



Northwest Trails

Newsletter of the Northwest Chapter of the Oregon-California Trails Association

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Reenacting Ezra Meeker's 1906 Old Oregon Trail Monument Expedition

By Ruth Anderson

In 1906 at the age of 75, Ezra Meeker of Puyallup, Washington, set off on what he called “The Old Oregon Trail Monument Expedition.” His mission: to mark the Oregon Trail that had witnessed the migration west of thousands of intrepid pioneers like himself.

Accompanied by an ox team, a wagon, a driver, and a dog, Meeker spent two years trudging across the country, arranging for the placement of 27 monuments, and setting in motion the establishment of many others. In Washington, DC, he met with President Teddy Roosevelt. Subsequent federal, state, and local acts, combined with private organizations—most notably OCTA—have resulted in the thousands of markers available for public viewing today.

We came to the decision to relive Ezra's 1906 experiences while in Vancouver, Washington, in 2004, attending the annual OCTA convention. Earlier, the Ezra Meeker Historical Society (EMHS) had restored a “prairie schooner” covered wagon that Ezra built in 1906. He used its twin for his expedition, and that wagon resides in storage at the Washington State Historical Museum in Tacoma.

Puyallup businessman and EMHS board member, Wes Perkinson, delivered the covered wagon to Vancouver, and offered, perhaps regrettably, to transport it all the way to St.

Joseph, Missouri, for the 2006 OCTA convention. Ezra Meeker interpreter, Ray Eagan, and Dave Welch, OCTA board member and National Preservation Officer, eagerly signed on, as did EMHS board member, Andy Anderson, and historian, Dennis Larsen, who had been researching Ezra's 1906–1908 trip. We gals now understand how all those thousands of men convinced their wives to set off on a journey that too many would not see end happily. Catching the gleam in our men's eyes, we weren't about to let them leap off without us.

In the ensuing two years we located an ox drover and purchased a box trailer for the wagon with signage that included a map of our route and a picture of Ezra. Our men arranged for presentations at over 20 monument sites between Puyallup and St. Joe, and we women spent considerable time outfitting ourselves in 1906 attire. Suzy Perkinson, Maura Egan, Wendy Welch, Pat Ziobron, and yours truly shopped or stitched our way into fashionable ensembles our grandmothers might have worn. The first time we met in our “period attire” we decided we looked like suffragettes. Outfitting our men proved equally challenging, but based on the number of people who subsequently sought to photograph us, we at least looked colorful.

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President's Report

As we near the end of the year, we also approach the end of the renewal transition year for membership. I want to first thank each member for bearing with us and renewing for another year. I especially thank the new members who have joined the chapter for the first time this year. You will derive not only the satisfaction of knowing you are playing a part in preserving some of America's historic resources, but also enjoy sharing that experience with other members. For many, the social interactions at the outings and meetings are the best part of OCTA membership. Welcome to OCTA and the Northwest Chapter.

Speaking of meetings, the September fall picnic at Centralia, Washington, was a great success—as usual. We made a small profit and had a great agenda of speakers and entertainment. Joyce Bolerjack is to be congratulated for putting together another great fall picnic meeting.

At the picnic, I mentioned the loss of a sponsoring chapter for the 2008 national convention and the possibility of co-sponsoring a convention with the Idaho Chapter. I asked for a show of hands of Northwest Chapter members present who would be willing to assist, should Idaho Chapter vote to go forward. Susan and I attended the Idaho Chapter meeting in October where they discussed a convention and favorably voted to sponsor a convention in Idaho in 2008. Jim McGill and I will act as convention co-chairs. We have had a subsequent planning meeting and are beginning to outline tasks and responsibilities. Since I asked for the show of hands only for an indication of support, I did not look to put faces to those hands. If you are willing to work, please let me know now by email. If you have a particular expertise or interest in a specific job, please identify what you wish to do. Contact me via email at rblair@oregontrail.net. Most of the leadership positions will be filled by Idaho members, so the Northwest Chapter's assistance primarily will be in supporting roles—tour guides, covering tables, ticket collection, and other activities at the convention. We are embarking on this endeavor with a shortened timeframe, but we are already excited that we will have a great convention. Please note the convention will be a week earlier than normal, August 4–9, 2008.

The chapter website is up and running! It is tied to the national home page. Please visit the site, which will be updated to provide current information about activities and outings. The address is www.octa-trails.org. Then click on the Chapters link along the left hand side panel. If you have items you would like to see promoted or added to the site, let me or Marley Shurtleff know. We will try to accommodate. Marley is due a tremendous "THANK YOU" for her efforts in working with Adam Welch and Association Manager Travis Boley in getting this update completed.

—Roger Blair

Summer Photos



PIT Project
Wallowa-Whitman National Forest
June 2006



Chapter Meeting



2006 Convention

Flying Over the Oregon Trail

By Dick Pingrey

In July I flew my Cessna to California to attend a granddaughter's wedding. It was a very smooth flight of four hours each way. The weather was ideal with almost no clouds, cool stable air at 7,000 feet, and the visibility was unlimited. The route took me directly over Biggs Junction, Oregon, where Highway 97 crosses the Columbia River and I-94. That is where the Oregon Trail comes down from the high country to the Columbia River. The actual trail route comes off the hill at the west edge of Biggs, and not where Highway 97 continues to the south.

At this time the grain crop is drying out and it will be harvested in August. The Oregon Trail comes through a rather large field as it starts to descend off the hill to Biggs. Right now the trail is perfectly clear as it goes through the maturing grain. Better, in fact, than I have ever seen it over the many years I have flown that route. I didn't have a good camera with me but I did take pictures of the trail as it winds through the field. Hopefully it will show the exact route if we want to plot it on a map.

Later in the month, Jenny Miller and I flew over the part of the Oregon Trail that runs from Hermiston, Oregon, to The Dalles, Oregon. The primary purpose was to photograph evidence of the trail in a wheat field just to the south of Biggs Junction, Oregon. It is at this location the trail descends from the wheat fields to Biggs and the Columbia River. Right now the trail route can be clearly seen in the changed growth of the wheat that trail-altered soil produces. We were able to observe and photograph the trail for a distance of approximately a mile from where it come out of a plowed field at the southeast end of the wheat field to where it goes into native grass at the north end of the field. The entire trail route through the wheat field was very clear from the air, especially from angles where the sun shadow makes it very obvious. We were there fairly early in the morning for that

reason. We also avoided some of the 100 degrees plus temperatures of Sunday afternoon.

Jenny used a digital camera to take pictures, but we need someone with the right equipment, computer program, and knowledge to take her card and work on the images to improve them. They probably need to adjust the contrast to make the trail stand out better, and when this is done we will have a clear record of exactly where the trail is located just south of Biggs. The pictures should make it possible to lay out the route very accurately on a map of the area. I hope someone with this equipment and ability will contact us so that this record can be made.

It is interesting that the trail route off the high ground down to Biggs is so clear in this wheat field. This field has probably been cultivated for nearly one-hundred years, and possibly longer, yet the soil where the trail is located still affects the growth of the wheat. While the trail can be seen at other places in cultivated fields, I think this is one of the obvious cases where the trail route can be seen. The farmers are harvesting at the present time and within a week or so it will be impossible to see where the trail was located. Even now it is nearly impossible to detect the trail route from the ground. It is clearest about five-thousand feet above the surface and become harder to see at a low altitude. Next year that field will not be planted so evidence of the trail can be seen only every other year and for probably a month or two at the most while the wheat is maturing.

Some observers might think that this is perhaps a farm route through the field. It is not. Where the trail leaves the wheat field at the north side, there is a significant bank of soil that has been built up by years of farming. There is also a fence at that location at the edge of the field, and no equipment or vehicles have passed through that point on the trail route in many years, if at all, since the wagons came through the field. There are farm equipment routes through this field, but they are totally different from the evidence left by the many wagons. The trail is a single set of wheel tracks and that is

consistent with the slope and shape of the wheat field. As one might expect, the trail winds through the wheat field along a route that would be the easiest and natural route for wagons to follow. That same route would serve no purpose for the farmer doing his planting and harvesting of the field.

Those of you familiar with the trail at Biggs know that the trail follows a shelf above the river for a distance of about two miles before descending to near the bank of the river where it continues to the west to the Deschutes River crossing. When observed from the air the trail route through the wheat field joins perfectly with the river shelf route and the trail to the south of Biggs. The only gap in the trail is an area of several hundred feet where gravel has been quarried on the hillside above Biggs. This quarry work has removed that short section of the trail.

Two Views of the Trail From the Air



Speakers Needed

FOR SPEAKING ENGAGEMENT

Topics: Oregon Trail (route)

Date: various

Event: Onboard Columbia River cruise

Comments: We are seeking presentations on the Oregon Trail. We would like to feature a presentation each week onboard two different vessels for our 2007 cruise season.

We are interested in a lecture or historical character presentation. This could be near Lewiston, Idaho, or Pasco, Washington, or The Dalles/Hood River area.

Please email or call, and we'll brainstorm some possibilities.

Thank you for your assistance.

Bill Wiemuth

Manager of Enrichment Programs

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Mark Your Calendars

The NW Chapter Annual General Membership Meeting will be held again at the Columbia Gorge Discovery Center in The Dalles, Oregon, on March 10, 2007.

Passing

Longtime NW Chapter member Connie Johnson passed away in early October. His son David notified OCTA Headquarters. He was a wonderfully kind gentleman and will be sorely missed.

SAVE THIS DATE — AND MAYBE A FEW MORE!

“Gold is Where you Find It!” (But It Helps to Know Where to Look!) is the theme of the 2007 California-Nevada Chapter Symposium.

The Symposium will be held April 21-22 in Yreka, California. Yreka sits at the top of California and is surrounded by rivers, forests, mountains, and small towns. The surrounding areas are steeped in history, culture, and beauty!

The event will offer lectures, tours, and camaraderie. The history of the emigrant trails and gold in northern California and the geology of the Cascade Range and Mount Shasta will be featured topics. Registration information will be provided in January.

Plan now to discover the “gold” of northern California and southern Oregon and consider a few extra days to look, explore, and enjoy the many unique features of this area:

Explore the quaint small towns of DUNSMUIR, McCLOUD, MOUNT SHASTA, and WEED. Fish, golf, or ski from any of these southern Siskiyou areas, or ride the Shasta Sunset Dinner Train.

Travel through SCOTT VALLEY and visit FORT JONES, ETNA, and CALLAHAN. See the early gold mining areas, stage coach routes, old Victorian homes, and visit the old soda fountain or the new brewery.

Travel into Oregon and ski Mount Ashland, or attend one of the many plays and concerts in ASHLAND, or wander the historic shops and buildings of JACKSONVILLE.

For Symposium information and planning queries, or to volunteer to help with the Symposium, contact BOB & CHERIE EVANHOE, phone: 530-842-5563, or email yreka98bob@sbcglobal.net.



HISTORIC SIGN AND GOLD MINER welcome visitors to Yreka, California, just off I-5 in northern California, 22 miles from the California-Oregon border. Yreka was incorporated in 1857, following the discovery of gold in 1851.

Meeker Reenactment Expedition

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On July 23, 2006, traveling by car and RV, we set off on our month-long journey. At our venues, the men unloaded the wagon, set the ribs and fit the canvas, while the gals set up the “Meeker Mercantile” tables. Ezra financed his trip by publishing postcards with his picture at the various monuments, and along the way he holed up to write his now well-known book, *The Ox Team, Or the Old Oregon Trail 1852–1906*. Our mercantile featured his book, reprints of his postcards, Dennis Larsen’s new book, *The Missing Chapters: The Untold Story of Ezra Meeker’s Old Oregon Trail Monument Expedition*, maps, and the 2006 OCTA coin. (NOTE: All items are available at the Meeker Mansion in Puyallup, or online www.meekermansion.org—except for the OCTA coin, which is available from OCTA.)

At each venue, “Ezra” would tell his story of his 1852 journey over the Oregon Trail, followed by Dennis’ slide presentation of the 1906 expedition. The presentations enlightened and entertained, and both were well received everywhere.

In Baker City, Dixon Ford, his grandson, Blake, and two magnificent oxen, Thor and Zeus, joined us. The oxen enabled us to provide an image not only of the 1906 trip, but the pioneer experience as well. In fact, most visitors to our events were more interested in the mid-1800s pioneer time.

Local Oregon Trail buffs and OCTA members lent their stories and expertise at every site. In Boise, Ezra’s great-great granddaughter, Janet Kanter-Purcell and her brother, Ray, both Californians, marched in our parade down Capitol Boulevard. Other more distant Meeker relatives turned up at several sites. At each location, no matter how hard we smiled, we couldn’t compete with the two Red Durham oxen that lured the crowds and stole the show. These gentle giants became like family and we treasured their company.

At all of our stops, our hosts had made arrangements for our presence, and we are very

grateful for the warmth and hospitality we found. The imagery evoked at several sites merits highlighting. In Ezra’s book he wrote, “Nature’s freaks in the Rocky mountains are beyond my power of description.” In 1906 at South Pass, Wyoming—the landmark best recalled of all those on the Trail—he located a large boulder, had his driver Mardon carve the usual inscription, “Old Oregon Trail, 1843–57,” and reminisced about his 1852 trip through the gap.

A Rocky Mountain summer storm nearly blew us off the trail at the Continental Divide at South Pass. Yet Dixon managed to hitch the oxen to our wagon and drive to the monument Ezra had placed there in the stark landscape. Wendy Welch received quite a surprise at the summit, finding a postcard addressed to her from Narcissa Whitman and Elizabeth Spaulding, pioneers of 1836. (We suspect some OCTA members passed that way the day before.)

Unlike Ezra, whose trek across Nebraska in 1906 yielded little interest and no monuments, when we reached Scotts Bluff National Monument we found a large crowd of trail fans eager to take in our programs in the setting sun. The oxen, wagon, and a few local people dressed in pioneer garb waded through tall prairie grass beneath the towering bluffs—a most spectacular retro event.

In July 1906 Ezra posed for a picture with his wagon, oxen, and another man beneath the graceful, towering spire known as Chimney Rock. Chiggers attacked us, dust smote our noses, and wind dried our eyes, but we took little notice. We were at Chimney Rock, high above the trail, on private land, re-posing the early photograph. Those of us not behind the camera directed our Ezra where to stand, how to hold his head, and reminded Dixon to remove his sunglasses.

At Alcove Spring, Kansas, on a steamy afternoon, we enjoyed the attention of a large crowd, gathered to commemorate the area’s role in providing a campsite with fresh water to emigrant trains. James F. Reed of the subsequently ill-fated Donner Party had left his name on a rock at the site. As a gathering storm

threatened a downpour, our oxen and wagon slowly appeared over the ridge of a hill, causing many a goose bump unrelated to the cooling temperature.

Finally we reached St. Joseph for the OCTA convention. To our great honor, attendees gave us a standing ovation and several bought books from our mercantile table. At Independence, Missouri, we attained our easternmost destination. Both St. Joe and Independence claim to be “The Beginning of the Oregon Trail,” while Ezra called both Tumwater, Washington, and The Dalles, Oregon, the “End of the Oregon Trail.” Friendly rivalry aside, to a pioneer, the beginning was your old front yard and the end was where you staked a claim.

On our return trip, we hosted visitors at a couple more sites, and too soon we were home. We did not have to claim land, cut down trees, and build houses when we ended our journey, but the weeds in our yards had given us no reprieve.

On the Trail, the oxen, teamed with the wagon, provided the live, earthy image that ruts alone cannot convey. If we count the number of people who physically visited our events, attended the presentations, read about us in their newspaper, or saw us on television, thousands of Americans acquired a little more knowledge about the Oregon Trail. Some even learned how to pronounce the name of the town Ezra Meeker, pioneer extraordinaire, platted.



Meeker Pioneers, Wendy and Dave Welch



2006 Meeker Wagon Parade



Ezra Meeker's Monument Expedition
Puyallup, WA, January 29, 1906



2006 Meeker Expedition at the Meeker Family
Homestead, Puyallup, WA, January 2006

With the advantage of perspective, we find certain insights gained from our mission:

The Oregon Trail retains its reality. Indeed there are miles of Trail in empty landscapes today that any pioneer would still recognize. That said, when Ezra sought to mark the Trail in Wyoming, he lost sight of it, and there was nobody to help him locate it. Today, Trail historians credit Ezra with being the impetus behind not only the thousands of markers that dot the landscape, but also the interpretive centers and other resource materials that fill libraries. OCTA maps and the carsonite and other markers enable one to leave Iowa and arrive at The Dalles, having seen virtually every rut and swale that still exists. Dave Welch took us off-road at several locations to marvel at the vestiges of 160-year-old tracks. His work with the Bureau of Land Management and others to preserve and mark the trail deserves highest praise.

Surviving the trail required attention to detail. Pioneers who selected sturdy animals, secured all recommended foodstuffs and supplies, and drank from only clear streams, or boiled their water, greatly increased their chances. Oxen offered better endurance than horses or mules for both pioneers and for Ezra in 1906, though Ezra also used trains in his later trip. Ezra's planning proved a bit haphazard, but his entrepreneurial spirit kept him going. Our two-year planning effort paid dividends for us.

Weather immeasurably impacted daily life on the trail. Relentless heat, humidity, wind, rain, sleet, snow—when you are in the elements without any appreciable cover, a feeling of helplessness can overcome the most stalwart traveler. Pioneers died from exposure, Ezra encountered nasty weather in 1906, and we coped with unremitting heat during one of the hottest summers on record. Daily ground covered depended on a variety of factors—weather being a major one. We were exceedingly glad to retreat to air-conditioning when we could.

Functioning as a family within a constant community takes patience. Pioneers who wished to reach their goal were never alone on the trail. Day after monotonous day they were captive to the company of their fellow travelers. Ezra faced that again in 1906 when he hired a much younger driver with whom he shared little in common but the trail. On our journey, we became much better acquainted, yet each couple enjoyed privacy at night.

Engaging in a quest becomes all-consuming. When pioneers left their homes and family members behind, they liberated themselves from the past to focus on the future. Gone were bills to pay, concerns about a house and barn, hail storms wiping out crops, or poor market conditions. Worries narrowed to a small wagon, some animals, and staying alive out on the endless prairie, in the scorching desert, or in the mountain passes. Hope alone kept them going. Ezra, imbued with this pioneer passion, spent the last 23 years of his life tirelessly ensuring the mass migration that had settled the West was not forgotten. The mission completely absorbed his attention to the exclusion of personal comfort and the company of loved ones. His critics only stimulated him—nothing slowed his fervor. We, too, took our reenactment activity seriously, but we were not entirely liberated from concerns about our homes, chores and the bills that kept coming.

It is immensely gratifying to keep the Oregon Trail experience alive. In the course of our planning, we encouraged local history aficionados at three sites to place and dedicate monuments that Ezra had commissioned but were never built. In April 2006, our group proudly attended the dedication of new granite markers in the small community of Claquato, Washington, and the town of Chehalis. The people of Soda Springs, Idaho, erected their monument in July, and we attended their dedication ceremony in August.

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Material may be submitted via email or on disk or as email attachment in Word or Text format.

Pictures can be sent via email, on disk (JPG format), or originals for scanning. Please send pictures separately from text document.

MASTHEAD: Replica of *The Old Oregon Trail* bronze relief sculpture created in 1924 by Avarð Fairbanks for Oregon Trail monuments.

It's Time to Report Volunteer Time and Expenses

In order to provide an accurate accounting of OCTA members' volunteer time and expenses related to OCTA activities, each participant is asked to report hours and non-reimbursed expenses annually to the Chapter Volunteerism Coordinator by **December 15**.

NOTE: Time and personal expenses should be reported "home-to-home." A form is available.

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