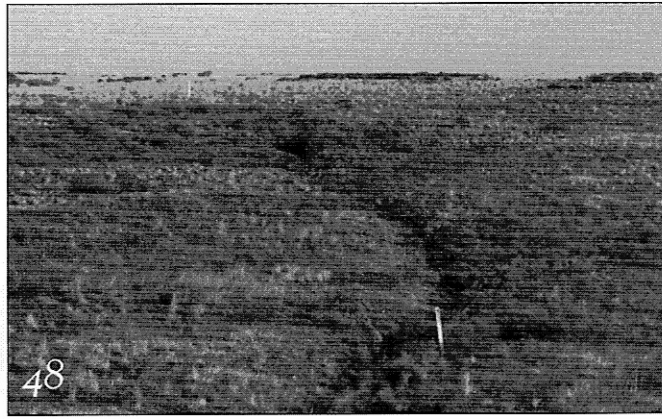
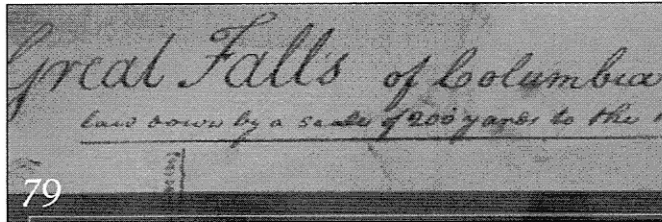
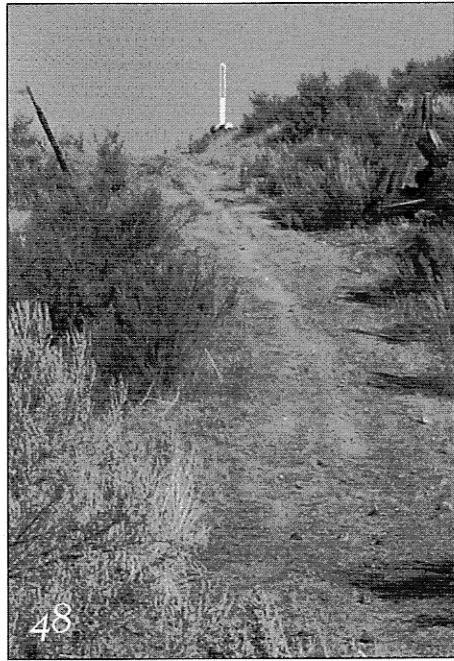


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ON THE COVER: North Alternate Oregon Trail in southwestern Idaho heading northwest towards Teapot Dome near Ryegrass Creek. This scene is very similar to what the emigrants would have seen in 1852–1854. *Photo by Jerry Eichhorst, whose article on the North Alternate Oregon Trail is contained in this issue.*

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BY JERRY EICHHORST

PIECES
to the
PUZZLE
Rediscovering
Idaho's North Alternate
OREGON TRAIL

TRUDGING THE FINAL FEW YARDS CLIMBING OUT OF THE SNAKE RIVER CANYON, I KNEW THAT I HAD FOUND THE MISSING PIECE TO THE PUZZLE. THIS OLD ROAD HAD BEEN USED BY THOUSANDS OF EMIGRANTS IN THE 1850S AS THEY

attempted to find a better route to Oregon across the southern Idaho desert. Chills overtook me as I turned to look back down the path. How many pioneers had looked back over the valley and felt the same feelings upon reaching the summit?

Sitting for a few minutes to take in the view, I contemplated what led me to this place in a search lasting two years. In the spring of 2007 I was doing research to find information about multiple graves that had been mentioned in several diaries. This quest led me to gather over forty diaries of those who traveled across Idaho on the route known as the “North Alternate Oregon Trail” (NAOT). I compiled the diaries by location, which provided a much clearer view of each site and allowed common features to appear. From those diary compilations I determined that the previously identified route of the NAOT did not match the diary descriptions. This realization led to an opportunity to map and photograph nearly thirty miles of the NAOT route that had been misidentified and forgotten in the over 150 years since it was used. Finding the correct route of the NAOT was similar to a jigsaw puzzle—a puzzle created many years ago when the route was incorrectly mapped. Through a combination of archival research, map work, and field trips the puzzle would finally be solved.

KELTON ROAD

The belief that the Kelton Road must have followed the route of the NAOT had created much of the problem identifying the emigrant trail.

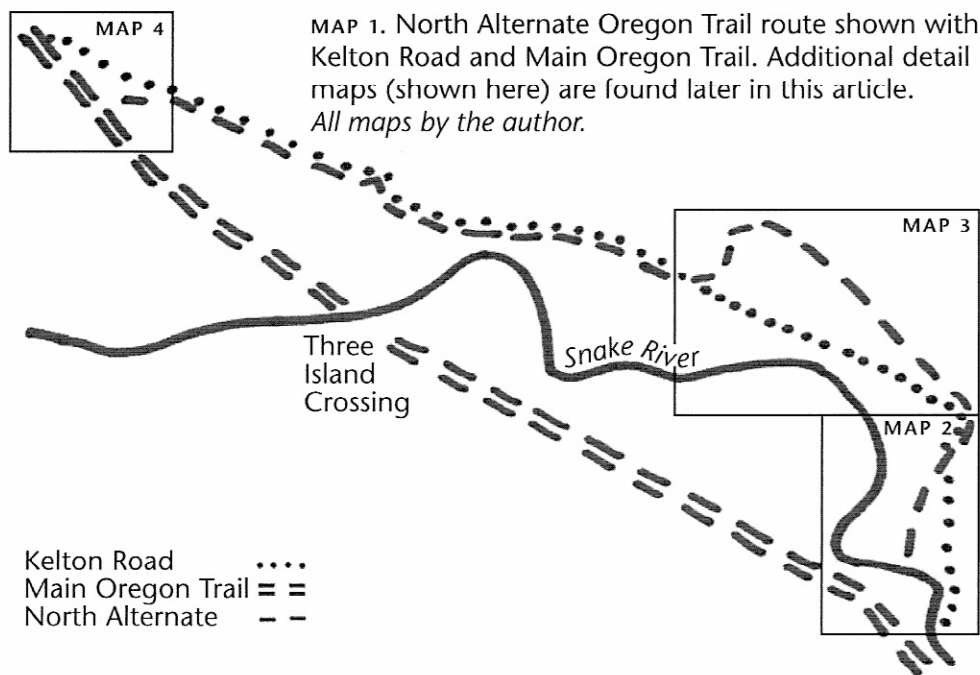
When the transcontinental railroad was completed across northern Utah in 1869, freight traffic began to travel from the railroad to Boise via several routes to serve the growing gold and silver mines in central Idaho. One of these, the Kelton Road, was the most popular and served the Boise area until 1883.

Near the mouth of Salmon Falls Creek, the Kelton Road crossed the Snake River at what was then called Payne’s Ferry. Later called Lewis Ferry, it was used by freighters and stages until the Kelton Road changed its route to use Glens Ferry in 1879. Climbing out of the Snake River canyon, the Kelton Road crossed the Malad River on a wooden bridge and headed northwest towards King Hill and on to Teapot Dome. There are many excellent remnants of the Kelton Road throughout southern Idaho.

Previous mapping assumed the Kelton Road followed the NAOT route and the two routes were generally talked about as one and the same. In fact, portions of the NAOT route were used by the Kelton Road and there are many miles where the NAOT and Kelton Road share a common path. There are three areas, however, where the routes are much different. These differences are shown on Map 1 and the detail maps which follow:

1. From the Snake River to the Malad River. The Kelton Road crossed the Snake River at the mouth of Salmon Falls Creek, five miles upstream from the NAOT crossing. The Kelton Road then climbed out of Snake River Canyon and traveled across the desert to Malad

(opposite) A possible grave site near the Malad River on the North Alternate Oregon Trail. All photos in the article by the author.



- River. The NAOT crossing was several miles to the west and followed a different route to Malad River.
2. From Malad River to the southwest bend of Clover Creek. The Kelton Road followed a direct route from Malad River to the Clover Creek station which was located near the southwest bend of Clover Creek. Although this route had no water available, the teamsters needed only to travel from station to station to obtain fresh animals. The NAOT emigrants traveled northwest from Malad River and reached Clover Creek five miles above Clover Creek station. They followed the east side of Clover Creek to the area where the station would later be built. At this point the NAOT and Kelton Road began to follow the same route.
 3. West of Ryegrass Creek. A short distance past Ryegrass Creek the NAOT turned west for two

miles before joining the main Oregon Trail at Hot Springs Creek. The Kelton Road continued northwest and joined the main Oregon Trail a mile west of the Teapot Dome Hot Springs.

OVERVIEW

When a group of Creole, Indian, and French trappers [Dinwiddie, 1853] started a ferry across the Snake River a mile above Salmon Falls in 1852, they gave the emigrants a choice of routes to follow. [See references and bibliography at end for sources.] Thirty miles of desert without direct access to water awaited the emigrants on the main Oregon Trail from Salmon Falls to where they reached the Snake River again at Three Island Crossing. An easier route was appealing for the emigrants with their tired animals. Trappers who

ran the ferry assured the emigrants that this new northern route was shorter and provided better grass and water than the main trail.

After receiving instructions from the ferrymen, the emigrants started on the NAOT with no trail guide to lead them. As they followed this new route, the diarists gave names to the creeks and rivers they crossed, usually based upon the terrain encountered in the crossing. Unlike the main Oregon Trail which had published guides naming the creeks and thus allowing consistency in the diaries, the NAOT names varied with the imagination of the writer.

From the diary research I have conducted, I believe that the NAOT was the primary route taken by the emigrants for the years 1852–1854, with nearly two-thirds of the emigrants traveling the Oregon Trail using it. An estimated 23,500 people traveled to Oregon in the years 1852–1854 [Unruh, page 85]. This would mean approximately 15,000 people traveled the NAOT route in those years.

Surprisingly, the only evidence I have found that the NAOT was used after 1854 are the reminiscence of John B. Kelso who notes an old man with a ferry at Salmon Falls while traveling in 1862, and the 1863 diaries of Medorem Crawford and James Bailey who crossed the Snake River at Salmon Falls and traveled the route of the NAOT. [Kelso, 1862; Bailey, 1863; Crawford, 1863]

SALMON FALLS FERRY

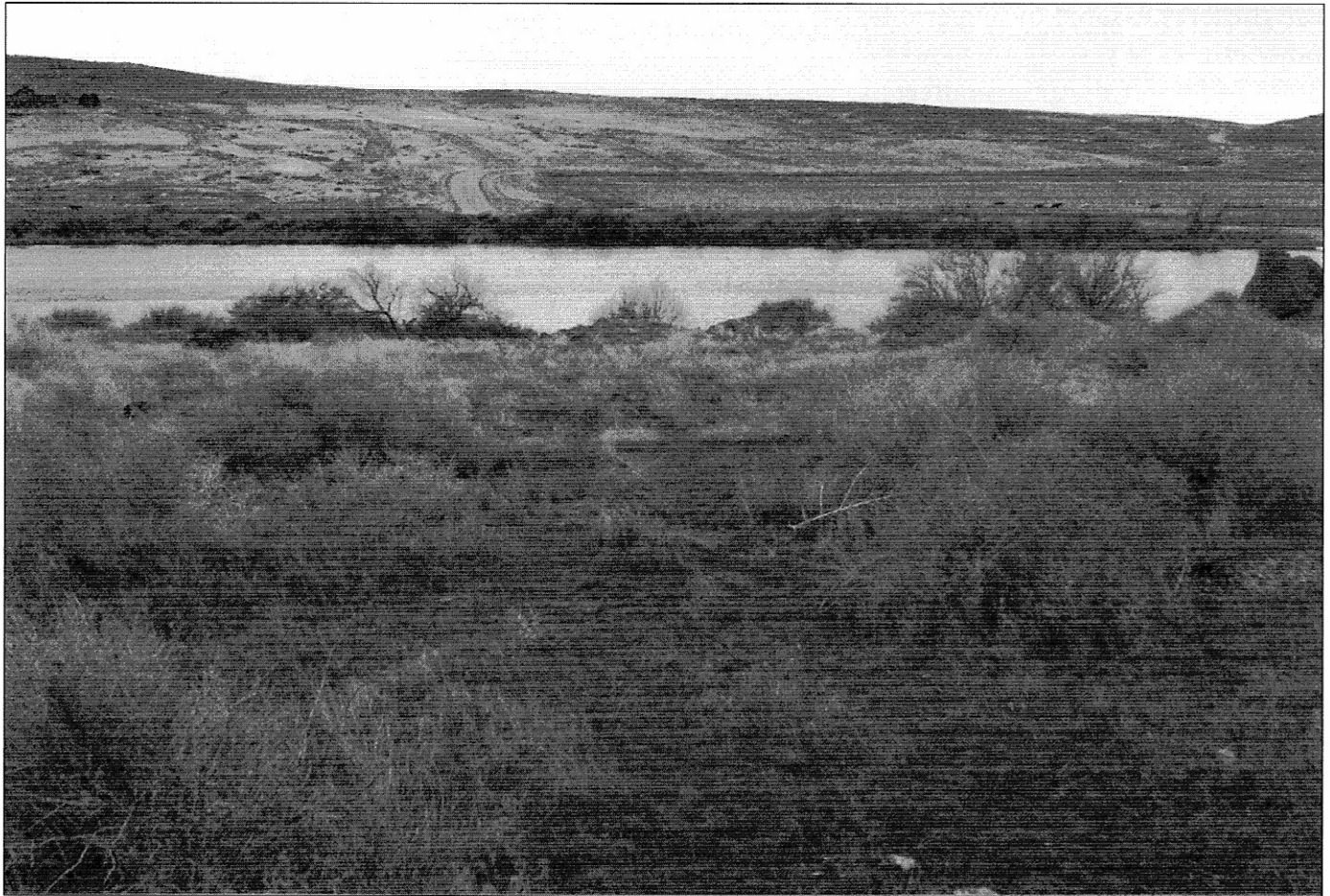
Salmon Falls was a primary encampment for many Indians. With modest vertical height, the falls were in a location where the Snake River passed through several narrow channels that allowed the Indians to trap and spear salmon as they ascended the river to spawn. Many of the Indians traded salmon to the emigrants for clothing and other

items. Salmon was a welcome treat to the palates of the travelers.

Located some thirty-five miles upstream on the Snake River from the emigrant ford at Three Island Crossing, the Salmon Falls Ferry site is south of the town of Hagerman, Idaho. [See Map 2.] Emigrant diaries are consistent in their placement of the ferry. Most diarists mention crossing Salmon Falls Creek and traveling four or five miles before coming to the ferry. Many describe the location as one mile above Salmon Falls. [Martha S. Read, 1852; Maria A. Belshaw, 1853; Charlotte Emily Stearns Pengra, 1853; Sarah Sutton, 1854.] The diary evidence clearly places Salmon Falls Ferry five miles downstream from Salmon Falls Creek which is where the ferry used for the Kelton Road was located. Identifying this difference was the first step in solving the trail puzzle of the route of the NAOT.

Two wagons were tied together to make the ferry. A make-shift rope was used to pull the ferry across the river. Ferry rates varied, but were generally about \$5 per wagon. Although two ferry boats were in use the first year, only one of the ferry boats remained in 1853. No mention of the ferry is made in emigrant diaries after 1854 until 1862 and 1863, when it appears to have been operating again [John B. Kelso, 1862; James Bailey, 1863; Medorem Crawford, 1863].

The emigrants often had long waits for the ferry, and grass for the cattle was scarce. Compounded by the number of dead animals and the dust, it was not a pleasant campsite. Emigrants relate having to pull the ferry across on their own, as the ferry owners charged for the privilege of its use. Cattle and other stock were forced to swim across the Snake River, usually downstream at the top of Salmon Falls using Dolman Island to help with the crossing. Many animals and a few people were



SALMON FALLS FERRY SITE
Remnants of road looking south towards Snake River.

drowned during the crossing of the Snake River in this area.

Few signs remain of the location of Salmon Falls Ferry. Because it was temporary, there are no pilings or other permanent supports remaining. The original Snake River channel is now under water because of a dam built at Salmon Falls. Grading for Bell Rapids Road and development of a small park along the river removed the trail remnants on the south side of the river. Heavy agricultural use over the years, including a pig farm, have

destroyed much of the remaining evidence on the north side. About a quarter mile upstream of the Owsley Bridge there is an area which contains a more gently sloping approach to the edge of the river. Here can be found some grooved rocks and the remnants of an old road. These faint traces of a road leading away from the river in the direction the emigrants would have traveled were the next piece in solving the trail puzzle. I believe that this was the location of the Salmon Falls Ferry and the beginning of the NAOT.



BILLINGSLEY CREEK CANYON

The NAOT route followed west side (to the right in this picture) and crossed near the pipe.

BILLINGSLEY CREEK

After crossing the Snake River, the NAOT emigrants headed north towards a narrow gap in the steep canyon wall of the Snake River Canyon high above Billingsley Creek. For many miles on either side of this gap, the Snake River Canyon wall is steep, rocky and capped with a thick, nearly continuous layer of basalt. Such an imposing canyon wall limited the options available for wagon train travel out of the Snake River Canyon to the north.

Billingsley Creek Canyon is a narrow, steep

stretch less than two miles in length nestled against the steep Snake River Canyon wall. Flowing from a number of springs on the east side of the Snake River Canyon, Billingsley Creek is a beautiful, crystal clear stream which is a renowned trout fishery.

Upstream from Billingsley Creek Canyon the basalt-capped Snake River Canyon walls prevented wagons from climbing to the rim above. Below Billingsley Creek Canyon the profile of the land quickly changes as the steep canyon walls



MAP 2. Salmon Falls Ferry to Malad River

disappear and the creek meanders across a flat desert landscape. Such an area would have proven far too muddy and marshy for wagons to cross. Thus the only route that the emigrants could have traveled was to cross Billingsley Creek in its canyon and climb out of the Snake River Canyon through the small gap above Billingsley Creek Canyon. [See Map 2.]

As mentioned above, most of the area between the Snake River and Billingsley Creek has been subject to heavy agricultural use for many years, thus removing any traces of the route. Most likely

there were multiple routes across the Hagerman Valley leading to the crossing of Billingsley Creek. Some diarists mention coming to a small creek about a mile from the ferry site [Martha S. Read, 1852; Henry Allyn, 1853]. Those diarists apparently traveled to the northeast after crossing the Snake River where they encountered Riley Creek, then followed down the west side of Billingsley Creek for several miles. About one-half mile upstream from where Tupper Grade Road currently crosses Billingsley Creek, this route entered Billingsley Creek Canyon. A short segment of an old road bed is visible at this location. An improved dirt road follows down the west side of the creek to Tupper Grade Road. Continuing down the west side of the creek, the route crossed the creek just upstream of where Hidden Springs Trout Farm is today.

Other emigrants who traveled directly north from the ferry missed Riley Creek. Many diarists describe a steep descent into Billingsley Creek Canyon, crossing the creek, and a steep climb out of the canyon [Parthenia Blank, 1852; Celinda E. Hines, 1853]. These emigrants apparently entered the canyon very near the crossing. The construction of a railroad grade long ago has removed signs of the descent into the canyon in this area.

Traces of the trail route can be found ascending the hillside east of the crossing location to the narrow gap in the basalt cliffs. Although it was a difficult climb out of the Snake River Canyon, the emigrants were clearly able to achieve the summit without problems. Later known as Johnson Grade, this route was the first road into the Hagerman Valley from the north. As the third piece to the puzzle, the road from Billingsley Creek out of the Snake River Canyon is critical to determining the route of the NAOT.



The emigrant trail leaving Billingsley Creek and approaching the summit of the Snake River Canyon.

MALAD RIVER

Once out of the canyon, the NAOT emigrants were again on a sage desert plain heading for the first available crossing of the Malad River. Created where the Big and Little Wood rivers join, the Malad River is one of the shortest rivers in the country. A deep gorge has been carved over thousands of years as the river drops from the high desert plain to the bottom of the Snake River Canyon.

Forced to go upstream because they could not cross such a chasm, the NAOT emigrants crossed the Malad River a short distance above the gorge. Deep rushing water and large rocks in the crossing caused a great deal of fear and some wagons to overturn [Henry Allyn, 1853; Charlotte Emily Stearns Pengra, 1853; Sarah Sutton, 1854].

Many NAOT diaries note the use of an island in the difficult fording of Malad River. Emigrants camped on both sides of the river and on the rocky



Looking south from the summit after the ascent from Billingsley Creek Canyon.

island. Emigrants were able to cross the south channel onto the island on a natural rock bridge. Located about a half-mile below the NAOT crossing, this “bridge” consists of large boulders which have fallen into the narrow chasm and wedged against the walls to form a rough crossing. Diary accounts note this natural bridge as being wide enough for only one person at a time. It was impassable by wagons but some emigrants dismantled their wagons and carried them to the island over this difficult bridge [Henry Allyn, 1853; Celinda E. Hines, 1853; Amelia Stewart Knight, 1853].

In the 1850s the Malad River flowed fast and deep. Today most of the water from the river has been retained in reservoirs and diverted for irrigation purposes. Sagebrush-covered desert surrounds the gorge which remains much the same as it was for the emigrants.

Approximately one-half mile downstream from the NAOT crossing and seventy-five yards below the natural bridge, the Kelton Road crossed the river using a wooden bridge which was built over the upper end of the gorge. Although the bridge burned in a wildfire in the 1930s, the abutments for the



NAOT crossing of one channel of Malad River.

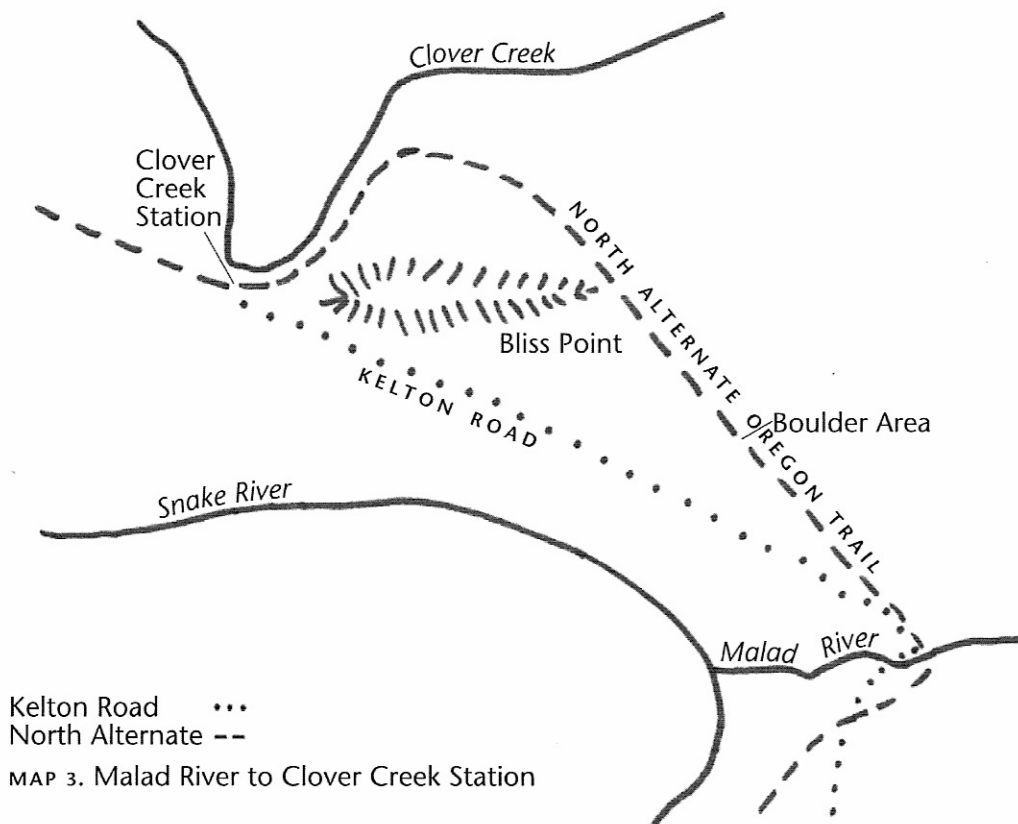
bridge are still visible. A stage station was kept on the north side of the river for many years. This was a home station where food and overnight accommodations were provided. Pits and a few scattered rocks are all that remain of the stage station.

Finding the natural bridge and the wagon crossing site upstream from the Kelton Road bridge site was the fourth piece of the trail puzzle in rediscovering the NAOT. The location of Salmon Falls Ferry, the route through Billingsley Creek

Canyon, and the sites for crossing Malad River determined the first portion of the NAOT which was different from the Kelton Road.

CLOVER CREEK

After crossing Malad River, the NAOT traveled northwest towards the eastern tip of Bliss Point. The Kelton Road followed this route for a short distance before it branched more to the west,



heading directly for Clover Creek station where Clover Creek turns to the north. Because the stage stations could provide fresh animals for the stages and wagons, the Kelton Road headed directly across the desert. Although the NAOT would eventually end up at the same location, its course was longer and continued further north. Struggling and weak, the emigrants and their animals needed to take advantage of the water and lush grasses offered along Clover Creek. Many rested on its banks for a day.

North of Malad River the road is soft alkali dirt for a distance from the river, then crosses through an area strewn with large boulders and lava outcroppings. Although not entirely covered

with lava, the rocky area is distinctive enough to have been mentioned in diaries [Henry Allyn, 1853]. After curving around Bliss Point, the route heads northwest to the crossing of the ridge upon which Clover Creek Road now runs. Heading down the draw on the north side of the ridge, the trail curves to the west and continues to Clover Creek. After turning south down the flat valley, the route follows the east side of Clover Creek before turning west, a distance of five miles [Martha S. Read, 1852; Elizabeth Goltra, 1853]. Signs of a small spring can be found on the east side of the valley about one-and-one-half miles from where the route reached the valley [Amelia Stewart Knight, 1853]. [See Map 3.]



Natural bridge over south channel of Malad River.

Traces of the route can be found wherever access is available via local roads. Excellent remnants can be found in many places, including one section which has a swale over four feet deep. A soft, powdery soil covers much of the route which would blow away in the frequent winds as wagons made their way across the trail, thus creating these deep swales. Other areas provide clear tracks which are fairly shallow. Remnants of the road approach a point sticking out from the east

side of Clover Creek valley. Many years of spring floods have washed away the route around this point. Excellent ruts remain in the soft sandy soil as Clover Creek turns to the west. Clover Creek station was located where Clover Creek turns to the north, but that site is now covered by the waters of Pioneer Reservoir, and the rocks of the station were used years ago to build the first dam on the creek. Another piece of the trail puzzle became apparent as the route following Clover



The Kelton Road bridge abutments at the Malad River gorge.

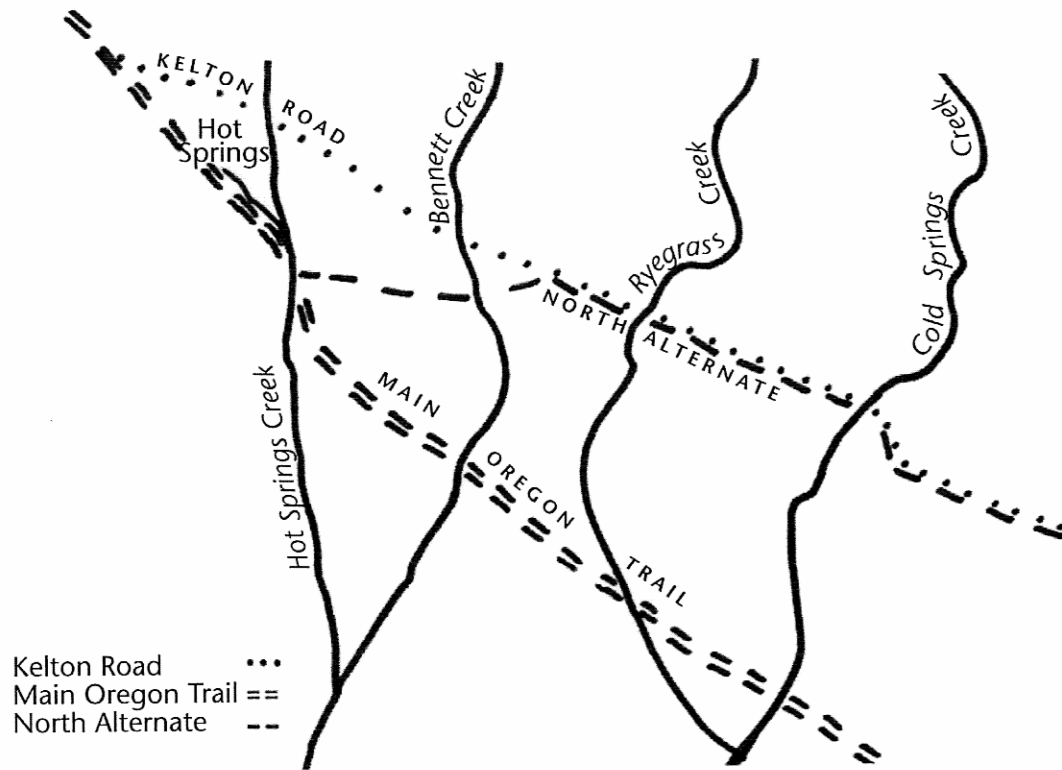
Creek matched that described in the diaries. This section from Malad River to the site of Clover Creek station is the second major variation of the NAOT from the Kelton Road.

MAIN OREGON TRAIL

When Clover Creek turns to the north, the NAOT route left the creek and headed across the desert to the northwest. The Kelton Road and the route of the NAOT are generally the same at this point, and follow the same path for thirty-one miles. After crossing Clover Creek two miles upstream from

the mouth at Snake River, the NAOT and Kelton Road route climb out of the valley and travel west to King Hill Creek. Emigrants then faced the long steep climb up King Hill. After reaching the summit, the route traveled across the desert in a nearly straight line towards the southern base of Teapot Dome. A number of small streams were crossed including Little Canyon Creek, Alkali Creek, Cold Springs Creek, and Ryegrass Creek. In the 1850s, each of these streams typically had water and grass available for the emigrants.

Improvements were made for some portions of the Kelton Road route. Rocks were piled along the



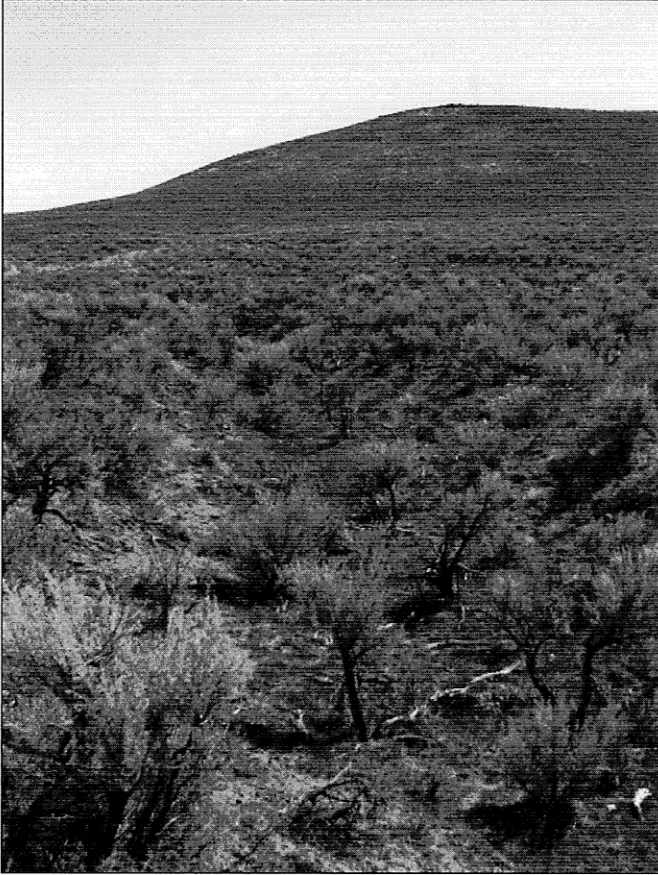
MAP 4. Cold Springs Creek to main Oregon Trail

side of the road to make it smoother for the freight wagons and stages, and road beds were dug out of the sides of flat valleys to allow travel during wet seasons. A fire on King Hill in the summer of 2010 exposed many of these cleared paths.

Only after crossing Ryegrass Creek did the NAOT and Kelton Road routes separate again. Branching to the west for a few miles, the NAOT rejoined the main Oregon Trail at Hot Springs Creek. [See Map 4.] Diaries from the NAOT pioneers indicate that they saw Hot Springs Creek and the Hot Springs three miles further west, the same as those travelers who had taken the

main Oregon Trail and crossed the Snake River at Three Island Crossing [Parthenia Blank, 1852; Maria A. Belshaw, 1853; Elizabeth Goltra 1853; Celinda E. Hines, 1853; Sarah Sutton, 1854].

Continuing to the northwest, the Kelton Road rejoined the main Oregon Trail one mile west of the Hot Springs. By continuing to the northwest, the Kelton Road passed nearly a mile north of the Hot Springs. Therefore, the third major difference and the last piece to the trail puzzle became apparent as the NAOT route rejoined the main Oregon Trail at Hot Springs Creek, well before the Hot Springs.



Deep ruts approaching Clover Creek.

DISEASE AND DEATH

It is interesting to note that many of the emigrants and their animals became quite ill shortly after reaching Clover Creek, a slow-moving, shallow stream which becomes very warm and stagnant by late summer. Clover Creek was described as “warm and not very palatable” and “a creek of poison water” [Henry Allyn, 1853; Amelia Stewart Knight, 1853].

People also became ill shortly after reaching Clover Creek, leading to the greatest number of graves noted in diaries across southern Idaho. For the next fifty miles, the trail became a long

graveyard. Diarists mention passing five, eight, ten or more graves in a row [Parthenia Blank, 1852; Maria A. Belshaw, 1853; Basil Nelson Longworth, 1853; Sarah Sutton, 1854]. Most of these died in 1852. Although one grave noted the cause as cholera, I believe the diseased water of Clover Creek led to the deaths. Mileages noted in the diaries indicate that there were several locations with multiple graves. Five graves in a row [Maria A. Belshaw, 1853] have been found east of Canyon Creek. A possible mass grave site on Ryegrass Creek has been known about for generations. Most of the other graves will likely never be found.

Only two of the people who perished in this section have been identified from the NAOT diaries reviewed thus far. Continued research will hopefully identify others. One of the saddest stories is that of Mary Elen Orchard. In August, 1852, William Cornell notes the death of the little girl.

Sunday Aug the 29 Day pleasant we traveled about 15½ miles and come to camp on Grave Creek here we found nine graves of recent interment

Monday the 30 Morning more cloudy than usual with considerable wind This morning we have to add another to the nine graves the child of Mrs Orchard's died about 8 O'clock aged 10 months. . . . After the burial of the child we got under way about 3 O'clock. . . .

William Cornell, 1852

Two years later, Sarah Sutton notes the grave in her diary.

Mony July 24 . . . noon'd at a grave yard where there is 10 died August 1852 here is the grave of Mary Elen Orchard, great has been the suffering of man, and beast, at this place. . . .

Sarah Sutton, 1854



Arrows mark the route approaching Clover Creek.

Disease and death were prevalent throughout the Oregon Trail during 1852, but seem to have stricken far more people on the NAOT than the main Oregon Trail or the South Alternate Oregon Trail routes across southern Idaho. Some consideration must certainly be given to the quality of the water in Clover Creek since the illnesses and deaths occurred shortly after reaching that portion of the trail.

SUMMARY

Crossing southern Idaho from the Snake River to Hot Springs Creek, the route of the North Alternate Oregon Trail is now clearly identified. Written in the 1850s as their authors struggled across the desert, emigrant diaries provided the inspiration and clues to rediscover this route. Only after many months of research and many miles of exploring was the correct route found. Significant



Faint trail remnants heading south along the east side of Clover Creek.

differences to the misidentified Kelton Road route have been discovered between the Snake River and Malad River, between Malad River and Clover Creek station, and to the west of Ryegrass Creek. Much of this route is located on public land and can be followed and explored via good roads with moderate hikes.

More than 150 years after the emigrants traveled this trail, the puzzle is complete and the true route

of the North Alternate Oregon Trail is known. Thousands of emigrants followed this route in an attempt to find a better road to Oregon. Contaminated water caused the deaths of hundreds of cattle and the route was soon littered with their bones and remains. People suffered as well and the gravesites of those who perished remain forever along this trail, lost among the sagebrush.



The NAOT route approaching Hot Springs Creek.

RECENT DISCOVERIES

A possible emigrant graveyard on the NAOT east of Mountain Home, Idaho, was discovered by the author in April, 2010. A trained cadaver dog verified over forty-five graves in the area. One puzzling aspect of the discovery was the apparent random pattern to the graves, all located in a relatively small area.

Continued diary research has led to the discovery that James Bailey traveled the NAOT with Medorem Crawford and his emigrant guard in 1863. [Bailey, 1863; Crawford, 1863] Bailey notes camping at the location of an 1858 Indian massacre of an entire wagon train. Mileage noted in

the diaries indicate this location is also the site of the emigrant graveyard. It is possible that the emigrant graveyard is the site of the massacre and the victims were simply buried where they had died. This would explain the random pattern to the graves. Further investigation will hopefully clarify this new piece to the puzzle of the NAOT.

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(above) One of five graves east of Canyon Creek.



(left) A grave at the emigrant graveyard. Center rock has initials and a date carved in it.

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