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Route for the Overland Stage

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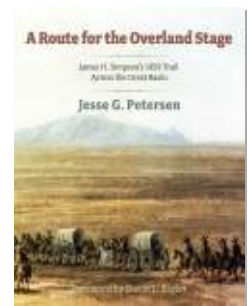
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Foreword by David L. Bigler

AT THE END of the Utah War in June 1858, General Albert S. Johnston selected Cedar Valley to establish a military post for some twenty-four hundred officers and men of the US Army's Utah Expedition. The location west of Utah Lake at present Fairfield, Utah, met the immediate needs of his command for grass for its animals and remoteness from population centers to avoid clashes between his soldiers and settlers of the territory ruled by Brigham Young.

At the same time, Johnston knew that the location for his new post, named Camp Floyd, was less than ideal when it came to its mission to support enforcement of federal law in the defiant territory. For one thing, it was some forty miles from the capital at Salt Lake City. For another, the same geographical formations that had allowed the territorial militia to block his advance the year before and force him to spend the winter of 1857–58 at Fort Bridger made his force vulnerable in the event of renewed hostilities. The winding Echo Canyon corridor through the Wasatch Mountains ruled his line of communications on the east. And the way to northern California from Camp Floyd led through Salt Lake Valley and around the north end of Great Salt Lake, two hundred miles out of the way.

To make his army effective in relation to its duties, Johnston had to open a supply line on the east that bypassed the Mormon Trail from Fort Bridger and the easily fortified Echo Canyon portal to Salt Lake Valley. In addition, he needed to make a wagon road to northern California that eliminated the northern loop around the Great Salt Lake. Instead, it should run due west from Camp Floyd on the south side of that briny body to meet the California Trail near Genoa in today's western Nevada.

Johnston had the right man to fill these requisites in Captain James H. Simpson of the US Army's elite Corps of Topographical Engineers, who arrived

at Camp Floyd in July 1858. The forty-five-year-old engineer first surveyed a new line of supply to the east that ran up Provo Canyon to Parleys Park and down the Weber River to present Coalville. From there, it continued up Chalk Creek to bypass Echo Canyon on the south. During the 1857 conflict, Utah Militia General Hiram B. Clawson had inspected this avenue to find out if it offered a way for the US Army to flank Echo Canyon defenses. He reported that it did not, without extensive roadwork.

Also that fall, a preliminary reconnaissance of the proposed route west motivated the energetic engineer to expand the wagon road survey to Genoa. With the approval of Secretary of War John B. Floyd and Johnston, Simpson set his sights on a vast area of the American West from which no water flows to any ocean. He planned to conduct the first recorded exploration directly across the heart of the Great Basin, a region large enough to encompass New England, New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio.

In width, the area of high-altitude desert and north-south running mountain ranges extends from central Utah's Wasatch Range to the crest of the Sierra Nevada. From north to south, it stretches more than eight hundred miles from Oregon to the Baja Peninsula in Mexico. In between, its triangular-shaped rim encloses most of Nevada and parts of Utah, California, Idaho, and Oregon. As a region of interior drainage, its waters flow into briny bodies, such as the Great Salt Lake and Pyramid Lake, and desert flats, never into the sea. Its longest perennial rivers are the Bear, which flows into Great Salt Lake, and the Humboldt, followed by the California Trail and today's Interstate 80.

On May 2, 1859, the topographical engineer headed into this virtually unknown region "to explore the country between [Camp Floyd] and Carson River, at the east foot of the Sierra Nevada,

for a new and direct route to California.” The sixty-four members of his expedition included an artist, geologist, wheelwright, blacksmith, teamsters, twenty soldiers, twelve six-mule wagons, scientific apparatus, and one of Nevada’s first citizens. In 1851, John Reese had purchased Genoa, the state’s earliest settlement, when it was still a trading post named Mormon Station on the Carson Trail’s Carson River route. Now he served, but not always to the captain’s satisfaction, as Simpson’s guide.

Over the next three months, Simpson traveled over eleven hundred miles across part of central Utah and virtually all of Nevada. His westbound exploration covered 564 miles to Genoa, while his more southern return route to Camp Floyd added only eight more to this number. Either way would shorten travel from Salt Lake City to Genoa along the Humboldt River by more than two hundred miles. His report also estimated the cost to open a wagon road and included the geology, plant and animal life, and Native American tribes of the Great Basin, among other things.

As Simpson was the right one to complete this significant study and report, Jesse G. Petersen of Tooele, Utah, has proved the right man to locate his trails and evaluate his major contribution to western expansion. Since 1999, the retired police chief of Tooele, Utah, has traveled some thirty thousand miles by SUV and an estimated two hundred eighty miles on foot. In his personalized narrative and seventy-two maps he describes his search and pinpoints Simpson’s routes and campsites to within a few yards.

Petersen brings to his book a lifelong interest in history and overland avenues of travel and transportation. A charter member of the Lincoln Highway Association’s Utah Chapter, in 1997 he produced the first study of the first transcontinental highway across the state, *The Lincoln Highway in Utah*, now in its fourth edition. In 2003, he and Gregory M. Franzwa co-authored *Lincoln Highway: Utah*. When he heard it said that the coast-to-coast thoroughfare followed Simpson’s path across the Great Basin, he looked into it and found there was little information on the topographical engineer’s exact routes to back up that claim. Typically, Petersen decided to find out for himself.

The product of his search manifests his character and background on every page. The quality of his scholarship reflects his degrees from Brigham Young University and the University of Utah. His experience in law enforcement can be seen in his dedication to accuracy and attention to evidence on the ground. His narrative is richly detailed, and incorporates interesting and accurate information on the region’s history as it goes along. His writing is clear, straightforward, and trustworthy. His work makes it possible for a novice to go with Simpson across what has been called the loneliest region in America without losing the trail more than a stone’s throw on either side.

In normal times, Simpson’s expedition would have won the acclaim Americans normally bestowed on western explorers, such as John C. Frémont, but as he prepared his detailed report, the nation was torn by the Civil War. General Johnston, who ordered the exploration, lost his life leading a Confederate army in 1862. Not until 1876 did the War Department carry out his instructions while he was serving as Utah Department commander, and order the publication of Simpson’s report.

Meanwhile, if Washington looked the other way for over ten years, Simpson’s exploit won the immediate attention of the nation’s emigrants and entrepreneurs. Within a year, westering American families had worn a new wagon road across the central basin. In 1860, trim young men aboard fast horses began to carry mail between Sacramento and St. Joseph, Missouri, on Simpson’s route across the vast expanses of the Great Basin. The short-lived Pony Express was followed by the Pacific telegraph, Overland Stage, Lincoln Highway, and US 50, known today as “the loneliest highway in America.” All followed the corridor Simpson opened in 1859.

As further recognition of James Hervey Simpson’s contribution to the history of the Great Basin and western exploration, Jesse Petersen’s volume makes an excellent companion to the topographical engineer’s report, which was reprinted in 1983 as *Report of Explorations Across The Great Basin In 1859*, with a foreword by Steven D. Zink.