

Taking the Scenic Road Over the Blue Mountains

By Jerry Eichhorst

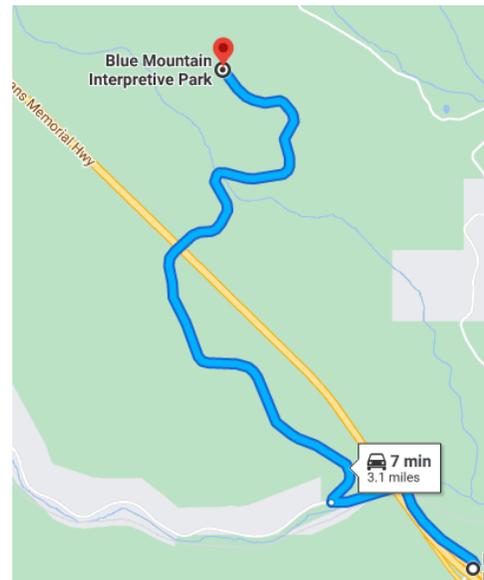
As emigrant travelers neared the end of their journey on the Oregon Trail, they faced one of the most difficult challenges on the trek in crossing the Blue Mountains. Rising several thousand feet above the grassland prairies on either side of the mountains, the Oregon Trail wound through the forested mountains with steep hills and descents. The first wagon trains of 1843 spent days cutting trees to clear a path through the mountains. The trek across the Blue Mountains took many days for wagon travelers.

Today's travelers heading west to Oregon must also cross the Blue Mountains, but modern vehicles traveling on Interstate 84 traverse the mountains in less than an hour. The biggest challenge is often the summer road construction projects.

Have you ever gotten off the interstate highway and taken old Highway 30 over the mountains? The slower pace winding through the river canyon and over the mountains offers access to beautiful forests, lush wildflower-covered meadows, incredible vistas, and Oregon Trail historic sites.

The **Oregon Trail Interpretive Park at Blue Mountain Crossing** is easily accessible, only 3.1 miles from I-84. When heading west on I-84, exit the interstate at exit 248. Turn right and follow the road under the interstate. A sign will then direct you to turn right, travel under the interstate again, and up to the interpretive park where you can walk among ponderosa pines on a paved interpretive path loop to view well-preserved Oregon Trail ruts, stage road ruts, and beautiful scenery. Additional discovery trails allow you to walk on the Oregon Trail ruts in the footsteps of the pioneers. Facilities include restrooms, drinking water, interpretive signs, a paved walking trail, and a large parking area.

Additional information can be found on the National Forest website at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/recarea/wallowa-whitman/recarea/?recid=52095>.

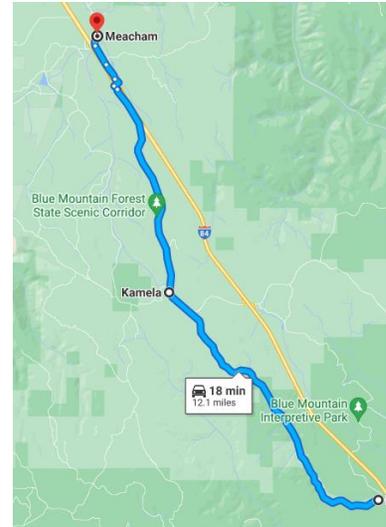




Remnants of the old Oregon Trail



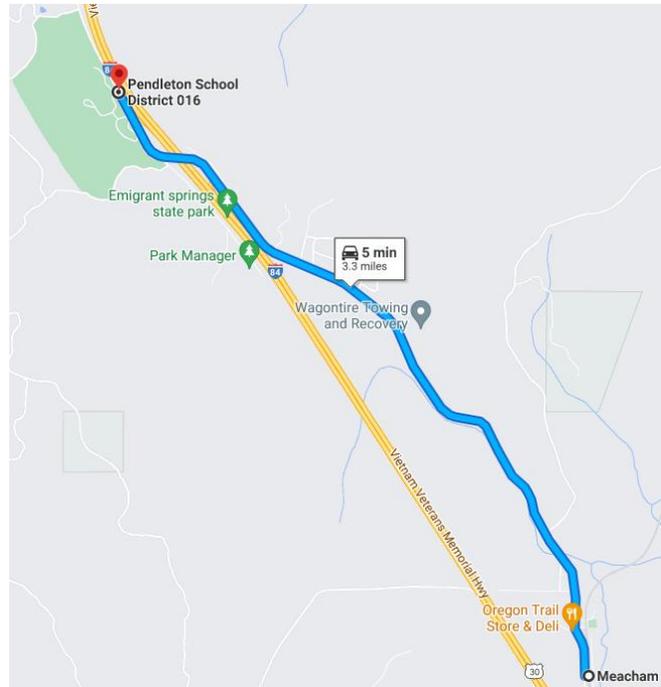
Continuing west on the old highway, now called the Old Emigrant Hill Scenic Frontage Road, for 12.1 miles takes you through the wide spot in the road called Kamela and brings you to the small town of **Meacham**. President Warren G. Harding visited this area on July 2, 1923, to speak at a gathering to commemorate the Oregon Trail. He stayed in Meacham for just over 8 hours and declared the small town "the capital of the United States all day long." An estimated 15,000 people attended the celebration including the governors of surrounding states and local Indian tribal members.



Below: President Warren G. Harding, right, is shown on July 2, 1923, next to a marker commemorating the Oregon Trail near Meacham.



Traveling west another 3.3 miles on the old highway brings you to **Emigrant Springs State Heritage Area**. The springs to the west were a camping area on the Oregon Trail. The park provides camping, picnicking, nature walks, and additional Oregon Trail interpretive signs.



Traveling west again on the old highway for 2.9 miles brings you to Squaw Creek Overlook. A short distance off the highway on a good gravel road brings you to the top of a ridge where you have an incredible view over the valley below.



Traveling west another 3.2 miles brings you to a rest area. Continuing another 10 miles through numerous switchbacks brings you to the bottom of the Blue Mountains. Another 4 miles brings you to the Umatilla Indian community of Mission. Turn left in 1 mile on S. Market Road to return to Interstate 84, 2 miles to the south.

Old Highway 30 over the Blue Mountains provides a slightly slower way to cross the mountains. On the drive you will have the opportunity to see beautiful scenery and Oregon Trail historic sites. It is a drive well worth taking. Slow down and enjoy the scenery and history of the area.