Route for the Overland Stage

Petersen, Jesse G.

Published by Utah State University Press

Petersen, Jesse G.
Route for the Overland Stage: James H. Simpson’s 1859 Trail Across the Great Basin.
Utah State University Press, 2008.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/9419.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9419
Camp 29-W. On the east side of the Middlegate gap. “Arrive at a second gate or gap in a low range, where, at 4 P.M. we encamp near the sink of Gibralter Creek.”

June 4, 1859
June 4, Camp No. 29, Middle Gate.—Moved at 6…Immediately after passing through Middle Gate, strike southwesterly over a pulverulent prairie to a third gate, which we reach in 3½ miles, and which I call the West Gate [Westgate].

By noting that they passed through the Middlegate gap after leaving camp, Simpson makes it clear that the campsites had been on the east side of the ridge. Heading west from the campsites, US 50 follows a straight line that takes it about a quarter of a mile north of the old Middlegate Overland Stage Station, the site of which is now occupied by a restaurant and motel. The expedition’s camp had been on the south bank of the creek, and there seems to be no good reason for them to have crossed it before reaching the site of Middlegate Station. The old stage road and the Lincoln Highway also remained on the south bank of Eastgate Creek, following Simpson’s route to the station. About three-quarters of a mile west of the station, this old route veered to the north, rejoined the route now used by US 50, and passed through the Westgate gap.

After threading this defile pass over another thirsty-looking marly prairie, surrounded by low, ashy-looking mountains [Chalk Mountain], with passes between. In 5 miles get across this valley and attain summit of a low ridge [Drumm Summit], whence we descend to another shallow valley… which I call Dry Flat Valley [Fairview Valley], on account of the whitish clay flat we cross and which is as smooth and hard as a floor. Indeed, the glare from it was almost blinding.

While studying this section of the route, I ran across an unexplainable error in Simpson’s distance figures. In his table of distances, Simpson listed a checkpoint, which he referred to as “In Alkali Valley,” and indicated that it was 10.2 miles west of Drumm Summit and 1.2 miles east of Sand Springs Pass. In describing this area, he said the valley floor was whitish in color and as smooth and hard as a floor. This is a good description of Labou Flat in Fairview Valley, but the distance figures do not work. Simpson’s figures would put the Alkali Valley point well to the west of the center of the valley, and partway up the eastern foothills of the Stillwater Mountains. The actual distance from Drumm Summit to the center of Labou Flat is closer to 5.7 miles, and, curiously, Labou Flat is also 5.7 miles from Sand Springs Pass. As a practical matter, this error is unimportant and has no effect on the location of the trail, but what makes it even more curious is that the same error, relating to the very same spot, was repeated during the return trip.

Twenty miles from camp we attain the summit of the range dividing Dry from a valley I call Alkaline Valley [Salt Wells Basin], on account of its general whitish alkaline appearance from saline efflorescence. Descending this ridge 1.7 miles, and turning northwardly and skirting it for 2.7 miles, we come to our camp-ground [Sand Springs], where the guide party, which is in advance of us, has dug a number of small wells…. Journey, 24.5 miles.

This campsite was located near a spot that soon became known as Sand Springs. The springs are about six-tenths of a mile northwest of where the road to Sand Mountain leaves US 50. I have been to this area several times, and have never seen any surface water, but a meager growth of bunch grass marks the spot where the springs are shown on the maps. Although I have been unable to locate the small wells that Simpson mentioned, I did find the remains of a very old concrete water trough. The ruins of the Sand Springs Pony Express station can be found a short distance farther to the north.

Sometime during this day’s march, some confusion developed about the difference between where they were and where Simpson wanted to be. Reese and some members of his scouting party were somewhere ahead of the wagons. One of the scouts returned to the wagon train, bringing a note from the guide. The note informed Simpson that the place Reese had selected for the coming night’s campsite was about twelve miles from Walker Lake, and they could camp on the shore of that lake the following night. This information was an unpleasant surprise to Simpson because he never had any intention of going anywhere near Walker Lake. In fact, he had been under the impression all along that their route would take them some distance to
Middlegate to Genoa

the north of it. In his usual habit of understatement, he described this news as “unpalatable,” and commented:

The consequence is, that as the point I have been aiming at is the north bend of Walker’s River, and not the Lake, we are a great deal too far to the south, and must therefore make the necessary corresponding northing.\(^5\)

John Reese was usually a reliable guide, but in this case, he had gotten it wrong. As it turned out, the expedition was exactly where Simpson wanted to be, and the lake that the guide was talking about was Carson Lake, not Walker Lake. Whether Reese actually thought Carson Lake was Walker Lake, or simply erred when writing the note, is never made clear, but when Simpson got the word from Reese that they were southeast of Walker Lake, he was not at all happy. He immediately got out the map that the Topographical Bureau had sent with him, and spent some time studying it very carefully. Based on Reese’s erroneous information, he began to suspect that the map was flawed. In this instance, he should have put more faith in the map than in his guide. It would be my guess that Simpson was rather poor company in camp that evening.

During this day’s march, when they reached the base of Sand Springs Pass, they turned to the northwest. It ought to be noted, however, that the shortest route to their eventual destination would have been almost due west. But, at this point, both Simpson and Reese were still under the impression that they needed to get a lot farther north. If they had continued in a more westerly direction, they could have crossed the south end of Salt Wells Basin and gone through a low pass that lies between the northern end of the Cocoon Mountains and the southern end of the Bunejug Mountains. There is a certain amount of irony in the fact that this low spot eventually became known as Simpson Pass.

The expedition passed by both the eastern and western approaches to this pass during the outbound and the return trips, but they never did attempt to take the wagons through it. During the westbound trip, they did not even think about it. During the eastbound trip, Simpson commented that he considered going this way, but Reese talked him out of it by claiming that it was “too full of sand to allow the passage of wagons.”\(^6\) Within a year, stagecoaches were traveling through Simpson Pass on a fairly regular basis. Burton describes his trip from Sand Springs to Carson Lake as follows:

About 11 A.M. we set off to cross the ten miles of valley that stretched between us and the summit of the western divide still separating us from Carson Lake. The land was a smooth saleratus plain, with curious masses of porous red and black basalt.
protruding from a ghastly white…. in one place the horses sank to their hocks and were not extricated without difficulty. After a hot drive…we began to toil up the divide, a sand formation mixed with bits of granite, red seeds, and dwarf shells…. Arrived at the summit, we sighted for the first time Carson Lake, or rather the sink of the Carson River…Our conscientious informant at Sand Springs Station had warned us that upon the summit of the divide we should find a perpendicular drop, down which the wagons could be lowered only by means of lariats affixed to the axle-trees and lashed round strong "stubbing posts." We were not, however, surprised to find a mild descent of about 30°.

What had happened to all the sand?

Perhaps because he was preoccupied with the problem of where they were, as opposed to where he wanted to be, Simpson failed to mention that they were camped at the foot of one of the largest sand dunes in the country. Young William Lee did notice it, however, and felt that it deserved to be mentioned it in his journal. “Near where we camped there is a large hill about a thousand feet high and perfectly bare—not a shrub or stone on it, all sand.”

---

**June 5, 1859**

June 5, Camp No. 30. Alkaline Valley. — Up at half past 3 A.M., but in consequence of mules straying off to get grass and water, the train did not move until 5. Course north of west along west foot of Black Mountains [Stillwater Mountains], to the north end of what turned out to be Carson instead of Walker’s Lake. The guide, therefore, at fault, and neither the Topographical Bureau map nor my calculations wrong. As the map will indicate, it will be perceived that before I made the turn to the northwest, pursuant to the representation of our whereabouts by our guide, my course was direct for the bend of Walker’s River, the locality aimed at from the commencement of the expedition at Camp Floyd. The consequence is that we have lost about 12 miles by our guide’s errors, and will have to retrograde, for a distance, our steps.

Fortunately for the expedition, Simpson eventually got it figured out that the map was correct, and Reese was confused about the name of the lake they were approaching. What is missing from the report is an explanation of just how Simpson discovered that it was actually Carson Lake.

While camped at the northern end of Carson Lake during the evening of June 5, Simpson added some additional information about the trail they had followed that day.

The road today has been along the east edge of Alkaline Valley [Salt Wells Basin], and the west foot of the Black Mountains [Stillwater Mountains]. In the valley it has been heavy, and on the benches, on account of the basaltic rocks, rough…. Journey, 16.6 miles.
Camp 30-W. Sand Springs in Salt Wells Basin, which Simpson called Alkaline Valley. “We come to our camp-ground, where the guide party, which is in advance of us, has dug a number of small wells.” The author has been unable to find any wells, but this concrete cistern must have held water in the past.

June 5, 1859
along the east side of Eightmile Flat. It was here that they encountered the volcanic rocks that Simpson mentioned. After traveling along the bench for about three and a half miles, they turned a little more to the west, crossed the northern part of Eightmile Flat, then crossed US 50 again about three and a half miles southeast of Salt Wells. From here, they headed toward Turupa Flat and the northern tip of the Bunejug Mountains. After another three miles, they came to the northern shore of Carson Lake and the stream that Simpson called the outlet.

Although this route crosses several roads and trails, it does not appear that any part of it travels along any modern road or trail. During one of my several trips to this area, I spent most of a day slowly working my way along several sections of two-track, traveling through the sand dunes along the eastern edge of Fourmile Flat, and then across the foothills above the eastern edge of Eightmile Flat. I should not have bothered, because I eventually figured out that the distance along these roads does not fit the mileage figures reported by Simpson, nor do they come anywhere close to corresponding with the shape of the trail on Simpson’s map. In the end, I had to do my best to superimpose the alignment shown on Simpson’s map onto a modern map, and completely ignore the modern roads and trails.

We are encamped at the head of the outlet from Carson Lake into the Sink of Carson, where our only fuel is dry rush. This outlet is about 50 feet wide and 3 or 4 feet deep, and voids the lake rapidly into its sink, which is some 10 or 15 miles to the northeast of us... The Carson River to the northwest, where it empties into the lake, can be seen quite distinctly, marked by its line of green cottonwoods.13

It is clear that the party’s camp for the night was on the northeast shore of Carson Lake, but determining the exact location of the campsite proved to be very difficult. The major problem is that the shore of Carson Lake is no longer where it was in 1859. As a matter of fact, for all practical purposes there no longer is a Carson Lake. A massive irrigation project that began in the early 1900s has changed the hydrology of the entire area, and the reservoir behind the Lahontan Dam now holds most of the water that once flowed into Carson Lake. The small amount of water that now gets to the lake is found several miles south of where the expedition camped that night.

Simpson did provide one helpful clue when he said the camp was on the bank of a stream that he called the outlet of the lake. Since he described the outlet as being 50 feet wide and three or four feet deep, I felt that I should be able to find some evidence of a stream of this size. During my first several visits to the area, I was unsuccessful in finding anything that I could recognize as a streambed, and I was beginning to believe that the construction of irrigation canals and ditches had completely wiped out any signs of the stream. This was before I learned about the Terraserver website and had begun to study some of the aerial photos that are available on the Internet. When I did begin to use this website, a study of the photos of this area revealed the general shape of the lake as it must have existed before the irrigation project. Then I noticed what appeared to be some sort of a channel running in a northerly direction from the old lakeshore. Comparing the aerial photos with topographical maps of the area shows that this channel is a combination of what is now called Pierson Slough, which is found on the south side of Macari Lane, and Grimes Slough, which runs north from Macari Lane. I am quite certain that this is the channel that Simpson called the outlet, and I believe that the campsite was about a half mile north of Macari Lane, and about a mile south of the southern end of the Fallon Naval Air Station’s main runway. Interestingly, William Lee used the word “slough” to describe the stream that he saw flowing out of Carson Lake.

Sunday, June 5th. Marched seventeen miles and came to camp on a slough at the northern end of Carson Lake,... The mules seemed to feel that they were near water, for it was hard to restrain them. Having had nothing to eat since last night, I was very glad to get to camp. Met here with a band of Pah-Utes; they seemed very healthy and were fishing in the lake. Noticed some decoy ducks among them.14
September 2005

Parking on the side of Macari Lane, I hiked northward, following the east bank of Grimes Slough until I reached the area where I believe Camp 31-W was located. If I understand the maps of this area correctly, this spot is on property that is a part of the Fallon Naval Air Station, but, unlike most of the station’s property, this area remains unfenced. The fenced part of the air base lies directly to the north. During this short hike, I noticed that a narrow dirt road approached this area from the west. A year later, with a slightly different set of GPS coordinates, I attempted to get onto this road with my vehicle, but was barred by a locked gate. Since I could not see any No Trespassing signs on the gate or the fence, I climbed over the gate and hiked the half mile to the location of the campsite.

June 6, 1859

June 6, Camp No. 31, north end of Carson Lake. — We retrograde today in our course, southerly direction, and skirt the east shore of Carson Lake.15

By retrograde, Simpson did not mean that they returned along the entire previous day’s trail, only that they were returning back toward the south. Simpson’s map does show that they did travel back along the earlier trail, but for only about a mile. At that point they left it and headed straight south, traveling between the western base of the Bunejug Mountains and the eastern shore of the lake. There is a good dirt road through this area today, but the expedition’s trail was somewhat farther to the west and closer to the lake. Three weeks later, during the return trip, Simpson mentioned that the rising waters of the lake had covered the trail they made through this area during the outbound trip.16

Somewhere along the eastern shore of the lake, William Lee and at least one of his fellow assistants, possibly Edward Jagiello, stopped to take a break.

We stopped under the shade of some cottonwood trees for about two hours, where we had a refreshing nap and let the animals graze; but contrary to our expectations, we found that the train, instead of camping on the lake, had concluded to push on. So we had a smart ride of about eight miles to catch up, and found them making a noon halt.17

This comment seems to imply that Simpson may have said something about making another camp on the shore of the lake, but when the main body of the expedition reached the southern end of the lake, it kept on going. Lee and his companion had to hustle to catch up.

In 9.7 miles leave the lake at its southern end, and, passing over and through some sand-hills, in 5.7 miles come to a small spring of calcareous water [Lee Hot Springs], where there is no grass. Here there has been a number of these springs, and
Camp 31-W. Looking south toward Carson Lake. The campsite was on the east bank of Grimes Slough, a short distance from the Fallon Naval Air Station’s primary runway.

June 6, 1859
the locality for a very considerable area is nothing but calcareous tufa, formed by the springs, which are all closed but one.\textsuperscript{18}

If I am right about the location of the shore-line at that time, they were about a quarter of a mile from the lake’s southeastern shore when they reached the point that was 9.7 miles from the previous night’s camp. During the return trip, the expedition came back to its outbound trail at this same spot. It is also at about this point that the Pony Express and the Overland Stage rejoined Simpson’s return trail after coming through Simpson Pass. On this day, the expedition continued in a southerly direction and crossed the barren flats of Wildcat Scarp. In doing this, they compounded the error they had made when they traveled all the way to the northern end of the lake. It would have saved them a lot of time and effort if they had turned to the west at this point. Their failure to make this turn may have been caused by Reese’s faulty recollection of the area, but it is much more likely that it was due to Simpson’s determination to get to the big bend of the Walker River. Whatever the reason, if they had turned to the west, they would have missed Walker River entirely, and their route would have been shortened by approximately twenty miles. Three weeks later, when the expedition was on its way back to Camp Floyd, Simpson had figured this out, and they did follow the shorter route back to Carson Lake.

\textbf{September 2001}

Nancy and I drove southeast from the city of Fallon, and got onto the dirt road that travels along the eastern side of what was once Carson Lake. Near the southeast corner of the lake, we came to an area that is known as Wildcat Scarp. As we drove into the scarp, the road we had been following abruptly vanished. The scarp is an expanse of soft clay soil that seems to melt and run as soon as it gets wet. Burton described it as “a plain too barren for sage.”\textsuperscript{19} The occasional rain that falls here quickly eliminates the tracks of anything that crosses the scarp. In order to get across this area you simply drive over the dusty flats, doing your best to avoid the random washes and gullies. In wet weather, such an attempt would surely end in disaster. On the far side of the scarp we found the road again, and started climbing into the foothills that lie to southeast of the White Throne Mountains. About five miles southwest of the scarp, we came to Lee Hot Springs, which is still sending up a column of steam. Heading west from the hot spring, we soon came to US Highway 95.

Three miles more brought us through some heavy sand-drifts to a very small spring of miserable mineral-water, so nauseous as not to permit me to take even a swallow.\textsuperscript{20}

A small seep called Stinking Springs is located just slightly over three miles from Lee Hot Springs and about a quarter of a mile east of US 95. A note on the USGS 30 × 60-minute map indicates that the water is undrinkable.

After proceeding a few miles further, in consequence of the day being very warm and the sand-hills heavy, halted at 3 o’clock and turned out the animals to graze upon the little grass which exists in bunches around. At 5 start again, and still ascending to crest of dividing ridge between Walker’s Lake Valley and Saleratus Valley [Lahontan Valley], in 9.4 miles reach summit. Just before doing so, Lieutenant Murry sent word that some of the mules were giving out, and he was afraid he would be obliged to halt. I sent word back to him to try and hold on till he could reach the summit, and after that there would be no difficulty. He managed, by exchanging some of the mules, to get the wagons all up to the top of the divide, but it was midnight before we reached Walker’s River, 6.9 miles distant, and as the night was quite dark, we considered ourselves very fortunate that we got along without accident….journey to-day a hard one….Distance 31.2 miles.\textsuperscript{21}

Simpson said only that they took their break a “few miles” beyond Stinking Springs, which is not enough information to determine the exact location of their rest stop. About five and a quarter miles south of Stinking Springs, an earlier, and now-abandoned, version of US 95 veers away from today’s highway. Simply because it was an older road, it is probably safe to assume that
Camp 32-W. Weber Reservoir on the Walker River, about twenty miles north of Walker Lake. The campsite would have been near the center of the photo, under the waters of the reservoir.

June 7, 1859
it was the route that the expedition followed. At four and a quarter miles from this split, the old road crosses the summit and begins to drop toward Walker Lake. About four miles south of the summit, the old road rejoins today’s US 95. After another three quarters of a mile, the expedition turned and headed directly west toward the Walker River, reaching it near the site of today’s Weber Reservoir. After a lot of map work and several trips to the area, it is my conclusion that the campsite is now covered by the waters of the reservoir, about a quarter of a mile to the northwest from the dam.

**June 7, 1859**

**June 7, Camp No. 32 Walker’s River.**—In consequence of getting into camp so late last evening, and the teams requiring rest, we lay over at this point till this afternoon. The river we are encamped on (Walker’s) is the largest I have seen this side of Green River; is about one hundred yards wide and from six to ten feet deep at its present stage, which seems to be high….Its banks, which are vertical, are about four feet above the surface of the water.²²

As subsequent events will show, there is no doubt that the river was running high at that time, but since it was not over its banks, and since Simpson had never seen it before, one has to wonder about what he saw that led him to conclude that it was higher than normal. William Lee took advantage of the morning layover and went for a swim. “Got up this morning pretty early and took a fine swim in the river.”²³

**June 8, 1859**

**June 8, Camp No. 33, Walker’s River.**—Moved at twenty minutes after 5. Continue 6.3 miles up valley of Walker’s River, as far as the North Bend, and, at 8 A.M., encamp in tolerable grass.²⁴

Sometime during this morning’s travel, the expedition crossed the trail of the first group of emigrants known to have made the overland journey to California. On October 11, 1841, the Bidwell-Bartleson party crossed the Walker River somewhere between Sunshine Flat and the big bend of the river. There is nothing in Simpson’s report about this group, and it seems likely that he was unaware of its existence. And
Camp 33-W. On the north bank of the Walker River, near Sunshine Flat. Water occasionally flows through the oxbow channel at the left of the road. The river’s main channel is about one hundred yards farther to the left.

June 8, 1859
it is not surprising that he failed to notice their trail, because well before reaching this point, the entire party had abandoned their wagons and had continued their journey mounted on horses and mules. In 1859, the 18-year-old trail would probably have been difficult to see.

When the Bidwell-Bartleson party left Missouri in May 1841, it was comprised of about sixty people and fourteen covered wagons. Just west of Soda Springs in Idaho, about half of the group split off and headed for Oregon. The rest of the party, which included both John Bidwell and John Bartleson, turned south and followed the Bear River into Utah. When they reached the northeast shore of the Great Salt Lake, they turned west and made their way past the north end of the lake. Reaching the Park Valley area, they turned south until they passed by the eastern base of Pilot Peak, then turned to the west again. Somewhere west of Pilot Peak, they abandoned their wagons and most of their worldly goods. Packing what they could on the backs of their draft animals, they continued west until they stumbled across the Humboldt River, which they followed to its sink. Heading south from Humboldt Sink, they passed by the western side of Carson Lake, then managed to find their way through the rugged Desert Mountains and came to the Walker River, striking it somewhere near its bend. According to the journals of John Bidwell and James Johns, after reaching the river they followed it upstream for about four miles, then left it to travel in a southwesterly direction. It seems quite likely that they left the river at the point where it began to turn to the east. Upstream from this point, the river is running almost due north. After crossing the Bidwell-Bartleson Trail, the Simpson expedition came to a sweeping bend in the Walker River, striking it somewhere near its bend. According to the journals of John Bidwell and James Johns, after reaching the river they followed it upstream for about four miles, then left it to travel in a southwesterly direction. It seems quite likely that they left the river at the point where it began to turn to the east. Upstream from this point, the river is running almost due north.

When I first began looking at this part of the route, I relied on Simpson’s statement, and placed Camp 34-W at the spot where the river reaches its farthest point to the north. At the time, this bend in the river seemed to be a dependable landmark, and I relied on it to determine the location of the two previous campsites, and the two campsites that followed. Later, after obtaining a good copy of Simpson’s map, I noticed that the symbol for this camp was shown as being some distance upstream from the high point of the bend. This discovery sent me back to my modern maps, and after a lot of re-plotting and re-measuring, and another trip to the area, I finally concluded that the map was accurate, and Simpson’s description should not have been taken quite so literally. The campsite had to be at the point where the north-flowing part of the river first begins to enter the bend to the east. Once again, I found that the map was more accurate than I had at first assumed.

After adjusting the location of Camp 34-W to fit better with Simpson’s map, I had to relocate the other two Walker River campsites. It was when I did this that I found that the site of Camp 32-W would have been under the waters of today’s Weber Reservoir. Previously, I had placed the camp some distance downstream from the dam, but this area had never seemed quite right, because I had found that this was an area that would have been difficult for the wagons to reach because of the river’s steep banks.

September 2004

Placing Camp 34-W at the very beginning of the big bend puts it on the western edge of the Stanley Ranch. The road that follows the northern bank of the Walker River bypasses this ranch by going around a hill to the north. While I was still under the impression that the campsite was farther to the east, Nancy and I had driven by the ranch a couple of times without stopping. However, in September of 2004, having figured out that the campsite was on the ranch property, we stopped and asked for permission to drive to this new location. Permission was readily granted, and David and Molly Stanley seemed genuinely interested in my project. They told me that they were aware that Frémont had traveled through this area, but they had never heard of James Simpson. They said that I was welcome to go anywhere on the ranch that I wanted, and we spent a couple of hours wandering around the campsite area, taking photographs and GPS readings.

Molly Stanley mentioned that on a few occasions since they began living on the ranch, the
Camp 34-W. On the northwest bank of Walker River, near the northern end of Mason Valley. “Continue up valley of Walker’s River, as far as the North Bend, and, at 8 A.M., encamp in tolerable grass.”

June 9, 1859
river has risen high enough to cover the entire area between the ranch buildings and Parker Butte, which is almost half a mile to the south. This is probably the way Simpson saw it in 1859. He had previously mentioned that the Walker River was running high, and the following day he reported that the Carson River was also running much higher than normal. Since the headwaters of both rivers are within a few miles of each other in the Sierra Nevada, it is probably safe to assume that the Walker River was over its banks in the area near Camp 34-W. This would have forced the expedition to choose a campsite that was up on the bench, rather than down in the grassy area next to the normal channel of the river.

June 9, 1859

June 9, Camp 34, North Bend of Walker’s River.—Our course lies northwestwardly to Carson River.…Six miles from camp we pass some hot and cold springs to left of road in valley. Leaving the valley of Walker’s River and striking for Carson River, we cross the point of a low mountain—ascent and descent good—and in three and one-half miles more get into an old wagon-road which we follow.87

When the expedition left camp, they struck off in a westerly direction across the northern end of Mason Valley, passing just north of today’s small community of Wabuska. When I first attempted to plot the route through this area, I was still thinking that Camp 34-W was about two miles farther east than it actually was, which caused me to believe that the expedition turned north at Wabuska to follow today’s US Highway 95A to the Carson River. Relying on this mistaken assumption, I made several failed attempts to find the features that Simpson noted during this day’s journey. After I finally determined the correct location for Camp 34-W, it became apparent that the expedition had crossed US 95A and had continued to the west for a couple of miles more before making the turn to the north. This would have taken them into the southern end of Adrian Valley, which they could then follow to the Carson River. Once I started looking at this possibility, it did not take long to locate a couple of the features that Simpson had noted in his report.

The first of these were the “hot and cold springs” that Simpson said they passed at six miles from camp. I had earlier assumed that these were today’s Wabuska Springs, but it now became apparent that they were somewhere west of the highway. After a little exploring, I found a cluster of springs at almost exactly six miles from the campsite. The next feature that Simpson mentioned was the point of a low mountain that he listed in the table as the “Divide between Carson River and Walker River,” and indicated the distance as being 6.7 miles from the camp. I found that at this distance from the Stanley Ranch, the dirt road that leads from Wabuska to Adrian Valley goes over the southern tip of the westernmost ridge of the Desert Mountains.

An even more significant landmark was a spring that Simpson said they passed at fourteen miles from camp, describing it quite colorfully as being “embowered among wild roses and willows.” I had been unable to find even the slightest indication of a spring anywhere along US 95A between Wabuska and the Carson River, but when I studied the Adrian Valley route on a USGS 7.5-minute map, it did not take long to find a spring that is located at almost exactly fourteen miles from the Stanley Ranch. This spring is identified on the map as Churchill Station Spring. Then there was a ridge that Simpson called the “Ugly Hill.” The expedition first crossed this ridge during the westbound trip. During the return trip, they came back across it, and within a short distance crossed over a second ridge, which Simpson referred to as “another spur.”88 Before finding the Adrian Valley route, I had been looking for the ugly hill just to the west of US 95A. At one point, I felt that I had identified it, and had gone so far as to spend a couple of hours hiking over it. But I always realized that there was a problem with this location, because there was no other spur to the east of this hill. Upon shifting the expedition’s trail to Adrian Valley, it became evident that Simpson’s ugly hill was a part of the ridge on the west side of this narrow valley, and the second spur was the ridge on the east side. The hill that I had climbed earlier is a part of the second ridge, but is about a mile south of where
the expedition crossed this ridge during their eastbound journey.

September 2004

A couple of months after I had figured out that the expedition had traveled through Adrian Valley, Nancy and I made a trip to the area. Although the road is not paved, it is fairly well traveled, and the only difficulty that we ran into was one deep mud hole alongside the railroad tracks, about three miles west of Wabuska. We got through that by shifting into four-low and giving it the gas.

Although made almost in passing, Simpson’s mention of the “old wagon road” is intriguing. One has to wonder where it went and who used it. I have been unable to find anything that would even hint at the answers to these questions. Nevertheless, this point on the route is significant because it marks the spot where the expedition was no longer breaking a new trail. As previously mentioned, they had first begun breaking new trail when they left the southern end of the Ruby Mountains, some 270 miles back. They now found themselves on an established wagon road once again, and they would continue to travel on established roads for the remainder of the westward journey. Simpson’s map shows a short section of this road coming to his route from the southwest. When Nancy and I were in Adrian Valley, we spent some time looking for this road, but failed to find it. However, since making this trip, additional study of maps and aerial photographs leads me to believe that in this area, the expedition’s trail was probably closer to the railroad than it was to today’s dirt road. If this conclusion is correct, it would mean that we were never in the right place to see the old wagon road. Aerial photos of the area show an old road that comes to the tracks from the southwest at about the correct spot, and it is marked as a trail on the USGS 7.5-minute map of the area. After leaving the railroad, this road goes through some bends and ends up reaching US 95A near Wabuska.
Looking west toward the ridge that Simpson called the ugly hill. “Pass over the steepest and roughest hill, or spur, we have seen.”

One mile more brings us to a cañon which we thread, and in which we find a considerable patch of grass and rushes. In this cañon, on left side, fourteen miles from last camp, embowered among wild roses and willows, is a small spring of good, cool water, about which there is a little grass; a plenty of the latter one half-mile south.

During our trip through Adrian Valley, Nancy and I stopped for a while at Churchill Station Spring. It is still a good source of water, and is surrounded on all sides by a lush growth of willows. Much to Nancy’s disappointment, we were unable to find any wild roses.

Two miles farther, pass over the steepest and roughest hill, or spur, we have seen. We would like to continue down the valley until we strike Carson River, and then turn up its valley to the left, and thus avoid this spur, but the height of the water prevents. At this hill we were detained two and one-half hours. All the teams had to double to get up, except Payte’s, which seems thus far to carry off the meed of power and good management. Three miles more along and up Carson River upon its bank brought us to a good spot on the river, where we encamp in good grass.....Journey, 19 miles.

At about a mile and a half north of Churchill Station Spring, the expedition left the road and turned to the west. They were still about a mile and a half from the northern end of the western ridge and the Carson River’s normal channel, but the scouts had discovered that the river was running so high that it had covered the road at the point where it turned to the west to go around the northern tip of the ridge. Determining that it would have been impossible to get the wagons between the rushing water and the northern point of the ridge, Simpson decided to climb over
the ridge before they got to the river. Turning to their left near what is now the Churchill railroad crossing, the expedition made its way over what Simpson would later call the “ugly hill.” The distance involved was only about a mile, but Simpson reported that it took them two and a half hours. In order to get over the steepest part, they had to double the teams on all the wagons, with the exception of one that was being driven by a teamster named Payte. After crossing the summit of the ridge, they dropped down its western slope and rejoined the wagon road in an area where it was traveling west along the south bank of the Carson River.

**September 2001**

During our first trip to this area, Nancy and I reached the Churchill railroad crossing by following a dirt road that leaves US 95A about two and a half miles south of the Carson River. We crossed the railroad tracks and got onto a narrow two-track that headed north, back toward the river. When we reached the end of the ridge, we turned west and followed the south bank of the river for about two and a quarter miles and came to a securely locked gate that prevented any further travel to the west. At that time I was still unaware of the actual location of the ugly hill, and we drove by both its east and west sides twice without realizing it.

**September 2005**

Four years after our first visit, Nancy and I returned to this area again. Now aware of the ugly hill’s actual location, I parked near the railroad crossing and headed west on foot to hike over the ridge. For the first four-tenths of a mile, the route is a fairly gentle slope. The next tenth gets quite steep, and the last tenth is one of the steepest sections to be found on Simpson’s entire route. After crossing the ridge, I dropped down the western slope and got back to the road near the river. From there I turned to the west, and followed the road for another two and a quarter miles to the site of Camp 35-W, climbing over the locked gate along the way. From the campsite I turned back to the east, following the road around the northern tip of the ridge, instead of retracing my steps across the ugly hill. By making this hike, I had managed to travel on nearly half of the expedition’s trail along the south bank of the Carson River. I now had to figure out a way to get to the other half.

After returning home from this trip, I spent some more time studying the maps and aerial photos of the area to the south of the river. I eventually found what appeared to be a narrow road that reached this area from the southeast, and worked its way to the river at a spot that looked like it could be beyond the fenced-in area. In late August of 2007, I decided to make one more try.

**August 2007**

Nancy and I drove south from Fallon on US Highway 95 until we reached Wabuska, where we left the paved road and turned to the west, following the expedition’s trail to the southern end of Adrian Valley. We had been on this section of the route before, but on this day we left it when it turned north through Adrian Valley. The road we wanted turned northwest, and entered the northeastern foothills of the Pine Nut Mountains. The road was narrow and rough, and soon turned really ugly. As it climbed into the hills, it became nothing more than a barely visible track across a ten-mile boulder field. For the rest of the distance to the river, we found it impossible to go any faster than three to five miles an hour. We eventually made it over a high ridge and down the northern slope to the river at a point that, as I had hoped, was just west of the fenced-in area. And sure enough, there was another locked gate that prevented us from going east into the private property. So we headed west, which is what we really wanted to do. The road we were now on was a good two-track, and we soon found ourselves across the river from the site of Camp 36-W. I had previously hiked to this spot from the west, and I knew that the road was blocked by another locked gate about a quarter of a mile away, so we turned around and headed back along the route we had already traveled.

Simpson’s map does not show it, and his report fails to mention it, but there was another wagon road just across the river. This road, along the north bank of the Carson River, was first traveled in 1848 by a small group of former Mormon Battalion members who were traveling from California to Salt Lake City. Leaving from the Placerville area, this group headed eastward into
Middlegate to Genoa

the Sierras, and opened up a new wagon road through Carson Pass. After descending the eastern slope of the Sierras, they followed the Carson River past the future sites of Genoa, Carson City, and Dayton. Just east of the Carson Plains, the river makes a major bend to the east. From this point, the Battalion members continued to follow the river, rather than taking the branch of the California Trail that follows today’s US Highway 50. During the years between 1848 and 1859, there had been some emigrant traffic along the north bank of the Carson River, and it may have been a better road than the one on the south bank. Regardless of whether it was, or was not, a better road, it was out of the expedition’s reach, because they had no way of crossing the swollen river until they reached Pleasant Grove, which was still about eleven miles upstream.

A few months after the expedition traveled through this area, Samuel Bucklands established a ranch and built a bridge at a spot about three miles downstream from where the expedition first reached the river. About a year later, the US Army established a military post on the river’s northern bank. It would appear that with the construction of Buckland’s toll bridge, and the establishment of Fort Churchill, most, if not all, of the wagon traffic would have shifted to the road on the northern side of the river. It seems highly unlikely that any other wagons ever followed the expedition’s route across the ugly hill.

June 10, 1859

June 10, Camp No. 35, Carson River.—
Moved at quarter of 5. Continue westward along south side of Carson River as far as opposite Pleasant Grove, where at 8 o’clock A.M. we arrive. Find the raft ready, made of cottonwood-trees of an old log-house belonging to Mr. Miller, the agent of the California Mail Company at this station, and which he has pulled down for the purpose. This point a good one for ferry or ford; banks on either side low and firm. By 5½ P.M. the wagons and property were rafted across safely, except one wagon, which unfortunately capsized, causing the loss of some $31 belonging to the driver, Payte, (as he said,) and some clothing, also three sets of harness.…Journey to-day, 9 miles.…We have now at Pleasant Grove, for the first time, got into the old Humboldt River and Carson Valley emigrant-road. The California Mail Company have a station here, under the charge of Mr. Miller, who occupies quite a good, weather-boarded house. The grove of cotton-woods near it give the place its name.

William Lee described the crossing of the river in some detail:

It took us all day to get the wagons over. They were taken over on a raft, and unfortunately our wagon was tipped over in crossing, and we came near to losing it. All my bedding and all my clothes in my carpet bag were wet through, taking some time to dry them. The body of the wagon separated from the wheels, which sank to the bottom. But after some trouble they were hauled out. We all had to swim across, sending the animals before us.

Simpson mentioned that at Pleasant Grove they got onto “the old Humboldt River and Carson Valley emigrant-road.” Here he was talking about what has become known as the Carson Route, which is a branch of the California Trail. Having split away from the Truckee Route about sixty miles to the northeast, near the Humboldt Sink, this emigrant road struck the Carson River near Ragtown, then headed west. Leaving the river where it made a bend to the south, the Carson Route went through the small communities of Silver Springs and Stagecoach, and then come back to the river at Pleasant Grove. This was probably the most used variant of the Carson Route, but as mentioned previously, some emigrants remained near the river all the way to today’s Dayton, passing the site of Fort Churchill along the way.

Pleasant Grove was located on the north bank of the Carson River, at the point where the river makes a bend to the east. Chorpenning had probably been using it as a mail station even before he shifted his route in late 1858. John Townley indicates that a trading post was established here in either 1849 or 1850. During the time that it was being operated by Chorpenning, and then by Russell, Majors, and Waddell, the station was known as Miller’s Station, presumably after the Mr. Miller who was in charge when Simpson’s expedition camped here. According
Camp 35-W. On the south bank of the Carson River, about five miles west of US Highway 95 A. The river is in the cottonwood trees. "Three miles more along and up Carson River upon its bank brought us to a good spot on the river, where we encamp in good grass."

June 10, 1859
to Joe Nardone, it was later called Reed’s, and sometimes Ten Mile, but the official name was changed to Clugagis Station sometime after June 1861. Richard Burton mentioned that he spent a few hours here on October 19, 1860: “At Miller’s Station…. Whilst the rain was heavy we sat round the hot stove, eating bread and cheese, sausages and anchovies.”

While Simpson’s party was in the process of rafting across the river, Mr. Von Beck, the expedition’s artist, stood on the south bank and made a sketch. Later, John Young used this sketch to make a watercolor painting. In this watercolor, the river is in the foreground, Miller’s house can be seen in the center, and a small but distinctive peak shows up in the background. During one of my visits to the Pleasant Grove site, I brought along a copy of the painting. Wading across the river, which was about a foot deep that day, I stood on the south bank, looked to the north, and compared the view with the picture. The curve of the riverbank seems to be similar, and a little peak can be seen at exactly the right place. Very little imagination is needed to figure out the place where Mr. Miller’s little house once stood in the field on the north side of the river.

**June 11, 1859**

**June 11, Camp No. 36, Pleasant Grove.**—

_Moved at quarter to 7. Immediately follow up the valley of Carson River, on its north side, the old emigrant-road, which is as well beaten as any in the States; our course, west of south._

Simpson’s map seems to show that after leaving Pleasant Grove, the emigrant road remained fairly close to the river until it reached China Town, which was located somewhere near the central part of what is now the town of Dayton. The trail probably merged with today’s US 50 at about a mile and a half northwest of the town.

*After proceeding 7.4 miles from camp, come to China Town (Dayton), on Carson River. This is a mining town of twelve houses, and contains about fifty Chinese…. At China Town we bear off somewhat from Carson River, one mile bringing us to forks of road; right leads to Johnstown, 1.5 miles off in Gold Cañon.*

Upon leaving China Town, the expedition turned to the west, following the emigrant road past the town’s cemetery. Just west of the cemetery, the trail climbed up a short but fairly steep hill. Near the top of this hill can be found a T-trail post that notes the location of the emigrant road. The inscription on the plaque reads as follows:

**CARSON TRAIL—ROCKY ASCENT**

_We ascend a high hill and had a very rocky road most of the way. Some places nothing but sharp angular rock. The road is not hilly. Though some hollows or ravines in two or three places._

_Byron N. McKinstry Sept. 6 1850_

From this marker, the route continues past a large mine dump, and after another mile and a half, crosses Nevada State Route 341 a little less than a half mile north of US 50.

*Four miles from China Town, cedars 15 to 20 feet high appear on either side of the road on the mountains and in the valley—the first we have seen since leaving the Se-day-e Mountains. Seven and one-half miles farther brings us to Carson City, in Eagle Valley, where, at 5 P.M., we encamp…. Journey, 19 miles._

The old wagon road probably crossed US 50 near the crest of the hill near Mound House. Remaining fairly close to US 50 for another mile, it curved to the west and skirted the north bank of the Carson River near what used to be the town of Empire. From the bend in the river, the expedition traveled southwest, probably crossing diagonally through the Terrace Park subdivision and the residential areas east of Stewart Street and south of US 50, which becomes Williams Street in Carson City. When they reached the area of what is now the intersection of Stewart Street and Carson Street, they camped for the night. A small park with a stream flowing through it can be found at this location today. If there was water in this streambed in 1859, it would have been an excellent spot for a campsite.
Camp 36-W. Carson River, where the expedition made use of a raft to get the wagons across. The expedition's artist made a sketch of this scene (see facing page) which helped the author determine the location. "This point is a good one for ferry or ford; banks on either side low and firm."

June 11, 1859
June 12, 1859

June 12, Camp No. 37, Carson City, Eagle Valley.—Leave Carson City, at quarter past 5. Course southwardly, continuing on the old emigrant-road between the base of the Sierra Nevada, and Carson River. In 3¼ miles cross Clear Creek, a beautifulstream running from the Sierra Nevada into Carson River. Near Clear Creek approach again Carson River, and continue along it about 10 miles to Genoa.40

When they left the Carson City campsite, the expedition traveled in a slightly east-of-south direction, crossing Clear Creek just north of the intersection of Bigelow Drive and Race Track Road. After crossing the stream, the wagon road turned to the southwest, passing the south end of Schultz Drive. Continuing to the southwest, the trail went through some open fields and then began to cross the fairways of the Sunridge Golf Course.

August 2003

There are no roads going through these fields today so they had to be crossed on foot. Parking at the end of Schultz Drive, I walked across an area that appeared as if it would be very boggy during years that are fairly wet. After walking for about a half mile, I came to the northern edge of the golf course. Returning to my SUV, I drove to US 395, and headed south until I reached the entrance to the golf course. Now heading back toward the Clear Creek crossing, I found myself on a road that probably follows the emigrant trail. By following this road, I was able to get back the place where I had turned around during my earlier hike through the open fields.

The old emigrant road and Simpson’s route crossed US Highway 395 near the entrance to the golf course. From there it skirted the southeast corner of the Jack’s Valley Wildlife Management Area, then turned a little more toward the southwest, entering what is now the Sierra-Nevada Golf Ranch, where it disappears.
Camps 37-W and 2-E. The site of these two camps is now a park on the east side of Carson Street (US 395) in Carson City. "At the east foot of the Sierra Nevada we encamp. This camp-ground beautiful; the prospect the most pleasing of any I have seen."

June 12 and 24, 1859
Nancy and I were able to get into this area by turning west from US 395 on Hobo Hot Springs Road. After about a mile and a half, we came to a gate with a No Trespassing sign. Stopping at the gate, I noticed a rancher unloading some hay at a feedlot a short distance away. After a brief conversation, he said that it would be okay to drive past the gate. About a quarter of a mile west of the gate is where the emigrant road turned toward the southwest, and this is where it enters the property of the Sierra-Nevada Golf Ranch. A fence now cuts off the emigrant road, so I parked and started walking. I soon found myself crossing the golf course, and the route I was following took me to the clubhouse where, in the parking lot, I struck up a conversation with a real estate agent whose office was in a small building next to the clubhouse. This gentleman knew about the emigrant road, and informed me that it had gone right through the parking lot, not far from where we were standing. He had never heard of James Simpson.

Reached Genoa at half past 9 a.m. Journey, 12.9 miles… Encamped among some giant pines at the foot of the Sierra Nevada, just upon the southern edge of the town, and on a gushing stream of pure water which courses down from the mountain. Our position is so high on the base of the mountain that we can overlook a large portion of the valley; and a beautiful one it is, fenced off, as it appears, into inclosures, and dotted with cattle. The sheen of the river (Carson), in its present high stage, discovers its course along the valley.

After reaching the settlement of Genoa, the expedition continued through the town and set up camp at a spot that is now a residential neighborhood. The “gushing stream” is now a concrete-lined channel.

The expedition’s arrival at Genoa did not go unnoticed. This was where John Reese lived, and it is quite likely that he had gotten there ahead of the main party. The citizens of the town were waiting, and as the expedition approached, they fired off a thirteen-gun salute and raised the US flag. Shortly after his arrival in Genoa, Simpson was visited by Major Frederick Dodge, the Indian agent for the region. Soon after that, Simpson received a telegram from Colonel Frederick Bee, the president of the Placerville and Saint Joseph Telegraph Company, asking if the new route could be used for a telegraph line.
While the other members of his command remained in camp at Genoa, Simpson made a hurried trip to San Francisco. He was accompanied by Major Dodge, and they left Genoa mounted on mules. After crossing the summit of the Sierra Nevada, they dropped down the western slope to Lake Valley, where they stopped for lunch at Chorpenning’s mail station. Here Simpson became acquainted with one of the most colorful characters of the region.

At the mail-station met Mr. T. A. Thompson, the celebrated Norwegian, who carried the mail across the Sierra Nevada, on snow-shoes, from about the middle of last April to fore part of May. He represents the snow to have been, in places where he had to go, 10 feet deep.... Mr. Thompson showed me how he walked on his snow-shoes last winter."

Although Simpson used the initials T. A. rather than J. A., there is little doubt that he was talking about the legendary “Snowshoe” Thompson. John Thompson had become a local hero when he began using skis, then known as snowshoes, to carry the mail across the Sierras during the winter months. Thompson must have begun to travel with Simpson and Dodge, because Simpson mentioned that after leaving Lake Valley, Thompson had pointed out several interesting sights, including Lake Bigler, which is now known as Lake Tahoe.

The party spent the night at a place Simpson called Barry’s, indicating that it was on the South Fork of the American River. The next day they went through Placerville, where Simpson purchased some supplies for the expedition and arranged for them to be hauled over the mountains to Genoa. Leaving the mules in Placerville, Simpson and Dodge traveled by stagecoach to Folsom,
where they boarded a railroad car for the remainder of the trip to Sacramento. From there, they found passage on the *Eclipse*, a river steamer that Simpson compared favorably to “our Mississippi boats.” Reaching San Francisco on the evening of June 17, Simpson checked into the International Hotel. He spent the next day visiting a large open market and calling on a number of friends, most of whom were Army officers.

Before leaving for San Francisco, Simpson had given instructions to Lieutenants Smith and Putnam to continue making astronomical observations, and for Putnam to take a look at a couple of roads that went into the Sierra Nevada. Other than this, Simpson did not say anything about what the members of the expedition did while he was on this trip. William Lee wrote in his journal that on June 18, he and Charles McCarthy took a trip to “Lake Biljer” (Bigler). They traveled, as usual, on mule back, and followed “Dagget’s Trail,” which was one of the roads that Simpson had instructed Lieutenant Putnam to explore.

On June 19, Simpson and Dodge left San Francisco, and began their trip back to Genoa. During this journey, they rode from Placerville to Lake Valley in an ambulance that belonged to Dodge, and the driver was Snowshoe Thompson. The ambulance was scheduled to stop overnight in Lake Valley, but Simpson was getting anxious to get back to Genoa, so he found a ride in a mail stage that left at 3:00 a.m. The driver of this stage, who Simpson identified only as “a famous whip,” was still very much under the influence of a night of carousing, and this ride proved to be the most dangerous event of the entire expedition. Just before reaching the summit of Luther Pass, the inebriated driver lost control of the stage and it tipped over. Fortunately for the passengers, just minutes before the accident occurred, Simpson had suggested that it might be helpful if they all got out of the coach and walked across the steepest part of the pass. They were walking when the coach went off the road and rolled. The bad news was that the tongue of the wagon was broken, and it would not be going anywhere until it had been repaired. After about an hour, the reliable Major Dodge showed up in his ambulance and transported the stranded passengers to Genoa.

Simpson arrived back at Genoa sometime during the day on June 23. The following morning the expedition began its journey back to Camp Floyd.