

BY DAVID J. WELCH

## LOOKING WEST

### *A Beginner's Guide to Trail Reading*

**T**HIS “LOOKING WEST” SERIES FOR THE *OVERLAND JOURNAL* USUALLY FOCUSES ON PRESERVATION-RELATED TOPICS, BUT I AM GOING TO STRETCH THAT A LITTLE FOR THIS ARTICLE. THE BASIS FOR THIS STRETCH IS THE FACT THAT PRESERVATION

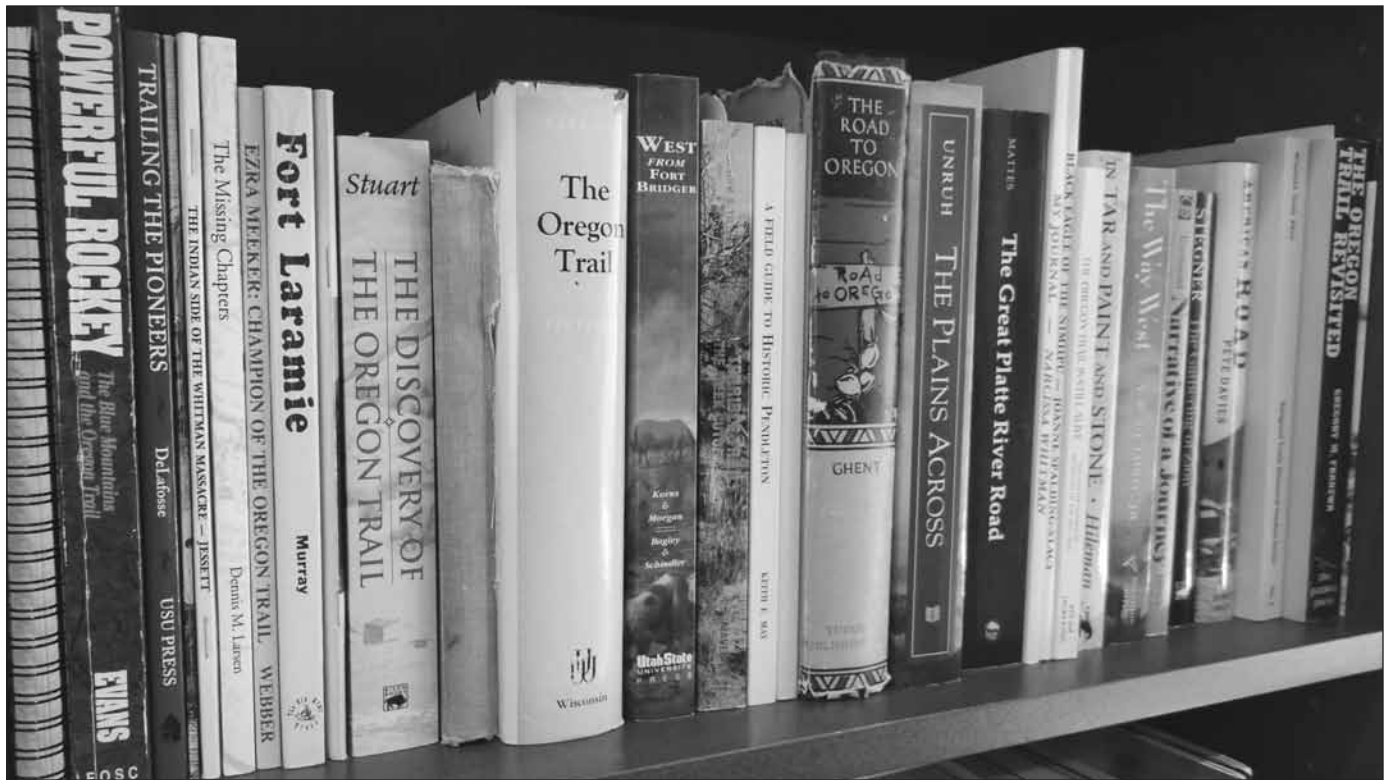
of the trails begins with knowledge of the trails and their history. I have asked a number of knowledgeable OCTA members for their recommendations for the best books and other resources for a novice wanting to know more about the trails. The final recommendations are mine, but I wish to thank those who contributed. Friendly disagreements may be sent to me or the editor.

A trail library, which many of us have assembled over the years, includes scholarly books, diaries and journals, and maps. Each varies greatly in content and quality, but together they tell the story of the trails. In this summary, I will focus on relatively “easy reads” since they will lead to the more scholarly works through their references.

Since this article is appearing in the *Overland Journal*, you are obviously aware of this excellent resource. It is published as the “scholarly journal” of OCTA. Its articles delve into the details of the overland emigrant experience and, therefore, may be too detailed for some, especially at the beginning of one’s trail research. Nevertheless, it is an essential component of any library. Back copies of most of the volumes are available from OCTA headquarters.

In so far as traveling along the trail, the starting point for the Oregon Trail and its route-sharing partners east of Salt Lake City (the California, Mormon Pioneer, and Pony Express Trails) is Gregory Franzwa’s *Maps of the Oregon Trail* and his guidebook, *The Oregon Trail Revisited*. For the California Trail, the Trails West publications in the series “Emigrant Trails West” are highly recommended. The National Park Service’s *Auto Tour Route Interpretive Guides* provide additional information for each trail state, although the California and Oregon guides are still being prepared.

For an historical perspective, a few books stand out. John Unruh’s *The Plains Across* is near the top of everyone’s list, as is Irene Paden’s *Wake of the Prairie Schooner*. Unruh’s book was my introduction to the trails. Bernard DeVoto’s *The Year of Decision: 1846* provides a broad overview of western history before and during the emigrant period. George Stewart’s *The California Trail: An Epic with Heroes* documents the California Trail experience. Merrill Mattes’s *The Great Platte River Road* is an essential resource for trails studies, which has been expanded upon by Will Bagley for the National Park Service and is being published



as the Overland West series by the University of Oklahoma Press.

Journals and diaries provide key insights from the emigrant period. Edwin Bryant's self-serving *What I Saw in California* remains a good read despite its shortfalls. Other good diaries include Jesse Applegate's *Day with the Cow Column*, J. G. Bruff's *Gold Rush: Journals and Drawings*, and *The Diary of Mrs. Amelia Stewart Knight*.

I mentioned Franzwa's maps of the Oregon Trail, but there are others. OCTA publishes a map covering the western United States with all the trans-Mississippi emigrant trails. It provides an excellent overview, as did earlier publications by Bob Berry (*Western Emigrant Trails 1820–1870*) and Greg Franzwa. The NPS map pamphlets for each National Historic Trail are also excellent.

I probably missed your favorite, but that is part of the fun. There are hundreds of publications, each of which contributes to the trail history in its own way. If you are interested in these titles and more, contact the bookstore at OCTA headquarters.

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. ☐