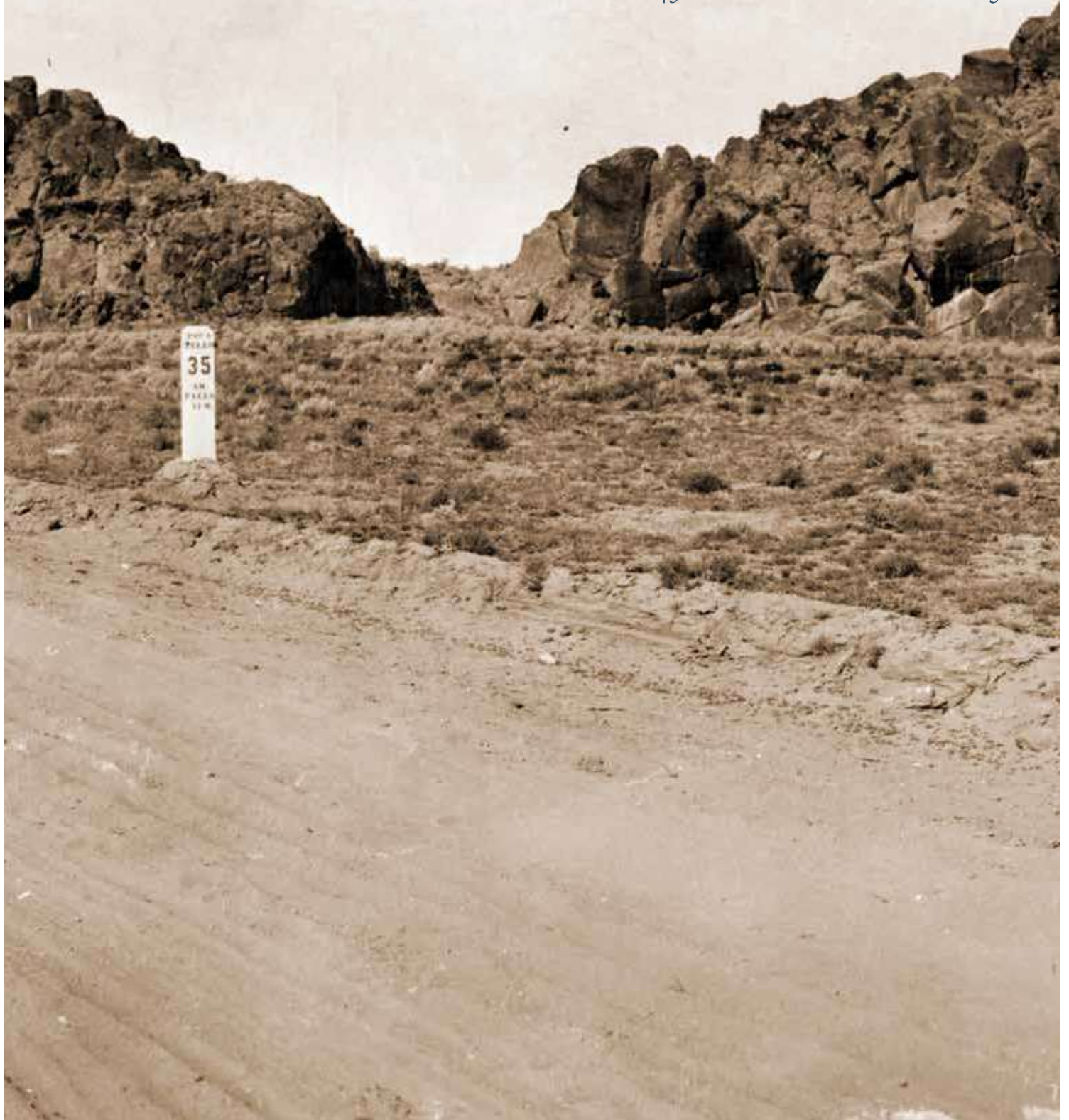


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ON THE COVER The approach to Massacre Rocks as it appeared early in the twentieth century. Notice that the Devil's Gate Gap has not been widened. COURTESY IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY. See Jerry Eichhorst's article herein, p. 23, for more information.

ON THIS PAGE Group of Bannock Indians. Photographed by W.H. Jackson. HARPER'S WEEKLY, JULY 6, 1878, P. 536. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

MASSACRE ROCKS

Fact or Fable?

BY JERRY EICHHORST

MASSACRE ROCKS IS A NARROW GAP IN A ROCKY RIDGE ALONG THE SNAKE RIVER IN SOUTHEAST IDAHO THROUGH WHICH THE OREGON TRAIL PASSED.

This defile became a landmark on the trail because many emigrants feared entering the gap, suspecting local Indians were behind the rocks waiting to ambush wagon trains. Emigrants gave the gap names such as “Devil’s Gate” and “Gate of Death.” The gap received the name “Massacre Rocks” because of an attack on a wagon train at the site on August 10, 1862, which killed nine men and wounded six.¹ Or so the story goes.

In truth, there were never any Indian attacks at the gap in the rocks. Indians did attack multiple wagon trains in August 1862; however, those attacks occurred about two miles east of Massacre Rocks. On August 9 Indians attacked a mule train from Iowa City, killing Andrew J. Hunter and Massimo Lippi. The Indians continued east, attacking the Adams train, killing Charles Bullwinkle and injuring four people. When the following Kennedy wagon train reached the Adams attack site, everything had been taken, and the ground was covered with

feathers, flour, and corn. Some members of the Bristol train further behind followed the Indians to the south and recovered fourteen oxen.

The next morning, anything of value remaining from the attacks was auctioned to support the survivors. About noon, Capt. John Knox Kennedy gathered thirty-five to forty men to recapture stolen horses seen on the hillside to the south. While in pursuit, Kennedy’s force encountered a much larger Indian force and retreated under fire. Thomas Newman and William Motes were separated and left to die. Two other men of Kennedy’s force, George Leeper and George W. Adams, a brother of Elizabeth Adams who had been badly wounded the day before, were also killed. They were buried with the three men killed the day before. Kennedy was shot through the side, and several others were also wounded. Some of the horses were returned to camp. Elizabeth Adams died a few days later while camped on the Raft River.² The attack and follow-up fighting the next day killed eight white people and about twenty Indians—hardly a “massacre.”

¹ Massacre Rocks State Park website, <https://parksandrecreation.idaho.gov/parks/massacre-rocks/history/>, accessed October 8, 2023; National Park Service Massacre Rocks website, <https://www.nps.gov/places/000/massacre-rocks-state-park.htm>, accessed October 8, 2023; Oregon-California Trails Association Massacre Rocks State Park website, <https://octa-trails.org/trail-sites/massacre-rocks-state-park-idaho/>, accessed October 8, 2023.

² Don Shannon, *Massacre Rocks and City of Rocks: 1862 Attacks on Emigrant Trains* (Caldwell, Id.: Snake Country Publishing, 2008), 67–108.

The gap received the name “Massacre Rocks” in 1912 when a local newspaperman suggested the name to promote tourism in the area based on the legends of the attack.³ A monument erected with much fanfare by the Sons of Idaho in 1927 contained incorrect information and spread many of these stories that have been propagated through the years. The marker was repositioned northwest of the original location when the gap was widened in 1997 during construction of Interstate 86.

In researching hundreds of diaries, reminiscences, and letters of emigrants who traveled along the Snake River in eastern Idaho in this area, I found that very few emigrants mentioned the gap in the rocks. I have yet to find an account where an emigrant feared for their life there.⁴ Only 3 percent of the accounts surveyed mentioned the gap. None of the emigrants expressed concern about Indians hiding near the rocks waiting to ambush wagon trains. Only one, Joseph Sanders, described the gap negatively: “to day we came through the Devils lane a narrow passage Just wide enough for a waggon to pass between two bluffs of rocks.”⁵

Just five diarists named the gap. The emigrant names include “Black Rock Pass,” “Rocky Pass,” “Rocky Gateway,” “Volcano Gap,” and “Devils lane.” One interesting discovery is that there were numerous emigrant names written on both sides of the

- 3 Justin Smith, “The massacre that never happened,” *Idaho State Journal*, February 7, 2020. https://www.idahostatejournal.com/opinion/columns/the-massacre-that-never-happened/article_04b77de6-f397-5f47-b5f1-158f28docb73.html, accessed October 7, 2023.
- 4 Search of over 744 diary accounts, reminiscences, and letters from the author’s collection of emigrants who traveled this section of the Oregon Trail from 1834 to 1867.
- 5 Diary, January 1, 1856 to May 31, 1880, Joseph B. Sanders, Penrose Library, Whitman College, Walla Walla, Wash.

A sketch imagining the supposed ambush at Massacre Rocks in August 1862 by C. E. Shaw of Gig Harbor, Washington, who donated the work to the Idaho State Historical Society in 1960. The attack, as revealed in this article, actually took place two miles to the east. COURTESY IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY.





W.
Massacre Rocks Aug-10-1862



Ezra Meeker at the gap in the rocks, 1916. COURTESY IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY.



rocks of the gap. These have been lost to road construction that widened the gap through the years. Cyrus C. Loveland provides one of the best emigrant descriptions of the gap. “Volcano Gap. This is a passage between two monstrous piles of rock thirty or forty feet high, just wide enough for a good wagon road between. As I passed between these monuments of nature, I beheld on either side the names of many who had gone before us.”⁶

The following story is an oral account of the incident at Massacre Rocks on the Oregon Trail, as told by Hattie Honena Ariwite, who was of the Northern Shoshoni People, also known as “Wihi’Naite,” which is interpreted to mean “by the Knives Edge.” The spelling and grammar are as given to me by my Northern Shoshone friend, Leo Ariwite.⁷

This was during the early to mid-1800s as Europeans travelled west along what is known as the Oregon/California Trail. The inhabitants of the area consisted of shoshone and bannock Indians that lived along the Snake river in South-eastern Idaho.

It was during this time that the Northern Shoshoni People had come from the North to trade and visit with their southern relatives. They camped in the Fort Hall bottoms area at the north end below Ferry Butte.

As the Northern Shoshoni enjoyed visiting and trading with their southern relatives, they began to enjoy their favorite past time of gambling. Playing a traditional game called “toahpah’dui” a group of Northern Shoshoni men were playing against several “Bannock men.” As the game continued into the late evening, a Northern Shoshoni man, who was a very good gambler, had started winning from the young Bannock men, particularly from a young man.

As the young bannock man had lost most of his personal possessions, he became upset and angry, and wanted to keep playing the game. The Northern Shoshoni commented that his opponent had nothing more of value and no longer wanted to play for nothing. Upon the verbal confrontation the young bannock man said, wait here I will go get something

6 Cyrus C. Loveland, *California Trail Herd: The 1850 Missouri-to-California Journal of Cyrus C. Loveland* (Los Gatos, Calif.: The Talisman Press, 1961).

7 Leo Ariwite emails with the author, 2024.

of great value and stood up and left. Returning with a horse, not belonging to himself but his father. The Horse was one of his fathers good horses used to hunt buffalo and war parties against northern enemy tribes.

The Northern Shoshoni man at first declined to play for a horse not belonging to the young bannock, but the young bannock insisted on playing the game.

Reluctantly the Northern Shoshoni man agreed to continue playing the game, and after some time, the young bannock man had lost his fathers best horse, the game finally ended as night fell. The next morning, the father of the young bannock man had noticed his best horse missing and began searching for it. Upon finding it in the Northern Shoshoni camp, there was a confrontation with the older bannock and the Northern Shoshoni man and they argued, by this time it had gotten the

OPPOSITE, TOP The Devil's Gate before being widened for the freeway that now runs through Massacre Rocks State Park west of American Falls. *IDAHO STATE JOURNAL*, FEB. 7, 2020.

BOTTOM The approach to Massacre Rocks as it appeared early in the twentieth century. Notice that the Devil's Gate Gap has not been widened. COURTESY IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY.







The Rocks today after being widened for Interstate 86 (Highway 30). View looking north. The Snake River is beyond the rocks at left in its canyon. PHOTO BY AUTHOR.

attention of the band leaders for both the Northern Shoshoni and Bannock camps.

The band leaders had told the Bannock man, that his son had lost the horse in a fair game of “toapah’dui.”

The Bannock father had become angry and returned to his camp, confronted his son for loosing his best horse, the son then feeling shamed had become angry, walking back to the Northern Shoshoni encampment tried to regain his fathers horse. After failing to regain his fathers horse, became angry and gathered his friends and in a rage, rode off to the south.

While riding south the young bannock and his friends had seen wagons at what is known now as massacre rocks, and being in an angry rage he and his bannock friends had decided to take their anger and frustration out on immigrants who were traveling on the oregon/california trail, as they were resting and having dinner.

A[s] the young bannock men confronted the immigrants there was a confrontation and a quick and short exchange of gun shots occurred where some of the immigrants were killed. The young bannock men had taken several horses and left.

When the young bannock men returned with the stolen immigrant horses the Northern Shoshoni encampment immediately departed back to their northern homelands in the Salmon River Drainage Country and the Southwestern Montana homelands.

This was how the story has been told from the Northern Shoshoni People as to the incident at Massacre Rocks.

There were numerous Indian attacks on Oregon Trail wagon trains along the Snake River in southeast Idaho in 1851, 1859, and 1862. There were no attacks, however, at the narrow gap in the rocks that became known as Massacre Rocks. The name “Massacre Rocks” was a term used to promote tourism to the area in the early 1900s. Although the site was named for the attacks on the Adams and Kennedy parties in August 1862, extensive research has found there were more attacks on wagon trains in the area in 1851. Therefore, the term “Massacre Rocks” is fiction.

A detailed analysis of the 1851 Indian attacks along the Snake River will be published in an upcoming issue of *Overland Journal*. [📖](#)



In 1927 the Sons of Idaho placed a somber marker at the Devil's Gate reading: *Massacre Rocks on Old Oregon Trail—In this defile on August 10, 1862, a band of Shoshone Indians ambushed an immigrant train bound for Oregon killing nine white men and wounding six.* It was a deeply moving ceremony, even though the monument got the location and the number killed wrong and conflated all the events into one event on one day. None of the facts mattered anymore. Legend had become heritage. PHOTO BY AUTHOR.