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## Route for the Overland Stage

Jesse G. Petersen

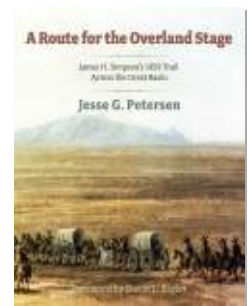
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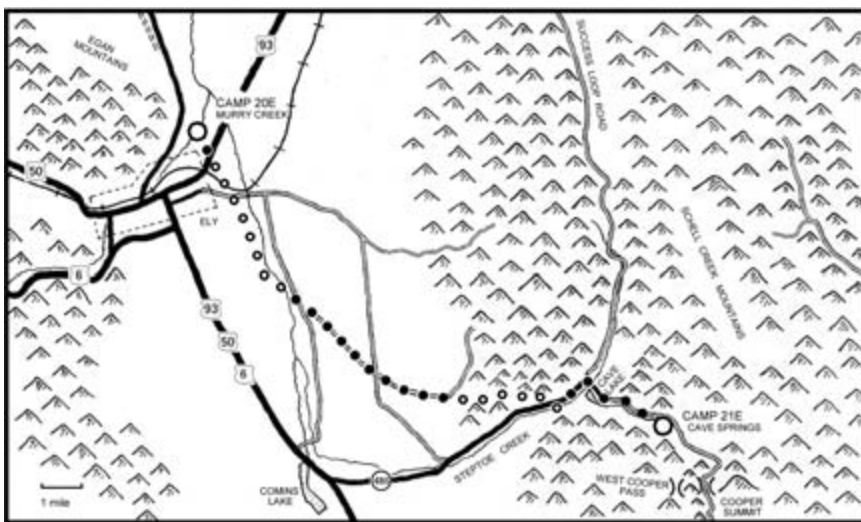
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Nine

# Steptoe Valley to Swasey Mountain



Camp 20-E. The Sixth Hole of the White Pine County Golf Course now occupies the campsite. The old channel of Murry Creek is just beyond the trees, but the stream is now diverted before it reaches this point.  
*“Encamp on a noble creek, which I call after Lt. Alexander Murry, the energetic officer in command of my party.”*



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JULY 18, 1859

JULY 18, CAMP NO. 20, MURRY'S CREEK, STEPTOE VALLEY.—*Moved at 20 minutes after 5; course, southeastwardly, across Steptoe Valley. Two miles and eight-tenths from camp get into and follow a wagon-road, which, an Indian who lives in this valley says, was made by the Mormons in the spring of last year.*<sup>1</sup>

AS MENTIONED PREVIOUSLY, Simpson had first heard about this wagon road just two months earlier, when the expedition was still west-bound, and was camped in the northern end of Butte Valley. Lot Huntington, the Chorpensing agent, told him that the trail had been made by a group of emigrants from the town of Fillmore, who were on their way to California.<sup>2</sup> At that time, Simpson may have been somewhat skeptical about its actual existence, but now he was seeing it for himself. He was very interested in the origin of this road, and he wanted to know what it was doing in a part of the country that the army still regarded as unexplored territory. Simpson seems to have discounted some parts of Huntington's story after talking with the Indian who lived here in the lower part of Steptoe Valley. This unidentified Indian told Simpson that a group of Mormons had made the road just a little more than a year earlier, and that there had been about fifty wagons that had traveled northward through this area. After continuing up the valley a few miles, they turned back and returned to the Mormon settlements. Simpson's conclusion was that this wagon train was probably made up of Mormons who were fleeing from the approach of the Utah Expedition. This was a fairly good guess, although the party that made the trail was not actually fleeing. It was a scouting party, looking for a place where other Mormons could find refuge if it became necessary for survival. Shortly after his return to Camp Floyd, Simpson received information that confirmed his conclusion. He also learned that he was very well acquainted with one of the group's leaders.

On August 10, a week after getting back to Camp Floyd, Simpson had an opportunity to talk to George Washington Bean, who had been his guide during his October reconnaissance trip. Bean told Simpson that he had been a member of a group that Brigham Young had sent to explore

the area west of Fillmore during the early part of 1858. The purpose of this exploration was to find a place that could be used as a refuge if the residents of Salt Lake City should be forced to flee from the city.<sup>3</sup>

A thorough account of the exploration that Bean had been involved in can be found in Clifford L. Stott's *Search For Sanctuary; Brigham Young and the White Mountain Expedition*. Bean and a group of about twenty men left Fillmore and headed west across the Sevier Desert. Somewhere near the present Utah-Nevada border, the group split into two smaller groups. Bean's contingent headed south. The other group, led by Orson B. Adams, turned northwest, crossing Sacramento Pass and the Schell Creek Mountains. In Steptoe Valley, they turned to the north and passed the site of present-day Ely, which is where Simpson picked up their trail. Some distance north of Ely, probably near Duck Creek, Adams's party turned around and headed back to the south, retracing their trail to the mouth of Steptoe Canyon, then continuing south for another forty miles to Cave Valley, where they rejoined Bean's party of explorers.<sup>4</sup>

Stott's account of this exploration is well researched and well written, and it solves the mystery of the Mormon road, but he did get one important fact wrong. The paragraph below shows that Stott was under the mistaken impression that Bean was traveling with Simpson in 1859.

*Indeed, Capt. James H. Simpson, the army engineer who explored the Great Basin in 1859 in search of a wagon route to Carson Valley, could not, at first, account for a portion of the White Mountain trail he discovered in Steptoe Valley. Ironically, Simpson had hired George W. Bean to guide him, and although Bean was leading the engineers over a segment of his own trail from the previous year, Bean told the captain nothing about its origin until after their return to the settlements, allowing Simpson to believe a story concocted by a Mormon mail agent in Ruby Valley that the trail had been forged by a California-bound emigrant train which had not been heard from since leaving Fillmore. Until he was enlightened by an Indian in Steptoe Valley who had witnessed the White Mountain Expedition, and Bean later confirmed*

*the story after their return, Simpson was as ignorant as was the rest of the world concerning the Mormons' efforts to explore the Great Basin's interior in 1858. Bean's lack of candor with Simpson and the mail agent's outright falsehood is clear evidence of the covert nature of the expedition.*<sup>5</sup>

This clearly indicates Stott's mistaken belief that Bean was with the expedition as it traveled the Mormon road in July of 1859. And he suggests that Bean was consciously withholding information about it from Simpson. The facts are, however, that although Bean had been with Simpson in October of 1858, he was not with the 1859 expedition, and therefore could not have been with Simpson when he was attempting to figure out the origin of the Mormon road. On the other hand, the mail agent that Stott refers to was Lot Huntington, who probably did attempt to mislead Simpson about the identity of the travelers.

As will be seen, Simpson's expedition followed the trail made by the White Mountain Expedition all the way from Ely to the eastern base of the House Mountains.

*About a mile from where we struck the Mormon road, we cross a fine creek [Steptoe Creek] which I call after Capt. Carter L. Stevenson, of the Fifth Regiment of Infantry. This stream comes from the Un-go-we-ah [Schell Creek] range, and after getting into Steptoe Valley, runs northwardly in it for 3 or 4 miles below where we crossed it and sinks.... After crossing Stevenson Creek we left the Mormon road (which goes around by the way of the mouth of the cañon, through which the creek flows,) and cut across some short and rather steep hills, crossing the river again 7.5 miles from last crossing, up in the cañon, and joining again and following the Mormon road up the cañon from this point.*<sup>6</sup>

It appears that the Mormon road remained fairly close to the stream all the way into the canyon, while the expedition took a shortcut across the southeastern part of the valley and through the foothills of the Schell Creek Mountains. Because of this shortcut, Simpson failed to discover that there was another branch of the Mormon road that continued in a southerly

direction past the mouth of Steptoe Canyon. This branch was the route that Adams and his group of Mormon explorers had followed to the White Mountain area where they rejoined the group that was being led by Bean.

MAY 2002

Nancy and I made our way into the area to the east of Steptoe Creek, and attempted to find the route that the expedition followed across the "short and rather steep hills." A short distance from the crossing, we located an old road that seemed to be heading in the right direction. Following this seldom-used two-track in a southeasterly direction for about three miles, we came to an area that is crisscrossed by a veritable maze of old mining roads. I was satisfied that we had located the expedition's route from the creek to the mining area, but its trail through the mining area eluded me during this trip.

JULY 2004

After spending more time studying maps and aerial photos, we made another trip to the mining area and Steptoe Canyon. This time we were able to work our way through the mining area and down a shallow canyon to where the creek flows through Steptoe Canyon. But I still did not feel that I had the route exactly right, because it was reaching the stream too soon. According to Simpson's mileage figures, they reached the creek after traveling seven and a half miles from where they had first crossed it near Ely. The route that I had traveled came to the creek at six and a half miles.

After returning home, I spent some more time studying the maps and aerial photographs of this area, and found what appeared to be a more likely route between the mining area and the stream. On the photos, I was able to make out a faint trace of a trail that crossed another ridge before dropping down to the creek at the correct distance. If this was their route, it would mean that the expedition had skirted the northern edge of the mining area, had crossed two low ridges, and then dropped down to today's paved road near what is now a developed camping area. It was also evident that this section of the route would not be drivable.



The arch in the ridge above Cave Creek. *“On right side of cañon, high up, I noticed a very pretty arch, through which I could see the blue sky.”*

#### AUGUST 2005

Returning to the mining area once again, I parked the SUV and hiked eastward through the low hills until I reached the campground. During this hike, I found abandoned trails all through this area, and it does not appear to me that this route would have presented any serious difficulties for the wagons. I was finally confident that I had located and traveled the correct trail through the hills between the mining area and the creek.

*The stream at this last crossing was so miry as to make it necessary to take the teams over by hand. In one-half mile we crossed it twice again.... This cañon discovers some splendid rocks of the most massive character, some of them being isolated and looking like castles. In one instance, on right side of cañon, high up, I noticed a very pretty arch, through which I could see the blue sky.... A mile and a quarter from where we last struck Stevenson's Creek, we again leave it and take up a branch ravine, which we follow for 2*

*miles, and encamp at a fine spring, the source of the branch, among good luxuriant grass and timber.... Journey 14.5 miles.<sup>7</sup>*

Today the Cave Lake Recreation Area, which includes a small man-made lake, occupies the mouth of the branch ravine. The pretty arch that Simpson mentioned is very easy to see on the skyline as you drive south from the lake.

Simpson did not mention it, but at the base of the ridge below the arch there is a large cave, presumably the source of the names Cave Springs, Cave Creek, and Cave Lake. The expedition made camp in the area just below Cave Springs.

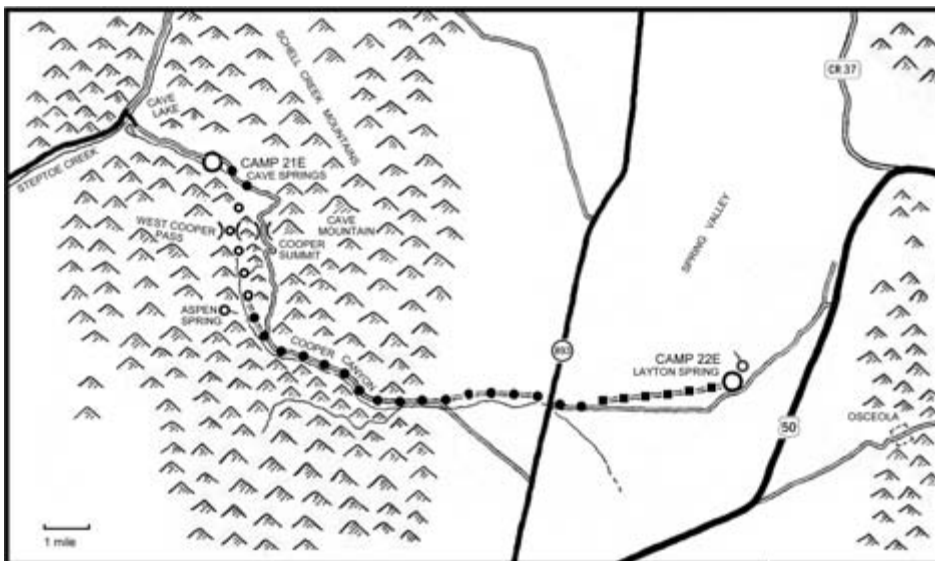
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JULY 19, 1859

JULY 19, CAMP NO. 21, STEVENSON'S CAÑON, UN-GO-WE-AH RANGE.—*Sent out guide-party early this morning, with particular instructions to send back a man daily to inform me of the country ahead. We are approaching, doubtless, the most*



Camp 21-E. Cave Springs, near the southern end of the Schell Creek Mountains. *“We take up a branch ravine, which we follow for 2 miles, and encamp at a fine spring, the source of the branch, among good luxuriant grass and timber.”*



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JULY 19, 1859



*difficult portion of our route, and I feel anxious that there shall be no faux pas. The party goes out with ten days' provisions, and, besides the usual persons (Reese, Stevenson, and Lambert), I have ordered three soldiers to accompany them. Pete also accompanies them for a distance, and then is to push on with all dispatch with my report to General Johnston, at Camp Floyd.*<sup>8</sup>

AT THIS POINT, Simpson did not provide an explanation of why he felt that the next part would be the most difficult part of the journey. He knew, of course, that except for the mysterious wagon road, this territory was essentially unexplored, and what little was known about it indicated that there would be several mountain ranges to cross, and that there were serious questions about the availability of water. He was attempting to leave nothing to chance, but as it turned out, the guides did not follow his instructions very well, and a few days later the party did become involved in what Simpson felt was a serious *faux pas*.

*Main party moved at 5.45. Course eastwardly up branch of Stevenson's Cañon, 1.7 miles to summit of Un-go-we-ah or Pine range [Schell Creek Mountains], and thence down a cañon [Cooper Canyon] I call after Capt. Henry Little, Seventh Infantry, 7.4 miles to its debouchment into Antelope Valley.*<sup>9</sup>

The most prominent peak in this part of the Schell Creek Range is Cave Mountain, which is located to the southeast from Cave Springs. A slightly lower peak, known as Cooper Summit, lies about a mile and a quarter to the west of Cave Mountain. A fairly well-used mountain road crosses the ridge at the western base of Cooper Summit, and since I have been unable to find an official name for this spot, I call it Cooper Pass. The mountain road continues south from Cooper Pass, then drops down the eastern slope of the Schell Creek Range through Cooper Canyon. Just west of Cooper Pass is another, but much lower and apparently unnamed peak, and then another pass. And because I have been unable to find a name for this second pass, I have decided to refer to it as West Cooper Pass. West

Cooper Pass is seven tenths of a mile due west from Cooper Pass and today's road.

JULY 1999

As the last leg of my first major trip on Simpson's route, I drove up Steptoe Canyon, over Cooper Pass, and down the east side of the Schell Creek Mountains. At that time, I was assuming that the expedition's route followed today's road. Later, after additional study of Simpson's map and the distances given in his text and the table of distances, I became convinced that the expedition did not follow today's road across Cooper Pass. It is my conclusion that the expedition and the Mormon road crossed the mountain by going across West Cooper Pass.

The most significant factor involved in reaching this conclusion is Simpson's figure of 1.7 miles for the distance between the campsite at Cave Springs and the summit of the pass. According to my measurements, it is 2.4 miles from Cave Springs to Cooper Pass, but from Cave Springs to West Cooper Pass it is almost exactly 1.7 miles. If this was the only factor involved, I would be tempted to pass it off as simply another mileage error, but there are some other persuasive arguments, one of which is the altitude of the two passes. Simpson listed the altitude at the summit he crossed as 8,140 feet above sea level. My GPS receiver gave me altitude readings of 8,680 at Cooper Pass, and 8,280 at West Cooper Pass. It must be kept in mind that Simpson's altitude readings were never exactly right, but the difference of 540 feet between Simpson's reading and the elevation at Cooper Pass is well beyond his average range of error. On the other hand, the difference between Simpson's reading and the elevation at West Cooper Pass is only 140 feet, which is within the normal range of Simpson's errors.

Simpson also mentioned that one of the men, a Sergeant Barr, who must have been doing a little scouting, ran across a couple of springs after crossing the summit.

*A spring and fine grass are reported by Sergeant Barr, 1.5 miles down the cañon and a quarter of a mile to right, in a branch cañon, and another spring about 3 miles down the cañon to the right, also in a branch cañon.*<sup>10</sup>

Maps of this area show springs that could fit this description. If you begin at West Cooper Pass and head south for a mile and a half, then turn to the right and go up a shallow side canyon, in just a little less than a half mile you will come to Aspen Spring. This fits very well with Sergeant Barr's description of the first spring. On the other hand, at 1.5 miles south of Cooper Pass, there is no branch canyon and no spring. At three miles from the summit, Sergeant Barr's second spring would have been in the Cooper Meadows area, which is reached after the two routes come back together, so its location has no bearing on which of the two possible routes is the correct one.

#### JULY 2003

Today there is no road across West Cooper Pass, and I calculated that the roundtrip hike would be about five miles, but I had no clue as to how steep or rugged the trail might prove to be. After staying overnight in Ely, I drove to the Cave Spring area, reaching it just as the sun was coming up. Leaving the road at a point about a half mile south of the springs, I began hiking up the shallow side canyon that leads to West Cooper Pass. It was immediately apparent that the first quarter-mile of this small canyon would have been impassable for wagons. In addition to being very steep, the bottom of the canyon is simply too narrow and choked with boulders for the wagons to have gotten through it. This was not an auspicious beginning. However, after looking around a little more, I noticed that the ridge on the eastern side of the canyon might have offered another possibility. It appeared to me that by utilizing one or two switchbacks, it might have been possible for the wagons to bypass the mouth of the canyon. By leaving today's road at some point a short distance to the south of the mouth of the canyon, the trail could have climbed up the eastern side of the ridge that forms the eastern side of the canyon, and then dropped into the canyon somewhere above the problem area. Later in the day, as I was returning to my vehicle, I followed the top of this ridge, and it looked to me as if it would have been possible for the wagons to have followed such a route. It may not have been easy, but I think it could have been done.

After passing the problem area, I continued up the canyon and soon found myself on a trail that has the appearance of having been made by wheeled vehicles. Although they were extremely faint, I could make out two parallel tracks that were the correct distance apart for wagon tracks. This trail begins to show up at about a half mile from the mouth of the canyon, and continues for about a mile, with the tracks being most evident in the area of the summit of the pass. At about three-quarters of a mile beyond the summit they start getting faint, and then fade out entirely.

After crossing the summit of the pass, I continued down the south slope of the mountain for another mile, and came to the upper end of a jeep trail. At that point, I turned around, retraced my steps back over the summit, and returned to my SUV. I then drove over Cooper Pass and dropped down the south slope of the mountain until I came to where the jeep trail I had encountered during my hike leaves the main road. Turning onto this trail, I followed it for about a mile to its upper end, where I had first encountered it. I had now traveled the entire route across West Cooper Pass, and I was convinced that it would have been a practical route for the wagons. I am quite certain that the White Mountain explorers and the Simpson expedition used West Cooper Pass to surmount the Schell Creek Range.

A couple of years after this hike, I came across another item that seems to support the idea of the West Cooper Pass route. On August 17, 1859, just a month after the Simpson expedition had crossed the Schell Creek Mountains, emigrant Charles Tuttle made the following entry in his journal:

*Wednesday Aug 17. We came today about 23 miles and encamped in about a mile of the summit of Ungo-we-ah or Pine Range.... The road to day has been very good considering the newness of it.<sup>11</sup>*

Since these were the names that Simpson used for the Schell Creek Mountains, it is clear that Tuttle was relying on information that came from Simpson. A couple of days after returning to Camp Floyd, Simpson gave a written itinerary of his return trail to a small group of emigrants,





Wheeler Peak, which Simpson called Union Peak, from Cooper Canyon on the eastern slope of the Schell Creek Range. *“As you descend Little’s Cañon, the Go-shoot, or Tots-arrh range, looms toweringly in front of you, the most conspicuous portion being Union Peak.”*

which included Tuttle. During my hike through this area, when I was about a mile south of West Cooper Pass, I found a small stream flowing through a level area that would make a very good place for a camp. On the other hand, on today’s road, at a mile south of Cooper Pass, you are in a very narrow and steep-sided canyon, where there is no water and no level areas. This would be a terrible place to make a camp.

After passing Cooper Meadows and the second spring that had been reported by Sergeant Barr, the expedition made its way down the eastern slope of the Schell Creek Mountains through Cooper Canyon. Simpson noted that as they were moving down this canyon, the mountain that he called Union Peak could be seen directly in front of them. I have driven down Cooper Canyon three times, and have found the view of Wheeler Peak to be spectacular.

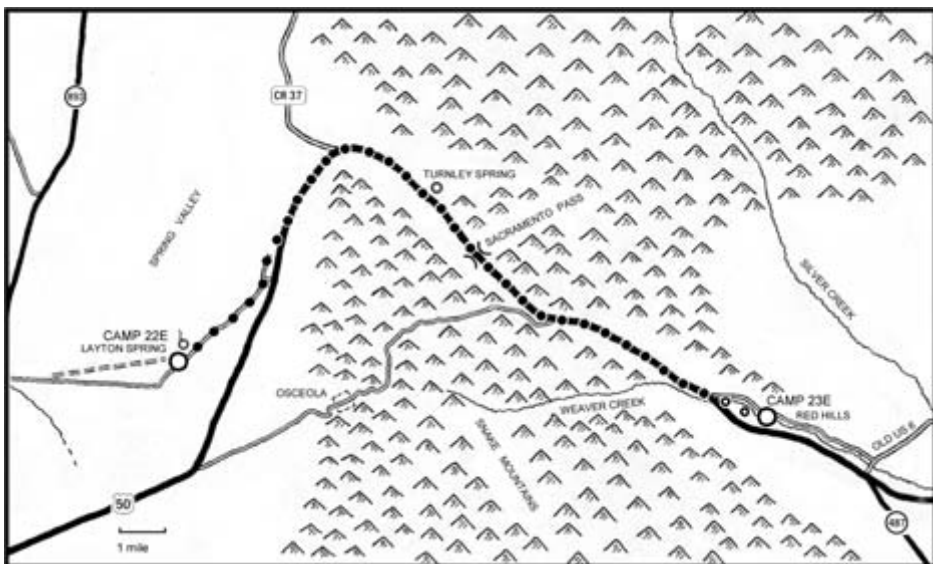
*Thence 6.6 miles, or about two-thirds of the way across Antelope Valley, to some springs [Layton Spring], which, by being opened, may be made to serve a large command. We encamp at these springs at 2.15....Journey 15.7 miles.<sup>12</sup>*

#### APRIL 2002

During my first trip across the Schell Creek Mountains in July of 1999, when I reached the lower end of Cooper Canyon, I left Simpson’s trail and turned to the southeast until I reached State Route 893, where I turned south to US 50 and left the area. Three years later, I returned to this spot and found the place where the expedition had crossed SR 893. Turning to the east, I got onto a power line service road and followed it across Spring Valley to Layton Spring. A couple of years later, while examining aerial photos of



Camp 22-E. Layton Spring, in Spring Valley: *“about two-thirds of the way across Antelope Valley, to some springs, which, by being opened, may be made to serve a large command.”*




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JULY 20, 1859



the area, I discovered the faint trace of an old trail that leaves the utility road about a quarter mile east of the highway, and follows a straight line to Layton Spring. Convinced that this faint trace was the expedition's route, in 2005 Nancy and I took a trip to the area with the intention of driving the old trail. Leaving SR 893, we turned east and made our way to the spot where the trail leaves the service road. We found that the trail is clearly visible, but we also found that it has become so overgrown with greasewood that it is impassable. I had to be satisfied with having crossed the valley on the service road, which in most places is no more than a quarter of a mile away from the trail.

William Lee described the Layton Spring area as "a fine spring; with good grass but no wood." He also mentioned that John Reese left the expedition at that point, intending to travel ahead of them all the way to Camp Floyd.<sup>13</sup> Lee either misunderstood the plan, or circumstances intervened, because the main party caught up with Reese eight days later at Chapin's Spring, in the interior of the House Range.

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JULY 20, 1859

JULY 20, CAMP NO. 22, SPRINGS, ANTELOPE VALLEY.—Decamped at 20 minutes past 5. Course east of north, 5.8 miles up Antelope Valley [Spring Valley], to mouth of cañon, which I call after Capt. P. T. Turnley, assistant quartermaster at Camp Floyd, and which leads us to the pass over the Go-shoot or Tots-arrh range.<sup>14</sup>

SIMPSON EVIDENTLY FELT that Spring Valley was the southern end of Antelope Valley, which the expedition had crossed on May 11 during its west-bound journey. When the expedition left Layton Spring, they turned north and merged with US 50 at a point about three miles south of the bend that takes the highway into Turnley Canyon.

*Our road turns up this cañon southwestwardly, and 2.2 miles from mouth we find some fine copious cold springs, which I call also after Captain Turnley. Grass and wood-fuel found in vicinity. Persons traveling our route will find a road to the north of ours, and move direct from near the mouth*

*of Little's Cañon to the mouth of Turnley's Cañon, which will cut off several miles. In that case they will make their encampment at these springs, and not where we did in Antelope Valley.*<sup>15</sup>

Here Simpson is advising future travelers to take a direct line between the mouth of Turnley's Canyon and the mouth of Cooper Canyon, which would bypass Layton Spring. He added that if they follow this shortcut they "will find a road to the north of ours." This probably means that the Mormons' wagons had taken this shortcut the previous year, leaving a discernable trail. If this is true, it also means that as the expedition traveled from the mouth of Cooper Canyon to Layton Spring, and from there to the mouth of Turnley Canyon, they were breaking their own trail and not following the Mormon road. Simpson's map shows the Mormon road as a dotted line, and indicates that it is "Practicable for wagons."

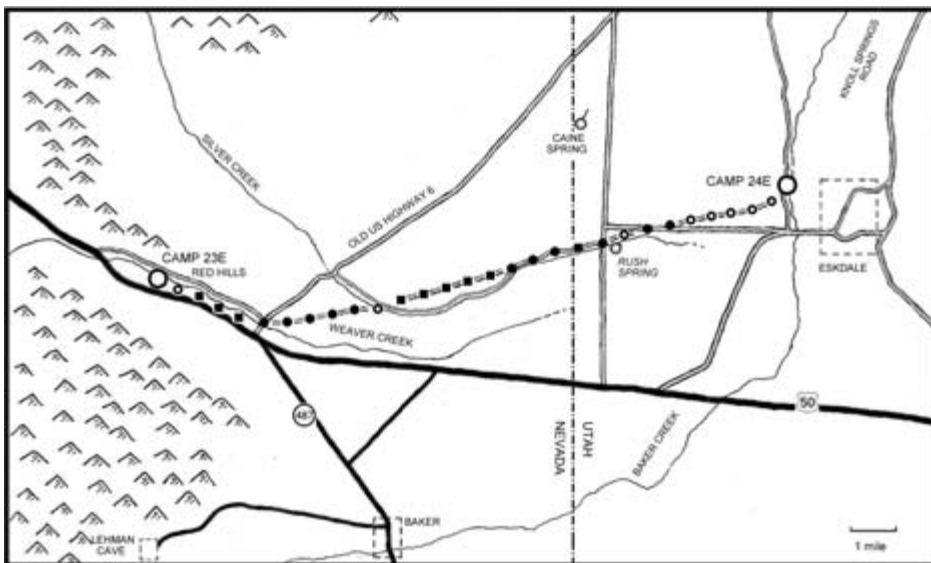
*Proceeding up Turnley's Cañon 1.8 miles by a remarkably easy grade, the cañon being amply wide, we reach summit of pass [Sacramento Pass] of the Go-shoot or Tots-arrh range [Snake Mountains], whence we had toward the east a fine view of some distant mountains, Union Peak [Wheeler Peak] of the Tots-arrh range [Snake Mountains] to the east of the summit towering far above every other height, and showing a great deal of snow and apparently depending icicles in its recesses. Indeed, I think this peak the highest we have seen on either of our routes.*<sup>16</sup>

Simpson erred when he said that his Union Peak was east of the summit of Sacramento Pass. It actually lies almost due south from the pass.

*Descending from pass on east side, by a cañon of very easy inclination, in 7.2 miles reach a fine spring of flowing water, where we encamp. This cañon I call Red Cañon, on account of its red-colored rocks. The spring is called by the Indians Un-go-pah or Red Spring. Plenty of grass exists near and in vicinity, and I notice also some springs to the south of us, in the cañon, about 2 miles off. Union Peak, which lies some 10 or 15 miles to the west of south of us, the Indians call Too-bur-rit;*



Camp 23-E. Strawberry Creek Ranch, on Weaver Creek, about nine miles west of the Utah-Nevada border.  
*"Descending from pass on east side. . . in 7.2 miles we reach a fine spring of flowing water, where we encamp."*



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JULY 21, 1859



*but I cannot learn its meaning....Journey 17.1 miles. Train got into camp at 12.45.<sup>17</sup>*

This time, the direction to Wheeler Peak is exactly right. This campsite was located on the south bank of Weaver Creek, about three miles west of the junction of State Route 487 and US 50. Today this site is occupied by the Strawberry Ranch.

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JULY 21, 1859

JULY 21, CAMP NO. 23, UN-GO-PAH OR RED SPRINGS.—*Resumed journey at 25 minutes after 4. Course eastwardly. Continue to descend Red Cañon to valley on east side of Tot-arr range [Snake Mountains], which valley I call after Deputy Quartermaster-General George H. Crosman, stationed at headquarters Department of Utah. The road we are following, and have been since we left Steptoe Valley, is the Mormon road referred to July 18. The indications are that some fifty wagons have been over it. The tracks of the cattle are still visible, and the dung yet remains on the road. About 3 miles from camp we leave the road, to cut off a bend of it. About 2.5 miles farther cross a dry branch [Silver Creek] just below its sink. Cottonwood at crossing.<sup>18</sup>*

IN THE AREA below the Strawberry Ranch, Weaver Creek flows in a fairly deep ravine along the southern base of some low hills. As the expedition left the campsite, they were following the south bank of the stream. At about three miles from Strawberry Ranch, the ravine disappears and the hills on the north side of the stream flatten out. A well-maintained graveled road comes from the northeast, crosses Weaver Creek, and joins US 50 a short distance south of the stream. At one time, this graveled road was designated as US Highway 6, but it lost that designation in the mid-1950s when the paved highway that is now US 50 and 6 was completed between the town of Hinckley and the Nevada border. At this point, the expedition crossed to the north side of Weaver Creek and started across Snake Valley, heading in a slightly north-of-east direction.

It would appear that the Mormon road continued to follow the south bank of Weaver Creek for some distance, then turned north to

follow Baker Creek toward the town of Eskdale. Simpson decided to take a shortcut by cutting diagonally across the valley. The dry branch that they crossed at five and a half miles from camp was Silver Creek, a small stream that flows in an easterly direction out of the Snake Mountains. An irrigated alfalfa field now occupies the creek bottom in the area where the expedition crossed the dry streambed.

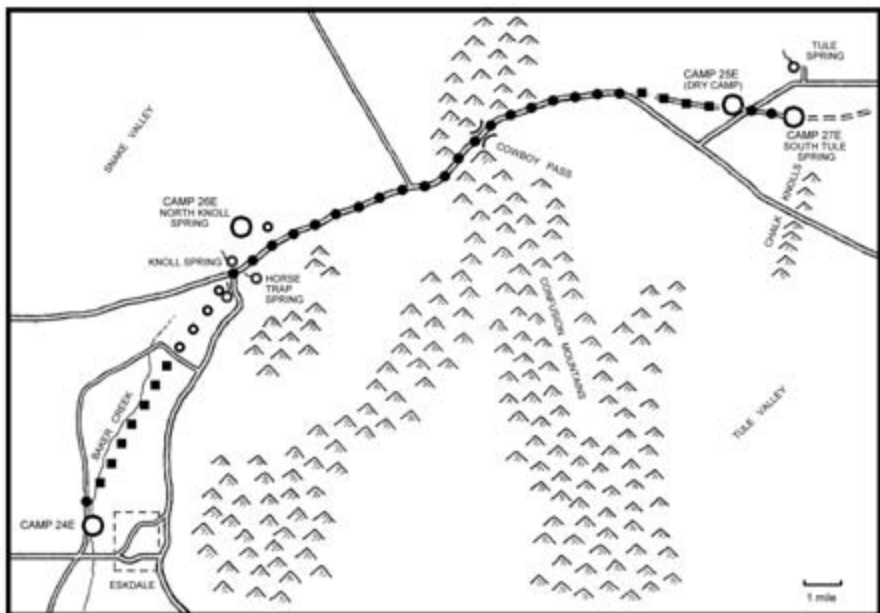
*Five and a half miles farther brings us to a rush spring of tolerable water, which, by excavation, could be made to serve a pretty large command. There is a great deal of grass about it, and in the vicinity.<sup>19</sup>*

About five and a half miles northeast of Silver Creek Reservoir, lying directly on the Utah-Nevada border, and surrounded on all sides by sagebrush flats, is a pleasant little oasis known as Caine Spring. When I first started looking at this section of Simpson's route, I assumed that this would have been the spring that Simpson described as a "rush spring." Acting on this assumption, I hiked the four miles between Caine Spring and Baker Creek, thinking that I was following the expedition's route. Sometime later, after obtaining a better copy of Simpson's map, I discovered that the expedition's trail followed a perfectly straight line all the way across Snake Valley, passing about three miles south of Caine Spring. This meant that I had to look for another spring, one that was on a straight line between the Weaver Creek crossing and Eskdale. While studying aerial photos of the area, I located what appeared to be a vegetated area at about the correct distance. Although this spot is not marked as a spring on the USGS maps of the area, it does have the appearance of a spring on the aerial photos. As I continued to study the photos, I noticed a faint trail extending both east and west from the spring. This turned out to be an important discovery. I soon found that I could trace this line in an absolutely straight line all the way from the Weaver Creek crossing to a point just a short distance north of Eskdale.

*Three and a half miles farther we join and follow again the Mormon road. Half a mile farther we*



Camp 24-E. The campsite was in the middle of this alfalfa field. Baker Creek once flowed through here but the water has been diverted and the streambed plowed and leveled: *“we come to a creek. . . which comes from the south, and sinks a quarter of a mile below camp.”*




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JULY 22–25, 1859



*come to a creek [Baker Creek], 3 feet wide, 1 deep, which comes from the south, and sinks a quarter of a mile below camp. In places it is lined with rushes and willows. On this creek, which I also call after Colonel Crosman, we encamp at half past 12, amid abundance of grass....Journey, 14.8 miles.*<sup>20</sup>

About a mile northwest of the small community of Eskdale, aerial photos show a bend in the trail that comes from the spring, and the faint trace of another trail coming from the south. This fork in the abandoned trail could very well be where the expedition rejoined the Mormon road. A short distance from the fork, the old trail joins a modern ranch road. This road goes past a cluster of ranch houses and sheds, and at a half mile northeast of the fork, it reaches the edge of an irrigated alfalfa field, which now covers the old Baker Creek streambed. It was at this point that the expedition made camp for the night. The campsite was on the west bank of Baker Creek, about five miles north of US 50, and about a mile and a quarter northwest of Eskdale.

#### MAY 2005

Nancy and I spent the better part of a day attempting to follow the abandoned trail across Snake Valley. Between the Weaver Creek crossing and the old Silver Creek crossing, we found that we could drive on the old roadbed. The junk that we noticed on the sides of the old trail in this area seems to indicate that it had been used for some time by people traveling in automobiles. When we reached Silver Creek, we could find no way to cross it anywhere near the old trail, so we headed northwest and crossed it on the old US 6 bridge. From there we were able to drive down the east side of the stream and pick up the trail again. However, we soon found that in the area east of Silver Creek, the trail was so overgrown with greasewood that we were unable to drive on it. We backtracked to old US 6, and found a power line service road that seemed to be going in the right direction. Three miles to the east we found where the old trail crossed the utility road. It was still not drivable. Another three miles to the east brought us to the Utah-Nevada border

and a gated fence that was clearly marked with prominent No Trespassing signs. Reluctantly, we turned around and retraced our path all the way back to US 50, then returned to the east until we came to a graveled road that goes north to Gandy, Trout Creek, and Callao. Three miles north of US 50, we reached the spot where the old trail crosses the road at a point that is only about a half mile east of where we had turned around at the No Trespassing signs. A short distance to the east of the road, we could see the spring that I had discovered on the aerial photos. Simpson called it a "rush spring," but today it is surrounded by a thick growth of willows. A fence prevented us from driving on this section of the old trail, so I started walking. I found some traces of the trail, but also found that it is impassable for vehicles due to the greasewood that has invaded it. After walking about a mile and a half, I returned to the SUV and we drove north for a short distance, then headed east on a road that leads to Eskdale. When we came to where the trail crosses this road, I parked again and hiked another two and a half miles to where the old trail meets the well-used ranch road. Turning around at that point, I hiked back to the SUV, and we drove to the ranch and the site of Simpson's east-bound camp number 24.

I am quite certain that Simpson's expedition was the first to travel the trail that I found across Snake Valley, but it is very apparent that a significant number of other travelers used it later, and did so for many years.

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#### JULY 22, 1859

JULY 22, CAMP NO. 24, CROSMAN CREEK.—  
*Moved at 5, and continue on Mormon road. Course, northwardly in valley for 10.2 miles, when we come to a number of small springs [Knoll Springs], which I call after Lieut. Peter V. L. Plympton, Seventh Infantry.*<sup>21</sup>

WHEN THE EXPEDITION began this day's march, they headed almost due north along the west bank of Baker Creek. At about a quarter of a mile they passed the creek's sink, then crossed the dry streambed and began bearing a little to the east. Simpson said that when they were



10.2 miles from camp, they came to the first of a group of springs. Some of these springs have formed large mounds on the otherwise level valley floor. Although they are scattered over a fairly large area, it appears that Simpson referred to the entire group as Plympton Springs. The most prominent of the springs have since been renamed as Knoll Springs, North Knoll Spring, and Horse Trap Springs, but the name Plympton survives as the name of a low ridge that lies to the northeast of the springs.

#### JUNE 2002

Maps of the area north of Eskdale show a dirt road that follows the Baker Creek streambed for some distance. Although this road does not follow what I believe to be the expedition's route, it appeared that it would be as close as I could get to it in a vehicle. When I attempted to get onto the road, I found that I would have to go right through a group of ranch buildings. I drove into the yard and knocked on the door of the ranch house to see if I could get permission to drive through the property. I was a little apprehensive, being well aware that, undeserved or not, the folks who live in this area have a reputation for being antagonistic toward strangers. My apprehension proved to be groundless. As soon as the rancher was satisfied that my reason for being there had nothing to do with either law enforcement or the news media, he made me quite welcome. After a brief conversation, we got into his pickup truck and headed north on the old road for a couple of miles as he showed me the unmapped side roads that I should avoid. Returning to the ranch house, I got back in my SUV and headed north again. By following the map and the rancher's instructions, I drove up the valley, paralleling the dry creek bed until it disappeared completely. Although I was not directly on the expedition's route, I was never more than a half mile from it. At about seven and a half miles from the ranch, the road made an abrupt turn and left Simpson's route altogether. Heading in an easterly direction, the road soon began to climb out of the bottomland, and came to the main road that traverses the east side of Snake Valley. Turning north again, I drove to Knoll Spring, where I parked my SUV and hiked back along the last three-mile section of the trail.

Although Simpson says nothing about stopping at Plympton Spring, one can assume that the expedition spent enough time there to allow the animals to drink their fill. But because Simpson believed that there would be more water a short distance ahead, the party soon pushed on. As things turned out, it would have been much better for them if they had remained here for the night. The remainder of this day, and the next couple of days, would turn out to be difficult and confusing.

*The soldier who last joined us at Un-go-pah Springs [Red Springs] was directed by the guide to conduct us to a spring 12 miles distant from our last camp, but as these are only 10 miles distant, and the soldier has not been to the place, we continued on in the hope of seeing the springs referred to within about a couple of miles and camping at it.<sup>22</sup>*

This statement shows that when they were at Knoll Springs, Simpson believed that they would come to another spring after traveling about two more miles. Later, he was to learn, much to his displeasure, that they were already at the spot where Reese intended for them to camp.

*It proved, however, that at this distance there were no springs, so I was lured on in hope of finding them a little farther on. At 13, 14, and 15 miles from camp we saw none, and then, according to the notes of the guide, which he had shown me, feeling confident that they were beyond, in striking distance, I continued on till, at quarter to 5 o'clock, we had traveled 30.1 miles, when we were obliged to encamp near some puddles of water, which had been made by the rain, just before we reached the spot.<sup>23</sup>*

They were relying on a guide who had never been anywhere near the spot to which he was supposed to guide them, and Simpson was obviously very unhappy about it. It becomes apparent that Reese had simply told the soldier who was acting as the guide that there would be some springs at about twelve miles from the previous night's camp. Reese must have been talking about Knoll Springs. But because they had traveled only ten miles to get to Knoll Springs, Simpson was certain



that the springs Reese was talking about were another two miles ahead. After leaving Knoll Springs, they traveled another twenty miles, all the time expecting that they would soon come to some other springs. Late in the afternoon, Simpson finally gave up on finding these other springs, and they stopped and set up camp for the night. This camp was located near the center of Tule Valley, where there was neither water nor any decent forage for the animals.

William Lee described this day's journey as follows:

*Friday, July 22nd. Marched thirty-one miles and came to camp on the desert, miles from any water; but fortunately for us it rained all day (a very rare thing by the way in this country) and the water lay in pools on the ground so that we secured enough for cooking.<sup>24</sup>*

Lee was wrong when he said they were miles from water. If they had continued on for only another mile and a half, they would have come to South Tule Spring, where there was plenty of water and grass. Simpson must have been exasperated, indeed, two days later, when he learned that this spring was such a short distance from where they had stopped for the night of the twenty-second.

Before he concluded his writing for the day, Simpson added a more detailed description of the day's journey.

*After reaching, as above stated, Plympton's Springs, our route lay eastwardly 6.7 miles to foot of pass, across a low, thirsty mountain-ridge, which I call Perry Range [Confusion Mountains]; thence 3.1 miles by a good grade up a broad cañon to summit [Cowboy Pass], the rocks on the left side being buttress or bluff like; and thence, by gentle descent 10.1 miles to camp.... From the summit of the pass, could be seen, some 25 or 30 miles off, on west side of range of mountains, quite remarkable on account of its well-defined stratification and the resemblance of portions of its outline to domes, minarets, houses, and other structures. On this account I call it the House range. Between it and the ridge forming our point of view is a very extensive valley [Tule Valley], very generally white with*

*alkaline efflorescence, and I have therefore called it White Valley.... It is in the middle of this valley we have encamped, and on account of the guides having neglected to send back a man, as he was wont, according to orders, to point to me a camp of which he was personally cognizant, the party is in its present uncomfortable situation.<sup>25</sup>*

The expedition now found itself right in the middle of the faux pax that Simpson had earlier emphasized that he wanted to avoid. They had gone right by a good source of water, and after an extra long march, they had been forced to go into a dry camp. Simpson was not at all pleased with his guide. He would become even less pleased during the next few days.

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### JULY 23, 1859

**JULY 23, CAMP NO. 25, WHITE VALLEY.—***Koenig, the dragoon, did not come in from the guide party in the night as was anticipated. I do not understand the guide's movements. It was enjoined upon him over and over again to send us back a man daily, to guide the party with certainty to water and grass, and he has still Pete, Lambert, Stevenson, and Private Koenig with him. It will be hazarding too much to persist in going forward at a venture, though Sanchez, who was with the guide when he examined to the northeast of the House range, on our outward trip, says there is water on the east side of the House Mountains. The route to the water, however, is not known to be practicable, and it would consume nearly the whole day to have it examined, and in the meantime the animals are without grass and water, and we cannot afford to give them another feed of forage, it being necessary for the desert stretch, which we may possibly have to pass before reaching Rush Valley. I have, therefore, determined to fall back to Plympton's Springs, where we can get grass and water, and await there the arrival of some one from the guide's party. Leave at 7 A.M., and retrace our steps to Plympton's Springs, where, at 2, we encamp. Journey 18.7 miles.<sup>26</sup>*

BECAUSE OF HIS lack of information about conditions in the country ahead of them, Simpson decided to return to the last place that he knew for certain that there was an adequate supply



Camp 25-E. Near the center of Tule Valley. The road to the right leads to South Tule Spring, which, not yet known to Simpson, was only another mile and a half away. *“we were obliged to encamp near some puddles of water, which had been made by the rain, just before we reached the spot.”*

of water. Accordingly, they turned around and headed west again, crossing back over the Confusion Mountains and Cowboy Pass, and made camp at North Knoll Spring. This retreat explains how camp number 26 got to be to the rear of camp number 25.

Cowboy Pass is located near the center of the Confusion Range. Some people say that these mountains got their name from the area’s rugged topography, but I have to believe that it has something to do with Simpson’s experiences in this region. In *Utah Place Names*, John Van Cott gives this area a Simpson connection when he says that the name of the Disappointment Hills, which are located about ten miles to the north, is “associated with the frustrations and disappointments endured by Captain Simpson and his party during the 1850s while surveying and exploring the region.”<sup>27</sup> That could very well be, but it seems more logical that the name of the

Confusion Mountains was a result of Simpson’s problems in this area.

The expedition remained camped at North Knoll Spring the following day, waiting for some word from the guides. Sometime during that day, Simpson sent Sergeant Barr and two soldiers, Privates Collamer and Sanchez, eastward again in an attempt to locate some water and the missing guides.

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### JULY 25, 1859

JULY 25, CAMP 26, PLYMPTON’S SPRINGS.—*Sergeant Barr came in at 11 last night, having ridden 40 miles, and reports that 2 miles beyond our rain-puddle camp (No. 25) he found a note from the guide to me stuck in a cleft-stick near a rush pond, informing me that the Indian with him says there are water and grass 10 miles beyond that locality. This mode of guiding me by notes stuck*

*up, depending upon the contingency of my reaching or getting them, is a new feature introduced by the guide since I have approached the desert, and is entirely unauthorized. It is true that he sent word by Private Nune, the last man he sent in, that I could continue to follow the Mormon road, and that if anything was wrong he would send back a man to notify me. But this is placing me entirely at his mercy, and this I do not choose to sanction. I must know what lies before me. The sergeant alone came back. Collamer and Sanchez continued on to examine the water and grass ahead, and are to return to us at Rush Pond, where the note was found. I have concluded, therefore, to again move forward. Started at 5.45 and retraced our track to our old camp-ground, No. 25. A mile and a half farther brought us, at 1 o'clock, to the Rush Pond reported yesterday by Sergeant Barr. Journey 20.3 miles.<sup>28</sup>*

WHEN I BEGAN looking at this section of the route, I started out by assuming that the expedition had followed today's well-traveled road across this section of Tule Valley. This, in turn, led me to assume that this evening's campsite was located at Tule Spring. Later, after making more accurate distance measurements and re-examining Simpson's description of the route and his map, I changed my mind and concluded that the camp was at South Tule Spring, about a mile to the south of Tule Spring and some distance off the main road.

The mileage figures reported by Simpson for the distances the expedition traveled during the three trips between Snake Valley and Tule Valley deserve some detailed explanation. At first glance, these figures appear to be as confusing as everything else about this part of the journey. However, these numbers do provide clues that help to determine the location of the three campsites involved. First, it should be noted that in the area to the west of Cowboy Pass, there are several groups of springs, which are scattered over a fairly large area, and it appears that Simpson considered them all to be a part of what he called Plympton's Springs. The most prominent of these are now known as Knoll Springs and North Knoll Spring. Knoll Springs is found just slightly north of old US 6, and North Knoll Spring is 1.3 miles north-northeast of Knoll Spring. Simpson reported that

on July 22, the expedition left the camp on Baker Creek, and after traveling 10.2 miles, they came to Plympton Springs. At this point, they would have been at Knoll Springs. As they traveled east from here, they went past North Knoll Spring, which would have been about a half mile to their left. From Knoll Springs, they traveled 6.7 miles to the base of the Confusion Mountains, 3.1 miles to the summit of Cowboy Pass, and then 10.1 miles to Camp 25-E, which Simpson called the "rain-puddle" camp. All of this adds up to the 30.1 miles that Simpson gave as the total distance traveled that day. Using Simpson's figures, the distance from Knoll Springs to Camp 25-E would be 19.9 miles. However, the next day Simpson stated that they traveled only 18.7 miles to get back to Plympton's Springs. This apparent discrepancy of 1.2 miles would be explained if they had returned only as far as North Knoll Spring. I have visited this spring a couple of times, and have found plenty of water. There seems to be no good reason for the expedition to have gone past it and all the way back to Knoll Springs. Finally, when they headed east again on July 25, Simpson reported that the distance from Camp 26-E to Camp 27-E was 20.3 miles, which is almost exactly the distance between North Knoll Spring and South Tule Spring. All of this leads me to the conclusion that Camp 26-E was at North Knoll Spring.

#### SEPTEMBER 1998

The first time that I ever traveled any section of Simpson's route with the conscious intent of exploring a part of his trail was in September of 1998. Phil Miller, a fellow Lincoln Highway enthusiast, and I had stopped at Knoll Springs after having spent part of a day exploring the route of old US Highway 6. This was shortly after I had obtained a copy of Simpson's report, and I had studied it only enough to know that his expedition had traveled through this part of the country. We picked up the trail at Knoll Springs and began to follow it toward the east. Staying on today's well-traveled road, we unknowingly bypassed the section of Simpson's route that goes past South Tule Spring, but we soon got back on the actual trail and followed it through Dome Canyon and down the east side of the House Mountains.



Camp 26-E. North Knoll Spring. Failing to find water in Tule Valley, the expedition returned to Snake Valley and set up camp here. Like a number of springs in this area, the water flows out of the top of the mound.

On the morning of July 25, the expedition headed east again, traveling the 18.7 miles back to the spot where they had camped during the night of the twenty-second. After passing this spot, they continued to the east for another mile and a half, then came to South Tule Spring, where they set up camp for the coming night. The past few days had been difficult and discouraging, and it would seem that Simpson might have been getting more than a little irritated with the performance of his guide and the scouts. But his problems were not over; even more difficult days were coming.

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JULY 26, 1859

JULY 26, CAMP NO. 27, RUSH POND [SOUTH TULE SPRING], WHITE VALLEY.—*Decamped at 5.30 o'clock. Continue on old Mormon road, north of east to mouth of cañon, leading to pass through House range. To get to it, cross an alkali flat, 3 miles wide, which in wet weather, must cut up very much....After crossing flat, pass through*

*a mile of sand knolls, where pulling is difficult. Reach foot of cañon, 8 miles from camp.*<sup>29</sup>

THE EXPEDITION'S ROUTE rejoins the main valley road about three and a half miles east of Tule Spring. About five miles east of the spring, there are a number of sand dunes, many of them ten to fifteen feet high. After passing the dunes, the road begins to climb into the foothills of the House Mountains, and enters Dome Canyon, which on some maps and road signs is identified as Death Canyon.

APRIL 2002

Nancy and I drove to South Tule Spring, reaching it by following old US 6 to Tule Valley, then getting onto a narrow two-track that leaves the main valley road at a point that is very close to the site of the expedition's "rain-puddle" camp. The road appeared to stop at the spring, so we parked and I began hiking to the east. After a short distance, I began to see indications that a well-traveled road had once continued to

the east from the spring. The road is not drivable now, but I found myself walking in a definite swale, which would occasionally appear and then disappear in the sagebrush. About a mile from the spring, I came to the edge of a large playa, and at about a hundred yards into this flat I began to notice what looked like the marks of wagon wheels.

I have visited the mudflats of the Great Salt Lake Desert near the Silver Island Mountains, and have seen the tracks made by the wagons that had traveled the Hastings Road. The marks that I found in Tule Valley look very much like those that can be seen near Floating Island and Pilot Peak. Because Nancy was waiting for me at the spring, I was unable to spend much time examining these tracks, but a few weeks later, I returned by myself and spent several hours taking photographs and obtaining GPS readings at various places where the tracks can be seen. There are so many tracks in this area that it is quite certain that this route had been used for a long time before being abandoned in favor of today's road, which goes past Tule Spring.

*...and 4.1 miles further, by a good grade, except near summit, where for about 100 yards it is rather steep, we reach the culminating point of pass. The bluffs at the entrance of this cañon are tremendously high and massive; that on the right very high, probably 1,500 feet, and like a dome. Call the cañon, therefore, Dome Cañon. Ascended a high point to right of pass to get an extensive view. To the south, some 20 miles off, lies a lake of sky-blue color, apparently some 10 or 15 miles long, and less broad. This is doubtless Sevier Lake, the sink of the Sevier River, on which Captain Gunnison and party were massacred in 1853, and to which he was tending for the purpose of examining it when the catastrophe occurred. The valley lying to the north of this lake exhibits one extended low, flat, desert plain, showing many spots of a whitish alkaline character.<sup>30</sup>*

In 1998, when Phil Miller and I reached the Dome Canyon summit we parked next to a small sign that was fastened to a wooden post.



According to the date on the sign, it had been ten years since it had been placed at the summit by a Boy Scout troop. When Phil and I saw it, there were perhaps a dozen bullet holes in it. I have driven past it several times since, and each time there have been another ten to fifteen holes added. At this rate, in another four or five years, this scout project will be completely obliterated.

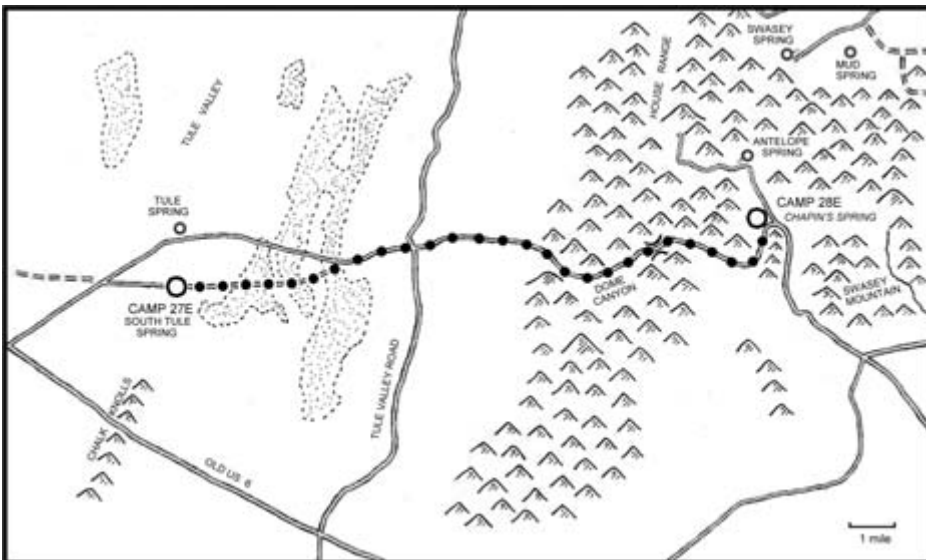
While Phil and I were parked at the summit, I took off on foot and hiked a short distance to the south in an effort to duplicate the hike that Simpson had taken. While it is doubtful that I was at the exact viewpoint that Simpson found, I did get to a spot where I had an excellent view of Sevier Lake.

*After descending from summit on east side, about two miles, met Collamer, who conducted us up a cañon to the left about half a mile, when we came to a fine cold spring of good water, where, at 12.45, we encamp.... Animals driven to the creek, up the cañon about a mile from camp, where there is a considerable quantity of fine grass and a growth of pines. Journey 14.5 miles. This spring, creek, and cañon I call after Lieut. Gurden Chapin, Seventh Infantry.<sup>31</sup>*

About one and a half miles east of the Dome Canyon summit, the road begins a sweeping loop that takes it around the north side of a prominent, steep-sided knoll. This knoll is located in the lower part of a large cove, known as Wheeler Amphitheater, in the southwest side of Swasey Mountain. About halfway into this loop, the expedition came upon Private Collamer, one of the dragoons who had been sent ahead



Camp 27-E. South Tule Spring. Returning to Tule Valley, Simpson found this spring a mile and a half to the east of where they had camped two nights before. *“Retraced our track to our old camp-ground, No. 25. A mile and a half farther brought us. . . to the Rush Pond reported yesterday by Sergeant Barr.”*



JULY 26, 1859





Wagon ruts in the flats east of South Tule Spring. "*Cross an alkali flat, 3 miles wide, in which wet weather, must cut up very much.*"

when they were camped at North Knoll Spring. Collamer led them to a small spring that was located a short distance to the north of the road. Their camp for the night was next to the spring, which Simpson named after Lieutenant Chapin, who had been in command of the escort that had accompanied Simpson during his reconnaissance the previous October.

In an article that appeared in the *Utah Historical Quarterly* in 1984, Dr. Owen Bennion, then an associate professor at Brigham Young University, suggested that Chapin Spring was probably the same as the Antelope Spring that is located on the southwest side of Swasey Mountain.<sup>32</sup> However, according to Simpson's description of the location, and what he shows on his map, it is quite apparent that Chapin Spring was just a short distance off the main road, while Antelope Spring is a mile and a half from the main road and higher up in the canyon.

During one of my first trips to this area, I located a small spring that was a little less than a quarter mile off the road, at the foot of a skinny poplar tree. Since then I have visited it several times. On two or three occasions, I have observed a meager flow of water coming out of the ground and running down the slope, but most of the time it is just a damp seep. I have been unable to find a modern name for this spring, and I think it is quite possible that Bennion was unaware of its existence.

There are several factors involved in my conclusion that the small spring near the road is Chapin's Spring. According to Simpson, the expedition had traveled two miles from the Dome Canyon summit when they found Private Collamer. He also stated that it was a half mile from that point to the spring, which would make it two and a half miles from the summit to the spring. My measurements indicate that this is the

exact distance from the summit to the little spring by the tree. On the other hand, it is slightly over four miles from the summit to Antelope Spring. Another factor is Simpson's comment that after they reached the campsite, the animals were "driven to the creek, up the cañon about a mile from camp."<sup>33</sup> All of the water from Antelope Spring now goes into a pipe, but there is a dry streambed extending down the canyon from the spring area. This would have been the creek to which the animals were driven. An additional factor is the altitude. Simpson obtained a reading of 6,530 feet above sea level at the Chapin's Spring campsite. My reading at the small spring near the poplar tree is 6,637 feet; 107 feet higher than Simpson's reading. The altitude of Antelope Spring is 7,480 feet, which is 950 feet higher than Simpson's reading, well outside the range of Simpson's average error.

William Lee made a short entry in his journal that evening.

*Tuesday, July 26th. Marched fifteen miles and came to camp at a spring of fine water with plenty of wood and grass. There is a fine view of Lake Sevier from the mountains near camp. Met Reese here, his mules having given out.*<sup>34</sup>

John Reese had not made it back to Camp Floyd as had been planned. He was waiting for the expedition at Chapin's Spring. The guide reported that he had found water and grass at a spot about fifteen miles ahead. This was Simpson's first meeting with Reese since the fiasco of the Tule Valley camps, but he remains silent about whether or not he mentioned his displeasure with Reese's actions during the last few days.