

QUARTERLY OF THE OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ASSOCIATION

OVERLAND JOURNAL

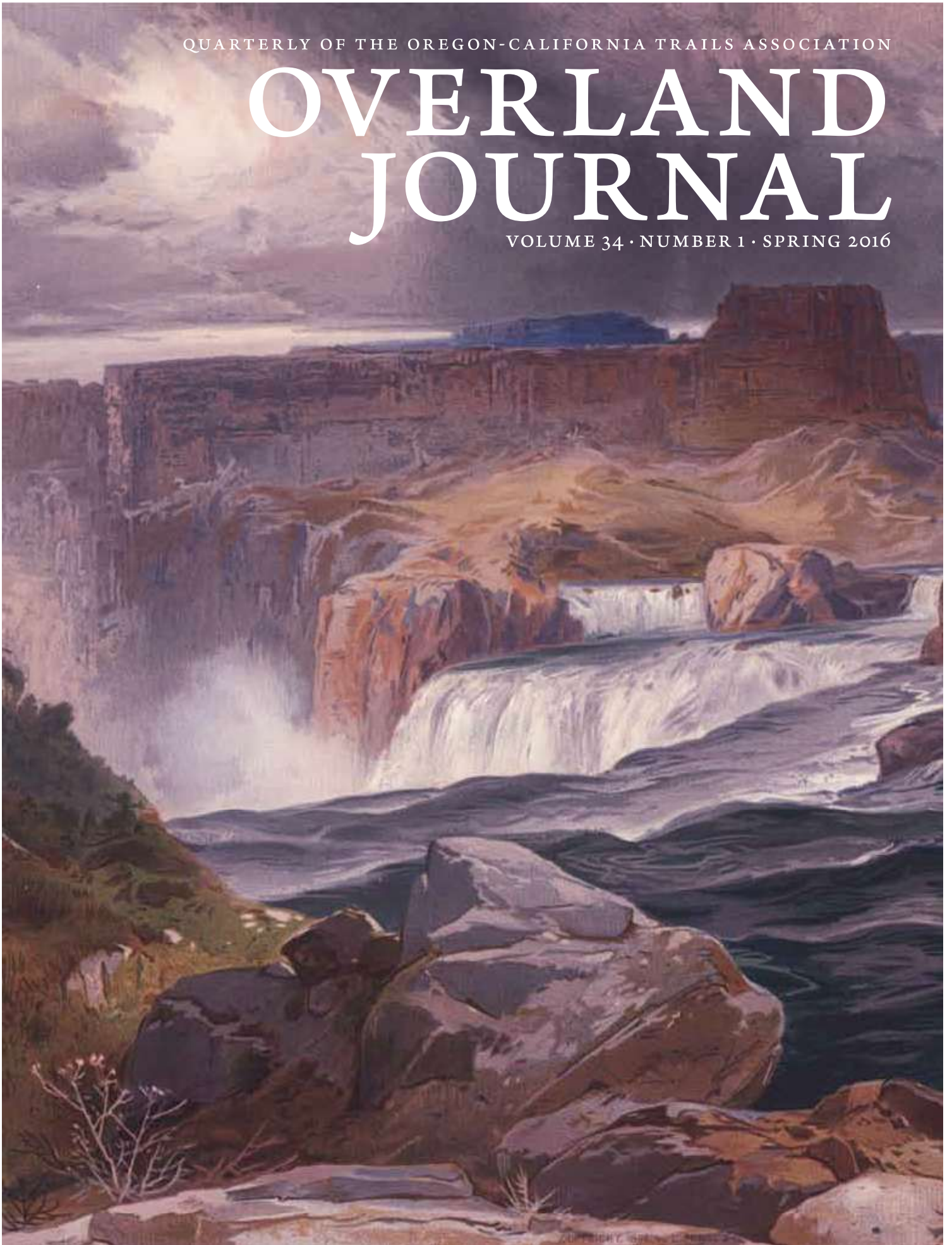
VOLUME 34 • NUMBER 1 • SPRING 2016

On arriving at Snake river
they commenced at once
to build a fort.

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Thomas Moran (1837–1926), *Great Falls of Snake River, Idaho Territory, 1876* (detail), chromolithograph on paper, 8³/₈ × 12¹/₂ in. L. Prang & Co, and Thomas Moran.

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Diaries across Idaho

Curiosities on the
Oregon Trail in
Southeast Idaho

BY JERRY EICHHORST

Pyramid Spring, with man-made geyser. The original Pyramid Spring is just south of the man-made geyser. Many diaries described it as a pyramid about twenty feet high, with water coming out of the top. Its shape is the result of a build-up of mineral deposits in the water. The man-made geyser was capped in 1937.
PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR.

Researching historical emigrant diaries is a fascinating passion for me. A GREAT DEAL OF INFORMATION CAN BE LEARNED ABOUT THE PEOPLE, TRIPS, SITES, AND ACTIVITIES OF THE ERA BY STUDYING THEIR ACCOUNTS OF JOURNEYS ACROSS THE COUNTRY.

Hundreds of thousands of people loaded their essential possessions into wagons and trudged across the plains to build a new life in Oregon and California in the middle of the nineteenth century. Many of these emigrants kept journals of their trip that fortunately are available to study and enjoy today. Some are filled with detailed descriptions of sites and events they encountered on their westward journey. Others simply noted the miles traveled and the camping conditions—crossing the country in a few pages, so to speak. Women tended to add emotion and sensitivity in their writings, yet some men rambled on with great detail and opinions to produce extensive accounts. I find that all are interesting to read.

Much has been written about the mass migration of people across the country to the Pacific Coast. Books supplement an interesting journal, providing insight into the emigrant, his family history, and the route that he traveled. Groupings of journals by year or by gender have proven to be popular. Countless histories of the trails have drawn upon these journals as sources to document the great migration, often using short diary quotes to accentuate a point. Still other books follow the trails from their origins across the country, augmenting descriptions of the route with maps and selected journal entries.

Little has been published, however, that analyzes large numbers of journals in detail by a specific location. Previously I compiled more than fifty diaries by location to identify the true route of the North Alternate Oregon Trail across southwestern Idaho.¹ In preparation for the upcoming Fort Hall OCTA convention, I have attempted to compile several hundred journals across southeastern Idaho—a monumental endeavor. This effort, however, has yielded interesting new discoveries in the hundreds of diaries I have been able to process.

THE OREGON TRAIL IN SOUTHEAST IDAHO

The Oregon Trail followed the Bear River valley in western Wyoming before entering what is now southeastern Idaho

at Thomas Fork, a branch of the Bear River flowing from the north. Crossing the Sheep Creek Hills, it descended the largest of which is commonly called “Big Hill,” before again reaching the Bear River valley. It followed the Bear River northwest through a lush valley with many small streams flowing from the mountains to the river. As the Bear River turned west to make a large bend around Sheep Rock and run south to Salt Lake, the emigrants encountered the Soda Springs, an area of geothermal activity complete with effervescent springs of hot and cold water flowing from mounds of sediment. The most famous of these springs is Steamboat Spring, now under the waters of Alexander Reservoir.

A few miles west, the trail turned northwest up the Portneuf River valley, another broad valley of lush grasses. It was at this point that the Hudspeth Cutoff was first traveled in 1849. Farther north up the valley, the route turned west over a saddle on Mount Putnam before descending along Ross Fork to the Snake River plain. The Lander Road joined the trail in this section after its creation in 1858. The route then crossed the lush Snake River bottoms to the Hudson’s Bay Company outpost of Fort Hall.² This route was also followed by thousands of emigrants who followed the Raft River route on their westward journey to California.

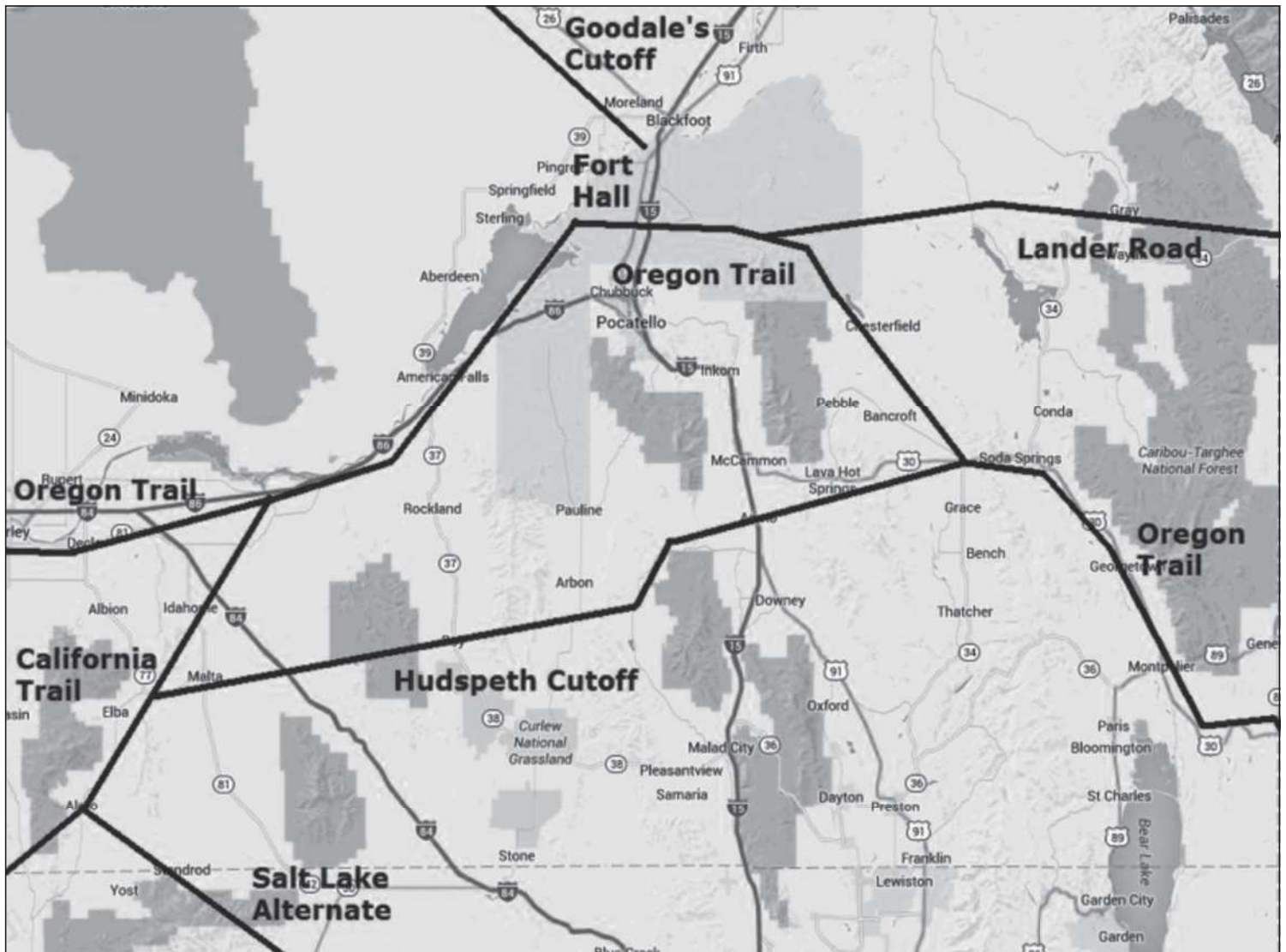
Compiling emigrant journals of the sites along this route provides fascinating descriptions of the sites, people, and events across this stretch of trail. In addition, a careful, detailed analysis has yielded a number of new findings that shed light on the Oregon Trail in southeastern Idaho.

SULPHUR SPRINGS

Five miles east of the town of Soda Springs and less than three miles northeast of the Oregon Trail route, is an area known as Sulphur Springs. Consisting of effervescent springs in a muddy basin, the area has the strong smell of sulphur from dozens of small springs bubbling up. Sulphur Springs is

¹ See Jerry Eichhorst, “Pieces to the Puzzle: Rediscovering Idaho’s North Alternate Oregon Trail,” *Overland Journal* 31, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 48–67.

² Fort Hall Trading Post, built in 1834 by Nathaniel Wyeth, was sold to the Hudson’s Bay Company three years later. See Jerry Eichhorst’s fuller history of Fort Hall elsewhere in this issue.



MAP 1. Map of Southeast Idaho Overland Trail Routes. GOOGLE EARTH, ADAPTED BY THE AUTHOR.

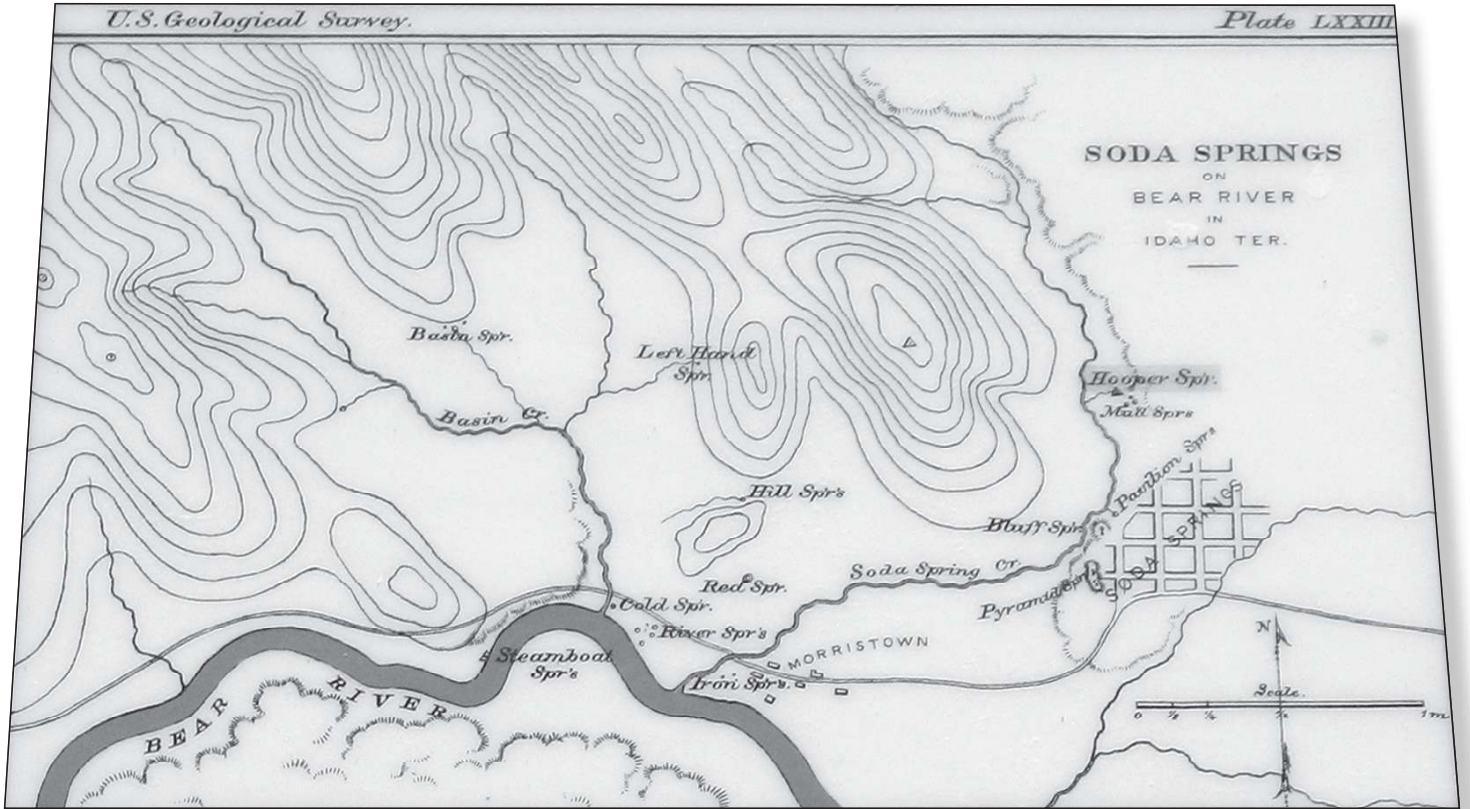
included in the Oregon Trail Bear Lake Scenic Byway website with a statement that it “was noted in numerous early explorer and emigrant diaries,” and showing an interpretive sign quoting Frederick Adolph Wislizenus, who traveled in the area in 1839.³ Wislizenus traveled west to Fort Hall, then turned around and returned east. A study of his diary, however, reveals that Wislizenus never saw the Sulphur Springs. The quote used on the interpretive sign is taken from his diary entry for July 18 at Steamboat Spring along the Bear River.

After researching more than 550 diaries of emigrants

traveling on the Oregon Trail down Bear River valley, I was unable to find an account which describes a visit to these Sulphur Springs. Only one account, Eleazar Stillman Ingalls, even mentions the area, referring to a sulphur lake while he was camped near Steamboat Spring: “There are also Sulphur Springs, and springs containing other minerals, and five miles back in the hills is a Sulphur Lake.”⁴ Yet, I distinctly

3 http://www.seidaho.org/scenic_byway.htm, accessed on March 6, 2016. Frederick Adolph Wislizenus, *A Journey to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1839* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society, 1912).

4 Judge Eleazar Stillman Ingalls, *Journal of a Trip to California by the Overland Route Across the Plains in 1850–51* (Waukegan, Ill.: Tobey and Co., Printers, 1852, reprinted Fairfield, Wash.: Ye Galleon Press, 1979). Digital copy online at <http://archive.org/details/journalofatripto3178ogut>. Accessed on January 28, 2013.



MAP 2. An early U.S.G.S. map was used as the basis for this plaque, which stands at Hooper Spring, near the town of Soda Springs, Idaho. This detail includes a section of the Bear River and the early Soda Springs townsite. PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR.

remember having come across one account some time ago of a man who visited the Sulphur Springs in the evening. Maybe someday I will find it again.

It is not surprising to me that the site was not noted more often. There was no need to travel far from the trail to find good camping sites since the Bear River valley itself was lush. The aroma of sulphur is not overwhelming today and thus cannot be sensed at a distance. With the prevailing winds blowing away from the trail, it is unlikely that many travelers ever noticed the smell of sulphur.

NARCISSA WHITMAN, 1836

Narcissa Whitman traveled west in 1836 with her husband, Marcus, and three other missionary couples. The wives are often referred to as the “first white women to cross the Rockies.”⁵ In her diary, Narcissa described visiting the Soda Springs:

July 30th Went today ten miles off our route with Husband Mr. McLeod & a few others, to visit Soda Springs. Was much delighted with the view of the wonders of Nature we saw there. The first object of curiosity we came to were several white mounds on the top of which were small springs of soda. These mounds were covered with a crustation made from the evaporation of the water which is continually running in small quantities from these springs. The next object we saw was a little singular. It consisted of an opening like a crater about three feet in diameter, by the side of a small stream. On some rocks a little below in the opening were dead flies & birds in abundance which had approached so near the crater, as to be choked with the gas which it constantly emits. On putting the face down, the breath is stoped instantly, & a low rumbling noise like the roaring of fire is heard beneath. Having satisfied our curiosity here we passed through a grove of juniper & pitch pine trees, & a small distance from them came to a large spring of soda water. Clear as crystal, effervescing continually. It appeared of great depth. At a considerable distance below the surface, there were two white substances, in appearance like lumps of Soda in a concrete state. We took with us some soda & Acid to try the effect

5 Narcissa Whitman, *Letters and Journals of Narcissa Whitman*, in Clifford M. Drury, ed., *First White Women Over the Rockies: Diaries, Letters, and Biographical Sketches of the Six Women of the Oregon Mission Who Made the Overland Journey in 1836 and 1838* (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1963–1966), 76–77.

of a mixture & found that it effervesced with both, but the effervescence was greater with the Acid, than with the Soda. Drunk freely of the water, found it very pleasant. There were five or six other springs near Bear River which we did not visit, in consequence of loosing sight of part of our company & being obliged to hasten back. The ground in every direction was covered with lava. Gathered several fine specimens. We desired more time to visit other curiosities there but was unable to, for camp was moving from us continually. Rode in all thirty miles, & found them encamped under a bluff covered with black basalt.⁶

Several clusters of springs were concentrated in the area and are mentioned in many diaries. As Map 1 shows, the Soda Springs were along the Oregon Trail route and were easily visible to travelers as they moved along the Bear River. Yet Narcissa Whitman traveled ten miles off the trail to visit more soda springs.

I believe that Narcissa and Marcus Whitman and the others traveled up Soda Creek to Hooper Spring. Since Hooper Spring is about five miles from Bear River by way of Soda Creek, going to the spring and returning would account for Narcissa’s statement “Went today ten miles off our route with Husband.” The “several white mounds” are likely the pyramid mound area noted as “Pyramid Spr” on the survey map to the southwest of the small community that existed when the map was created. This pyramid area lies close to the creek. It remains today, located immediately to the south of the man-made geyser in the town of Soda Springs, Idaho, as shown in Map 2.

Continuing up Soda Creek, the Whitman party “passed through a grove of juniper & pitch pine trees & a small distance from them came to a large spring of soda water. Clear as crystal, effervescing continually.” The Whitmans would have seen trees on the mountain to their left as they neared Hooper Spring. It is possible that in 1836 those trees came down to the creek. A short distance north of the small community on Map 3 is Hooper Spring, a clear, effervescent spring which constantly bubbles. The spring has been modernized over time with a concrete surround and pavilion being built. Just as Narcissa “Drunk freely of the water, found it very pleasant,”⁷ today, people still fill containers with the water.

6 *Ibid.*, 1:76–77.

7 *Ibid.*, July 30, 1836, 1:77.

The numerous springs near Bear River, which the missionaries did not have time to explore on their return trip, are likely those located to the west of the mouth of Soda Creek.

A GREAT CURIOSITY

Just as Narcissa Whitman's did, many of the emigrant diaries used the term "curiosity" in describing the Soda Springs and Steamboat Spring. The number was so great that it appears out of proportion. Thinking that usage of the word may have come from popular guidebooks using the term, I searched fifteen trail guidebooks that described Soda Springs. I found only one that used the term. In 1841, on his journey to California, John Bidwell wrote, "This is a noted place in the mountains and is considered a great curiosity."⁸ Bidwell's journal was later published as one of the first guidebooks to California. The route he followed to Soda Springs became a primary route of the Oregon Trail. I was surprised to find that none of the other guidebooks I examined used the term "curiosity" when describing Soda Springs, yet travelers' accounts frequently did.

Emigrants often wrote interesting descriptions of Soda Springs and the nearby Steamboat Spring. Some accounts are extensive, filling several pages of their typescript diaries. More than 25 percent of those accounts that were analyzed used the term "curiosity" in their writing. A small sampling of "curiosity" descriptions used in accounts written before 1850 follows:

A few yards from our camp is a curious spring called the Soda Spring.

JASON LEE, JULY 8, 1834⁹

The continual ebullition which the gass in escaping causes renders them an object of much curiosity

CYRUS SHEPARD, JULY 8, 1834¹⁰

- 8 John Bidwell, August 10, 1841, *A Journey to California with Observations about the Country, Climate and the Route to this Country* (ca. 1842; San Francisco: John Henry Nash, 1937), 13.
- 9 Jason Lee, July 8, 1834, "Diary of Rev. Jason Lee" [April 20, 1834–August 7, 1838], ed. by F. G. Young, *The Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society* 17, no. 2 (June 1916): 116–46; 17, no. 3 (September 1916): 240–66; and 17, no. 4 (December 1916): 397–430.
- 10 Cyrus Shepard, and Gerry Gilman, *Diary of Cyrus Shepard, March 4, 1834–December 20, 1835* (Vancouver, Wash.: Clark County Genealogical Society, 1986), 40.

This is indeed a curiosity.

SARAH GILBERT WHITE SMITH, JULY 24, 1838¹¹

Of all the curiosities that I ever Saw this Spring Surpasses all them.

SYDNEY SMITH, AUGUST 29, 1839¹²

Some places on Bear river exhibit great natural curiosities.

FR. PIERRE-JEAN DE SMET, AUGUST 10, 1841¹³

The greatest Natural Curiosity I ever saw.

MEDOREM CRAWFORD, AUGUST 11, 1842¹⁴

A number of springs . . . which cannot fail to excite the curiosity and interest of the traveler. These singular natural curiosities are known among the trappers as the Beer and Soda springs. A few hundred yards below these, is another remarkable curiosity, called the Steamboat spring.

RUFUS SAGE, 1843, REMINISCENCE¹⁵

The soda springs are a curiosity but I was very much disappointed from reports.

JOHN HOWELL, AUGUST 5, 1845¹⁶

But *the* greatest curiosity is the "Steam Boiler Spring" hard by the river. . . Here are Petrifications and geological curiosities, evidences of Volcanic nature are plenty here.

PETER DECKER, JUNE 25, 1849¹⁷

- 11 Sarah Gilbert White Smith, *Diary of Sarah White Smith, First White Women over the Rockies* (Glendale, Calif.: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1966), 3:61–125, quoted on 99.
- 12 Sydney Smith, *To The Rockies and Oregon, 1839–1842*, ed. LeRoy R. Hafen (Glendale, Calif.: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1955), 67–93, quoted on 80–81.
- 13 Pierre-Jean Smet, Hiram M. Chittenden, and Alfred T. Richardson, *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S.J., 1801–1873: Missionary Labors and Adventures Among the Wild Tribes of the North American Indians, Embracing Minute Description of Their Manners, Customs, Games, Modes of Warfare and Torture, Legends, Traditions, Etc., All from Personal Observations Made During Many Thousand Miles of Travel, with Sketches of the Country from St. Louis to Puget Sound and the Altrabasca* (New York: F. P. Harper, 1905), 302.
- 14 Medorem Crawford, *Journal of Medorem Crawford: An Account of His Trip across the Plains with the Oregon Pioneers of 1842*, in *Sources of the History of Oregon*, Vol. 1, no. 1 (Eugene, Ore.: Star Job Office, 1897).
- 15 Rufus Sage, *Rocky Mountain Life, or Startling Scenes and Perilous Adventures in the Far West* (Boston: Wentworth & Company, 1858), n.p.
- 16 John Ewing Howell, "Diary of an Emigrant of 1845," *Washington Historical Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (April 1907): 138–58, quoted on 147.
- 17 Peter Decker, *The Diaries of Peter Decker: Overland to California in 1849 and Life in the Mines, 1850–1851* (Georgetown, Calif.: The Talisman Press, 1966), quoted on 107.



Not until July 1845, when emigrants began traveling along the east side of the Portneuf River valley did they come upon, sample its water, and describe Soda Pool, shown here. The pool is still fed by a small spring that emerges from an outcropping of basalt rocks. PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR.

we arrived at the famous Bear & Steamboat Springs & real curiosities they are

ELISHA DOUGLAS PERKINS, AUGUST 8, 1849¹⁸

Today about noon we arrived at a cluster of springs some of them of a very curious natuere. This [Steamboat Spring] is the greatest natural curiosity that I have ever seen.

ALEXANDER RAMSAY, JULY 12, 1849¹⁹

This [Steamboat Spring] is the greatest curiosity of the kind I ever saw.

SAMUEL MURRAY STOVER, JULY 26, 1849²⁰

PORTNEUF RIVER VALLEY ROUTES

West of the Soda Springs about five miles, the Oregon Trail turned north around the point of a hill across Bear River from Sheep Rock. The current definition of the trail shows that it followed the east side of the valley for about eight miles before heading northwest to cross the Portneuf River near the present community of Chesterfield. The route then followed the river upstream. According to emigrant diaries, however, this is not the original route.

In August 1841, Joseph Williams crossed the Portneuf valley and tried to follow the Portneuf River downstream through the canyon to the west. This proved to be impossible for wagons so he returned to the valley and turned upstream the following day. He wrote,

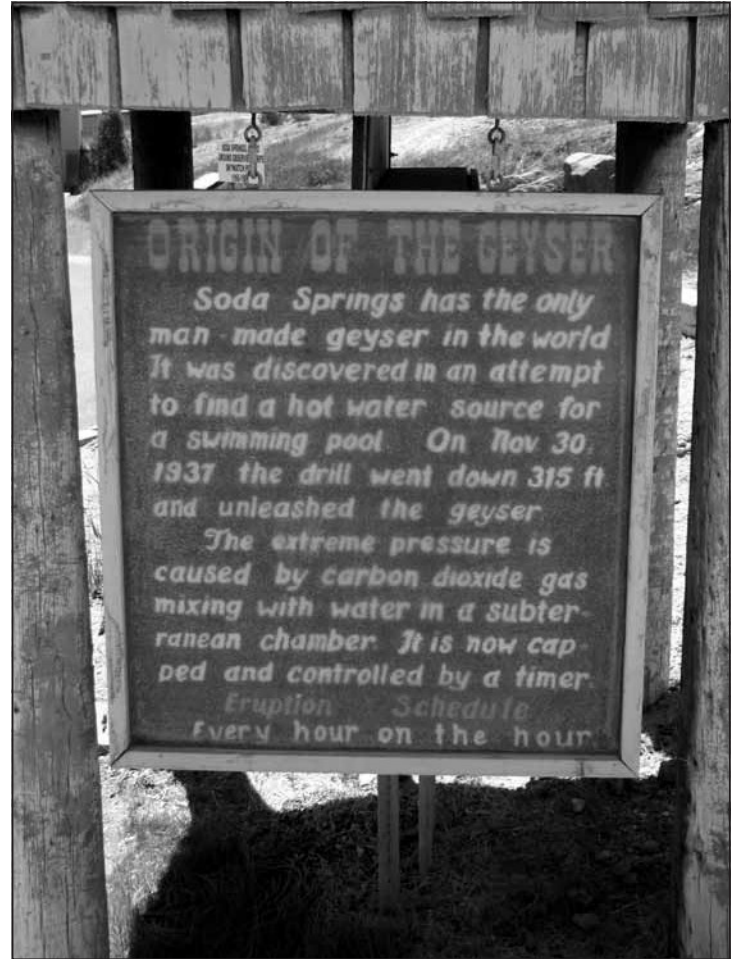
We turned off from the Bear River and struck over on to the waters of Snake River, Next morning we started down one of its branches [Portneuf River], but found that we could not get along with the wagons. We therefore turned back again, and stayed near where we encamped the night before. The next day we continued on up [upstream to the north], and fell over on Snake River.²¹

18 Elisha Douglas Perkins, *Gold Rush Diary: Being the Journal of Elisha Douglass Perkins on the Overland Trail in the Spring and Summer of 1849*, ed. Thomas D. Clark (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1967), quoted on 91.

19 Alexander Ramsay, "Alexander Ramsay's Gold Rush Diary," *Pacific Historical Review* 18, no. 4 (November 1949): 437–68, quoted on 453–54.

20 Samuel Murray Stover, *Diary of Samuel Murray Stover Enroute to California 1849* (Elizabethtown, Tenn.: H. M. Folsom, 1939), quoted on 18.

21 Joseph Williams, August 1841, *Narrative of a Tour from the State of Indiana to the Oregon Territory in the Years 1841–2* [1843] (1843; reprinted in LeRoy R. and Ann W. Hafen, eds., *To the Rockies and Oregon, 1839–1842*, Glendale, Calif.: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1955).



This plaque at Soda Springs explains how "the only man-made geyser in the world" came into being in 1937. PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR.

James Willis Nesmith described the route across the valley to the Portneuf River: "Leave Bear River; traveled twenty miles over to a creek running into the Snake River, by the name of Portneuf [River]."²²

Overton Johnson stated that "At this point, we left the [Bear] River, and bore off to the right, across the valley, which is about ten miles wide. . . . We passed, on the left, a large, hollow mound, the crater of an extinguished Volcano."²³ If

22 James W. Nesmith, August 25, 1843, "Diary of the Emigration of 1843," *The Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society* 7, no. 4 (1906): 329–59.

23 Overton Johnson and William H. Winter, September 7, 1843, "Route Across the Rocky Mountains with a Description of Oregon and California," *The Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society*, 1906, v. 7:1, 62–104; 7:2, 163–210; 7:3, 291–327.

Johnson had turned to the right and immediately gone up the east side of the valley, he would not have been close to the volcanic crater. Traveling west would have placed him on the north of the crater after one and a half miles of travel.

As they traveled north up the Portneuf River valley, early travelers did not mention crossing several small streams or seeing other features, such as the Soda Pool, that later travelers on the eastside route would mention.

A new route, which turned sharply to the right and followed along the base of the hills on the east side of the valley, was created in July 1845. Carlos W. Shane reached Sheep Rock on July 26, 1845. He noted the road going west across the valley, but he turned to the right instead. Shane appears to have been the first to travel this route:

Here we leave the waters of Bear River. . . . On the opposite side of the river are the Sheep Bluffs [Sheep Rock], and on this side to our right are the Bear River Mountains. Instead of taking the road leading directly forward and leaving the B. R. Mountains, we hugged them close, turning to the right. Made about 8 miles and nooned. . . . No one had gone this rout before us and so we had the best of it.²⁴

Two days later, James Field's company hired a guide to lead them on a new route that was supposed to have saved nine or ten miles. They left the regular road "not far from Soda Springs to take a nearer cut." After traveling only ten miles from Soda Springs, they camped that evening at what appears to have been Soda Pool, thus indicating that they took the new route on the east side of the Portneuf River valley. James Field wrote:

Mon July 28 Went about 10 miles today leaving Bear River on our left and camping near a spring [Soda Pool] slightly impregnated with soda. About a mile from camp [Soda Springs] we passed a spring the water of which tasted more like soda water than any I have tasted of. The trail from the States to California, parts from the Oregon road at Bear River, down which it follows while the Oregon Road strikes over onto Snake River near Fort Hall.

Tues July 29. . . . I omitted mentioning yesterday that we had left the regular road again not far from the Soda Springs to take a nearer cut under the pilotage of a Frenchman. Our

company found and employed him at the springs but we had not proceeded far before we found the Greenwoods were conducting Teatherows company by the same route and as they made a plain road for us to follow, our pilot returned. We have not yet got into the old road but we have thus far had an easy level way and from the relative bearings of the two roads, we must cut off at least 9 or 10 miles. We had an excellent camp with plenty of grass and water. These Greenwoods are an Old man and Three sons whom he has raised in the Indian country. They are well posted on the route.²⁵

Solomon Tetherow, whom Field referred to above, was captain of one of the wagon trains that left St. Joseph in the spring of 1845 on their way to Oregon. This would not be the last time Tetherow used a guide to follow a new shortcut. He later followed Stephen Meek across central Oregon in their attempt to find a shorter route to the Willamette valley.

CALEB GREENWOOD WAS AN EARLY TRAPPER IN THE west, working for numerous trapping companies for nearly twenty years. At the age of sixty-three, he married and had five children. Greenwood guided the first wagon train in 1844 on what would become known as the Sublette Cutoff and over the Sierra Nevada mountains to California. He would have been eighty-two years old when he guided Tetherow's company from Soda Springs. A few years later, he took part in the rescue of the Donner party in the Sierra.

A few days after James Field took the new route to the east, Joel Palmer wrote of the two roads across the valley and his choice to turn north.

Five miles brought us to where the road leaves the river, and bears northward through a valley. The river bears to the southward and empties its waters into Big Salt Lake. The range of mountains bounding the north side of the river here comes to within a half mile of it, then bears off to the north, leaving a valley of about seven or eight miles in width between it and a range coming from Lewis river, and extending south towards Salt Lake. The range bounding the south side of the river comes abruptly to the stream at this point, presenting huge and cumbrous masses of basaltic rock, but it is generally covered with heavy timber. At this point two trails are found:

24 Carlos W. Shane, July 26, 1845, "Oregon, Being an Account of a Journey to the Territory of Oregon, with Some Account of the Soil and Climate," in *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society* (1943-1961) 21, no. 1, 1-33.

25 James Field Jr., July 29, 1845, "Crossing the Plains Diary," Typescript, MSS 520, Portland: Oregon Historical Society.

one striking west, across the valley, to the opposite side; the other, which is the nearest and best, follows around the point, hugging the base of the mountain for several miles.²⁶

The original Oregon Trail route from Sheep Rock went west across the valley to the Portneuf River before turning north to follow the river upstream. This route was apparently used until 1845. This route has been extensively farmed for many years, and I have found no trail remnants.

After the new route on the east side of the valley was established in July 1845, it soon became the only road traveled after leaving Sheep Rock until the opening of the Hudspeth

I was born in Omaha and lived with my grandparents for a couple of years who were just up on the hill above where the Mormon Trail Center is now. We moved to Raytown, Missouri, a suburb of Kansas City, when I was five and lived about a mile from Blue Ridge Boulevard, which was the old route to Westport and crossing the Missouri River. Lived there until sixth grade when we moved to Phoenix. Grew up there and still have family there. Now I am in Boise, still on the Oregon Trail. It must be fate.

JERRY EICHHORST

Cutoff four years later. This route includes a number of trail remnants remaining today. Many diaries described the Soda Pool, springs, and hills along the route that are visible today. My compilations include no other accounts of emigrants who appeared to travel the original route after 1845, as well as no other accounts that reference the choice of routes at Sheep Rock until the opening of the Hudspeth Cutoff in 1849.

26 Joel Palmer, Reuben Gold Thwaites, and Henry Harmon Spalding, August 5, 1845, *Journal of Travels over the Rocky Mountains to the Mouth of the Columbia River: Made During the Years 1845 and 1846* (Cleveland, Ohio: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1906).

SODA POOL

Four miles north of Sheep Rock, on the east side of the Portneuf River valley a spring bubbles out of a small cave at the base of a basalt wall. The clear water flows a few yards into an oval pool before spilling into a larger meadow pool. I stumbled across this spring many years ago when exploring the valley in search of remnants of the Oregon Trail. The water tasted good, not nearly as strong or effervescent as the water at Hooper Spring, seven and one-half miles over the mountains to the east. I showed the spring to trail friends and to an Oregon Trail expert, but all were previously unaware of the location and did not consider it an Oregon Trail site. I found the spring interesting, but considered it insignificant at the time.

One can still see the spring, Soda Pool, and immediately below, a small meadow reservoir that sometimes dries up on the edges and leaves a salt residue. The Soda Pool has been changed because of ranching through the years. A cattle or sheep dip and fence were built near the pool, indicating the area was apparently once heavily used. Only recently has studying the compilation of diaries by location turned up a number of them that clearly identify this spring as a site often visited along the Oregon Trail. A sampling of these diary accounts follows. Carlos W. Shane's description of the Soda Pool is one of the best that I have yet found. As noted earlier, Shane appears to have been with the first wagon train to travel the east side of the valley:

Here we concluded to correll. Hard by our camp is the Soda Pool, a body of soda water 18 feet long, 10 feet wide and about 3 feet deep. It is very clear and beautiful, but not so strong tasted as those at the [Bear] river. Just below it is a small Salt Spring, which formed a light crust of salt as it ran off from the spring.²⁷

Other diary accounts note that the soda pool is close to the trail. It appears that there must have been multiple paths for the trail in this area, as some accounts describe the Soda Pool on the left side of the road, some on the right. As shown in Map 6, possible trail remnants appear close to the pool above and below the basalt bluff.

Joel Palmer also provides a good description of Soda Pool:

Two and one half miles distant, and immediately beneath a cliff of rocks by the road side, is to be found a soda pool.

27 Carlos W. Shane, July 26, 1845, "Oregon," 20.

A little spring of cool soda water runs out at the base of the rock, and a basin of eight or ten yards in extent, and about two and one half feet high has been formed. Inside of this, is a pool of water;—the material composing the bank around, is of a white color.²⁸

Other diarists include details of traveling past Soda Pool:

Advanced twenty-one miles and camped on a small stream [Portneuf River], good camp. In four miles travel we came to an excellent soda water just to left of road.

DR. BENJAMIN CORY, JULY 15, 1847²⁹

. . . Two miles farther we leave the Bear River which turns south. We make about 5 miles and stop near another spring of mineral water that we use for drinking. It is not as strong as the previous ones.

RT. REV. A. M. A. BLANCHET, AUGUST 3, 1847³⁰

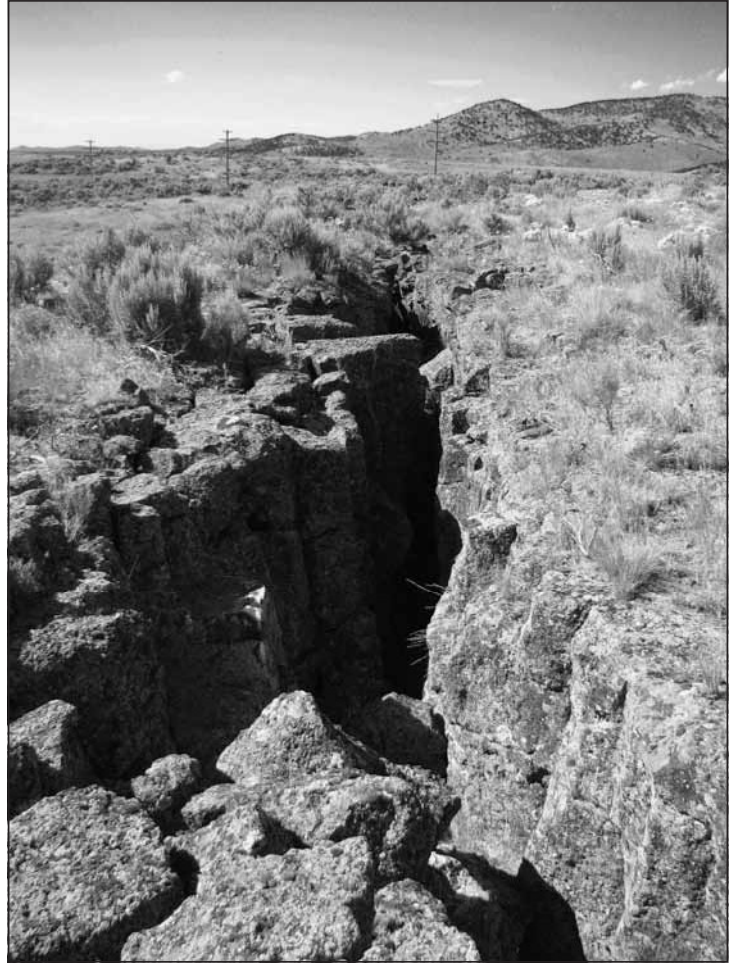
Geared up and rolled out down Bear River some 6 miles where we left it, turned the spur of a mountain and came to another soda spring, not of equal celebrity of those we had left, but very good.

RICHARD M. MAY, AUGUST 4, 1847³¹

Ten miles [from Soda Springs] brought us to another spring of the same sort. It was on the right of the road coming from a high bluff. This is some times called Soda Pool. The water from the spring runs into a basin which has formed by the crystallisation of the water at its edges. It is 25 ft. in diameter & the wall around is 2 ft.

VINCENT GEIGER AND WAKEMAN BRYARLY, JULY 11, 1849³²

In two or three miles from our camp the road left Bear River. After a few miles travel we came to another Beer Springs. It



Emigrants who left the original route turned northwest across Bear River from Sheep Rock to travel up the east side of the Portneuf River valley. They would have encountered volcanic rifts in the earth such as this one, as well as “curiosities” such as Soda Pool. Some emigrants believed this area was close to Hades and wanted to leave immediately. PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR.

did not boil like the others but was rather sour. It tasted like the bottled soda of St. Louis shops.

ISRAEL FOOTE HALE, JULY 20, 1849³³

2½ ms brought us to Soda Pool on the right handside of the road This is a basin the sides of which are about 2 feet above the surface of the ground and composed of rock of the Soda formation. It is about 15 feet long and 9 feet wide a constant

33 Israel Foote Hale, July 20, 1849, 93.

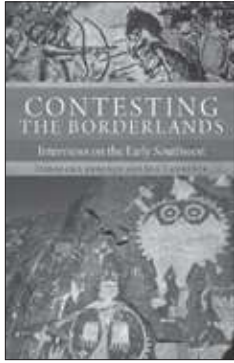
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supply of water flows up at the foot of a perpendicular ledge of rock close by which keeps the basin nearly full.

JOHN BROWN, JULY 28, 1852³⁴

Clearly, the “curious” Soda Pool was visited by many emigrants traveling the east side of the Portneuf River valley. Their diary accounts describe it much as it still is. It remains an interesting site to visit today.

FINDING AND COMPILING EMIGRANT DIARIES BY A particular location takes a great deal of work. But it often yields interesting insights into the journeys. My compilation of diaries that describe traveling through the Soda Springs area of southeast Idaho helped identify the original route of the Oregon Trail in the Portneuf River valley and the Soda Pool site. It also helped clarify the route Narcissa Whitman took while sight-seeing near Soda Springs, and revealed the frequent use of the term “curiosity” in emigrant accounts that describe Soda and Steamboat Springs.

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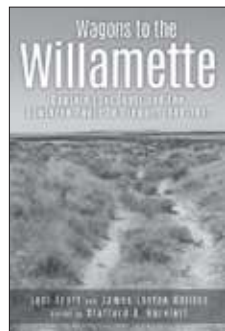
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