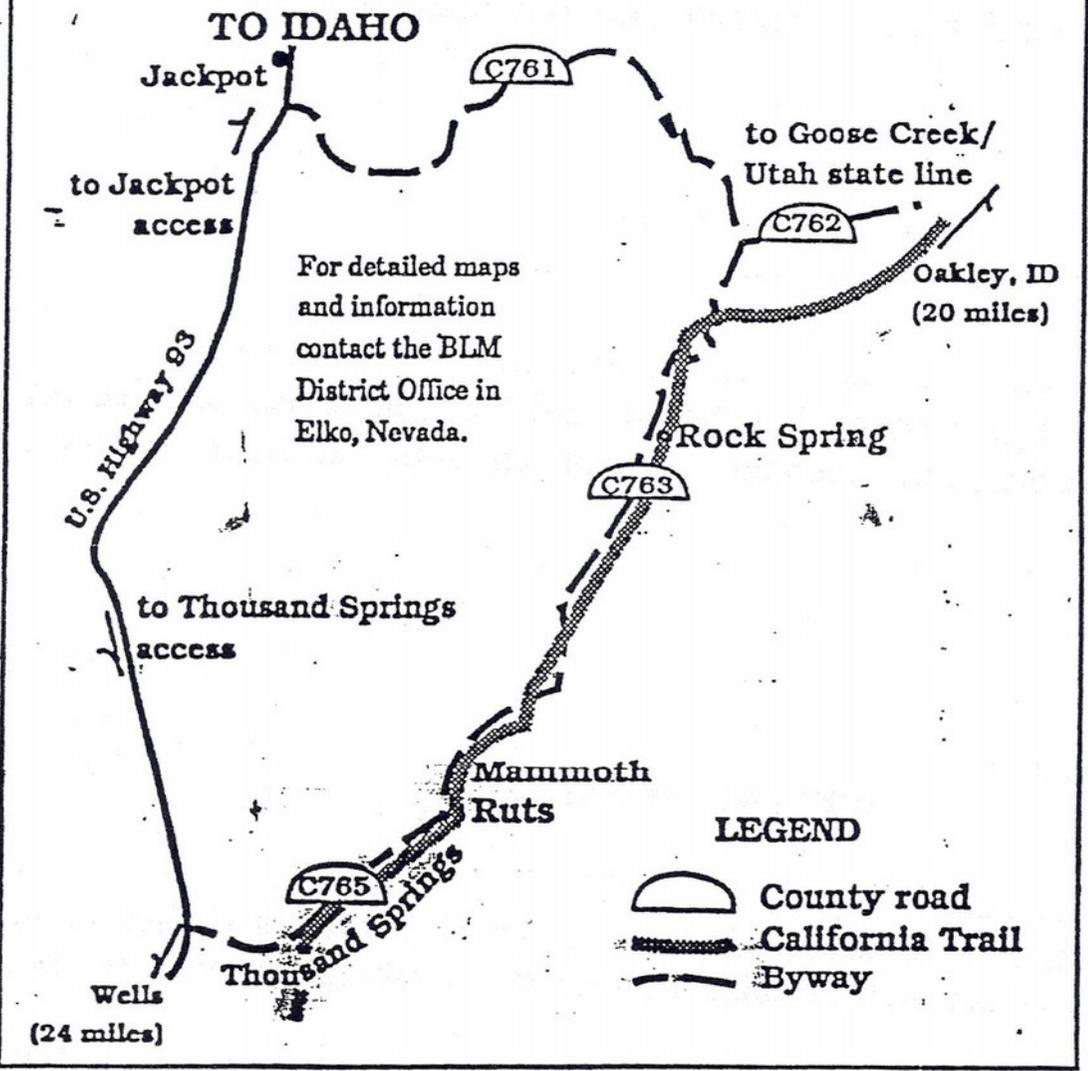


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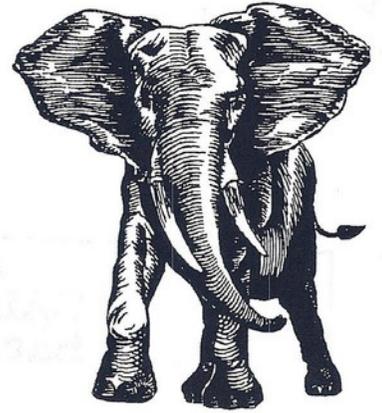
# CALIFORNIA TRAIL Back Country Byway



**PLEASE, SHOW RESPECT**

2

# SEEING THE ELEPHANT



No expression characterized the California gold rush more than the words "seeing the elephant." Those planning to travel west announced they were "going to see the elephant." Those turning back claimed they had seen the "elephant's tracks" or the "elephant's tail," and admitted that view was sufficient.

The expression predated the gold rush, arising from a tale current when circus parades first featured elephants. A farmer, so the story went, hearing that a circus was in town, loaded his wagon with vegetables for the market there. He had never seen an elephant and very much wished to. On the way to town he encountered the circus parade, led by an elephant. The farmer was thrilled, but his horses were not. Terrified, they bolted, overturning the wagon and ruining the vegetables. "I don't give a hang," the farmer said, "for I have seen the elephant."

For gold rushers, the elephant symbolized both the high cost of their endeavor—the myriad possibilities for misfortune on the journey or in California—and like the farmer's circus elephant, an exotic sight, an unequalled experience, the adventure of a lifetime.

—Jo Ann Levy in *They Saw the Elephant*

## HERE IN THE HUMBOLDT VALLEY, THE ELEPHANT TOOK ON A SPECIAL MEANING:

"But there is here [in the Humboldt Valley] a lure [as powerful as any] that have drawn this army forward thus far. They feel that this is the last; this is the end; this is "the Elephant"! If you can stand this you are victor! Beyond is California and its gold. Hang on now and see the thing through the Humboldt Valley and you have won!

You must get that view of it. The finding of gold is luck; you will not be held blamable if you are unlucky. But making the journey—overcoming obstacles—fighting your way through—that is a matter of grit, not luck. Do that, get there, and you are absolved, you have filled the bill, eaten the "Elephant's ears," mastered the part of the game that depended on you. Whether the god, Luck, will give you gold or not is another question and out of your control. If you see this view of it, you will know how thousands endure these days in this Valley of the Alkali Shadow of Death."

—A. B. Hulbert, *Forty-Niners*

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This much food is suggested  
for each adult in the group:

- 200 pounds of flour
- 30 pounds of pilot bread (hardtack)
- 75 pounds of bacon
- 10 pounds of rice
- 5 pounds of coffee
- 2 pounds of tea
- 25 pounds of sugar
- ½ bushel of dried beans
- 1 bushel of dried fruit
- 2 pounds of saleratus (baking soda)
- 10 pounds of salt
- ½ bushel of corn meal
- ½ bushel of corn, parched and ground
- 1 small keg of vinegar

—Jacqueline Williams, *Wagon Wheel Kitchens*

Question: Why was vinegar an essential supply? (Answer below)

A

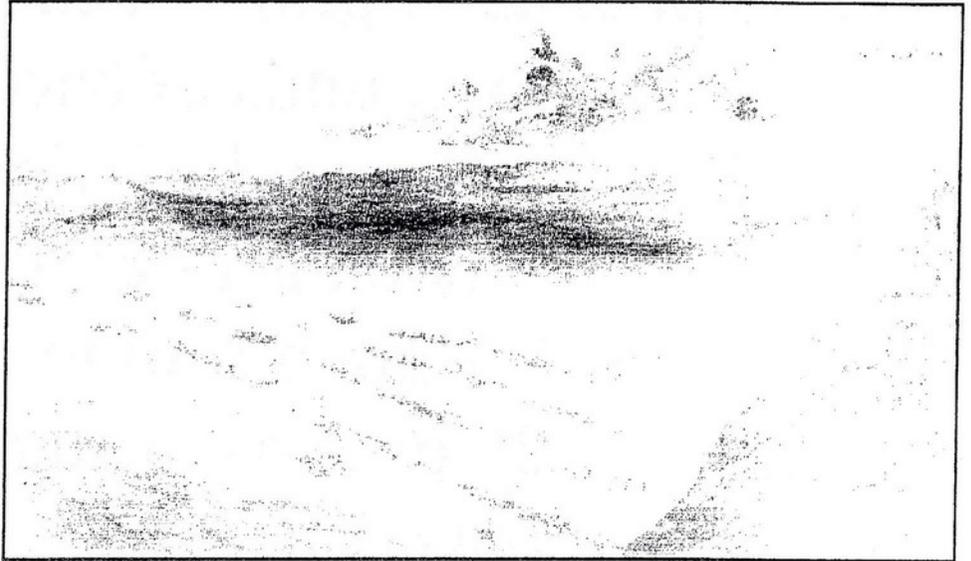
## THE MYTH OF "THE TRAIL"

The twentieth century has taught us to think in terms of "a road," the narrow strip of land dedicated to the safe passage of vehicles. It is limited in breadth, usually improved, and is The Path You Followed. That is our experience, and we forget that it has not always been so. Before the advent of the automobile, other considerations influenced the specific route you would travel.

To be sure, there were often places where geographic and topographic conditions mandated that every wagon take exactly the same path. Limited numbers of good mountain passes and river fords (or bridges and ferries across rivers) also forced the wagons onto a single path for certain stretches of the route. But the rest of the time, when geography and topography were not a problem, the single route "trail" is generally a myth.

This is especially true here along the Humboldt River. For most of its course, the river flows through a valley from six to eight miles in width, flat as a billiard table, almost totally lacking in physical barriers to force the wagons to a single route. (There are a few exceptions, such as Emigrant Pass.)

Here the controlling factors of the specific route of a specific wagon or wagon train would be matters of dust, grass and water. The route would change from wet year to dry year, and from early in the season to late in the season.



Josiah Gregg (State Historical Society of Missouri)

Dust was an ever present problem that was mentioned in almost every diary. Traveling along Nevada's alkali desert in August was pure torture—the salts in the dust would crack the lips and burn the eyes; so at every opportunity, the wagons spread out to avoid the dust of the wagon ahead, seeking fresh air. (See the illustration above.)

In wet years portions of the trail close to the river or in low-lying areas would be muddy and difficult to cross; the sloughs (old portions of the river channel now abandoned by the river) would be full of rain water and have good grass. Conversely, in dry years the trail would have to stick closer to the river for whatever water and grass there was.

Finally, the "tail end Charlies" of each year's migration often found that the livestock of the wagon trains ahead of them had eaten all the grass along the preferred route, and these latecomers were forced to travel by less desirable routes in hope of finding feed for their animals.

In short, during any given year, wagons were occupying a large portion of the river valley, and there was no one trail or pathway that everyone traveled.

But what about the ruts that can be seen today along the Humboldt? Two answers: First, there were routes that a larger percentage of wagons may have gone which cut ruts into the landscape; but secondly and more likely, these are the ruts of the supply wagons and stagecoaches of the 1860's – 1880's, which would have been very heavy and would have traveled the same route each week, thus cutting ruts which would have survived until today. This is not to say the covered wagons never went this way—it's just that they weren't the only ones.

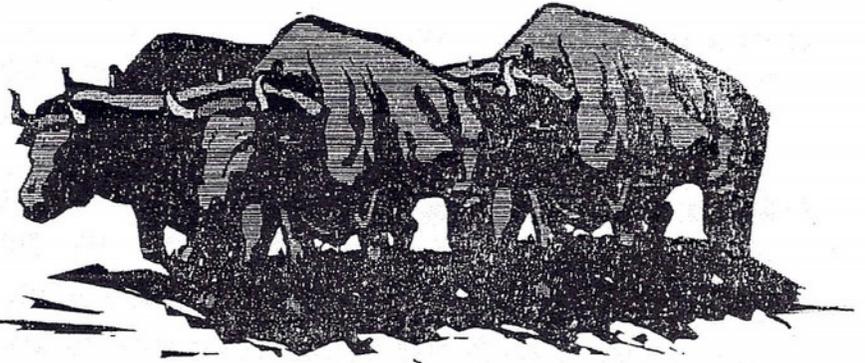
In short, if you had stood in one of these ruts in 1849, you would have gotten run over by a covered wagon; but if you had stood forty (or fifty or sixty) feet to the left (or right) you would have also gotten run over.

You need to think 19th century, not 20th or 21st century!

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## WHAT IS AN OX, ANYWAY?

In commercial herds, bull calves are usually castrated from birth to six or eight months of age to



make a good steer. If given enough time, the steer would be large enough to become an ox. If I was raising oxen 150 years ago, I would let the bull calves remain bulls as long as their necks did not become too large or the hump on the neck did not develop because they would grow faster and larger while a bull. You could never wait to castrate a bull when he is all grown up (about four years of age) because the hump on his neck would not leave a place for the yoke. A castrated grownup bull is a stag. I think that a stag could be used for work only by using a yoke lashed to its horns and, to my knowledge, these yokes were rarely used in this country.

—Gordon Hull, in the quarterly *folio*, August, 1998

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## AN AVERAGE DAY ON THE TRAIL

**4:30 a.m.** Awakened by the noise of the night herdsmen bringing the animals from where they were grazing all night, back into camp. In some camps a bugle was used to awaken everybody.

**4:45 to 6** Dress, prepare and eat breakfast, prepare lunches to eat during the noon break, hitch up the teams, milk the milch cows, fill the water barrels, search for any strayed animals, repack the wagons with the cooking supplies and bedding, and prepare to move out.

**6 to Noon** On the trail. Yesterday's lead wagon now at the rear, new wagon in the front, out of the dust of all the following wagons. Tomorrow, it will take its place at the rear, and another family will get a dust free day. Captain or guide out front, scouting the route and looking for good water and feed for the noon break.

**Noon to 2 p.m.** Stop at a site picked out by the Captain as having the best feed and/or water in the area. Rest; let the animals graze, eat lunch, refill water barrels if there is a supply of good water, repair wagons, doctor sick animals, mend clothes, do wash, hunt or fish if available in the area. If heading for an area where grass is scarce, cut hay and load it in the wagons.

**2 to 7 or 8 p.m.** On the trail again. The time the train would finally stop for the night would usually be how ever long it took to find a spot with good feed and water for the livestock, and not by the time of day (or night). The well being of the livestock was all important and if they had to go until midnight for feed and water, so be it.

**Once camped for the night:** Unpack cooking and bedding supplies, fix dinner, pitch the sleeping tents, send out the night herdsmen with the livestock so that they can feed, set the night watchmen, get ~~some sleep~~ ~~some sleep~~.



# CHILDREN'S CHORES

Young children making the trip to California with their parents were expected to do their part and help the adults. Both boys and girls would be expected to do the following:

**Milk the cow** - if the family had brought a milk cow (called a milch cow), it had to be milked every morning, and some times in the evenings too.

**Fetch water** from the stream

**Watch out** for the smaller children

**Gather firewood** or buffalo chips for the cooking fires

**Help pack and unpack** the bedding and cooking supplies from the wagon

**Herd the extra livestock** that would follow the wagon - this would include the milch cow, spare oxen or horses; some people took goats or sheep with them for food.

**Help cook** the food and wash the dishes

**Help with the laundry**

In areas where the trail was rough, walk ahead of the wagon and throw stones out of the way, clear brush, and put limbs and brush over muddy spots so that the wheels of the wagon would not sink in

**Fish or hunt** for small game

# THE BATTLES OF BATTLE MOUNTAIN

During the period of the westward migration, 1840 to 1860, there was nothing where the town of Battle Mountain now stands; however, about 5 miles to the north along the most often traveled route, was Stony Point, a famous trail landmark.



It was here in 1857 that three separate attacks occurred on the trail; two against small wagon trains and one against the government surveyors who were working on the trail. It was the knowledge of these events that probably led to the name of "Battle Mountain."

The first of the attacks, on August 12, was against a small train known as the Wood party, consisting of a single mule-drawn wagon that had fallen behind the rest of the train. As the attack began, Wood, an Englishman, cut two mules out of their harness and placed his wife and three-year-old child on one while he mounted another. As they fled toward the wagons ahead, the woman and child were killed while Wood, though wounded, did make the safety of the other wagons.

The second attack was even more horrific: Early on August 15, a small party of six men, two women and a baby, having camped by themselves near Stony Point, were attacked as they began to stir. In the first few moments, most of the men and one woman was killed. One man, an African American blacksmith, though wounded, managed to find shelter in the river. The child was killed. The remaining woman, Mrs. Holloway, was injured, and fell to the ground feigning death to prevent further attacks. Her assailants, to ensure that she was in fact dead, first pulled the arrows from her body and then thrust them into her again. With great courage, Mrs. Holloway gave no sign of life during both these assaults and later when she was scalped. The attackers were soon frightened off by an approaching wagon train. Mrs. Holloway was rescued, her scalp found, and she was tenderly nursed back to health in Carson City before traveling on to California. It is said that her scalp was made into a wig.

The third attack occurred on August 24, when seven of the government surveyors working on the trail were attacked by "55 or 60" well armed and well mounted Indians. Over what was reported to have been a two hour battle, the surveyors worked their way back to their camp and reinforcements. The reports say that the surveyors' casualties were one killed, three wounded - all horses. Losses on the Indian side were unknown.

So who was it that did all of this? Many people at the time felt that at least a portion of the attacks were done by white men masquerading as Indians, or at least renegade Indians led by whites. There were reports that during some of the attacks the survivors recalled hearing the "Indians" talking to each other in English. This was the year of the Utah War, when President Buchanan send an army to Salt Lake City to quell what was seen in the east as a rebellion by the Mormons, and feelings, both pro- and anti-Mormon, were running high, as evidenced by the tragic Mountain Meadow Massacre in Southern Utah along the Old Spanish Trail to Southern California, when Mormons and Indians combined to destroy a wagon train of some 128 easterners, killing all but a few young children.

Probably the most likely candidates are the Bannock.

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# Tribal Territories of the Great Basin Indians

Smithsonian Institution, *Handbook of North American Indians, Vol. 11*

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## FIREARMS

The emigrants' greatest fear was attack by Indians. As a result of that fear, most travelers armed themselves to the teeth.

Ironically, studies have shown that as a result, the third leading cause of death on the trail was accidental gunshot wound. (Disease was #1, drowning #2.) And death at the hands of an Indian? It ranked a lowly 10th, with less than 400 people ever killed by Indians between 1840 and 1860 on the California or Oregon Trails combined.

The high incidence of gunshot wounds was the result of two factors:

1. Too many guns in the hands of inexperienced "greenhorns;" and
2. The transition from single shot muzzle loading guns to multiple shot weapons with a whole new and untested technology that resulted in many of the new designs being intrinsically dangerous.