

Gravelly Ford Bus Tour



"Through the lens of history, preserving the past, focusing on the future."

Oregon-California Trails Association
38th Annual Convention
Elko, Nevada - September 13-16, 2021



OCTA 2021 Elko to Gravelly Ford Tour

Jan Petersen, tour presenter

Many thanks to the Horseshoe Ranch and Nevada Gold Mines for access to the site!



As we travel westward along I80 to Gravelly Ford, there are many sites...and sights...before we get there.

Elko was established the last week of December, 1868 as the western half of the transcontinental Central Pacific Railroad was building eastward to meet with the west bound building Union Pacific Railroad. The coast-to-coast railroad was dedicated May 19, 1869. Travel across the United States was reduced from six months by wagon to a mind boggling warp speed of 5 days. Most train speeds were 35 miles an hour. Miners were arriving and rushing to mines 120 miles south of Elko. With the completion of the transcontinental railroad, it became much easier to ship cattle to market. Soon ranchers from drought stricken California began moving their cattle to the high seasonal pastures in northeastern Nevada. In the fall, the cattle would be driven to rail shipping yards in Elko and taken to markets. Elko rapidly became known as a mining and ranching center of economic importance.



Elko, Nevada – January 1869 Grindstone Mtn. to the west

The Elko Hot Hole was used by members of the local Shoshone tribe for thousands of years. The hot and warm pools next to and in the river provided relief for old bones of the elders and fishing opportunities year round.

These Shoshones – natives – members of the Shoshone tribe, have lived in the area for at least 10,000 years. The “Newe” (people in Shoshone), lived in small family groups consisting of the grandparents, their married children and grandchildren. Most of these family units traveled from season to season and food source to food source. They lived in small grass homes, constructed at each camping site. It wasn’t an isolated lifestyle - neighboring groups would occasionally gather together for social occasions and assist each other with hunting needs. (And, of course...in many cases, courtships evolved!) It was a tough, sparse lifestyle but these inventive, intelligent and artistic peoples made this work for generations.





MARKER C-37 AT THE HOT SPRINGS WEST OF ELKO

The trail continued west and southwest along the Humboldt River corridor for about twenty-five miles to the hot springs located about 2 miles west of Elko on the east side of the river.

During the late 1820s, American and Hudson's Bay Company fur trappers, camped at the Elko Hot Hole, December 11, 1828. It was a cold winter with the river frozen but not a lot of snow on the ground. A local Shoshone was recruited as a guide and the group continued the next day to the northern end of the Ruby Mountains. Ogden's journal noted, "Wood very scarce, only a few willows on the banks of the river." Beaver trapping was good but not plentiful. The next day Odgen's men continued eastward.

The Hot Hole was also noted by emigrants. September 12, 1849, David DeWolf: "Here we had quite a row. Two men had a chunk of a fight. One got his arm broken and the other his ear nearly bit off and otherwise bruised. Weapons used were a shotgun, club, & teeth. After the fight, we hitched up and traveled six miles." By now the trip had become routine and tempers were thin.

Leaving Elko, heading west, the freeway is almost on top of the California Trail. Basically, the California Trail follows the Humboldt River across northern Nevada until the river ends at the Sink just west of Lovelock. The railroad followed the river and when those new fangled automobiles came along, they followed right along the old rail bed.

At the base of the hills at the Hunter Banks Ranch is a winding canyon where the South Fork River empties into the Humboldt. It was a deceiving location. The entrance is open and wide but, as wagons went further into the canyon, it narrowed. Peter Skene Ogden explored and trapped beaver there in December of 1828. The Bidwell Bartleson company came down this same canyon in the fall of 1841. The steep high walls made turning around impossible so emigrants had no choice but to continue toward the Humboldt. Five years later, the much troubled Donner/Reed wagon party made their way down this same canyon September 27, 1846. A few, but not many others used this route as well. Sarah Davis wrote in 1850, "We traveled all day and only came 10 miles...traveled in the creek half the time." This was the final leg of the much ill advised Hastings Cutoff and rarely used after 1850. With great relief travelers joined the main trail at the big meadow and continued westward.



South Fork Canyon looking toward Grindstone Mountain (south to north)



The California Trail Center opened in 2012 and is located 13 miles west of Elko at Hunter Exit 292 on I80. The Trail Center site was selected because it was an important camping place during the Gold Rush travel period. It is near the mouth of the South Fork Canyon where the Bidwell Bartleson party first encountered the Humboldt River and Hastings Cutoff (and the Donner/Reed party) joined the main California Trail.

The Hunter family established a cattle ranch in the valley in 1869. There was good grass and water. It's been a ranch since then. The present owners, Maggie Creek Ranch, owned by the Searle family, donated the 40 acres for the footprint of the of the Trail Center property.

Crossing northern Nevada was the hardest part of the trip for wagon trains. The Great Basin was a place to hurry through, not go to. Wagons creaked louder than ever as the wood dried under the blazing summer rays. In this Humboldt River valley, Bennet Clark counted 200 wagons from various wagon trains camped in the area in 1849. It was mid summer – mid July and August – and the river was almost dry, looking pretty spindly with only pools of water in the river bed. But...there was grass available.

Peter Decker wrote on July 14, 1849: *“Laid down by a sagebush to screen my head from the scorching sun. Here is a dreary scene... the road or trail several inches deep with ashy hot dust, occasionally large sage bushes & greasewood as far as the desert extended, the mountain ridges bare of timber looked blue & seemed to reflect the most unsufferable heat. A profound stillness reigned here & the mind seemed to be overpowered with the desert scene. When a breeze came up, whirlwinds rose at several places.”*

George Read... Sunday, July 21, 1850 *“We were on the trail early and passed along rapidly all day. Roads sandy and bad grass, all on the other side of the river and hard to get. Much of the country barren. Oh! I dislike this and have not language to express my dislike“*

It was a tough go for the emigrants. They were hot, dusty and perhaps cranky. Day after day was the same sagebrush scenery. There were no trees for shade. Captain Richard Burton wrote, *“The Humboldt River is a humbug. One cannot count the river as water. It is horse piss laced with alkali and salt. It is the meanest, filthiest, meanest stream in all creation. I swear that I will never again endure foul water and wretched heat. All we do is walk, walk, walk. And the dust...seems it is manure gone to powder.”*

Evenings were a time for resting and perhaps a little fun
Alonzo Delano while crossing Nevada - August 14, 1849 *“Mr. Hammer brought out a banjo and gave quite an amusing concert of Negro songs, and we had a merry time by the light of the fire. ...one of Colonel Kinkead’s Negroes came in, and notwithstanding, he had been walking all day, he found the music irresistible. He jumped Jim Crow in a perfect breakdown style, amid shouts of laughter and cheering from the whole crowd.”*

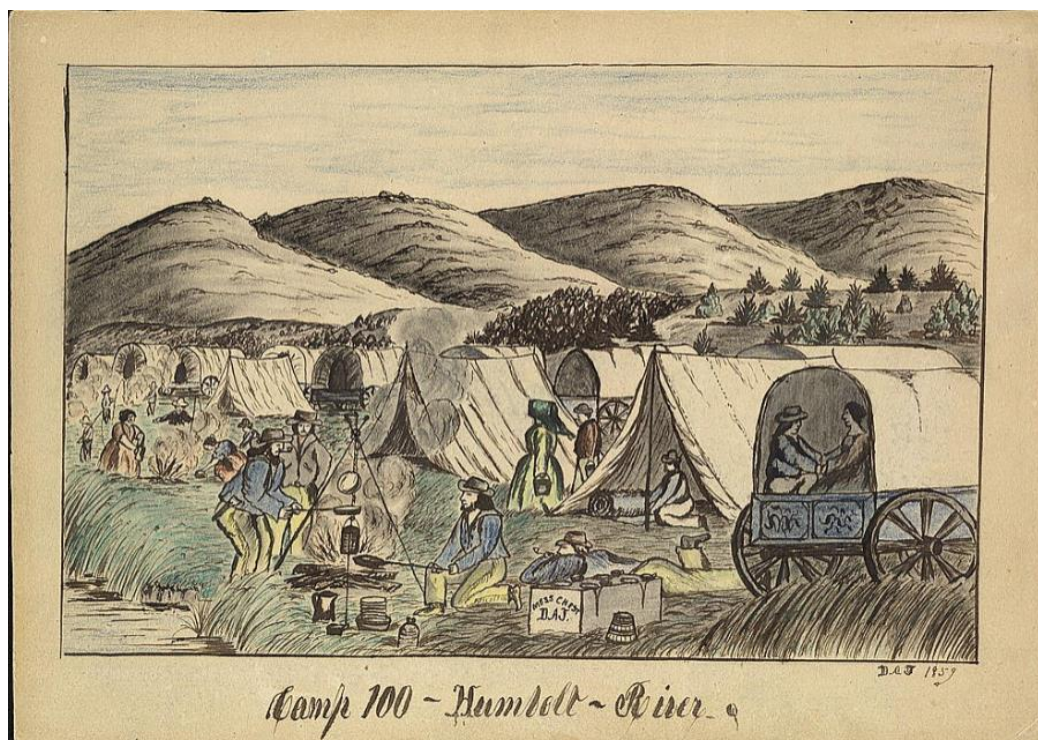
(It is interesting to learn that some emigrants from southern states moved west with their own families as well as slaves)



Daniel Jenks, artist, 1859

Two and a half miles west of the California Trail Interpretive Center is the eastern gateway to the Greenhorn Cutoff. This nine-mile route was used during the high water years in the 1840s and 1850s when Carlin Canyon (as we now call it) was flooded by the Humboldt. The road took emigrants along the low hills north of the river and canyon. Alonzo Delano wrote in 1849, "With a good deal of vexation, the emigrants took the mountain road...It was immediately called the Greenhorn Cutoff." It returned to the main road just east of present day Carlin, Nevada.

The first travelers to be in present day Carlin Canyon were Peter Skene Ogden's men trapping beaver. During the 1840s and Gold Fever days, this WAS the main road. As the Argonauts were making their way west, the Humboldt was often almost dry – or dry. However, there are springs in the river so water was usually available. Sometimes, wagon trains would stop over a day to rest, replenish water and wash clothes before pressing on. Lewis Beers wrote on August 8, 1852, "We have to cross the river four times. On each side of you, there is a perpendicular wall of vast rock overhanging the road so one has the feeling very near bordering onto fear as he passes under the precipices."



Daniel Jenks, artist, 1859

The present day Carlin area was first known to American fur trappers as well as the Hudson Bay trappers. Later, this valley was a welcome stop for emigrants. On the west side were hot springs in the river. These were a welcome relief for bathing and washing clothes-hot and cold running water in one place!

Carlin itself was established with the construction of the Central Pacific Railroad in early December, 1868. A round house and brick machine shops were built. It was a busy railroad town with optimistic miners boarding stagecoaches and headed to boom towns 100 miles south of town. After the completion of the transcontinental railroad in May of 1869, many Chinese construction workers returned to the area. They planted vegetable gardens and peddled them in the area. Others worked as cooks on ranches and opened laundry services. In the early 1990s, Steve Feasel, an OCTA member and high school teacher in Carlin, ...restored the Chinese Gardens as a nature and history park and preserve.



Chinese railroad workers



2021 Carlin Chinese Gardens

The emigrant road continued almost parallel to the freeway. Many class 1 ruts are still in place on the south side of I80 and the low hills. This summit is now known as Emigrant Pass.



West side of Carlin on Pine Valley Highway (State Route 278)



Trails West Marker # C41

And then.... up and over Emigrant Pass....a long pull uphill!



THE TRAIL HEADS DOWN TO MARKER C-44

After leaving the last marker, several branches of the trail went downhill toward the river.

Gravelly Ford

After traveling over Emigrant Pass on the way to Gravelly Ford, the route went around the high walled Palisade Canyon. At the top of the pass, emigrants entered Emigrant Canyon. Between Emigrant Canyon and the Humboldt River, there were three routes taken to reach the canyon again.

The main trail for wagons led directly southwest to Gravelly Ford. A branch of wagon trail led to the river about 1.5 miles east of Gravelly Ford. A foot and pack trail continued south down the narrow Emigrant Canyon, reaching the river about 2.5 miles east of Gravelly Ford. Those reaching the river east of Gravelly Ford had to travel west on the north side of the river to the ford, in order to continue their journey.

The trail split here: one went down each side of the Humboldt River to the Big Meadows (now Lovelock, Nevada). The north side trail was known as the Bluff Trail or dry weather route and was received the greatest use. The south side of the river near the ford had grass and was a camping area.

Gravelly Ford had a history of conflict with Indians. Actually, it was the disruption of the native ways and they'd had enough. The Shoshones generally had little to share. Most didn't have horses -they ate too much and grass was scarce. It was a hard scrabble but successful existence. Many emigrants scorned the Shoshones as pesky paupers and resented their stalking the wagons. Theft for food was often the reason for "raids."

During the 1850s and 60s, it is reported that nearly 23 emigrants were killed over the years near Gravelly Ford. Many more natives were killed as well. Sometimes hunger is simply a lack of food. Sometimes it is much more complicated.

A small military camp was established at Gravelly Ford in the late 1860s during the construction of the Central Pacific Railroad.



Emigrant graves at Gravelly Ford – none are identified

Willian Yeager wrote in 1863, “...every ford we have made across the Humboldt...was gravelly.”

For many years, this was believed to be the site of James Reed stabbing John Snyder. However, in more recent times, the place was identified to be further west near Iron Point, near Golconda, Nevada.



Ruts and a grave near Gravelly Ford (before and, after a wildland fire)



Ruts near Gravelly Ford



