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BY *Wagon Box*

plus
SOURCES ON THE SOUTHERN TRAIL
and more

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BY JERRY EICHHORST AND RICHARD RIECK

Floating the
Traveling Idaho's *Snake*
Oregon Trail by Water



AFTER THEIR FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH THE SNAKE RIVER AT FORT HALL, EMIGRANTS ON THE OREGON TRAIL FOLLOWED IT WESTWARD NEARLY THREE HUNDRED MILES ACROSS SOUTHERN IDAHO. AS THEY STRUGGLED

across the dusty, sagebrush-covered Snake River Plain, many of the emigrants must have wondered why they couldn't simply float down the river instead of trudging through the desert high above the water.

The Snake River drops over 2100 feet in elevation between Fort Hall and Fort Boise. Its course varies from slow, placid stretches to imposing rapids and waterfalls. For many miles, the river is buried deep in a steep canyon, hundreds of feet below the flat plain on which emigrants traveled, making it inaccessible. There were a few spots within this long canyon that provided difficult access to the river and an opportunity to water their herds. However, animals were often too weak to climb back up the hill to the trail, and they died along or near the river.

The urge to float the river was accentuated by the summer heat, the lack of grass for the animals, and the never-ending, smothering dust along the trail. In 1849 Major Osborn Cross remarked that the sediment was "so pulverized that by every revolution of the wheels it would fall off in perfect clouds." On August 13, 1852, Abigail Jane Scott wrote that "the dust to day and for the last 100 miles or more has been verry annoying it is as light and as easily stirred up as the dust of the summer threshing floor allmost suffocating man and beast."

The wagons of many emigrants were designed so that the beds would float and could be used to ferry across rivers along the trek. These wagonbed ferries were utilized in crossing the Snake River at Salmon Falls, Rosevear Gulch above Three Island Crossing, and Fort Boise. Tempted as they were, did emigrants make use of their amphibious

wagons, abandon their animals, and attempt to float down the Snake River? A number actually tried.

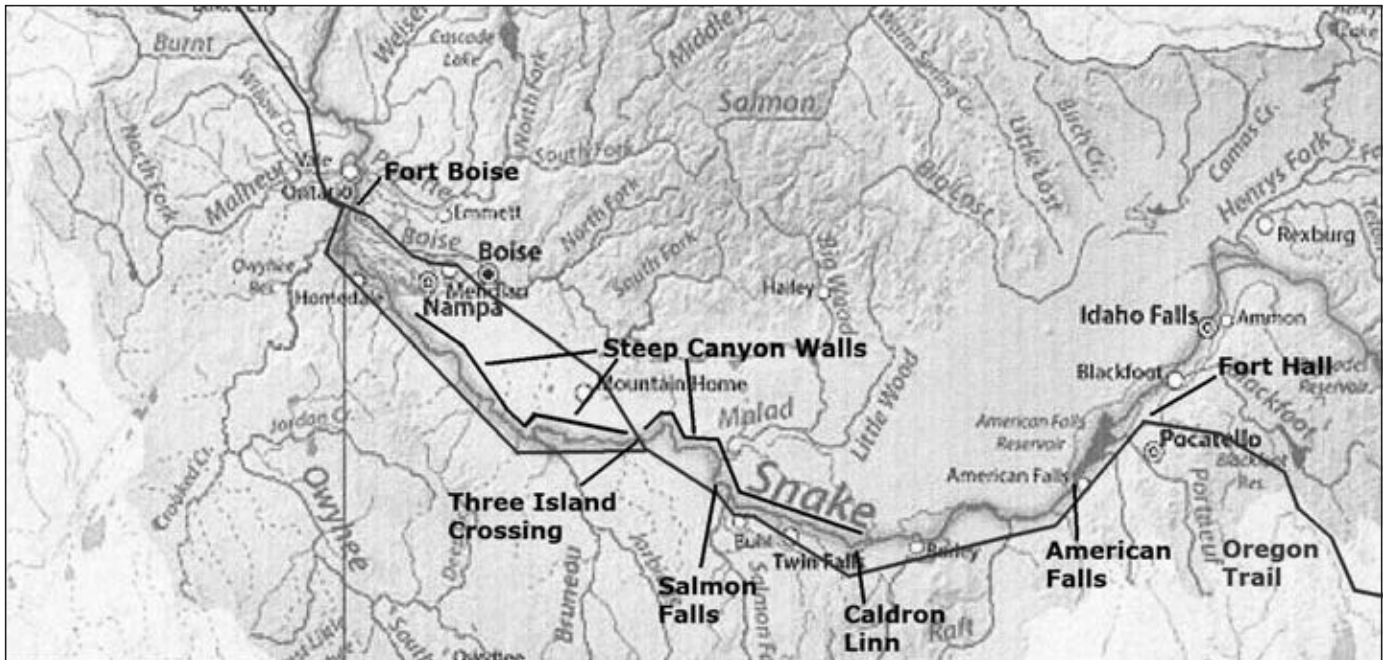
1811

Wilson Price Hunt led a portion of the Astor Expedition that traveled to Oregon by land in 1811–1812. On their trip westward, Hunt and his group of trappers built crude canoes from cottonwood trees in October 1811, and started their float down Henry's Fork of the Snake River.

With the cargoes loaded into our canoes, we left this place on the 19th. The force of the current hurried us along at a rapid pace, and we were not long in passing the little river that I mentioned on the 7th. Beyond its confluence with the Mad River it becomes large enough to make navigation possible for canoes of all sizes.

As we went on downstream the river became more beautiful and much larger; a space of from 1,200 to 1,800 feet separated its two banks. We made 40 miles on the 20th, but throughout the last twenty the river bed was broken by rapids, and we found two other rapids farther downstream. In going through these, two of our canoes were swamped and we had to stop at once. I sent my canoe and one other to the rescue. We saved the men, but we lost a good deal of merchandise and many supplies, as well as one of the canoes.

Hunt and his party continued their struggle down the Snake River. Regularly they encountered rapids and waterfalls that required portages of their canoes and equipment. Often they attempted to "line" the canoes over the rapids using ropes.



Snake River basin crossing southern Idaho.

(on page 135) Three Island Crossing. Photo by Jerry Eichhorst.

Unfortunately, they lost several, as well as much equipment, and many furs, with this method.

When on the 21st we had passed two rapids, we came to a portage of a mile and a quarter. We carried the supplies by land and towed the canoes. For nearly a half mile the river narrows between two sheer mountain walls to not more than sixty feet, in a few places to even less. (6 miles)

We passed over the rapids with the canoes tied to a rope, but we did not delay re-embarking on the 21st. Thereafter we came to a series of rapids, two of which forced us to portage. One of the small canoes swamped and capsized and we lost more supplies. (6 miles)

Finally, on October 28 Hunt came to a narrow rock-walled canyon of the Snake River where the

entire river cuts through a steep gorge. Located in southern Idaho west of Murtaugh, approximately a hundred miles downstream from Fort Hall, they named the site “Caldron Linn.” In attempting to navigate through this section, a canoe capsized and one of the members was drowned.

Our journey was less fortunate on the 28th; for after passing through several rapids, we came to the entrance of a narrow gorge. Mr. Crook’s canoe capsized, one of his companions drowned, and we lost a great deal of merchandise. (18 miles)

Hunt stopped and explored the river for thirty-five miles downstream. After reaching the conclusion that they could not continue the float, they cached much of their load and headed west on foot.

1849

After nearly one-half a century, the next reference found of floating the Snake River occurs in the journal of Major Osborne Cross as he traveled with a group of soldiers on a trip to Oregon. On August 27, 1849, he penned the following about the local Indians near Fort Boise:

The india-rubber boat which Lieutenant Jones had descended the river for several days greatly excited their curiosity, being the first they had ever seen. They appeared much puzzled how it could be so easily made.

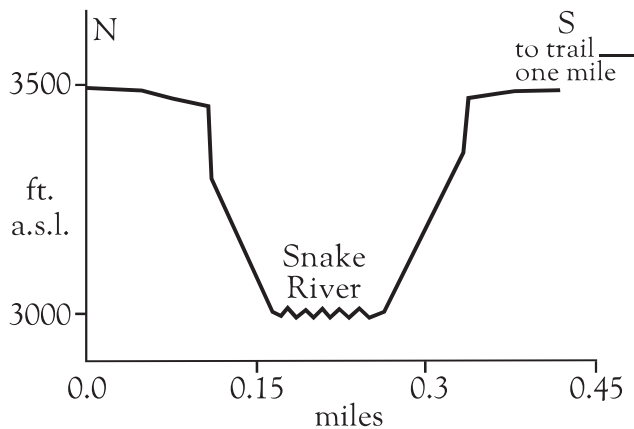
Unfortunately, there are no other references to the boat or Lieutenant Jones floating on the river.

1850

The first description found of wagon train members attempting the float occurs in the diary of Hiram Rockafeller Schutt in August 1850. Traveling between Rock Creek and Salmon Falls Creek he discovers a family that attempted the voyage in a boat starting at Fort Hall. They traveled on the river only a few days before abandoning the idea and setting out on foot with no food or supplies. When found by Schutt, the woman was sitting with her children at a small spring prepared to die.

Aug. 21st Wed.

. . . We now travel a desert stretch of twelve miles or more, finally descending by a long slope to a poor camp on Snake river. . . Our attention, on nearing this camp, is attracted to a bunch of willow bushes by the cries of a child, and as we saw no emigrants about, we supposed that there were Indians in the thicket. I followed a trail around to the opposite side of the thicket where a little path conducted me to a spring in the center of the clump, and here I laid up a picture in memory



North-south profile of Snake River canyon about 5 miles west of the city of Twin Falls, Idaho. The river flows at the bottom of a canyon 500 feet deep preventing access by emigrants or livestock. The steep canyon is typical of the Snake River for much of the route across southern Idaho. *Drawing by Richard Rieck.*

that will probably be vivid through an ordinary lifetime. Here was a white woman and five small children seated upon the ground around the noble spring that sent its tiny tribute a few rods into the river. On seeing me the woman said with tears, “Well stranger we have come here to die,” and with a little craft to avoid seeming contrary, I endeavored to convince her that she had selected a poor location for that kind of a project. After short conversation, and learning that her husband was out searching for an emigrant ox that had been left as no longer serviceable, they now requiring it for food, we divide our scanty store with them and in a short time heard the story of their disasters . . . Their name is Brown.

Schutt took the family in and provided food and shelter as they recovered. He went with Brown the next day to find his raft and provisions. They found the provisions that were cached but the raft was now gone. The next day another wagon train agreed to take the Browns with them.

Apparently one brush with death was not sufficient for Brown. Shortly after being rescued and restored to health, the family again attempted to float the river. Schutt continued:

August 25, 1850 Sun.

We start early, travel about four miles, find some inviting grass, and halt, for some hours not neglecting our revised doses of Salmon.

While here, we observe a boat approaching and as it nears the bank we recognize Brown, who lands and tells us that the Indians had his boat at the designated landing, with the remainder of his goods in it all safe.

He made them presents with which they seemed much pleased, and they assisted him to pass some rapids, when he left on his way to Fort Boise for provision. We travel late find camp & stop for night.

Schutt later notes the arrival of the Brown family in Oregon but provided no further information about their continued float.

1851

Two members of Charles A. Brandt's party left the wagon train along the Boise River a few miles east of Fort Boise. Five more fellow-travelers decided to float at Fort Boise. Three of the unsuccessful floaters returned to the wagon train a few days later. There is no indication of what happened to the other four. The Snake River below Fort Boise is calm and gentle for about fifty miles before heading into the steep hills of the upper reaches of Hell's Canyon, the deepest chasm in

North America, surpassing even the Grand Canyon. Packed with rapids and swift water, one could assume that floating through the canyon would be dangerous and very difficult at best, especially with clumsy wagon-bed boats.

Traveled 16 miles. Crossed Boise River and camped. Good grass and water. Two of our boys left sometime in the night intending to go down Snake River on a raft. They took some provisions with them.

August 22d. This morning five more of the boys left and joined the raft expedition.

August 26th. Left camp and traveled 14 miles over the roughest road that we have had since we left Bear River. Very cold and windy. Three of our boys came to the train today. They were tired of the trip down the Snake River on the raft.

1852

During one of the largest emigrations of the overland era, more than a few travelers attempted to float the Snake. Salmon Falls, south of the present town of Hagerman in central Idaho, was the trail's last point of contact with the river until it reached Three Island Crossing after thirty-five waterless miles. In 1852–1854, a ferry operating just above the falls allowed emigrants to cross and follow the North Alternate Oregon Trail across the Idaho desert.

At this location in 1852 several emigrants decided to risk floating down the Snake rather than continue to follow the dusty ruts. Converting their wagons into boats, they took what necessities they could stow, and pushed off from shore below Salmon Falls. This route would have been treacherous with a cumbersome wagon-box raft and makeshift paddles. Although many people took this option, most were unsuccessful and many died in the effort.

Mary Ann Boatman described the cabin and traders at Salmon Falls. According to her, the traders induced travelers to sell their cattle and float down the river.

We are slowly making our way down Snake River Valley (and) one morning about 10:00 we came in sight of a little log cabin on the banks of the river and a dozen or two running gears of wagons standing around the place. All were taken by surprise to see a house in the wilderness, but we soon learned that two men occupied the house and were traders. (They) had a few articles, provided one had money enough to pay ten times the value of the desired article. They had established themselves as traders; their aim (being) to deceive people by telling them that if they would sell them their cattle, then take the wagon box and make it water proof and put all their belongings in it, putting it in the river as a boat, using oars as on any small boat, that in four days they would be at their journey's end. That was a very true saying, for many who started down the river in their wagon boxes came to their journeys' end in a very short time. For I am sorry to say, quite a good many were persuaded to sell them their cattle and take the wagon boxes for boats—putting their beds and provisions and families in them and starting down the river, never to be heard of any more.

Further west on her journey, Mary Ann met two men who fell victim to the traders and were lucky to survive their float.

After all had partaken of the rations allowance, camp utensils stored away in their usual place (and) as the men came up with their teams, two men came out of the weeds, bareheaded with what clothes that remained hanging on their frail bodies (and) torn in shreds, feet cut and bleeding, faces as pale as dead men's, land and starved

almost to death, nothing to eat but wild berries and young twigs from the brush for 12 days. They were a party of six who had started down Snake River in their wagon beds for boats. In going thru a narrow canyon where the river made its course over a steep rugged fall, all of the party were lost but these two. Everything was gone, as they were lucky, if "luck" one may term it, (to be) thrown close to the bank on the side of the river that the wagon road was on. The bank was almost perpendicular with a few small shrubs growing on the side of the bank. As they managed in some way to get hold of the bushes and climb to the top of the bank, there they were, miles from any one, in a strange mountainous country, no food, no clothes to speak of, no means for obtaining the staff of life, only guided by natural instinct which way to go after twelve days' wandering without food except wild berries and the young sprouts, they had come within hearing of our men when they were driving the cattle to camp, attracted their attention and thinking there was a little chance for life, hurried as fast as their languid condition would allow them, (and) arrived at our camp just as we were ready to start. Oh, what a sight met our gaze. The emmaciated human beings, almost starved, feet lacerated and bleeding, clothes torn to shreds, pale and shrunken cheeks, eyes dull, lips and tongues parched for the want of water. They told their story. They had been two of the unfortunates who had listened to the tales of the traders and had lost all but their lives—companions, boats and all (were) lost. They were soon fed and clothed as good as good as we could.

Several emigrants note attempts of others to float the river. Louis Iman describes his father's apparently unsuccessful attempt as follows.

Father came here in 1852 by ox team. When father's wagon train reached the Snake river, they



Caldron Linn. Photo by Jim Payne.



Shoshone Falls.

Photo from Smithsonian collection.

Published in “An Early Photograph of Shoshone Falls:
Uncovering a Network of Communities in 1870s Idaho,” by Frank H. Goodyear III,
History of Photography, Volume 35, Number 3, August 2011.

dumped out a lot of their supplies and furnishings and used the wagon boxes for boats to float down the river. But you can't navigate a stream like that in wagon boxes and this they found out.

Moses F. Laird also noted attempts to float the river. Although exaggerating the distance the launch point was above Fort Boise, his comment that a great many drowned is of interest.

. . . some started down Snake River 300 miles above Fort Boise and a great many got drowned. Some sold their teams and things and took their wagon beds and started down the river as they

thought they could get along better and as there is a great many falls in the river a great many got drowned and some left their wagon beds and went a-foot until they reached the trail again.

In another short description, Mary Elizabeth Warren describes her memories of those who attempted to float the Snake River.

Some of the company tied their wagon beds together and floated down the Snake dragging them around the falls. I was curious about how they would get around the rapids and when they joined us later I asked how they had done it. One

lad told me they had jumped. This amused me very much.

Sarah Elizabeth York traveled to Oregon in 1852 when she was seven. Many years later she told the story of her father helping four men who had attempted to float the Snake River but failed. The portion in parenthesis was added by Sarah after the original reminiscence was typed.

Along the Snake River a lot of the emigrants got it into their heads—they took their wagon beds and made boats and were going to go down Snake River and get to Oregon in a hurry. There were such falls in the river. I think there were four men that came to our wagon and they had started down the river and went over one of these falls and lost everything they had and one of the men was drowned. They said he was a good swimmer, too, but they supposed he had gotten hurt. They were away off the road, and had been out eleven days and didn't have anything to eat but berries, and when they came to our wagon they had some berry bushes broke off. That was the only thing they had for eleven days and they were about given out. One man was stronger and had more courage than the others, and had to keep coaxing them along, and when they came to a certain mountain or hill, these men said that when they got to the top of this hill if they didn't see the road they wasn't going to try to go any further. They looked down and saw the road and the first wagon they came to was ours. My father gave them some flour, bacon, salt and pepper, so they could have something to eat. That was the last they ever knew of them. They left us there. (I remember as well as if it was yesterday. We saw some men making their wagon beds into boats. They called to Father and said they were going to Oregon in a hurry. Father called back and said he thought they would get there in a hurry if they

went that way. These were the same men who came to our train after being out eleven days.)

Origen Thomson traveled along the south side of the Snake River in August. While stopped near Givens Hot Springs, he saw a dead man floating down the river. Thomson believed him to be one of those who attempted to float the river.

Saturday, August 14—13.—In four miles came to a dry branch, but found a little water for the cattle about a mile above the crossing. Hot Springs four and a half miles. . . . While stopping here a dead man floated down the river. He had no coat, was dressed in jeans pantaloons. Suppose he was one of those who attempted to come down the Snake in wagon beds.

On Friday, August 20, Thomson reached Farewell Bend. He notes a wagon bed boat which has been abandoned and provides his opinion of attempting to float the Snake River.

Friday, August 20.—13.—. . . In three miles more came to the Snake. This is our last camping on the Snake river; . . . One of the wagon bed boats is lying just below; the owners have determined to leave the river; they gave a thrilling account of the passage through some canyons. It is folly, it is worse than folly, it is absolute madness to attempt the descent of Snake river in that way. There are so many falls in the way, as to destroy the best boats, and many places where they must cordelle for 204 miles. None got any farther than within ten or twelve miles of the mouth of Snake. A boat load went to the mouth of Grande Ronde river and came up Fremont's old trail. Many were wrecked before going that far and lost all, and were three or four days climbing the mountains before coming to the road, and that too without provisions. Let no one ever think of attempting such a thing.

Abigail Jane Scott also traveled along the south side of the Snake River, a day behind Thomson. On August 8th and 9th, she saw groups floating down the Snake River below Three Island Crossing.

August eighth. Sab[bath]. We traveled seven miles five miles brought us to the crossing of Snake river, here are two islands which look as if they might covered with good grass a few days since, but it is now all eat off; We traveled near the river two miles farther and encamped. Tolerable good grass. About noon a party of ten men and two women passed us going down the river in a boat made of a wagon bed. They were bound for the Dalles and from thence to Oregon City

August 9th . . . We again saw some men going down the river in a wagon bed bound for the City

On August 15, several members of Scott's wagon train decided to take to the river. She sees the floaters the following day and all is going well.

Aug 15th Sabbath day we are encamped on the banks of the "Snake" the weather oppressively hot we shall remain here until morning & then resume our toilsome journey. To day 5 of our company concluded to go on by water. They accordingly fitted up two wagon beds for the purpose and launched them into the "Snake" they seem to answer a good purpose and if no accident befalls them they will reach the dalles in ten days or less to day we lost another of our cattle by drowning!

Aug 16th . . . Our men that left us this morning in the boats landed at our encampment to night in fine spirits and highly pleased with their enterprize.

A few days later Scott arrives opposite Fort Boise. Here the floaters learn of the hazards of the Snake River downstream. They wisely decided to sell their boat and return to the trail on foot.

Aug. 21 We came three miles which brought us opposite to fort Boise . . .

The young men who left us the 16th inst. in wagon beds reached the fort and learning that there were some rapids of thirteen miles in extent below the fort, they sold their boat and for \$25. and went ahead on foot; Emigrants are ferrying across to this side in the boat, and paying \$10 per. wagon for the privilege

Enoch Conyers was a day behind Scott. Several members of his party decided to float down the Snake River at Fort Boise. Encountering rough water and canyons with towering walls, however, they also abandoned the effort and returned to the trail on foot.

August 22—Sunday.—. . . We traveled on four and a half miles to Burnt River . . . We had not been in camp but a short time when here comes the boys, bringing with them Wilson Hess, a Quincy boy and a cripple. Quite a number of the emigrants took some discarded wagon beds at our last crossing on the Snake River, near Fort Boise, calked them with strips of rags, loaded their provisions and blankets and started down the river, as they said, for Oregon City. Wilson Hess had cast his lot with these unfortunate emigrants. They reported the river as very swift and filled with large boulders, and perpendicular cliffs of rocks (basalt formation) towering up 400 and 500 feet on either side, and exceedingly dangerous to navigate. One of the wagon beds struck a rock and capsized. They lost all their provisions, bedding and clothing, the occupants barely escaping with their lives. They became frightened by their dangerous adventure down the Snake River in a wagon bed and concluded to desert their boats and take the emigrant road for the balance of the way. They packed their blankets and what provisions they had on their backs and traveled over the mountain about one



Snake River Canyon below Shoshone Falls.

Photo by Jerry Eichhorst.

mile to the emigrant road, where they left young Hess to shift for himself. When we picked him up he said that he was waiting for his train to come along. We expect to do all we can for the unfortunate boy. Since arriving in our camp tonight William Hess heard that his train was but one day back of us, and has come to the conclusion to wait at this camp for them to arrive.

James Akin was further behind the others. He reached the Snake at Rosevear Gulch above Three Island Crossing and saw people floating the river on August 17. These people likely started below Salmon Falls, the last place the trail was close to the river. On August 20, Akin and his party finished crossing the Snake River while one of his party, James Nicholson, decided to float in a wagon bed boat.

Tuesday, August 17,—Start at daylight and travel six miles to the crossing of Snake River; lay by the balance of the day; emigrants going down the river in wagon beds.

Wednesday, August 18,—Lay by all day in same place; very bad place to camp; preparing to cross the river.

Thursday, August 19,—Try all day to get the cattle across the river and could not.

Friday, August 20,—Tow the cattle across the river between the wagon beds; ferry the wagons over in the evening. James Nicholson starts down the river in a wagon bed.

John N. Lewis was even further behind and took a different route across Idaho as he ferried across the river above Salmon Falls, traveling the North Alternate Oregon Trail. On September 14th, he



Most floaters started from this location below Salmon Falls.
Photo from old postcard.

reached Fort Boise and ferried the river again to the west side where he camped. Lewis noted that a raft with nine people on board started downstream from Fort Boise that day.

Sep 14th we traveld about 5 m. & encamped on the south bank of Snake R. here we fered over the R. on 4 wagon boxes fasend together, & paid three dolars per wagon we swaim the cattle & horces . . . there was a raft started down Snake River from here to day with 9 persons aboard we was informed today that there was about 200 wagons yet behind

FIRSTHAND ACCOUNTS

There are a few accounts of emigrants who actually attempted to float the Snake River themselves. Obviously they survived the attempt. Most, however, lost their possessions and wagon bed, so they ended up walking on the south side trying to reconnect with a wagon train as one of the roads followed that side of the river.

Henry Clay Huston attempted the voyage in 1852. He converted his wagon beds to boats at a location one day downstream from Three Island Crossing. Several other men joined him the first night camping on the river bank. Reaching an impassable falls in the river, some of those men crossed the river and blazed a path along the north side of the river to Fort Boise. The rest of the group abandoned the effort, and rejoined a wagon train traveling on the south side of the river.

On the 29th we passed Salmon falls and two days afterwards reached the “old Three Island Crossing” of Snake river, and found a large number of emigrants. Some were crossing while others were taking the “South Side Road.”

On the 1st of August, McCullum, Dobyons, Dameron and myself, concluded to build a boat and go down the river, which we made out of wagons beds, and in the morning of the 4th started on a smooth river. At night two other boats with eight men came up with us, and we all encamped

together on the bank of the river. The next morning we were afloat again, and at about 10 o'clock we passed some dangerous rapids, soon afterwards we came to a falls that we could not pass as some ten men the night before had demonstrated by being shipwrecked and left without clothing, food and blankets. Here we resolved to leave our boat—the other two boats crossed to the north bank and after enduring every hardship and risking their lives reached Fort Boise. Portage on the south side was impossible, so we left our boat, and after preparing a few days provisions and selecting what things most necessary, on the morning of the 5th we set off on foot to find the road and some friendly train if possible. After a tiresome tramp with heavy packs we struck the road at Catherine's Creek. That night we slept without any covering except our clothing; but the next day found situations in trains.

Al R. Hawk floated with his family for several days before giving up and returning to his wagon train. The trip started peacefully below Salmon Falls but soon changed as the river became swifter and the rapids more intense. Unable to guide the wagon-bed boat down the rapids from the shore with ropes, the men were forced to wade in the river to get the boat through. At long last they emerged from the river to the sight of their wagon train members who had traveled overland at the same speed with less danger and work. Happily rejoining their company they continued the trek west on land. Hawk's reference to Shoshone Falls is clearly in error as he was far to the west at the time his father killed the salmon.

From this point I would like to be able to give the reader a correct account, in detail, of what we endured in the next four weeks of that perilous trip on Snake River, but it will be impossible, and all that I can do is to write from the imperfect

recollection I have of the trip, aided by information that I got from Mrs. Willis Boatman.

There were two miserable white scrubs located at Salmon Falls for the purpose of swindling the emigrants out of their stock. They would induce the pilgrims to sell them their cattle and horses, and convert their wagon beds into boats and float down Snake River to The Dalles, telling them it was a pleasant trip and without danger, and could be made to The Dalles in a short time. What a great relief it was to the tired emigrants to quit the dusty road and take to the water. What a glorious change it would be, and the idea was hailed with delight. We bit like fish.

We converted our wagon bed into a boat, and in order to make it water-tight we took the hides from dead cattle, which were plenty, and covered the bottom of the bed. They were attached on tight, which gave more strength to the bed and kept it perfectly dry inside. Father would not dispose of his team, for he thought if anything should happen to us we would have something left to help us out of our difficulty. So Mr. Cline took the team and running gear of the wagon and hit the trail for The Dalles, where he expected to find us waiting for him. But the fond hopes and pleasure that we expected to enjoy on that boating trip were never realized. How many families had preceded us I can't say. One I do remember—a violinist and his wife. We found where their life journey had ended: two new graves on the bank of the river, where they had been buried by the Indians. We left Salmon Falls with a full crew. Besides our family of eight, we had Jim Riley and Bob Wallace. We drifted and paddled along where the current seemed the strongest, and were getting along very nicely as Riley remarked, on a four-mile current. All seemed to be perfectly satisfied with the boat in preference to the wagon until we got into quick water, when the river seemed



Snake River a few miles downstream from Salmon Falls.
Photo by Jerry Eichhorst.

to stand pretty nearly on end for about half a mile. It was impossible to make the shore. The boat and all hands were at the mercy of the angry waters. But we shot through those waters so quick that it didn't give us time to realize the dangers we were in. From then on the boat hugged the shore pretty closely. We now began to discover the disadvantages of river travel. The river was a continuation of rapids for miles, and it required the greatest care to keep the boat from swamping. And then again for miles it would be without a

ripple and but little current. At times, we would be near the road and could see along the emigrant trail. What a blessing it would have been to us if we had stopped when relief was near, but we kept on, drifting nearer trouble every minute.

The river seemed to narrow down to half its width, and the current became very swift and terminated in some very dangerous rapids. Mother and children were put ashore to get along the best we could, while the men, with ropes, let the boat down over the rapids, and from that on we had

only one day of pleasant boating. It was along a low, flat country, and the footing on the banks was good. One day a brother and I were enjoying a walk along the bank, which was a great pleasure after being cramped up in the boat so much, and we were, boylike, fooling along gathering shells and other curiosities. In the meantime the boat had got quite a start of us, and in looking back upon the river, to our great surprise, we saw three Indians in hot pursuit of us. Prickly spears and brush didn't deter us from making the best kind of time until we reached the boat. On realizing the circumstances of the pursuit, the men got their guns in readiness in case the Indians showed a disposition to be hostile, but they never put in an appearance. I think they took in the situation from some friendly bush on the river bank and gave up the chase. The river soon made a change for the worse. Going into camp that night at the head of a very swift rapid father killed a large salmon with the axe and I think it was the fattest fish of any kind I ever saw. They must have been land-locked salmon, for no salmon that ever left the sea could climb the Shoshone Falls. The following morning in making a hasty examination of the river below, it was found to be very bad. However, the men started with the boat and mother and children clambered along the steep hillside and among the rocks as best we could.

The banks were so steep in places that it was [not] possible to manage the boat from the shore, so the men had to take to the water and in many places it was from knee to neck deep. The men were compelled to manage the boat that way for days, and over many difficult places we had to take everything out of the boat and let it down empty. Quite often we had to take the boat out and carry it around dangerous places.

An old Indian and his two boys were our only companions. They became very much attached to

us. In about ten days, as near as I can remember, out our hearts were made glad by the appearance of Mr. Cline and the team. It was the work of a short time to get the watersoaked bed on the wagon again and rolling over the prairie, and we were as happy as a picnic party.

J. C. Morrison successfully floated the Snake River, probably also in 1852. A story from the *Illinois Daily Journal* [Springfield, Illinois], from February, 1853, states that Morrison successfully floated the "Lewis river" after his teams gave out. He started with a group of twenty young men who attempted to float and was one of only four who survived the ordeal. Could Morrison have been one of the party that Sarah Elizabeth York's father befriended?

J. C. Morrison, of Tazewell county, arrived safely in Oregon. Their teams gave out 500 miles this side of their destination. They left their oxen and those who had families, and started down Lewis river on the beds of their wagons, and out of twenty young men who so embarked, only four ever got again ashore alive, so rapid was the stream and so full of rocks. The four having escaped, started through an uninhabited country with but little provision and few clothes. They arrived at the settlements at last, after passing through trials and dangers beyond the power of tongue or pen to describe.

Remarkably, Edward J. Allen successfully floated the Snake River from Three Island Crossing to Fort Boise in 1852. Together with several people from his wagon train, they traveled nearly 150 miles on the river before returning to the trail for the remainder of the trip to Oregon. Allen's account from a variety of sources is quite long and very detailed. However, he wrote the summary that follows of the floating adventure on October 10, 1852. His party of ten men and two women is



Drawing of emigrants floating the Snake River by Jon Standley.

likely the one that Abigail Jane Scott saw floating the river on August 8.

Finding myself, upon the 8th of August, upon the banks of Shoshone, (or Lewis' Fork of the Columbia,) pretty well forward in the emigration, and pretty well tired of land travel—I, and some two or three others, concluded to try the water, and so sending my team in the train, we procured three or four wagon beds, caulked them and made them water tight, and went on our way—much against the advice of those who predicted for us all kind of rapids, waterfalls, cascades, &c. We did “see sights.” Amid about fifteen boats, which started at the same time, we were the only ones which got through to Fort Boise, some 200 miles—and were three days going three miles, packing our boats around heavy falls, dropping down rapids, &c., floating with the current sometimes 50 miles a day, through long “cañons” where the whole broad river would be compressed in a space not more than seventy feet wide, between perpendicular cliffs, beetling above us 600 feet high, and

sometimes 1,000. Hurried along for miles, unable to land, emerging into broad—almost lakes—with a current scarcely perceptible, past Indian villages where we were supplied with salmon; with boats lashed together, dashing over falls from six to ten feet, until the danger had a charm for us, although at the foot of every fall we would see numbers of broken boats, and at one a drowned man.

More information about Allen’s adventures crossing the plains, and floating the Snake, can be found in the book *Our Faces are Westward: The 1852 Oregon Trail Journey of Edward Jay Allen* by Dennis M. Larsen and Karen L. Johnson, published by the Oregon-California Trails Association in 2012.

CONCLUSION

Strangely, we have found no accounts of floaters in the years after 1852. But over the decades following the first emigrations in the 1840s, tens of thousands of travelers crossed Idaho on the various routes of the Oregon Trail, suffering from heat

and dust as they plodded across the desert. At least few dozen emigrants attempted to float down the Snake River to avoid the arduous overland trek. A number were unsuccessful, with death as their sad ending. The remainder soon abandoned the effort and rejoined wagon trains for the remainder of the trip.

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