

The Importance of Setting
by David Welch

Wilderness provides a unique experience and the essence of this experience is the lack of modern intrusions. Advocates and visitors have long recognized the importance of preserving landscape, and have fought for more than a hundred years to set aside areas where today's visitor finds a setting basically unchanged over the centuries. I suspect something within us preserves the memory of our ancestor's first intrusion into the natural landscape.

Those of us with an interest in history have been much less successful in articulating the importance of the setting (or landscape) to the location of an historical event. While historic preservation laws and regulations recognize the importance of the area around a site, protection of the larger setting has often been a lower (or absent) priority. As a result we are left to visualize history by attempting to subtract irrelevant things from the view, a difficult if not impossible task. For example, often we must attempt to visualize a Civil War or Indian war battlefield and its horrific events by eliminating intrusions such as signs, malls, and office buildings. It does not work.

Historic trails present a special challenge due to their length and the size of their setting. The California and Oregon National Historic Trails are each about two thousand miles long. In the wide-open spaces of the west, their setting often encompasses thirty miles or more on each side of the trail. Thus their setting encompasses 120,000 square miles most of which has already been severely impacted by modern intrusions. There are, in fact, only a few sites which remain relatively pristine.

My interest in the western emigrant trails is based upon the fact that I am the descendant of twelve trail emigrants in the mid-1800s. The journey they undertook was history changing and the emigrant's sacrifice was great. While all of my ancestors survived the journey, it is estimated that over twenty thousand died on the trails due to disease and exposure, ten emigrants for every mile of trail. When visiting the trails you are literally visiting a cemetery that is a memorial to the

emigrant's efforts. Native Americans honor the spiritual importance of many locations; it should be recognized that descendants of trail travelers can be similarly moved.

Sharing some of the emigrants' experience when I visit the trail (of course without many of the hardships) is important to me, and I know many others. I have stood alone at South Pass in Wyoming and felt the passing of 200,000 or more emigrants through that welcoming gap in the Rockies. The wind whistles through the sagebrush, and with a little imagination you can hear the jangle of the wagon gear and the voices guiding the oxen across the plains. The view extends a hundred miles to the west to the next mountain range and fifty miles to the Wind River Range to the north. It was at this point the United States as a continent-wide nation was born when the trappers and then the emigrants passed.

The setting at South Pass is not pristine, but it is still evocative of the emigrant's journey. A power line crosses the trail a few miles west of the pass and an old railroad grade lies parallel to the trail. Wind farm sites are being studied on the adjacent ridges. I am not certain that future visitors will be able to replicate the experience at South Pass that means so much to me.

A friend of mine, who deals with historic trail setting and landscape issues on a daily basis, summarized the preservation of an historic trail as follows. First, there is the story: the challenges, failures, and successes of the emigrants themselves as found in the journals, reminiscences, and stories that have been preserved. Second, there are the physical remnants: the ruts and swales. Third is the personal experience, which can only be felt by visiting an undisturbed trail site. We have done a good job on the first (history), less well on the second (physical remains), and very little on the third (setting). As another colleague observed, once part of the trail and the setting is lost, a part of the story is lost as well. The loss is irreplaceable.

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September 21, 2009