

BY DAVID J. WELCH AND DON BUCK

LOOKING WEST

Trail Classifications

A SIGNATURE ACHIEVEMENT OF OCTA IS THE DEVELOPMENT AND THE ACCEPTANCE BY OTHERS OF THE TRAIL CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM. AS THIS IS BEING WRITTEN, AN UPDATE OF THE MAPPING EMIGRANT TRAILS (MET) MANUAL IS AT THE PRINTERS, SO IT IS A GOOD TIME TO REVIEW THE CLASSES WHICH HAVE BEEN VERY CAREFULLY UPDATED. THE CHANGES CLARIFY, BUT DO NOT REVISE, DEFINITIONS. THE WORK ON TRAIL CLASSIFICATIONS HAS BEEN LED FROM THE BEGINNING BY DON BUCK, WHO JOINS ME FOR THIS ARTICLE.



The first five emigrant trail classification categories are designed to assess the condition of trail segments at the time of mapping, and to establish a basis for protecting and preserving those trails. A sixth classification category has been added for altered or destroyed trail segments that have been reconstructed on their original location. These six categories are:

CLASS 1: UNALTERED TRAIL

The trail segment retains the essence of its original character and shows no evidence of having been substantially altered by motor vehicles or by modern road improvements. There is visible evidence of the original trail in the form of depressions, ruts, swales, tracks, scarring, vegetative differences, rock alignments along the trailside, and eroded trail features.

CLASS 2: USED TRAIL

The trail retains the essence of its original character but shows past or present use by motor vehicles, typically as a two-track road overlaying the original wagon trail. There is little or no evidence of having been altered permanently by modern road improvements, such as widening, blading, grading, crowning, or graveling. In forested areas the trail may have been used for logging but still retains elements of its original character.

CLASS 3: VERIFIED TRAIL

The trail route is accurately located and verified from written, cartographic, artifact, geomorphic, and/or wagon-wheel impact evidence (as rust, grooved, or polished rocks). But due to subsequent weathering, vegetative succession, rodent surface digging, or logging, trail traces will not be visible



On page 133, Class 1 segment on the Oregon Trail at Echo Meadows, Oregon. Photo by David Welch.

Above, Class 2 trail east of South Pass, Wyoming. Photo by Randy Wagner.

on the surface. What does remain is a verified trail corridor that has not been directly altered by modern intrusion or development. Typically this includes trails that once passed through forests and meadows, across excessively hard surfaces or bedrock (such as on ridges), over alkali flats and sandy or gravelly soils, through ravines or washes, and other surfaces not conducive to trail preservation.

CLASS 4: ALTERED TRAIL

The trail location is verified but elements of its original condition have been permanently altered, primarily by road construction, such as widening, blading, grading, crowning, graveling, or paving. In some cases, the original trail has been permanently altered by underground cables and pipelines. In other cases, trail segments, whose locations are verified, may have been destroyed by natural events or modern developments, leaving no evidence of their original appearance.



A Class 2 trail within a broad Class 1 swale near the Big Sandy in Wyoming. *Photo by Randy Wagner.*

CLASS 5: APPROXIMATE TRAIL

The trail is either so obliterated or unverifiable that its location is known only approximately. In many cases, trail segments have been destroyed entirely by development, such as highways, structures, agriculture, or utility corridors, or inundated beneath reservoirs. In other cases, natural causes have removed any remains of a trail. In both cases, there is not enough documentary or geomorphic evidence to locate the trail accurately. Thus, only the approximate route is known.

CLASS 6: RECONSTRUCTED TRAIL

A segment of Class 1, 2, or 3 trail no longer exists in its previous form due to alteration or destruction. Subsequently, this trail segment was replicated by design and construction in its previous verified location to appear as the trail class it was before the alteration or destruction occurred.



Class 4 trail north of Vale and Tub Springs in Oregon. *Photo by David Welch.*

For a more complete discussion of trail classifications including some very useful guidelines, please refer to the MET Manual. Also, helpful clarifications and interpretations follow the definitions in the “Additional Guidelines and Qualifications for Classifying Trails.” The manual is available at OCTA’s website (octa-trails.org) for download (Part A: Investigative Procedures & Trail Classifications). Members may purchase the complete MET Manual (five parts and thirteen appendices) from OCTA headquarters for \$10 plus shipping and handling.

DAVID WELCH served as OCTA’s president and national trails preservation officer. He also has been Northwest Chapter president and a member of the national board of directors. He is currently chair of OCTA’s mapping and marking committee and the investment advisory committee. Dave is a retired aeronautical engineer and lives with his wife, Wendy, in Lacey, Washington.

DON BUCK is a charter member of OCTA. For the past three decades, he has undertaken research and mapping of numerous emigrant trails in Nevada and California. This led Don to produce the first four editions of OCTA’s MET Manual. 