The Devil’s Backbone

CHAPTER FIVE

Above rapids thick with salmon at mile 1,367 of the 2,170-mile journey from Independence, Missouri, to Oregon City, Oregon, the trail humped over a bluff. Oxen struggled in the sandy soil of fossil-rich flood deposits. Jesse A. Applegate walked: “In getting away from this place we had a narrow escape,” wrote Applegate in Recollections of My Boyhood. Age six in 1843, he tugged at his mother’s side in a train of 875 pioneers and twice that number of livestock—the largest caravan yet to follow the Oregon Trail. Dark cliffs above the Snake River at Salmon Falls startled the Missouri farm boy. “We had to follow the Devil’s Backbone,” Applegate recollected. “It is a very narrow ridge with a gorge a thousand feet deep on the left hand and a sheer precipice on the right.” No child who could toddle or walk was allowed to cross in a wagon. Between iron-hooped wheels and certain disaster were barely inches to spare.
"Strait is the gate and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life," wrote Applegate in 1914, near death and quoting from Scripture. "Wide is the gate and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction. But this Devil's Backbone was worse than either, for it was both narrow and crooked, and it was hard to tell where it might lead to."

Often the road beyond Hagerman led to a West of graver hazards; it led, in Applegate's recollections, to a swollen ford of the Snake at Three Islands, a scaffoldlike tomb of hanging corpses near Fort Boise, a near-fatal fall under a wagon wheel in Oregon's Malheur Desert, a rock-and-spear-throwing brawl with Indian youths outside Fort Walla Walla, an early snowfall in the Blue Mountains, and then calamity at The Dalles of the Columbia where a skiff disappeared in a whirlpool, killing three. Shrouded in lore and idealization, the trail led also to myth. Oregon in the 1840s was national wish fulfillment. God's Country. A window on the Pacific. A pastoral Eden beyond the Indian country where righteous yeomen staked claim to the fertile Northwest. "Oregon," said the Alton Telegraph, "would contribute to our national honor." It would "connect the North with the South, and the East with the West, so firmly that nothing but the power of Omnipotence could separate them or prevent the United States from becoming the leading nation of the world." First, however, Americans would have to drive "an entering wedge" through the Snake River's lava landscape. Why go to Oregon? asked John Quincy Adams. "To make the wilderness blossom as the rose, to establish laws, to increase, multiply, and subdue the earth which we are commanded to do by the first behest of God Almighty."

The imagery demonized Idaho. Where the August heat left little forage for livestock and the buffalo had been hunted to near extinction, the Snake cut vertical chasms through a waste of ghoulish place-names: Gate of Death (renamed Massacre Rocks), Caldron Linn (the river's "boiling, seething cauldron" that killed a trapper in 1811), Devil's Scuttle Hole (the 35 miles of rapids above Twin Falls), Rattlesnake Creek (near Mountain Home), Malad Gorge (north of Hagerman where the French-named Riviere Malades, or "sick river," entered the Snake). The not-yet Magic Valley
seemed sinister, even satanic. "How old man Vulcan has played Havoc here," said mapmaker Charles Preuss.

Never mind that the ghouls were mostly imagined. And never mind that the drop from Hagerman's hump—about 400 feet—was less than half what a farm boy recollected. Fear was a rite of passage on Idaho's road to Canaan. Pioneer Elizabeth Miller Applegate, Jesse's mother, hid a pistol in her apron. Her terror of the desert was genuine whether the dangers were real or not.

And yet they came, streaming toward Oregon sunsets. By 1846, at least 5,000 settlers had reached Oregon's Willamette Valley via the Snake-Columbia basin. Others abandoned the Snake at Raft River (one hundred miles or so before reaching the Devil's Backbone) where the trail branched south toward the promise of California.

Estimates vary. Historian Aubrey Haines of the National Park Service counted 43,264 Oregon-bound emigrants for the years 1841-1863. Historian John D. Unruh Jr., greatly enlarged the estimate by factoring in the many thousands who arrived via detours and cutoffs. From 1840 to 1860, according to Unruh's calculations, 253,397 reached the Shoshone country via South Pass and Fort Hall. Billowing west in one of history's most impulsive migrations, an estimated 300,000 reached the Pacific by wagon before cannons bombarded Fort Sumter. Murder, massacre, and massive flooding in the early 1860s only suspended the wagon migration. Even after 1869, when a golden spike at Promontory Point, Utah, completed a rail connection between California and Missouri, the old Snake-Columbia road freighted most of the Oregon traffic. Not until the Oregon Short Line's 1884 bridge over the Snake above Huntington did rails supercede trails.

America's destiny was manifest in those hordes hurtling westward. So said Francis Parkman, the wealthy adventurer who, in 1846, traveled as far as Nebraska and published a popular book that gave the migration its name. "The Indians will soon be abased by whiskey and overawed by military posts," wrote Parkman in The Oregon Trail. Wild and noble and caught in the great invasion like the buffalo on which they depended, the natives seemed dumbfounded and doomed. The Oglala, for example, "were [not] in the slightest degree modified by their contact with civilization. They know nothing of the power and real character of the white men, and their children would scream in terror when they saw me." White
men knew even less of the red. Gawking emigrants were “tall, awkward men in brown homespun and women with cadaverous faces.” Children lost in the woods, they were “totally out of their element, bewildered and amazed.”

*The Oregon Trail* spawned a folk genre of memoirs and guidebooks, of Currier & Ives prints and barroom murals, of prairie schooners breasting amber grasslands. Not until Frederick Jackson Turner, however, did the trail swell to mythic importance as a highway of national identity. “The frontier,” wrote Turner in an 1893 address to the American Historical Association, “was the most rapid and effective line of Americanization.” The Old West had “consolidated” national culture with enduring characteristics, namely “that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom.” The Oregon Trail—for Turner an idea more than a highway—was a vital stage of a sweeping process that year after year had replenished America’s virtue and strength.

Historians ever since have searched for America’s center on the frontier’s moving edge. Taking a cue from Turner, who compared “the progress from savage conditions” to Darwin’s theory of evolution, the World War I-era historian T. C. Elliott claimed that the Americans who settled Oregon were simply “the fittest to survive.” Likewise in 1929 the historian Agnes Laut called the emigrants “Children of Israel,” their trail a “racial highway.” Superior breeding, again, was the engine of civilization in the Federal Writers’ Project 1939 Oregon Trail guide: “The biological genes transmitting the characteristics that drained Europe of much of its vitality and made the United States an empire extending from coast to coast have not been bred out.” Territorial conquest, a biological imperative, was inevitable and therefore right.

As history became metaphysics, the emigrant corridor all but vanished as a physical space. In 1914, after a search of the Idaho Statehouse, a historical society founder wrote a letter to a patron in Caldwell. “I regret,” said John Hailey, “that I have no map of the Old Oregon road.” Nor had he ever seen one. The desert passage, he continued, had never been a single road: it was a swath of parallel trails a mile across in places. Ironically it was Hailey, formerly a stagecoach entrepreneur, who had done as much as any one man to scatter the original trail. Eighty-five percent of the nineteenth-century road had been plowed or paved or otherwise obliterated by the time Congress, in 1978, granted historic landmark status to what shrinking mileage remained. The trail, said a 1999 report to the National Park Service, was “a symbol of westward expansion [that embodied] traditional concepts of pioneer spirit, patriotism, and rugged individualism.” But which set of ruts best embodied that
Americanism? Decades of meticulous work by a dozen or more state and federal agencies have since rediscovered and mapped 318 miles, mostly in Wyoming. Three difficult miles (and perhaps another three waiting for further study) dissect the Hagerman Fossil Beds National Monument.

"It is rare to see history pure and undisturbed," said Idaho's department of tourism in its brochure on the Oregon Trail. Rare—but not in Idaho where "the landscape is exactly as the emigrants left it," where the tourist willing to step away from the highway can "almost imperceptibly hear the creak of the axles, the lowing of the oxen, the crying of babies." Atop the Devil's Backbone that tourist could almost hear and see what Applegate recollected if not for back-flooded rapids, row crops, barbed wire, cattle crossings, and a slashing line of steel towers that harnesses the Hagerman Valley to a power grid larger than France.

It is rare to see history pure—especially rare in a flood-swept lava desert where ordinary farmers in an extraordinary migration transformed a remarkable land.
Across the wide Missouri and up the Platte to the Colorado Rockies, then south to the Texas Panhandle through trials of heat, thirst, desertion, theft, near mutiny, and near starvation, Maj. Stephen Long, in 1820, led the scientific wing of the army's Yellowstone expedition to the psychological edge of American civilization. "In regards to this section of country," wrote Long, an engineer from rainy New England, "we do not hesitate in giving the opinion that it is almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence." Printed across Long's first map was "GREAT DESERT," which became "GREAT AMERICAN DESERT" in Henry Tanner's popular Atlas of 1823.

Westerners paid little attention. Already a vanguard of backwoods trappers had scoured the beaver-rich canyonlands of the Snake-Columbia basin. In 1826, the St. Louis Enquirer maintained that wagons could reach Oregon without meeting "any obstruction deserving the name of a MOUNTAIN." The rosy assessment was confirmed in Jedediah Smith's 1830 report to Secretary of War John Eaton: families with wagons and cattle could follow the Snake to a fine country for farming. Two years later, when the French American soldier and fur trader Benjamin Bonneville took wagons over the Continental Divide into future Wyoming, expansionists rejoiced. American evangelists, stirred by frontier reports from the Presbyterian missionary Samuel Parker in 1835, claimed the road across the lava desert had been "excavated by the finger of God." On that desert passage were obstacles more political than physical. The United States and Britain held Oregon Territory jointly, although few Americans ventured north of Puget Sound. The London-based Hudson's Bay Company had long monopolized the beaver trade with a string of trade outposts and forts. Company agent John McLoughlin, the factor at Walla Walla and celebrated "father of Oregon," dismissed the idea of Yankees beyond the Rockies. Emigrants might just as well "undertake to go to the moon."

More fearsome than the British resistance were the nomadic and warlike Sioux. Displaced by white migration to the Upper Mississippi, the Sioux were highly mobile and less susceptible to smallpox than stationary tribes. By the 1840s, the Sioux had enslaved the Arikara people, scattered the Mandan, and pushed Plains Indians such as the Omaha and Cheyenne into the Blackfoot lands at the base of the Northern Rockies. Sioux warriors so devastated the Pawnee that the defeated tribe made an alliance with the U.S. Army. Although the Snake River Shoshone had no tradition of organized warfare, the tall-grass steppelands were ablaze
with violence and thoroughly destabilized long before the first of the covered wagons rutted the Oregon Trail.

Missionaries first passed through Indian lands under the protection of British and American trappers. Jason Lee, a Methodist, went west in 1834 to preach among the Flathead. His mission on the Willamette River became the nucleus of the first American settlement in Oregon.

Another pioneer of the great migration was a pious Presbyterian with a degree from a New York medical school. Dr. Marcus Whitman, in 1835, won fame among the Shoshone, Nez Percé, and Flathead by removing a three-inch arrowhead from the back of mountain man Jim Bridger. The following year Whitman returned to the mountains with his schoolteacher bride, Narcissa Prentiss Whitman, and fellow husband-and-wife missionaries Henry and Eliza Spalding. On July 4, 1836, the party with its shanty wagon crossed the Continental Divide. “Were met by a large party of Nez Percé, men, women, and children,” wrote Eliza Spalding in a diary entry for July 6. “All appeared happy to see us. If permitted to reach their country and locate among them, may our labors be blessed to their temporal and spiritual good.” But the horse trail across the future Idaho-Wyoming border was a teamster’s nightmare. On July 18, Narcissa Whitman reported that the hated wagon had flipped over twice. “It was a great wonder,” she wrote, “that [the wagon] was not turning somersaults continually.” When the axle broke ten days later, the schoolteacher rejoiced. The rejoicing, however, proved premature when the men converted the wagon into a makeshift cart and continued on two wheels. Still, the cart was probably the first wheeled vehicle to survive the Devil’s Backbone. Although the wagon was junked for scrap at Fort Boise, the journey punctured the myth of the West as a trackless desert. There was no stopping America’s greatness if missionaries—even “delicate females” as one senator put it—could undertake such a migration. In 1837 a Senate bill to protect U.S. citizens in Oregon prompted a bellwether call to evict the British from the entire 700,000 square miles of the Pacific Northwest.

A surge to the Pacific secured America’s claim. On September 20, 1838, Thomas Jefferson Farnham of Peoria contracted Oregon fever from the touring Jason Lee.
Farnham's Oregon Dragoons crossed the Missouri the following year with fifteen emigrants and a homemade banner that boldly proclaimed "OREGON OR THE GRAVE." The dragoons split into several detachments after suffering many hardships. Farnham, nevertheless, stirred interest in the Shoshone-Paiute country by publishing vivid reports. At Salmon Falls were "digger" Indians, "the most worthless Indians, that is poor, that we have seen." The Peorians traded three knives for "a bale" of sun-baked salmon cured "in a very fine style." Rested and fed, they arched the Devil's Backbone and descended through rocky desert to Three Island Crossing. Farnham then followed the Shoshone trail past bubbling hot springs to the bluffs of "a very ble[ea]fulfull and rapid stream" with a "stony and gravelly bottom." It was the Boise River near the future town site. Again the dragoons traded for salmon and wandered through dangerously twisting canyons where, said Farnham, "our ears are yet saluted by the howl of the woolf." Soon the travelers heard human "howling."

An encampment of Bannock, apparently, were "mourning for the loss of some of their friends that had been killed in battle." Three suspended their grief long enough to point the dragoons toward Fort Boise. There in the dying days of the fur trade the Peorians feasted on duck, bacon, sturgeon, buffalo, elk, turnips, cabbage, and pickled beets at the table of the fort's famous factor, the French Canadian Francois Payette.

By 1840, some 500 Americans occupied maybe one hundred farms in and around the Willamette Valley. In 1841, legendary hunter Tom "Broken Hand" Fitzpatrick led John Bidwell and his Western Emigration Society—the first
bona fide wagon train. U.S. Topographical Engineer John C. Frémont marched west the following May with Hawkin rifles, barometers and transits, pack mules, kettles and blankets for Indian tribute, a stout crew of French trappers, six thermometers, an inflatable rubber raft, a soft-spoken scout named Kit Carson, and the red-faced German who became one of
America's most celebrated cartographers, Charles Preuss. Two days ahead of Frémont was Indian agent Elijah White with his emigrant company of more than one hundred children, women, and men in thirty amphibious wagons.

In 1842 the British well understood that the push through the lava desert was more than a peasant migration. Strategic intelligence in the guise of scientific reconnaissance—a tactic predating Lewis and Clark and continuing in the work of highly placed army savants such as Long, Frémont, Zebulon Pike, William H. Emory, Howard Stansbury, Andrew A. Humphreys, and Gouverneur K. Warren—ran counter to the myth of the West as the process through which Americans shed the schooled culture of seaboard civilization. Government science preceded the wagon migration. Already in 1841 the U.S. Exploring Expedition had grounded the USS Peacock in the crashing surf at the mouth of the Columbia River. It was a fortuitous embarrassment for American imperialism. Demonstrating the uselessness of the Columbia as a gateway to Asia, the wreck of the Peacock turned the attention of Congress north to safe harbor in Puget Sound.

Congress, meanwhile, stirred West Coast colonization with offers of farmland. Two decades before the Homestead Act of 1862 sent farmers flooding west, the Senate, in 1843, pledged 640 acres of Oregon Country to each male pioneer. Although the proposal died in the House, it stoked expansionist fire. Democrat James K. Polk turned the 1844 presidential election into a referendum on annexation or, if necessary, brute conquest. Challenging the British to “Fifty-four forty or fight”—a demand for every inch of disputed terrain from California to Alaska—Polk defeated moderate Henry Clay. Two years later a British-American compromise at the 49th parallel made the United States continental. Approved by the Senate on July 17, 1846, the Oregon treaty gave America its deepwater port (future Seattle) and relinquished to the British the wilds above Puget Sound.

By 1846—a “year of decision,” said historian Bernard DeVoto, a zealous time of “manifest destiny” when the Mormons left for Salt Lake and General Zachary Taylor decapitated northern Mexico—the overland trails were rutted and thronged. On July 17, 1850, the peak day of the migration, 6,034 emigrants crowded toward Oregon and California. James Wilkins, Missourian, noted “a great many [wagon] companies continually in sight.” White-topped schooners dotted empty Nebraska “like a string of beads.”
A braid more than a trail, the road to empire looped, sidetracked, and frayed through a tangle of byways and cutoffs. "Here we are upon a sage plain with roads running in every direction," wrote Julius Merrill, Boise-bound and short-cutting through the Camas Prairie in 1864. "We are at a loss which [road] to take."

A trace of the nineteenth-century route onto a twentieth-century map shows 492 miles across the barrens of Idaho via Three Island Crossing. Those unwilling or unable to cross that dangerous ford could detour 505 miles via the mesa lands of Idaho's Owyhee desert. In 1852 a ferry at Thousand Springs opened the Rock Creek or North Alternate Route that bypassed the Devil's Backbone via Malad Gorge. Steep and stony in any direction, Idaho was tough going—"the most tortuous road I could ever imagine," said emigrant Ester McMillan in that year. Idaho was elsewhere an "ash heap." Its serpentine river was "mad." For an emigrant to enjoy the ordeal, said one, "a man must be able to endure heat like a Salamander, mud and water like a muskrat, dust like a toad, and labor like a jackass. He must learn to eat with his unwashed fingers, drink out of the same vessel with his mules, sleep on the ground when it rains, and share his blanket with vermin, and have patience with musketoes, who don't know any difference between the face of a man and the face of a mule, but dash without ceremony from one into the other. He must cease to think, except to where he may find grass and water and a good camping place. It is hardship without glory, to be sick without a home, to die and be buried like a dog."

For many, the eighty-some miles from Caldron Linn to Three Islands (Murtaugh to Glenns Ferry) were the most difficult leg of the trip. "Hideous world, fearful roads, all grass poisoned, every day one to three head of cattle dying," wrote William Keil in 1855. The wind-blown Idaho silt now famous for growing potatoes (geologists call it loess) could blind in the heat of August. "The dust," said emigrant Jane Gould from the Middle Snake in the summer of 1862, "was even worse than Indians, storms, or winds or
mosquitoes, or even wood ticks. Dust ... if I could just have a bath.”

The excessive dust was a good indication that the cattle-invaded steppeland was an ecosystem in shock. No longer a flowering diversity of bitterroot, goldenweed, balsam, clover, rye, wild onion, and camas, the Palouse had surrendered to sage. As noxious weeds such as cheatgrass and Russian thistle (tumbleweed) displaced more edible species, nature, said emigrant Overton Johnson, was “wrecked and ruined.” Another witness to desolation was the twenty-one-year-old Ohio man who later returned, eastbound on the eve of his 98th birthday, to make the case for preserving segments of trail. “When the Snake River was reached,” said Ezra Meeker, recalling the 1850s, “the heat again became oppressive, the dust stifling, and the thirst almost maddening. In some places we could see the water of the Snake winding through the lava gorges; but we could not reach it, as the river ran in the inaccessible depths of the canyon.” The desert “scarcely afforded sustenance,” said Cyrus Shepard. It was “burnt rocks ... damned bad dust ... horned toads, rattlesnakes and the damned Snake Indians,” said E. S. McComas. Five decades before Twin Falls boosters imagined “fertile soil ... beautiful scenery ... a climate equal to Italy’s best ... a new Garden of Eden,” Basil Longworth of Ohio saw only “a remarkably strange place.”

Remarkably strange, surely, but wondrous to tastemakers like Washington Irving who rediscovered the pastoral West as mysterious and sublime. “It is a land,” wrote Irving in 1837, “where no man permanently resides; a vast, uninhabited solitude with precipitous cliffs and yawning ravines, looking like the ruins of a world; vast desert tracts that must ever defy cultivation and interpose creary and thirsty wilds between the habitation of man.” It was a land so beguiling, moreover, that many thousands of the Oregon-bound suspended the race against starvation and snowfall to stand, spellbound, on the brink of impossible chasms in the mist of plunging cascades. T. J. Farnham of Peoria, a visitor to Twin Falls in 1839, heard the boom of its crashing water from at least three miles away. Today but a trickle of its former grandeur, its water diverted upstream by plumbing for agriculture, Twin Falls of the Middle Snake once sheeted in a double torrent around a
massive rock. An 1880 lithograph shows a native with raised spear sentry-like at the foot of a roaring Niagara. Taller but more remote was the future tourist attraction four miles downstream. Shoshone Falls—called Canadian Falls until the U.S. Army expunged the reference to America’s rival—fell 212 feet into a hollow amphitheater where a whirl of the Bonneville Flood left a ruin of fractured basalt. Known to trappers and traders but inaccessible by emigrant wagon, Shoshone Falls remained outside the geography of American science until U.S. Geologist Clarence King took a photographer to Idaho in 1868. King reported “a strange, savage scene: a monotony of pale-blue sky, olive and gray stretches of desert, frowning walls of jetty lava, deep beryl-green of river-stretches, reflecting, here and there, the intense solemnity of the cliffs, and in the centre a dazzling sheet of foam.”

Emigrants turned from the brink as if, said King, “from a frightful glimpse of the Inferno,” but soon the vision had vanished and the stillness of sagebrush reigned. At trail mile 1,327 a willow-matted ravine called Rock Creek provided the first accessible water since the emigrants left Caidron Linn. Here in 1864 outfitter John Bascom built a lava rock stage station on the future Kelton Road. Bascom soon added a general store with a sod-roofed cellar and squarish Old West verandah—now the oldest building in south-central Idaho. Here also was the saloon where a grocery clerk cut down outlaw Bill Dowdle in one of Idaho’s famous shootouts. A nearby cave held the first jail in Twin Falls County until a federal statute made it illegal to keep prisoners underground.

A sugar factory and water treatment plant now flank the Rock Creek Crossing west of Twin Falls. Along a prehistoric trail well used by the buffalo hunters, wagons looped north to the rim of the Snake and, if the salmon were running, one of the journey’s most thrilling views. Here in May or June the Chinook returned by the countless thousands to challenge Kanaka Rapids. And here below thundering springs were dams and dikes of boulders and brush that diverted the leaping salmon through a gauntlet of fishing pools. “Fish rise in such multitudes that the Indians can pierce them with their spears without looking,” said mapmaker Preuss. Shoshone-Paiute journeyed from as far as Oregon and Wyoming to fish for steelhead trout in the spring and Chinook in the early summer. Buffalo hunters rode west from Fort Hall en route to the Camas Prairie. Horseless Northern Paiute descended from the Nevada highlands. Armed with nets, hooks, stone axes, and double-
pronged fishing spears, the natives took mountains of fish. Applegate in 1843 saw among willow huts "something red in color." Scarlet strips of drying fish hung everywhere like laundry on lines.

A thousand springs freshened this trenchlike reach of the Snake, its canyons diked and piled with refuge from the Bonneville Flood. Rifleman Osborne Cross saw in these weeping fissures "a singular freak of nature." Frémont embellished: "A subterranean river bursts out directly from the face of the escarpment, and falls in white foam to the river below." On October 1, 1843, under the curious gaze of "good nature[d]" and "unusually gay savages," Frémont set out in a rubber raft to study the foam at its thundering source. Ten miles upriver from Kanaka Rapids (called "Fishing Falls" in Frémont's journal) was "a picturesque spot of singular beauty." Bursting like broken plumbing in the canyon's northern wall were two crystalline springs that rushed together and fell 160 feet onto rocks whitened by saline. Blue water hugged vertical cliffs like a flowing apron. At 58°F, the blue spring water measured seven degrees warmer than the river's silvery snowmelt. Nearby on a slope dense with cane and poison nettles, the engineer collected shells "of small crustacea" said to be evidence of a freshwater sink in the neighboring highlands. Frémont was essentially right: Crystal Springs, as it came to be called, was snow-fed through a sink of the Lost River in the lava beds north of Fort Hall.

Emigrant impressions were mixed and less scientific. Guidebook author William H. Winter saw Thousand Springs from a distance and imagined "banks of snow resting on the cliffs." Longsworth of Ohio described a most pleasing and sublime spectacle." Jason Lee praised the divine: tumbling springs, icy white, ran with impetuous fury and astonishing splendor down the rugged banks. ... How astonishing are the works of God.

And how astonishing the works of Man at trail mile 1,366 where a dozen squat Indian lodges or "wigwams" resembled a willow grove. The seasonal "village" at Upper Salmon Falls commanded the head of a roaring staircase between two sets of rapids about five miles apart. "The river on this [southwest] side and all the islands are lined with shanties and black with Indians," wrote Theodore Talbot of Missouri, a greenhorn in the Frémont
party. "These Indians," Talbot continued, "speak
the same language as the other Snakes but are far
poorer." Copper-skinned, they were "low in
stature and ill-made." Some wore groundhog skins
with a vest or maybe a shirt bartered from an emi-
grant's wagon. Others were "entirely naked." The
women had "thick crooked legs." The men had
"bad eyes." Preuss called them "miserable" but
"happy" and "harmless." W. H. Winter of Indiana
reported natives "so poor and feeble [in winter]
that they frequently die from actual starvation." In
summer, however, "they [were] fat as penned
pigs, ... the fattest, most depraved, and degraded
creatures anywhere to be found among the dregs
of human nature."

Happy, harmless, isolated, depraved—the
Shoshone at Salmon Falls seemed the Lockean
ideal of natural man untouched by civilization.
Only now are Americans beginning to see how
traumas exported from Europe had preceded the
wagon invasion. How blights such as smallpox
and measles had decimated indigenous peoples.
How northern Shoshone had been displaced by
Blackfoot fleeing the Sioux who had crossed the
Mississippi to escape farmers in Minnesota. How
the catalytic horse, returning to Idaho via Mexico,
had suddenly enriched and empowered societies
such as the Oregon Bannock who now hunted at
the base of the Tetons and pastured in the
Hagerman Valley. How a fad for beaver hats had
forever changed the stream hydrology of the
Shoshone country by eradicating the backwater
pools impounded by beaver dams. Already the
natives of the Middle Snake had been thoroughly
shaken, their cultures remade, by people and
microbes in motion. Stereotypes deceived.
Never, however, were they unconditionally defeated. To reduce their history to “one horror after another endured by the reds at the hands of the whites” would be to slight the leverage of armed resistance, converting the marauding savage to the passive victim in an exchange of stereotypes. To say that “the progress of the white settlers meant the death of the Indians” would be to forget some 9,000 Idaho-Nevada Sho-Ban who remain ethnically independent enough to be counted by the U.S. Census. To flatly declare that “Native Americans were exterminated” would be to deny the Indian the most pervasively human of frontier characteristics—the capacity to cope.

Marauding savage and passive victim once coexisted in the mythology of the road that conquered the West. In 1843, for example, the dour German who traveled with Frémont thought the bounty of Thousand Springs made the natives too complacent for Christ. “Wealth,” wrote Preuss of the Salmon Eaters, “makes them insolent and arrogant, as it does the Sioux.” For George Catlin, however, the lords of the Far West prairie were incapable of insolence. A lawyer-turned-artist who visited the western Shoshone in 1855, Catlin saw behind Indian eyes “a beautiful blank upon which anything could be written.” Indians “had no business hours to attend or professions to learn.” They had “no notes in the bank or other debts to pay—no taxes, no tithes, no rent.” Why, then, should Christian man bother to convert and conquer? Because romantics like Catlin knew all things wild would perish, and also because even an artist could see the Great American Desert was richer than once imagined. Crystal Springs, said an emigrant in 1853, was “large enough to turn machinery.” Thousand Springs, said another, had “mill sites enough for the whole state of Illinois.”

Nowhere were the prisms of misunderstanding more culturally distorted than in the barter for goods and services so vital to the Oregon Trail. Maj. Osborne Cross of the U.S. Regiment of Mounted Riflemen pondered the “degenerate” state of primitive man after trading at Salmon Falls. Why had the Salmon Eaters haggled so doggedly for “an old tin cup, partly without a bottom.” And why were two rifle cartridges worth more than a woolen blan-
Perhaps these people bartered for sport or, said Cross, “simply to gratify their fancy.” Shirts were especially valuable. “Father took the shirt off his back in exchange for a big fish,” Clarence Bagley remembered. Metal fishhooks were another popular item. On August 21, 1851, an emigrant bartered a hook for a monstrous fish “as long as a wagon bed.” It was enough fish “to make us wish never to see any more.” Often the market was glutted. “Dull sale,” Cecilia Adams remarked after Indians tried for a second day to unload a basket of glistening salmon.

Markets pitched and fell in a rudderless commerce without the ballast of a shared legal tradition or a common ethical code. What legality governed ownership and access to prairie resources? Was it stealing to gather wood? To forage and hunt? Indeed it was, said Chief Washakie of the Wind River Shoshone. “This country,” the chief reminded his people, “was once covered with buffalo, elk, deer and antelope, and we had plenty to eat, and also robes for bedding, and to make lodges.” Born in Sacagawea’s village a year before Lewis and Clark arrived, he had come of age on buffalo hunts at the base of the Grand Teton during an era of unprecedented prosperity for Plains Indians suddenly enriched by the horse. “But now,” he protested in 1855, “since the white man has made a road across our land, and has killed off our game, we are hungry. ... Our women and children cry for food and we have no food to give them.” Where the historian Turner lauded that frontier process, Washakie saw devastation: the cattle grazing that crushed edible roots and seeds so vital to Shoshone subsistence, the gold hysteria that stripped forests and pockmarked the hills, releasing mudslides. More ruinous still were the sportsmen and trophy hunters. Twenty-five million buffalo had roamed west of the Mississippi before horses and firearms. In 1883 a museum expedition searched the Plains for a healthy specimen. Less than 200 remained.

Emigrants of good conscience denounced the barbarous slaughter. Should a horse go missing, however, Indians were condemned. In 1851 a pioneer lost a horse, suspected theft, crouched behind a rock where Shoshone were lancing salmon, and shot an Indian dead. Nearby at Rock Creek that same year an emigrant company arrived to find Sho-Ban peacefully
camped. The wagon master blasted a shotgun while his men charged cavalry-style. The next day a war party shot three emigrants, killing one.

Arrogant treatment continued because the risk of retribution was small. Historian John Unruh has shown that the danger of Indian ambush has been greatly exaggerated, that more Indians than whites died in these confrontations, and that red-on-white violence accounted for less than four percent of emigrant deaths. Murder, indeed, was rare, but raids on livestock were common near Salmon Falls. Historian Donald Shannon's chronology of "Snake country massacres" shows nineteen attacks on emigrant trains before 1863. Ten erupted within one hundred miles of the Devil's Backbone. Idaho, moreover, was the killing ground of the trail's most sensational carnage. Of the very few "non-mythical trail tragedies" large enough to make Unruh's selective list of "real massacres," the two most horrific involved Shoshone-Paiute who allegedly fished and pastured in the Hagerman Valley. Said Col. George Wright, the Oregon District commander at Fort Vancouver, "those [Indians] who are more hostile are near Salmon Falls."

Horse trading gone bad may have been the spark that ignited the first confrontation lopsided enough to deserve Snake Country "massacre" status. On August 19, 1854, about thirty miles north of the Devil's Backbone where Goodale's cutoff dissected the Camas Prairie, eleven Sho-Ban approached a wagon train, demanded horses, and opened fire. Three emigrants died. Survivors said the attackers
were "Winnestah Snakes" (mounted Shoshone) from Salmon Falls. Historians speculate that the attack was connected to an altercation of the previous day in which wagon master Alexander Ward of Lexington, Missouri, had tracked horses to a Sho-Ban camp near the future city of Boise. Ward and his men retrieved the horses, presumably at gunpoint. By midday on August 20, a war party of thirty or more had overtaken Ward as his five-wagon detachment crossed the Boise Valley near the future farm town of Middleton. A warrior jumped on a horse. Guns blazed.

Thirty Indians charged. Two days later the rescuers found among blackened wagons the widely scattered remains of nineteen pioneers. The wife of the wagon master had been ravaged with a hot poker. Three children were missing and another three, a newsman reported, "had doubtless been burnt alive, and the mother forced to witness it." Outraged editorialists called for an "everlasting treaty" of genocidal retribution. Sixty-five federal troops arrived the following spring, corralled about 200 Indians, tried and convicted four, shot one, and at nightfall on July 18, 1855, noosed the remaining three to a gallows at the massacre site. Soldiers cut down the bodies at daybreak. The gallows, however, remained.

Idaho's second "massacre" began in late August 1860 when a one-eyed white man and two Indian companions tracked a forty-four-emigrant train from Rock Creek to Salmon Falls. Wagon master Elijah Utter (or "Otter" as historians have misspelled it) suspected the rough-looking three were spies. "We bought some dried salmon of them and hurried away," said Emeline Trimble, the daughter of Utter's new wife. Age 13 in 1860, she had already lost her father to typhoid fever and the middle finger of her left hand to an accident with an axe. While riding in her stepfather's wagon, she had also lost part of an eye to a flying nail, but she was observant: the white man, apparently the leader, had a torn white hat, a thick stubble on his upper lip, and long hair pulled over his bad eye. His face was brown with war paint. One night the sinister trio "came to our wagon and pretended to be glad to see us." The pioneers consulted and "thought the safest way would be to kill them, but [we] hardly dared do so for fear of being found out by the Indians." Instead the wagon train fled via the Devil's Backbone. Seven days later, again with an axe, Trimble would fend off the one-eyed man and other attackers, escaping through the cover of sagebrush. "I often wish we had done as our better judgement had told us and killed them," wrote Trimble in Left by the Indians, her account of the gruesome event.
The attack began Hollywood style. About 10 A.M. on September 9, 1860, at mile 1,450 on the South Alternate Route in the slabbed and terraced barrens of future Owyhee County, an Indian horseman in breechcloth and feathered headdress led one hundred braves against eight encircled wagons. Arrows tore canvas. Bullets and firebrands rained intermittently for thirty hours as emigrants dug in behind a breastwork of trail supplies. Charles Utter of Wisconsin, a towheaded lad of twelve or thirteen and an excellent marksman, killed five charging attackers as fast as he could reload. The wagon circle held until an hour before dusk on the second day when four of the defenders—all ex-soldiers who had fallen in with the Utters, promising protection for food—galloped toward the western mountains with emigrant horses and guns. Twenty overlanders and perhaps thirty Indians died or were mortally wounded in two days of withering combat. Three of the four deserters later fell in a mountain ambush. Eighteen pioneers escaped.

Col. Wright's 1860 report from the Oregon Country had already boasted "complete success in the protection of the immigration route." Now Wright thought he was fighting a phantom. "We have no fixed objective," Wright wrote on October 11, 1860. "We pursue an invisible foe, without a home or anything tangible to strike at." The best the army could do was dispatch a one-hundred-troops relief force from Walla Walla. Second Lt. Marcus A. Reno—later martyred with General George Armstrong Custer at Little Bighorn—led forty dragoons to Farewell Bend near Huntington, Oregon, where the young officer discovered six of the eighteen who had escaped five weeks before. Reno found them "gleaming in the moonlight, dead, stripped, and mutilated." Closer to the original massacre site were twelve others who had survived mostly on moss and the flesh of four dead emigrant children. Frostbitten and muttering blankly after forty-five days of exposure, the living were "raving mad."

The Salmon Falls Massacre (so named in 1860 by survivor Joseph Myers; also called the Sinker Creek Massacre and the Otter-Van Orman Massacre) erupted six days and seventy-nine trail miles west of the Devil's Backbone in a desert too remote for a more accurate place-name. Twenty-two months elapsed before Abraham Lincoln's army could properly
search for the marauders and the four children allegedly kidnapped. At last in August 1862, the First Oregon Cavalry reached what Lt. Col. Rueben F. Maury called "the principal haunt of the Snake Indians." Here at Salmon Falls, according to an army informant, a council of chiefs had recently divided over whether or not to make war on emigrant trains. But the Oregonians found no war council, only an encampment of impoverished natives too "miserable" to attack. Searching from Bruneau Canyon to Twin Falls in the summer of 1863, the cavalry "collected" about forty Shoshone who "had no arms and a very small number of Indian ponies," and who "expressed great desire for peace and a willingness to do anything or go anywhere they might be directed." Maury insisted that "something should be done" with these fishing people lest they be "punished for the depredations of the roaming and more enterprising bands."

An American soldier of another sort was meanwhile too impatient for distinctions among Indian cultures and types. "Leave their bodies thus exposed as an example of what evildoers might expect," said Col. Patrick E. Connor of the California Volunteers. "You [the troops] will also destroy every male Indian who you may encounter. ... I desire that the order may be rigidly enforced." Shooting Shoshone on sight as his army marched eastward from Sacramento to Camp Douglas above Salt Lake City, Connor spoiled for combat. It came on the subzero morning of January 29, 1863, at Battle Creek off the Bear River north of Franklin, Idaho. Connor allegedly yelled "Kill everything—nits make lice" as 300 volunteers with two howitzers opened fire on a seventy-tepee encampment. Four hours of methodical fire killed an estimated 368 Shoshone, including perhaps ninety women and children. Twenty-two soldiers died.

It was the bloodiest slaughter of Indians on record in the history of the American West. With a body count more than double the Sioux dead at Wounded Knee (146) or the Cheyenne dead at Sand Creek (130), the Battle of Bear River remains all the more tragic because its tale is rarely told. In the 1974 edition of Westward Expansion, a standard college-level textbook, famed historian Ray Allen Billington reduced the Shoshone resistance to a single, inaccurate sentence: "[In 1868] Shoshoni and Bannock tribes ceded their lands in return for annuities and two small reservations." More recently, Jon E. Lewis's Mammoth Book of the West finds space for Buffalo Bill's funeral and outlaw Butch Cassidy's escape to South America but none for the army's final solution to attacks on the
Oregon Trail. Perhaps Idaho remains too remote for the publishers of history textbooks. Or perhaps Idahoans prefer the brevity of William Ghent's account in *Road to Oregon*: "The weather was bitterly cold and [Colonel Connor's] men suffered greatly. ... [Connor] attacked the Indian camp on Bear River, near the present Franklin, Idaho, killing most of three hundred warriors and capturing 160 women and children. For this feat, which brought peace, cleared the Trail, and opened to settlement a region that had been harassed for fifteen years, Connor was made a brigadier general of volunteers."

Alas the hapless savage. Peace and progress required a crushing defeat—or so Ghent contended in 1929. A poem published in Boise the following year bled for the “brave pioneers” who “suffered woe to bring the frontier westward ho.” The poet continued:

They braved dangers ever near,
In early days of Idaho.
Ah, who can say they did not fear—
In Idaho, our Idaho—
To meet the dusky, hidden foe,
With poison dart and trusted bow,
Whose purpose was to lay them low,
In Idaho, our Idaho?

Poison darts? So fogged was the road to empire that historians ignored the Shoshone resistance until the United States Army was again chasing a hidden foe through the jungles of Vietnam. Not until the late 1960s and 1970s did historians such as Merle Wells and Brigham Madsen begin to understand that the killing of Shoshone noncombatants accomplished about as much as the carpet bombing of Hanoi: it infuriated the enemy, redoubling the will to resist.
"Instead of cowing the Northwestern Shoshoni," wrote Madsen, "there is overwhelming evidence that the reverse happened." In 1863, for example, a twenty-warrior attack near the boom town of Bannock City (future Idaho City) killed the gold miner who discovered the mother lode, George Grimes. Michael Jordan, the prospector who found gold in the Owyhees, met the same brutal fate. The emigrant road from Rock Creek Station to the ferry at Salmon Falls became a target of Sho-Ban resistance, frequently raided for livestock. In 1865 a battle near Rock Creek suspended stage service and left three Indians dead.

Violence trapped the Salmon Eaters like wayfarers battered by storm. More than 400 Shoshone from various places spent the bitter winter of 1867–68 under armed guard at a refugee camp near Boise. But no trail of tears forced the refugees to abandon ancestral homelands. When the army in 1869 attempted to caravan the refugees to the new Fort Hall Shoshone-Bannock Indian Reservation, most dispersed into trackless canyons. When again in 1877 the U.S. Indian Bureau used "every possible means" to entice "homeless" nomads to a second Sho-Ban reservation at Duck Valley in the Owyhee highlands, two-thirds refused to go. Some returned to the Hagerman Valley under the protection of friendly whites. For decades they ranched, sold baskets, worked the ferries, fished the seasonal salmon, camped along the river, and learned the ways of the whites without forsaking all tradition. When Swan Falls Dam opened without fish ladders in 1902, they subsisted on suckers and trout.

"The Shoshone had little to lose," wrote anthropologist Peter Farb in an essay that tried to explain why horseless nomads were spared the wrenching dislocation experienced by other Indian groups. For centuries they had purposefully migrated from resource to resource without trade goods or military escort or even the pretense of sole ownership to any particular place. Warfare reduced the Shoshone-Paute to the bare minimum of human existence—a familiar state. Acculturating without assimilating, the fishing people of the Middle Snake acknowledged the emigrant's world without forsaking native religion or language and without conceding defeat. Thus they weathered the Oregon Trail in much the same way their ancestors had braved the trauma of smallpox or the ecological ravage of lava flows and floods. They coped with the catastrophic, adapting to survive.

"Stand at the Cumberland Gap," said Frederick Jackson Turner, "and watch the procession of civilization, marching single file—the buffalo following the trail to the salt springs, the Indian, the fur-trader and hunter, the cattle-raiser, the pioneer farmer—and the frontier has passed by." Turner continued: "Stand at the South Pass in the Rockies a century later and see the same procession with wider intervals between." Stand at Hagerman and deconstruct that linear progress. See not one society consuming another but strata upon strata of human experience, not a process remaking a nation but a homeland, an actual place.

Stand where Applegate stood and see the historical importance of a ridge more famously known for fossils of megafauna. Much has changed. An Idaho Power Company dam
has silenced Salmon Falls, reducing Class III rapids to an annual generating capacity of 60,000 kilowatts. Likewise the fury that so astonished John C. Frémont and Clarence King at Shoshone Falls and Thousand Springs can today best be appreciated by flicking a light switch in Salt Lake City or Seattle. But the mystery of the steppe and remains atop the Devil’s Backbone where sandy soil preserves a metallic record of rings, rings, pins, chains, and square nails of the sort that partially blinded farm girl Emeline Trimble. The Hagerman Fossil Beds National Monument is one of only three park service sites with Oregon Trail remnants. Largely undeveloped and undiscovered by vandals, the torturous grade preserves in its graveyard of broken hardware a maze of trails and cutoffs. Some are straight and rutted with hardship enough to support the well-worn mythology of the West as America’s triumph. “The blazing of the Old Oregon Trail will stand forever as one of the greatest achievements of man,” said Boise’s Capital News as moviegoers packed the Egyptian Theater to watch John Wayne kill Indians for civilization in the 1930 release of The Big Trail. Other trails, however, resemble the historical record: faint and distorted, a progression thoroughly twisted by what Americans choose to forget.

“How did the United States get title to Shoshone territory?” asks Raymond Yowell of Elko, Nevada. Black hat, silver hair, a U.S. Air Force veteran who heads the Western Shoshone National Council on the Duck Valley Reservation, he fights the government still. “If you say we’ve been conquered, show us where the battle took place. Show us the terms of surrender and show us the signatures of the Shoshone chiefs who signed the papers.”

Yowell is right historically speaking. And wrong. No juggernaut rolled in from the East to smash his civilization. In the battle for historical understanding, however, the Sho-Ban’s defeat was a rout. So completely was history conquered that Americans cheered when President Herbert Hoover lopped thirteen years off a century to make 1930 the official “centennial” of the 1843 Oregon Trail. Boiseans celebrated on June 12, 1930, with a day of horseshoes and baseball. At dusk the festivities closed with what the souvenir program called “an exact historical reproduction of an emigrant train being attacked by Indians and their timely rescue by a troop of United States Cavalry uniformed in authentic military style of 1860.” Whooping savages fled before soldiers on polo ponies. The phantom had been vanquished at last.
The Devil's Backbone