4. Pleasant Valley to Roberts Creek

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Pleasant Valley to Roberts Creek

Camp 8-W. The campsite was near the ranch building in the foreground, just west of the Utah-Nevada border.

May 10, 1859
May 10, Camp No. 8, Pleasant Valley.—
Pleasant Valley, which is very narrow, contains grass all along it, but no water above the spring where we encamped last night except occasionally.... From Pleasant Valley to Camp No. 8 [sic, 9], the road, which has a general direction north of west, traverses in 8.5 miles two or three steep but short hills, which, however, did not require the teams to be doubled, to the west summit of the Tots-arrh range [Kern Mountains], and thence 4 miles to camp. The mail company have done on this portion of the route some little work, but not enough to make the road what it should be. The road as made does not follow the direct pack-route, but makes quite a detour to the right or north. The mail-man, who has piloted us from the last camp, says a road, however, could be made by the pack-mule route, The difficulty is a very steep declivity into Antelope Valley.... Journey to-day, 12.5 miles.

Simpson clearly made an error when he said they traveled from Pleasant Valley to “Camp No. 8.” They were actually leaving Camp Number 8, which was in Pleasant Valley, and heading for Camp Number 9. The summit that they crossed at 8.5 miles is known as Cedar Pass, and is located on the ridge between South Mountain and Kern Mountain. Today two roads cross this pass. One is a well-traveled and well-maintained dirt road that travels along the eastern side of a knoll that lies in the middle of the pass area. The second road is a very seldom used, but drivable, track that passes the western side of the knoll. Since it is older, it is my assumption that the expedition followed the now-abandoned road. The pack-mule route that the Chorpenning mail carriers were using must have gone through a canyon known as Blue Mass, and then across Moffitt Pass.

The route followed by the expedition during the second half of this day’s journey proved to be one of the most difficult sections of the entire route for me to figure out. It was not until after a great deal of study, and several trips to the area, that I finally came to a satisfactory conclusion regarding the alignment of the route and the location of the campsite. The primary cause of my confusion was Simpson’s failure to mention an abrupt turn that they made. Simpson’s map shows that after crossing the summit, the trail continued in an almost northerly direction for some distance, and then made a sharp turn to the west. The exact location of this turn cannot be determined from the map, and it is not even mentioned in the report, and it took a long time to find it.

As I began looking at this section of the route, I did not have access to a good copy of Simpson’s map, and I was assuming that his trail followed today’s well-traveled road all the way down Tippet Canyon into Antelope Valley. A short distance after emerging from the canyon, the road comes to a four-way intersection, and for a long time I thought this was the location of the turn. However, this assumption failed to account for a couple of important items. The first of these was the fact that the table of distances includes a listing for “Ridge east of Antelope Valley,” at 2.8 miles beyond the summit. The problem with this is that after crossing the summit, today’s main road never goes over anything that can be described as a ridge. The second item was that both the table and the text of the report indicate that the campsite was located four miles from the summit. The problem here is that on the main road, at four miles from the summit, you are still in the canyon, and still a mile and a half short of the four-way intersection. This would mean that the camp would have been somewhere to the south of the turn, but the map shows it as being west of the turn. When I first discovered these problems, I reluctantly concluded that Simpson must have put the campsite at the wrong place on the map. But that still did not account for the location of the turn.

I had been looking at this problem off and on for about four years when it occurred to me that the expedition may not have remained on today’s main road all the way to the valley. Perhaps Simpson had found a place where they could get across the ridge that made up the western side of the canyon. Taking another look at the maps, and paying particular attention to the contour lines, I found what appeared to be a pass through the ridge at about a mile above the mouth of the canyon. This turned out to be the right idea, but it was the wrong place.
October 2003

My wife Nancy decided to come with me on this trip, and we drove to Tippett Canyon, where we looked for the pass through the western ridge. Not very far from the mouth of the canyon we found a low pass leading to the south-west. Finding no road of any sort through this pass, I took off on foot to see if this route would have been passable for the wagons. After hiking a couple of miles, I found that this area would have presented no serious problems for the wagons, but I was suspicious of the fact that I was unable to find even the slightest indication that any type of wheeled vehicles had ever passed through this area. The mere absence of visible tracks cannot be considered as proof of anything, one way or another, but it did leave me very doubtful. Added to the lack of any indication of a trail was the fact that a route through this little pass would still fail to solve the distance problem. The camp would still be on the wrong side of the turn. Reluctantly, I had to admit that I had not yet solved the puzzle.

After returning home and spending some more time studying my maps of the area, I stumbled across the answer. While taking another look at a USGS 7.5-minute map, I noticed a faint line that had never caught my attention before. This line was some distance to the south of the area I had been concentrating on, and I had simply failed to notice it. It was apparent that the narrow line represented some sort of trail that leaves the main road at about three and a half miles southeast of the four-way intersection. Heading west, this trail appeared to cross the canyon’s western ridge and then drop down into Antelope Valley. Suddenly things were beginning to fit, and I could hardly wait to get back to Tippett Canyon to check it out.

May 2004

I was accompanied on this trip by Jim Hall, who wanted to get a look at the country between Ibapah and Tippett. Once we had gotten into Tippett Canyon, we had no trouble locating the faint trail I had discovered on the map. We found it to be a seldom-used two-track that crosses the west ridge of the canyon at exactly the distance from the summit that is listed in Simpson’s table of distances. When we reached the spot where the campsite would have been, we found a small running stream and a reservoir that is marked on the map as Cedar Spring. This spring would have been the first water that the expedition encountered after leaving Pleasant Valley, and is almost certainly the reason that this particular spot was selected for the camp. Simpson does not mention anything about water in relation to this camp, and I was somewhat surprised to find the spring. It was not until a couple of years later that I read in William Lee’s journal that they had “camped at a spring on the side of a hill on the divide between Pleasant and Antelope Vallies.”

After finding the small stream at just the right distance from the Pleasant Valley campsite, I was finally satisfied that I had found the route the expedition had used to get from Tippett Canyon to Antelope Valley, and the correct site for Camp 9-W. After finally getting it all figured out, it became apparent that Simpson’s map was exactly right, and I had been much too quick to assume that he had made an error.

May 11, 1859

May 11, Camp No. 9, east slope of Antelope Valley.—Moved at 25 minutes of 6. Course, south of west across Antelope and Shell Valleys. Just after leaving camp we have a fine distant view of the mountains hemming in the Antelope Valley at the west and north. After getting across the valley you can see to the east of south, glittering with snow, the high peak of the Go-shoot, or Tots-arrrh range (Union Peak), some 60 miles off.

Cedar Spring is located at the bottom of a steep-sided canyon that blocks the view to the north and the south. But after less than a quarter of a mile, a westbound traveler comes out of the canyon, and the view in all directions opens up. Wheeler Peak, which Simpson called Union Peak, and which he had previously observed from Snake Valley a few days before, lies about fifty-five miles from where the expedition crossed the southern part of Antelope Valley.
Camp 9-W. Cedar Spring, on the western slope of Kern Mountain. Although Simpson did not mention that there was water here, they probably camped at this location because of the small stream that now empties into the man-made reservoir.

May 11, 1859
May 2004

After spending some time at Cedar Spring, Jim Hall and I continued west, following Simpson’s trail about halfway across Antelope Valley. At that point, our progress was halted by an ungated fence, so we turned around and headed home by way of Pleasant Valley and Fish Springs.

July 2003

I had been doing some exploring in the southern end of Spring Valley, and had decided to head north into Antelope Valley to see if I could get onto the section of the trail that traverses the western part of the valley. I found that although this piece of the route can be seen from the eastern base of Twelve-Mile Summit, it has become so overgrown with sage-brush that it is impossible to negotiate in a vehicle. However, I was able to find a drivable road that sort of parallels the trail a short distance to the south. I drove eastward on this road and followed it until it turned to the north and joined the route that was used by the expedition and Chorpenning’s pack mules and mail coaches. After getting onto the old trail, I followed it until I came to the fence that would later stop Jim Hall and me from crossing the valley after our trip to Cedar Spring.

After crossing Antelope Valley, you ascend a rather low range of mountains [Antelope Range], composed of slaty, stratified rocks, by a tolerable grade, and get into a shallow valley, called Shell Valley on account of its being covered with shale. Crossing this you descend over a formation of dioritic rocks, in 2 miles, by a good grade, into Spring Valley, where there is an extensive bottom of alkaline grass and of spring water, and where we encamp early in the afternoon. Journey, 19 miles.

As mentioned previously, Simpson’s route and the route followed by the Pony Express, the Overland Stage, and Lincoln Highway, had separated at Boyd’s Station in Snake Valley. These two routes come together again just before reaching Twelve-Mile Summit at the southern tip of the Antelope Mountains. According to Joe Nardone, the Pony Express riders sometimes took a shortcut and crossed these mountains through Rock Springs Pass, but most of the time they used the Twelve-Mile Summit route.

After crossing Twelve-Mile Summit, the expedition turned northwest and went through Tippett Pass, which is not to be confused with Tippett Canyon, which is fifteen miles away, on the eastern side of Antelope Valley. After crossing the shallow valley that lies to the west of Tippett Pass, the expedition emerged into Spring Valley, at a spot that is known today as Stonehouse. Later, the Pony Express would establish its Spring Valley station at this location.

May 12, 1859

May 12, Camp No. 10, Spring Valley.—Our course lay west of north for about 3 miles, when we turned up a ravine south of west, along a rapid mountain-stream (Spring Creek), which we followed for 3.5 miles, when we left it, and continuing up a branch ravine, in 2 miles, by a good wagon-road grade, attained the summit of the Un-go-we-ah range [Schell Creek Range], whence could be seen lying immediately to the west of us Steptoe Valley.

When they left camp on the morning of May 12, the expedition traveled upstream along the east bank of Spring Valley Creek. Simpson felt that the main stream, which he called Spring Creek, flowed out of Stage Canyon. Modern maps, however, indicate that Spring Valley Creek continues to the north, and the stream coming out of Stage Canyon is a tributary. When they reached the mouth of Stage Canyon, the expedition forded Spring Valley Creek and entered the canyon. After traveling three and a half miles up the canyon, Simpson said they left the stream and turned up a “branch ravine.” Evidently, he felt that the main stream and the main canyon continued in a southwesterly direction from this point. Today, his branch ravine is considered to be the continuation of Stage Canyon.

Somewhere near the mouth of Stage Canyon, the expedition came across several mules that were running loose. Simpson had his herders round these animals up and put them in with the expedition’s herd. Partway up the canyon, they encountered two men from the Chorpenning
Camp 10-W. This campsite was in Spring Valley at a spot now known as Stonehouse. “Descend by a good grade, into Spring Valley, where there is an extensive bottom of alkaline grass and of spring water.”

May 12, 1859
mail station that was located on the western side of the mountain. One of these was Lot Huntington, who was in charge of Chorpenning’s operations in the area between Pleasant Valley and the Humboldt River. Huntington was attempting to track down some mules that had been run off by Indians, and was pleased to find that they were with the expedition. Simpson consistently misspelled this name as Lott Huntingdon, but there can be little doubt that he was the same man who was later killed by Orrin Porter Rockwell at the Faust Pony Express station. In January of 1861, Huntington and five other residents of Salt Lake City were charged with assaulting John W. Dawson, the Governor of the Territory of Utah. Learning that there was a warrant for his arrest, Huntington decided to leave the area. Apparently lacking a horse of his own, he stole one and headed west, taking refuge in the mail station at Faust. Unfortunately for Huntington, the owner of the horse was a good friend of Rockwell, who tracked him to the station and shot him when he attempted to make another getaway.

Descending the west slope of the mountain, which is somewhat steep, about 2 miles more, along a pure, mountain-gushing stream, which I call after Lieutenant Marmaduke, of the Seventh Infantry, brought us to the mail-station on the east side of Steptoe Valley, in the vicinity of which we encamped after a journey of 11.1 miles among good grass, water, and fuel.

The expedition made camp near the site of what would later become Fort Schellbourne, and which is now Schellbourne Ranch. A number of old stone structures that were probably built by the army are still standing near the ranch buildings. The exact location of the mail station is uncertain, but measuring two miles from Schellbourne Pass would put the expedition’s campsite about a quarter of a mile below the present ranch buildings. The employees of the mail company told Simpson that they had not yet had a chance to do much to improve the road beyond this point, but they had been getting ready to build a bridge across the stream that flowed through Steptoe Valley. They had already cut and hauled most of the needed logs. An agreement was reached that if Simpson and his men would build the bridge, the Chorpenning people would deliver the rest of the logs that would be needed. Consequently, the soldiers of the escort worked on the bridge during the day of May 13, and the party stayed at the Schellbourne camp for two nights.

May 14, 1859

May 14, Camp No. 11, east slope of Steptoe Valley.—Moved at 5.30 o’clock. Course westwardly, directly across Steptoe Valley to Egan Cañon. This valley, trending about north and south, is bound by the Un-go-we-ah Mountains [Schell Creek Range] on the east, and the Montim Mountains [Egan Range] on the west, and is open at either end as far as the eye can reach. This is a poor, arid valley, perfectly useless for cultivation where we cross it; but farther south, where I crossed it on my return, as my report will show, there is a great deal of good, available pastural and cultivable soil.

When he said “where I crossed it on my return,” Simpson was talking about the expedition’s return trip from Genoa. This and a few other statements make it clear that his report was not an unaltered journal. At some point before his report was finalized, Simpson went back to his journal and made some additions to his original entries.

When they left camp that morning, the expedition continued to follow Chorpenning’s mail route and the future routes of the Overland Stage and the Pony Express. The Lincoln Highway, however, now turned to the south. Simpson’s route and the Lincoln Highway would next come together in Kobeh Valley, about a hundred miles to the west. But they would only cross each other there, and it would be another eighty miles before they merged together again at Eastgate.

Along the axis of the valley a stream [Duck Creek] runs northwardly, which, at the present time, is twenty-five to fifty feet wide; bottom miry; depth, in places, three feet; current moderate. It is said to dry up in the summer. On account of the marshy approach to the bridge we constructed yesterday over this creek, we were detained three-quarters of an hour.
Camp 11-W. The camp was in this meadow just below today’s Schellbourne Ranch. “Descending the west slope of the mountain brought us to the mail-station on the east side of Steptoe Valley, in the vicinity of which we encamped among good grass, water, and fuel.”

May 14, 1859
Several of the wagons were taken over by hand. At noon, 6.8 miles from bridge, we reached the mouth of Egan Cañon, down which a fine, rapid stream runs, and on which we encamp. Grass on the side of the mountain. Journey 13.3 miles.9

After the party had set up camp near the mouth of Egan Canyon, Simpson and Lieutenant Murry made a scouting trip through the canyon. Someone at the mail station had warned Simpson that a lot of work would be needed before they could get the wagons through the canyon. He was pleased to find that very little work would actually be required. Later in the afternoon, the officers set up their instruments and prepared to make some lunar observations after it got dark.

**May 15, 1859**

May 15, Camp No. 12, mouth of Egan Cañon.—Moved at quarter to 6. The pioneer party went ahead, in order to prepare the road. Our course is westward up Egan Cañon, by an easy ascent, to Round Valley [Egan Basin], about 2.5 miles, thence six miles across Round Valley, and by a ravine which required some work, to the summit of the Montim range [Cherry Creek Range], and thence 9.5 miles across Butte Valley, to the vicinity of a small well on the west side of the valley…. The Humboldt range [Ruby Range] has appeared ahead of us to-day, looming up above the range limiting Butte Valley on the west, and is covered with snow. It is the most imposing range I have seen since leaving the Wahsatch Mountains, and is to be seen stretching far to the northward. Our day’s travel has been 18.1 miles.10

Immediately after leaving camp, the expedition entered a narrow, steep-walled canyon that first took them almost due west, and then turned to the southwest for a short distance before coming out into the Egan Basin. Once out of the canyon, they turned to the northwest and crossed this small valley, then climbed to the summit of the Cherry Creek Range. The trail that Simpson described as going up a ravine is...
Camp 12-W. On the west side of Steptoe Valley: "we reached the mouth of Egan Cañon, down which a fine, rapid stream runs, and on which we encamp."

May 15, 1859
now abandoned, and a better-traveled two-track road turns west near the Egan Basin Well, then after a short distance turns north to climb the mountain. Simpson’s table of distances lists two summits in the Egan Mountains. The first one was at 5.2 miles from the camp, and is shown on some maps as Overland Summit. The second was at 8.3 miles and is on the main ridge of the Cherry Creek Range.

July 1999

During my first long trip along Simpson’s route, I drove through Egan Canyon, then got onto the abandoned trail and followed it to where it rejoins the better-traveled dirt road a short distance below Overland Summit. It was slow going, but presented no real difficulties for my four-wheel-drive SUV. A few years later, during one of the trips that Nancy made with me, we traveled through this area again, but this time we remained on the better road to Overland Summit.

Because the slope in both directions is so gentle, it is a little difficult to know when you have reached Overland Summit. The actual summit lies about halfway between where two branches of the same two-track road reach the Pony Express Trail. This other road comes from the town of Cherry Creek and splits into two branches about a tenth of a mile to the east. About two miles from Overland Summit, the trail comes to a surprisingly wide and well-traveled graveled road. It was at this point during my first two trips to this area that I lost the trail. Not knowing exactly where I was, I got onto the wide road and followed it to an open-pit mining operation, where it came to a dead-end. During my second trip, I thought I was going to avoid this trap, but I got confused and did the same thing again. Both times, I had to work myself down into the valley on the west by using an almost non-existent two-track that took me past Mustang Hill before I could get back onto the Pony Express Trail. But the third time was the charm. This time I had studied the maps a little better, and had my GPS to keep me going in the right direction. Instead of turning onto the mine road, I crossed it and got onto a faint two-track that turned out to be the Pony Express Trail. This road took me over the main ridge of the Cherry Creek Mountains, then down the western slope into Butte Valley.

From the Cherry Creek summit, the expedition dropped into Butte Valley and crossed it in a slightly north-of-west direction. They made camp for the night in the southern foothills of the Butte Mountains. Simpson’s map shows that this campsite was in close proximity to one of Chorpenning’s mail stations.

We are encamped at the foot of a dark brown, isolated, porphyritic rock, near the summit of which is a small dug well, 10 feet deep and 2 feet wide. The water in this well can only get here on the principle of the siphon bringing it from some distant source….(Subsequent to this date, in the summer, this point had to be abandoned by the mail company as a station on account of the well drying up. I have learned, however, that they have since found water in the vicinity, probably about 2 miles to the southeast, where a Sho-sho-nee told us there was water.)

Simpson does not say when or how he heard about the new source of water, but this information was at least partially correct. The mail station that Chorpenning established at the southern tip of the Butte Mountains, and near which the expedition camped, was later abandoned and another station established. However, this new station was about three miles to the northeast, near Pony Springs, not to the southeast, which would have been down in the bottom of the valley. The move to the new site required a significant change in the mail route. The new trail split away from the older route at the east side of the valley, near the base of the Cherry Creek Range. Traveling in more of a northwesterly direction than Simpson’s trail, the new route climbed into the Butte Mountains and crossed the ridge just a short distance below Pony Springs. Dropping down the west side of the mountain, it rejoined the older route about three miles north of Simpson’s camp. The date of this change is elusive, but it probably took place before the mail route was taken over by Russell, Majors, and Waddell.

Richard Burton arrived at what he called “Butte Station” on October 5, 1860. It was probably the Pony Springs site. His description of his evening at the station is nothing if not colorful.
Camp 13-W. On the west side of Butte Valley: "We are encamped at the foot of a dark brown, isolated, porphyritic rock."

May 16, 1859
A Route for the Overland Stage

The good station-master, Mr. Thomas, a Cambrian Mormon... bade us kindly welcome, built a roaring fire, added meat to our supper of coffee and dough-boy, and cleared by a summary process amongst the snorers places for us on the floor of “Robber’s Roost,” or “Thieves’ Delight,” as the place is facetiously known throughout the countryside.... It is about as civilised as the Galway shanty, or the normal dwelling-place in Central Equatorial Africa. A cabin fronting east and west, long walls thirty feet, with portholes for windows.... The length was divided by two perpendiculars, the southernmost of which, assisted by a half-way canvass partition, cut the hut into unequal parts. Behind it were two bunks for four men.... The floor, which also frequently represented bedsteads, was rough, uneven earth, neither tamped nor swept, and the fine end of a spring oozing through the western wall kept part of it in a state of eternal mud. A redeeming point was the fireplace, which occupied half of the northern short wall.12

Nothing but a small mound of rocks can be found at the site of the first mail station, near which the expedition camped.

May 16, 1859

May 16, Camp No. 13, west slope of Butte Valley.—Moved at 20 minutes of 6. Course continues a little north of west. In 2 miles reach summit of divide between Butte and Long Valleys, by a very gradual ascent, and 2.5 miles more, by and easy descent, reach Long Valley.13

As they left the Butte Valley camp, the expedition started out in a westwardly direction, but soon made a turn to the north and began climbing a gentle slope. After crossing the ridge of the Butte Mountains, they turned toward the northwest and dropped into Long Valley.

Crossing this dry valley, which is 2.7 miles wide, 3.1 miles more up a tolerable grade brings you to the summit of a low range [Maverick Springs Range] running north and south, dividing Long from Ruby Valley, about one mile below which, on the west slope, we encamp, at a spring [Mountain Spring] just discovered by Lott Huntingdon, of the mail party, and which therefore I have called after him. It is a good camping-place, and grass and fuel are convenient. Journey to-day, 12 miles.14

During the last few miles of this day’s journey, the expedition traveled up today’s Murry Canyon to the summit of the Maverick Springs Range, then dropped down the western side of the ridge to make camp at Mountain Spring. In this area today there is a man-made pond that is fed by the spring. The USGS 7.5-minute map for this area indicates that the Mountain Spring Pony Express station was located near this spring. However, Joe Nardone’s research indicates that the station was about two and a half miles back along the trail, near the lower end of Murry Canyon, where he has found an abandoned well and the ruins of a couple of stone structures.

Included in this day’s report is the first of a number of comments about a wagon train that had traveled through the area that Simpson was planning to explore during his return trip. The story was that this had occurred sometime during the previous year. It is quite clear that Simpson had been completely unaware of this wagon train until he heard about it from Lot Huntington, while the expedition was camped at Schellbourne. Simpson now learned that John Reese, his own guide, had come across the trail of the mysterious travelers while scouting for the expedition’s return route.

He represents that he has found a route generally parallel to the one we are on, and some 30 miles to the south, which is practicable for wagons, and furnishes water and grass at intervals of 15 to 20 miles. Indeed, a good portion of the way is an old wagon-road.15

In his account of the return trip, Simpson adds more information about this wagon road. We will get back to this matter later.

May 17, 1859

May 17, Camp No. 14, Huntingdon’s Spring, east slope of Ruby Valley.—Move at quarter to 6, and, shortly after attaining summit of Too-muntz range [Maverick Springs Range]...
Camp 14-W. This campsite was near what later became known as Mountain Spring: “we encamp at a spring just discovered by Lott Huntingdon, of the mail party.”

May 17, 1859
pass down a cañon, which I call Murry’s Cañon, after Lieut. Alexander Murry, the commanding officer of the escort.\(^{16}\)

The name Murry Canyon seems to have migrated. Simpson said that he gave this name to the canyon they traveled through as they descended the western slope of the Maverick Springs Range. Today’s maps show it on the eastern side of these mountains. I have been unable to find a name for the canyon on the western side.

In 3.9 miles we reach the mouth of the cañon, and immediately cross Ruby Valley, requiring 5.3 miles more of travel to mail-station in the valley, where we encamp at 9.30 a.m. Journey, 9.2 miles. Road good…. At our camp is a spring which sends out a small stream of pure water, flowing along the valley northwardly.\(^{17}\)

This day’s travel brought the expedition to Station Spring, near which the Chorpenning company had established a station. A year later, the station was taken over by Russell, Majors, and Waddell, to be used as a station for the Pony Express. Simpson says nothing about the station itself in his report, but it is clearly designated on his map. Horace Greeley did mention the station building, describing it as being constructed of “red or Indian Pine.”\(^{18}\) This structure may have survived to this day, although not at its original location. Several years ago, a small building that was believed to be the mail station was dismantled and moved to the city of Elko, where it was put back together and now stands in front of the Northeastern Nevada Museum.\(^{19}\) During the summer of 2005, I was wandering around in the tall greasewood brush on the south side of Station Spring when I came across what appeared to be some sort of concrete marker. I could see four rusted bolts protruding from the concrete, and it appeared to me that they had once been used as fasteners for some sort of metal plaque. It seems quite likely that I had stumbled across the site of the mail station.

May 18, 1859

May 18, Camp No. 15, Ruby Valley.—Moved at 5½ o’clock. Struck immediately for

Found just off the road near the Butte Valley camp, this pile of rocks is possibly the remains of the structure that was used by the Chorpenning mail company prior to the advent of the Pony Express.
Hastings’s Pass [Overland Pass], lying southwest from mail-station, the foot of which we reach in 2.5 miles, and the summit by a remarkably easy ascent in 3.3 miles more. This pass leads through the Humboldt range [Ruby Mountains] from Ruby Valley into the valley of the South Fork of the Humboldt which some call Huntington’s Creek [Huntington Creek]. For the first time we in this pass get into Beckwith’s, here coincident with Hastings’s road, both of which at the present time are very indistinct. 20

Simpson’s map seems to indicate that from the campsite, the expedition continued almost due west for some distance before turning to the southwest. Today you must follow a narrow two-track that heads directly south along a fence line for about a half mile before turning to the west. After traveling two and a half miles, the expedition came to the Hastings Road and started up the slope that leads to Overland Pass, a summit that is located at the southernmost tip of the Ruby Mountains. Hastings Road was the route that was opened and promoted by Lansford Hastings in 1846. In August of that year, Hastings led a vanguard of three parties of emigrants down the eastern base of the Rubies, breaking an entirely new trail that he had never traveled. A few weeks later, the Donner-Reed party made their way along this new wagon road. In 1849 and 1850, the Hastings Road was traveled by a number of California-bound gold rushers, but had seen little use since then. In 1854, Capt. E. G. Beckwith, of the Army’s Topographical Corps, traveled a portion of this road while looking for a suitable route for a railroad. Beckwith had followed the Hastings Road from Salt Lake City to Hope Wells in Skull Valley. From Hope Wells, which is now known as Iosepa, the Hastings Road turned northwest to cross the Cedar Mountains through Hastings Pass. Beckwith left the Hastings Road at Iosepa, and continued in a southwesterly direction to cross the Cedar Mountains through a narrow pass that leads, in a southwesterly direction, from Cochrane Spring. From there to the Ruby Mountains, Beckwith’s route remained some distance south of the Hastings Road. The two routes rejoined at the western edge of Ruby Valley, then split apart again west of Overland Pass.

At the highest point of the pass, I found a marker made from two sections of railroad rail that have been welded together to form a T. It is one of a number of so-called T-rail posts that have been placed along various emigrant trails in the Western states. The small plaque on this post is inscribed with a quotation from an emigrant journal: “The pass is an excellent one, no rocks, nor very steep, and the road is very firm.—Madison Moorman, 1850.”

Descending from the summit, by the finest kind of grade, in about 4 miles we leave Beckwith’s and Hastings’s roads, which go, the former northwestwardly to join the old road along the Humboldt, 10 miles above Lassen’s Meadows, the latter northwardly to join the same road at the mouth of the South Fork of the Humboldt; while we strike southwestwardly, over an unknown country, toward the most northern bend of Walker’s River… We also now leave Chorpenning’s or Mail Company’s extension of my route from Hastings’s Pass, it also turning northward, and joining the old road near Gravely Ford, which they follow by way of the sink of the Humboldt and Ragtown, on Carson River, to Genoa…. From this point, therefore, to where we expect to strike the old road on Carson River, we will have to be guided entirely by the country as it unfolds itself. 21

About four and a half miles west of the summit, the road comes to a fork. The right-hand branch turns north, climbing up a short hill. The left branch continues straight ahead for a short distance, then turns southwest. There was no fork at this point when the expedition arrived; the road simply made a bend to the north, which was the direction that had been taken by all previous travelers. To the best of Simpson’s knowledge, no one had ever turned to the south from here before. If anyone had ever gone in this direction, they had left no trail.

There is another T-rail post at this fork. The inscription on this one reads: “The road wound fi rst to the northwest and fi nally wholly to the north, now going steadily down into the valley.—Heinrich Leinhard, 1846.” Leinhard was with a group of emigrants that were traveling just a few days behind Lansford Hastings. Leinhard was
Camp 15-W. Station Spring in Ruby Valley. “At our camp is a spring which sends out a small stream of pure water flowing along the valley northward.”

May 18, 1859
apparently talking about the Hastings Road as it traveled north along the western base of the Ruby Mountains.

Simpson mentioned that the Hastings Road, Beckwith’s trail, and Chorpenning’s mail route all turned to the north and joined the California Trail on the banks of the Humboldt River, but each of them reached it at a different place. The Hastings Road continued in a northward direction and came to the river near the mouth of the South Fork of the Humboldt, about ten miles southwest of Elko. A short distance north of today’s fork in the road, the Beckwith trail and Chorpenning’s mail route split away from the Hastings Road, and turned west to go though Railroad Pass. A few miles farther west, these two routes split apart. Beckwith continued west and reached the Humboldt about twenty-five miles southwest of Winnemucca. The Chorpenning route turned to the northwest, crossing Pine Valley, then climbing over the low Cortez Mountains, and reached the Humboldt River at Gravely Ford, a well-known crossing on the California emigrant road, near present-day Beowawe and about seventeen miles southwest of Carlin.\(^{a}\) This was a part of the route that Chorpenning had opened in late 1858. And Chorpenning was paying close attention to what Simpson was doing in 1859. Shortly after Simpson returned from the expedition, Chorpenning began making plans to adopt the new route that Simpson had found between the Ruby Mountains and Carson Lake. By early 1860, Chorpenning had dropped the Humboldt River route entirely, and had switched to Simpson’s route. During the first three months of 1860, Chorpenning established several relay stations along Simpson’s route, and was planning on several more when his contract with the Post Office was canceled and given to Russell, Majors, and Waddell.\(^{23}\) Turning to the southwest from the southern end of the Ruby Mountains, the Simpson expedition of 1859 first began to break new trail through unknown territory.

After reaching the west foot of Hastings’s Pass, in the valley of the South Fork of the Humboldt, we struck for a pass in the next western range, which we could see lying to the southwest of us, about 9 miles off, and which looked favorable for admission into the next valley.\(^{24}\)

In his comments relating to this day’s travel, Simpson mentioned that he had with him a map that he called “the Topographical Bureau map.” He noted that the map showed the route followed by John Charles Frémont in 1845, “but as he has never submitted a detailed report of this reconnaissance, and his track is no longer visible, and it goes too far south for our purposes,
his exploration is of no service to us in our progress.” This comment suggests that Simpson felt that Frémont’s 1845 exploration had little, if any, bearing on the objectives of his expedition. On the other hand, Simpson did show Frémont’s route on his map, and it indicates that Frémont had traveled through the very pass that Simpson’s party would cross the following day.

After crossing the Overland Pass at the southern end of the Ruby Mountains, the expedition turned to the southwest and headed toward another Overland Pass, this one located in the Diamond Mountains, about thirty miles north of the town of Eureka.

In 4 miles we struck the South Fork of the Humboldt [Conners Creek], a rapid stream, stony bottom, 6 feet wide, ½ foot deep, course northwardly. We follow up this creek for about a mile, and then leaving it, in about 2 miles, come to a small mountain-stream flowing over a stony bottom, where we encamp at 1 o’clock.… Journey 17.6 miles.

The stream that Simpson called the South Fork of the Humboldt appears to be a combination of today’s Conners Creek and Huntington Creek. Conners Creek empties into Huntington Creek, which empties into the South Fork of the Humboldt about thirty miles to the north near Twin Bridges. Earlier in his description of this day’s journey, Simpson had mentioned that they were headed for “the valley of the South Fork of the Humboldt, which some call Huntingdon’s Creek,” but he never did mention the name of the “small mountain-stream” on which they camped. Evidently, it was Conners Creek, and Simpson seems not to have realized that it was the same stream that he called Huntingdon’s Creek.

The expedition would have first come to Conners Creek about three miles upstream from where it empties into Huntington Creek. Simpson’s comment about following this creek for a mile, then leaving it and later coming to a small stream, seems to mean that he believed they left one stream and, after traveling two miles, came to a different stream. However, I have been unable to find a second stream in this area, and have reached the conclusion that there was only a single stream involved, and it was Conners Creek. It appears to me that when they came to Conners Creek, they followed it for about a mile, veered away from it and traveled two miles, then came back to it and made camp. William Lee said that they “camped on Huntingdon Creek, a branch of the Humboldt.”

The campsite would probably have been near the spot where the Pony Express Trail crosses this now usually dry streambed.

May 19, 1859

May 19, Camp No. 16, Valley of South Fork of the Humboldt.—Raised camp at 25 minutes of 6, and directed our course west of south to pass of the mountain-range directly west of us. In 2 miles cross a small rapid mountain-rill.… In two more miles we commence ascending the pass, which on the east side is quite steep, all the teams doubling but the leading one, and ropes being used to keep the wagons from upsetting… Descending from pass by an easy grade down the west slope of the range, albeit in places slightly sidling, in 3 miles and at quarter to 1 P.M., encamped in splendid and abundant grass, near the small stream which comes down the pass. Day’s travel 7.1 miles.

During this day’s journey, the expedition made its way across the Overland Pass in the Diamond Mountains, possibly the steepest climb of the entire journey, then descended Telegraph Canyon and set up camp about a mile above the canyon’s mouth. Somewhere along the way, the mule that William Lee was riding got away from him, and he “had some trouble to catch her.”

Simpson gave the name of “Cho-kup” to the pass and the canyon on the west slope of the mountain. This was the name of a Shoshone chief who visited the camp that afternoon. This was Simpson’s second encounter with Chief Cho-kup. The first was a couple of weeks before, in Rush Valley, when Cho-kup was on his way to Camp Floyd. Apparently, Cho-kup had concluded his business with the Indian agent and caught up with the expedition. During his eastbound journey, Cho-kup had been a passenger in one of Chorpenning’s mail wagons, and it is probably reasonable to assume that he returned the
Camp 16-W. Conners Creek in Huntington Valley, at the east foot of the Diamond Mountains: “Come to a small mountain-stream flowing over a stony bottom where we encamp.” The low spot in the mountains is Overland Pass which they would cross the next day.

May 19, 1859
Camp 17-W. In Telegraph Canyon on the west slope of the Diamond Mountains. “Descending from pass by an easy grade we encamped in splendid and abundant grass, near the small stream which comes down the pass.”

May 20, 1859
same way. That, however, does not explain how he got to Telegraph Canyon, which was not on Chorpenning’s mail route at that time. Whatever his means of transportation, he had obviously been traveling faster than the expedition.

**July 1999**

During the second day of my first extensive trip on Simpson’s route, I spent an entire afternoon in a failed attempt to find a trail that I could use to get over this pass. I started up the mountain on several different trails, but each of them disappeared before I was able to reach the pass. I later learned that I had actually been on the correct trail for a time, but when it ran into a boggy area, I had decided it was a dead end and turned around. Late in the evening, I gave up and made my way around the northern end of the Diamond Mountains, going through Railroad Pass. Coming south again on the west side of the mountain, I camped for the night near the mouth of Telegraph Canyon.

**August 2001**

Equipped with a more detailed map than I had with me in 1999, I approached the Conners Creek area from the south, and had no trouble finding the two-track road that goes over the Diamond Mountains. It took about four hours to cross the mountain and drive down Telegraph Canyon to Diamond Springs. But I still had not covered the two and a half mile section of the trail between the campsite on Conners Creek and the road that reaches the pass from the south.

**August 2005**

Nancy and I drove to the Conners Creek campsite, where we got onto the Pony Express Trail and headed southwest toward the pass. When we reached the boggy place where I had turned around in 1999, I shifted into four-low and kept on going. Finding solid ground and the old trail on the far side, we soon reached the better-traveled road that comes from the south. Shortly after that, we made it over the top of the mountain and dropped down Telegraph Canyon to Diamond Valley.

**May 20, 1859**

**May 20, Camp No. 17, west slope of Chokup’s Pass.**—Moved at 5.30 o’clock. In 1 mile reach foot of pass in Pah-hun-nupe, or Water Valley [Diamond Valley].… Six and eight-tenths miles farther brings us to a large spring, in marsh, where we water. Plenty of grass about it, though not of best quality. This valley is in some portions argillaceous and in some arenaceous. The latter glitter with small crystals of quartz, of very pure character, which we amuse ourselves in picking up, and facetiously call California diamonds….In 5.6 miles more reach a large spring on west side of valley, at foot of mountain range, where we encamp in pure salt grass, which the animals eat with avidity.…Road to-day good, though it might cut up early in the spring.…Day’s travel, 13.3 miles.  

Immediately after leaving the mouth of Telegraph Canyon, the expedition’s trail turned sharply to the left, skirting the bottom of the hills, then went through the Thompson Ranch. From this ranch, the expedition followed the Pony Express Trail almost all the way across Diamond Valley. Simpson’s comment about the “California diamonds” originally led me to believe that this may have been the origin of the name of the valley, but western historian John Townley indicates that it was named for Jack Diamond, an early prospector who spent some time in the area.  

Showing some geographic confusion, young William Lee’s journal indicates that he believed they were now in Smith Valley.  

At about a mile and three-quarters south of the Thompson Ranch, a cross-valley road heads in a slightly south-of-west direction. The expedition’s route crosses this road about midway across the valley. About 2.3 miles from the crossing, the expedition left the track that the USGS 7.5-minute map shows as the Pony Express Trail, veered a little to the west, and after another two miles reached Sulphur Spring. Aerial photos show a faint trail in this area, and it is quite certain that the mail riders also went to Sulphur Spring, which Joe Nardone has identified as a Pony Express station.
Camp 18-W. Sulphur Spring on the west side of Diamond Valley. A stainless steel Pony Express station marker can be seen in the center of the photo. “Reach a large spring on west side of valley, at foot of mountain range, where we encamp in pure salt grass.”

May 21, 1859
The expedition’s camp for the night was near Sulphur Spring. The site of the Pony Express station is just west of the main road. The spring itself must have dried up many years ago, but a caved-in cistern can still be found at the station site.

May 21, 1859

May 21, Camp No. 18, west side of Pah-hun-nupe Valley.—Raised camp at 5.25 A.M. Keep up the Pah-hun-nupe Valley, or south, two miles; then turn to the right up toward the pass of west range bounding the valley; two miles more commence ascending pass.33

From Sulphur Spring, the expedition headed south for a couple of miles, rejoined the track that the maps show as the Pony Express Trail, then began to turn to the southwest to follow the Pony Express Trail over a low pass near the south end of the Sulphur Springs Range. Today’s main road does not follow the old trail over the ridge, but continues south until it reaches the mouth of Garden Pass Canyon. The trail across the ridge is essentially abandoned, and I had bypassed it during my first couple of trips through this area. In 2003, while returning from a trip to another area, I drove north from US 50 and made my way along this section of the trail. In most places it is a fairly good two-track, but a couple of washouts required the use of four-wheel drive.

After crossing the Sulphur Springs ridge, the expedition dropped down to Garden Pass Creek at a point near the southeastern base of Mount Hope. Here they crossed the stream and headed into another range of hills, traveling in a slightly south-of-west direction.

In five miles more, by a very gradual ascent, reach second highest summit of pass, whence can be seen, to the south and southwest, a low ridge trending apparently northwest and southeast....The pass we have come through, a most excellent one for a wagon-road, the only steep portion being for about 100 yards at the summit....Immediately to our north is a conical peak [Mount Hope], which, as we found afterward, in our journey westward, continued for days a most notable landmark, and which I call Cooper’s Peak, after Adjutant-General Cooper of the Army.34

Simpson’s “second highest summit” was directly south of the mountain that he called Cooper’s Peak, and is now known as Mount Hope. Some modern maps show a peak in the northwestern part of the Roberts Creek Range that bears the name Cooper Peak, but it is clearly not the peak that was given that name by Simpson. This is possibly another case of a migrating name.

July 1999

During my first visit to this area, I was relying on a USGS 30 × 60 minute map, which does not indicate the existence of a road on the south side of Mount Hope. I did have an idea that the Pony Express Trail went this way, but I could not find where it started west from the Garden Pass area. After spending some time in this failed attempt, I left the area and drove south to US 50, then headed west to the Roberts Creek road, which I followed back to the north until I reached Roberts Creek Ranch.

August 2001

When I was exploring the Roberts Creek area in 1999, I had noticed what I thought might be the western end of the road that came from Garden Pass, so I decided to make an attempt to find the trail from the west. Leaving the Roberts Creek road, I headed east on a well-traveled dirt road for about three miles, when I came to a bend where a narrow two-track veered off to the right. As I drove along this seldom-used road, I noticed several of the red and white fence posts that are sometimes used to mark the Pony Express Trail in this part of the country. Satisfied that I was now on the Pony Express Trail, and on Simpson’s route, I continued to the east and had no difficulty in following the old road along the south side of Mount Hope all the way to Garden Pass.

In 6 miles from summit, by an easy grade, at a quarter to 1 o’clock, reach the She-o-wi-te, or Willow Creek [Roberts Creek], where we encamp. The short, steep hill which we passed down just before reaching camp, may be turned at the south
by making a short detour. She-o-wi-te Creek, a fine one, 4 feet wide, 1 foot deep, and quite rapid. It sinks about 1 mile below camp. . . . journey, 14.9 miles. 35

As Simpson was describing the route they had traveled that day, he stated that the road was good, “except short hill referred to, which can be avoided.” While visiting this area, I noticed that there is a small knoll on the north side of the road just before it comes to the Roberts Creek Road. In taking a closer look, I found a very faint two-track trail going through the low pass on the north side of the knoll. I have concluded that this knoll is the “short hill” that Simpson mentioned. The expedition went through the low pass, but today’s well-traveled road does just what Simpson said could be done, and avoids the short hill by going past it on its south side. During one of my visits to this area, I spent some time visiting with Jim Esqueviara, the manager of the Roberts Creek Ranch, who mentioned that he has been told by Pony Express Trail researchers that the mail riders used the trail that went past the north side of the knoll. In 2004, Nancy and I found this trail and followed it to the ranch.

Due to limitations of scale, Simpson’s map fails to show that his trail made a turn as it approached the campsite. Nevertheless, it is quite certain that just after coming out of the little draw, the expedition would have turned toward the northwest until they reached Roberts Creek. I believe that the expedition’s campsite would have been very near the present-day ranch buildings. Esqueviara is quite certain that the Pony Express station was just north of the ranch house.

Simpson indicated that the natives of the area called the stream She-o-wi-te, which he understood to mean Willow Creek, and that is what he decided to call the stream. That name did not last very long. Sometime during the following year, a Chorpenning employee by the name of
Bolivar Roberts set up a relay station at the spot where the expedition had camped. When the Pony Express took over the mail route, Roberts went to work for Russell, Majors, and Waddell. When Burton came through this area in October of 1860, he mentioned that it was known as “Roberts’s Springs Valley,” having been named for Bolivar Roberts. It is interesting to note that the stream on which the expedition camped two days later soon became known as Willow Creek. Is this another case of a migrating name or just a coincidence?

Simpson decided to remain at this camp for an extra day “to recruit our animals and observe the Sabbath.” Reese came into the camp and reported that he had located water and a passable route to the southwest. During the late afternoon, Simpson and two other members of the expedition hiked to the top of a peak that was located a short distance northeast of the campsite. He reported that from the peak they could see the Humboldt [Ruby] Mountains and the We-a-bah Mountains behind them, and “to the west several ranges, the most distant ones covered with snow.”

In the text of the report, Simpson mentions nothing about Frémont traveling through this area, but his map seems to show that Frémont’s trail crossed Roberts Creek at a point that was near the Simpson expedition’s campsite.