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
Eight

Smith Creek Valley to Steptoe Valley

Camp 10-E. Near the western edge of Smith Creek Valley: “reach Kirby Smith’s Creek, which we follow into Woodruff Valley, and continuing along creek 3.3 miles farther, encamp on it.”

July 5, 1859
July 5, Camp No. 10, Smith’s Creek.—Decamped at 20 minutes after 5. Course north of east, directly toward our old pass between Woodruff and Reese Valleys [Smith Creek Summit]. In 3.7 miles get into our outward route, and follow it till near Reese’s River, where we leave it to the left, and encamp on river, about 2 miles above old Camp No. 25....Day’s travel, 20.8 miles.

Although Simpson reported that they started out by heading somewhat north of east, they probably traveled almost due east at first. This would have had them coming to their outbound route at about three and a half miles. Today there is no evidence of a trail for the first part of this route, but at about a mile from camp, their route may have joined a faint trail that can be seen on aerial photos of this area. This route would have crossed Old Overland Road, which is heading southeast at this point but which soon turns to the northeast. The expedition’s route would have cut across the angle and come back to the road about two miles northeast of Camp 26-W. This would be where they rejoined their outbound route. Backtracking along the outbound route, the expedition crossed the dry lakebed, climbed over Smith Creek Summit, and dropped down into Reese River Valley. Leaving their earlier trail when it neared the river, they set up camp on the river’s west bank, about three-quarters of a mile south of US 50. Simpson mentioned that this camp was about two miles from where they had camped on the river during the outbound trip. When I measure between Camp 11-E and Camp 25-W, I get 2.4 miles.

July 6, 1859

July 6, Camp No. 11, Reese River.—Move at 5 A.M....About a mile below camp cross Reese’s River: ford, miry; not near so good as that used on outward route. In 5 miles more join outward route and continue on it through Simpson’s Pass [Emigrant Pass] and park in the Per-ree-ah Mountains [Toiyabe Range] to about a mile below the lake, where we encamp in the cañon on Won-a-ho-no-pe Creek [Willow Creek]. Journey, 16.5 miles.

Six weeks earlier, the expedition had crossed the Reese River Valley while traveling almost due west. Then, after fording the river, they turned to the south along its western bank. During the return trip, Simpson must have decided that they could save some distance by cutting off the angle that the outbound trail had made while traveling across the valley. On this day, after leaving camp, the expedition followed the river in a northerly direction along its western bank for about a mile, then crossed to its eastern side. This crossing was about a quarter mile south of today’s US 50 bridge. Heading northeast from the ford, they crossed today’s highway about a quarter mile east of the bridge.

There is no way to drive to the site of Camp 11-E, but I have walked to this area once from the Pony Express Trail to the west of the campsite, and twice from US 50. During the first two trips, I had not yet begun to use my GPS, nor was I very certain about the site’s exact location. The last time I hiked to this area was in 2005. I had my GPS receiver, and I was able to go directly to the location of the campsite. During this hike, I left US 50 near the bridge and walked upstream along the west bank of the river. On my way back I crossed the stream where the expedition made its eastbound ford. I then followed the expedition’s route until it crosses US 50.

At six miles from camp, the expedition rejoined its outbound trail and turned almost due east toward the Toiyabe Mountains. Backtracking along their previous route, they crossed Emigrant Pass and dropped down into Simpson Park. After crossing the length of the park, they made camp for the night near the upper end of Simpson Park Canyon.

Simpson’s map shows only one campsite symbol in the Simpson Park area, and it is labeled with the numbers 24 and 12. This makes it appear that the expedition camped at the same spot during both the outbound and the return trips, but other items of information indicate that the camps were at different locations. During the outbound trip, Simpson stated in a couple of places that Camp 24-W was on the shore of the lake. On the return trip, he indicated that Camp 12-E was about a mile below the lake. The table of distances indicates that the
Camp 11-E. On the west bank of the Reese River, about a mile south of US Highway 50: "Get onto our outward route, and follow it till near Reese’s River, where we leave it to the left, and encamp on river, about 2 miles above old Camp No. 25."

July 6, 1859
Camp 12-E. In Simpson Park, looking south toward the upper end of Simpson Park Canyon. The campsite was probably on the creek bank, near the center of the photo: "join outward route and continue on it . . . to about a mile below the lake, where we encamp in the cañon on Won-a-ho-no-pe Creek."

JULY 7, 1859
westbound camp was 4.7 miles from the summit of Emigrant Pass, while it shows the eastbound camp as being 5.3 miles from the pass. William Lee indicated that the camps were separated by at least some distance when he said the eastbound campsite was “on Simpson’s River near our camp of May 27th.” After taking all of this into consideration, I have placed the eastbound campsite near the southern edge of Simpson Park. Townley believes that this was the location of the Simpson Park Pony Express and Overland Stage stations. The apparent discrepancy between the map and the other information about the locations of the two campsites is clearly due to the scale of the map. The mapmaker must have decided that it would be better to show one symbol rather than to crowd two symbols next to each other.

July 7, 1859

July 7, Camp No. 12, Won-a-ho-no-pe Creek Cañon.—Decamped at 6.15 o’clock. Continue down the Won-a-ho-no-pe Cañon [Simpson Park Canyon]…. After journeying 4.8 miles, at 9 A.M. encamp at spring near mouth of cañon and sink of creek. Make only this short march so as to be enabled to reach Wons-in-dam-me Creek [the Willow Creek of Kobeh Valley] to-morrow.

IN THE TEXT of the report, Simpson does not say whether the campsite was on the east or the west side of the stream. On his map, the symbol for the camp is on the west bank, but that needs to be scrutinized carefully, because the map also has the symbol for Camp 23-W on the east bank, which it very clearly was not. In his description of the expedition’s travels on May 26, Simpson indicated that they were traveling in a northwesterly direction along the east bank of the creek. When they came to the mouth of the canyon, they crossed the stream, went about a quarter of a mile farther, and set up camp on the west bank. He did say, however, that the eastbound camp was in the mouth of the canyon, and near a spring. Today, there is only one spring in this area, and it is on the west bank of the creek, just below Wes Parson’s ranch house. Because of the nature of the terrain, it appears to me that as the expedition approached the mouth of the canyon, they were probably traveling along the west bank of the stream, which would have taken them right past Camp 23-W. Another tenth of a mile would have brought them to the spring where they set up their camp for the night. William Lee’s journal indicates that during this day they “Marched four and twelve-thirteenth miles and came to camp at mouth of canyon near our camp of May 26th.”

July 8, 1859

July 8, Camp No. 13, mouth of Won-a-ho-no-pe Cañon [Simpson Park Canyon].—Leave outward track, and taking a short cut, join it again in 3.1 miles. Continue on it 1.3 miles, and then leaving it and taking another short cut through a good pass in the Pah-re-ah range [Toquima Mountains], join it again in 18 miles, within 1.3 miles of our old Camp 21, on Wons-in-dam-me Creek [Willow Creek, Kobeh Valley] where we again encamp. Journey 25.4 miles.

THE FIRST OF THE TWO shortcuts that the expedition took this day served only to cut off a bend in the creek. This route took them in a straight line toward Cape Horn, rather than following the creek, which they had done during the outbound journey. After traveling three miles, they crossed to the east side of the creek, and after another mile, they rejoined their outbound route. Later on, the stage road would follow this shortcut. It appears that Simpson made a mileage error when he said they rejoined their outbound route after 3.1 miles; the actual distance would have been closer to 4.5 miles.

The second shortcut involved a much longer distance, and by taking it, they bypassed Hickison Summit and crossed the Toquima Mountains through a pass that is located about three miles farther to the south.

August 2000

I spent almost a full day in my efforts to travel the route of this second shortcut. I arrived in this area late in the evening, and camped overnight near the ruins of the Cape Horn stage station. When morning came, I spent a couple of hours
Camp 13-E. Just below Wes Parson’s ranch house in the mouth of Simpson Park Canyon. “After journeying 4.8 miles, encamp at spring near mouth of cañon and sink of creek.”

July 8, 1859
searching for indications of the trail in the area just south of US 50, but was unable to find anything. Deciding to try another area, I headed east on US 50 for about four miles, then turned south on a fairly well-traveled dirt road that leads to a place called Pete’s Well. About a mile south of US 50, I came to an abandoned two-track trail that is marked as “jeep trail” on my map. Although the map shows that this trail only goes eastward from the Pete’s Well road, I found that it actually crosses the road and continues to the west. I decided to follow it in that direction first. After traveling about a mile and a half, I came to the top of a low ridge, from which I could see the faint track continuing into the valley and heading toward Cape Horn. Making my way down off the ridge, I continued to the west for about a mile before a dense growth of sagebrush prevented me from driving any farther.

Returning to the road that leads to Pete’s Well, I crossed it and continued eastward along the seldom-used two-track. This road turned out to be a real challenge. Not that it was dangerous in any way, but it did require a great deal of patience. I eventually made it over the summit of the Toquima Mountains and down the eastern slope into Monitor Valley. As I was heading down the slope, I could see that the road continued in an easterly direction across the valley, but I soon found that I could not follow it. At the point where the old road crosses Stoneberger Creek, a deep wash has made it impassable for vehicles. Turning back from this wash, I got onto a well-traveled dirt road and headed north, reaching US 50 near the eastern base of Hickison Summit. Upon reaching the highway, I drove east for about four miles, then turned south again on the Grimes Ranch Road. When I reached the deserted ranch site, I was back on Simpson’s route again. I was hoping to be able to follow the old road back to Stoneberger Creek, but found that a new, and ungated, fence has been built across the old road. Heading to the east instead, I was able to follow the old road to the Willow Creek Ranch, where the expedition camped for the night. This camp was at the same location as Camp 21-W, where they had spent the night of May 24.

At the time that I was traveling this section of Simpson’s return trail, I was completely unaware that it was also the route of the early Lincoln Highway. It was some time later that I found that the 1924 edition of The Complete Official Road Guide of the Lincoln Highway lists “The Willows Ranch” and “Ford Grimes Ranch” as checkpoints. There is also some evidence that seems to indicate that it was this route over the Toquima Mountains that earned the nickname of “Ford’s Defeat.” In 1925, construction began on a new section of the Lincoln Highway farther to the north. This new road crossed Hickison Summit at the same place that the Simpson expedition crossed it during the outbound journey. A caption on a photograph of the new road at Hickison Summit states that it had been constructed to replace Ford’s Defeat, which, it follows, means that Ford’s Defeat was somewhere other than Hickison Summit, and it can probably be safe to conclude that it was on the ridge of the Toquima Mountains, about three miles to the south. The new Lincoln Highway route would become US 50, and the old road was essentially abandoned.

May 2003

The washout at Stoneberger Creek, and the new fence at Grimes Ranch, meant that a stretch of about five miles could not be accessed in a vehicle, so three years later I was back in Monitor Valley, prepared for a long walk. Leaving my SUV on the west side of the dry streambed of Stoneberger Creek, I crossed the wash on foot and headed eastward toward Grimes Ranch. For the entire distance, I found myself walking along a road that could be easily driven if only I could have gotten past the wash or the fence. As I was going through a low pass in the Grimes Hills, I found one of the metal signposts that had been used to mark the route of the Lincoln Highway during the early 1920s.

July 9, 1859

July 9, Camp No. 14, Wons-in-dam-me (or Antelope) Creek [Willow Creek].—Moved at 7.… After proceeding on outward route 1.6 miles, we diverge to left slightly around some foot-hills [Twin Spring Hills], and in 5.1 miles come to a couple of springs, which I call Twin Springs.
Looking east from the road to Pete’s Well toward the Toquima Mountains. The expedition went through the pass near the center of the photo. This route was later used by the early Lincoln Highway, and the pass earned the nickname of “Ford’s Defeat.”

July 9, 1859
As they left camp that morning, the expedition headed in a northeasterly direction, back-tracking along their outbound trail. A well-traveled two-track follows this route today, but at about one mile from the ranch, it begins to turn toward the southeast. The older route, now nothing more than a faint track, continues straight ahead for another half mile, then begins to turn toward the north. After traveling 1.6 miles from the campsite, the expedition left the outbound trail and veered off in a more northerly direction. Continuing along the western base of the Twin Spring Hills, the expedition crossed the route of US 50 and came to Twin Springs.

**August 2000**

During my first visit to this area, I drove right by the first fork without noticing it. After following the well-used road for a couple more miles, I realized that it was leading me too far to the south so I stopped and turned around. As I was heading back toward Willow Creek Ranch, I found the abandoned road and began to follow it. After about a mile, I came to an ungated fence and was forced to turn around again and return to the ranch. From there I headed north for a couple of miles and got onto another well-traveled road that headed east. I followed that road for two miles and found where the abandoned road that was the expedition’s route crossed it. Turning north onto the abandoned road, I followed it for about a mile, but because I did not know if it would take me all the way to US 50, and because it was getting quite late in the day, I turned around once more and left the area.

**May 2003**

Three years after finding the southern end of the section of the trail that skirts the western base of Twin Springs Hills, I came back to cover the northern section. Since I had been unable to find a way to drive into this area from the north, I parked on the side of US 50 near Twin Springs, and hiked the four miles of the old road to the spot where I had been in 2000. As I hiked along the abandoned road, it was very apparent that it had seen a lot of traffic in the past. In some places, the roadbed is from two to three feet lower than the surrounding terrain. In many places the sides of the road are littered with rusty cans and broken glass.

*Two miles further we cross our old road, and leave it, not to get into it again, probably, until near Camp Floyd. One mile further reach a spring, which I call Fountain Spring, on account of its welling up like a fountain. Here is an abundance of water of good quality, but the grass is scant and alkaline. There are, however, two or three acres of rush-grass about it, which would answer for a small party....Six and three-tenths miles further across the valley (Ko-bah) we come to a creek, which, on account of the color of the water, I call Clay Creek [Slough Creek]. The water exists in holes, but is pronounced constant by the Indians. There is a great deal of grass on different portions of it. Train got into camp at half past 2....Journey 16.1 miles.*

At Twin Springs, the expedition turned to the east and began paralleling US 50 across the southern end of Kobeh Valley. The place where they crossed their outbound trail was probably just a little less than two miles from Twin Springs, and it is only another half mile to where two artesian wells can be found today. Simpson’s Fountain Spring was probably somewhere near these wells. For the next several miles, their trail was never more than a half mile from today’s highway. Continuing east from Fountain Springs, the expedition’s route followed an abandoned roadbed that was used for a time by the Lincoln Highway. Re-crossing US 50 near the southern base of Lone Mountain, the expedition made camp on the north bank of Slough Creek, a short distance upstream from where it enters a bend to the north. Lone Mountain is a very large knoll located near the southeast corner of Kobeh Valley. Simpson named it Mount Lowery, in honor of Walter Lowery, the consumptive newspaper correspondent who had joined the expedition at Genoa.

**July 10, 1859**

**July 10, Camp No. 15, Clay Creek, Ko-bah Valley.**—Intending to travel only about 5 miles to reach a better camp-ground, we did not move
The expedition began this day’s march by fording Slough Creek at a point just east of the campsite. From the ford, they moved toward the northeast, climbed to the top of the hill, and merged with US 50. There is good evidence of an abandoned road leading from the campsite to the top of the hill, and it is quite probable that it was used by the early Lincoln Highway. After traveling a little over five miles, they came to a small group of springs, which Simpson called Lee’s Springs after his young assistant, William Lee. During the Lincoln Highway period, this place was known as the Hay Ranch. When the expedition reached these springs, they found two members of the scouting party who, much to Simpson’s displeasure, reported that they had been unable to find a passable route to the east.

This decision to go back to the previous night’s campsite illustrates once again that Simpson’s objective was not simply to travel through the area, but to establish the best route for future travelers to follow. When he made his decision to go back to the previous campsite, he was thinking that the road would be turning to the north, probably along the eastern base of Lone Mountain, rather than going west to Lee’s Springs. He took the expedition back to the Slough Creek campsite so that when they started toward Telegraph Canyon, they would be taking the most direct route across Kobeh Valley. But Simpson was not the sort of person who gave up easily, and even after making the decision to return to their previous campsite, he was still thinking about his plan to return to Camp Floyd by a route that would be well south of his outbound route.

After returning to camp, I called Stevenson again, and had another talk with him and Mr. Reese about the prospect ahead. He (Stevenson) is not so decided about the new pass in the We-a-bah Mountains [Diamond Mountains] being so impracticable as he this morning represented it. I have, therefore, some little hope that we may yet, by a more thorough examination, get through the mountains ahead of us, without being forced to take our old road through Cho-kup’s Pass. I have accordingly ordered Mr. Reese, Stevenson, Lambert, and Private Collamer, with two pack-animals and 10 day’s provisions, to go again forward and make a more thorough and conclusive examination of the passes. If a practicable pass is found Collamer is immediately to return and report the fact.

One has to wonder what was said during this late-night discussion. Earlier that morning, Stevenson and the other guides seemed to be quite convinced that there was no way to get the wagons through the mountains that were directly to the east. But before this discussion was over, probably sometime around midnight, Stevenson had changed his mind and was ready to concede that there just might be a useable pass in the southern part of the Diamond Mountains. In other words, he had waffled. So what was this whole situation really about? Could it have been that the guides simply did not like the idea of returning by a different route? Were they attempting to manipulate Simpson into getting back onto the outbound trail? If so, their scheme did not work, because Simpson remained steadfast in his determination to find a southern route.

Whatever the reason for the guides’ apparent reluctance to find a new route, Simpson did persuade them to look again. They left early the next morning, with two pack mules and provisions for ten days. The other members of the expedition
Camp 15-E. On the north bank of Slough Creek, about one hundred yards south of US 50. The stream is marked by the lighter horizontal line across the center of the photo. “We come to a creek, which, on account of the color of the water, I call Clay Creek.”

JULY 10 AND 12, 1859
spent that day in camp. Simpson spent the day making a number of astronomical observations and waiting impatiently for some word from the scouts. None came during the day, but probably well after he had turned in for the night, he was roused out with some good news.

**JULY 12, 1859**

**JULY 12, Camp No. 15, Clay Creek [Slough Creek].—**Private Collamer came in just after 12 o’clock, (midnight,) and reported to our joy, a practicable pass in the range ahead of us, on the proposed course of our new return-route. The pass had been found by Ute Pete, who, though he had been four days and three nights without food except roots, yet had been the instrument of finding us a pass, and thus enabling us to keep on our course.¹⁶

A few hours later, shortly after daybreak, Simpson had the expedition headed east again.

*Retrace our steps to Lee’s Springs, 5.2 miles, and turning to the right around the point of some low rolling hills, and threading a narrow valley thickly clothed with different kinds of grass of luxuriant growth, in 2.5 miles get into a plain cañon or pass [Devil’s Gate] of Colonel Cooper’s range which in 1.5 miles, leads us into Pah-hun-nu-pe Valley [Diamond Valley]. The rocks of this cañon are quite fine, on account of their abrupt height and well-defined stratification....In consequence of the number of swallows which build their nests in its walls, I call it Swallow Cañon.*¹⁷

The expedition returned to Lee’s Springs along the same trail they had used two days earlier. After passing the springs, they came to Slough Creek again and followed it through what Simpson called Swallow Canyon, but is now known as Devil’s Gate.

*Leaving this cañon we cross Pah-hun-nu-pe Valley [Diamond Valley], the cross range of mountains closing it at the south being about 5 miles distant....Six miles from mouth of Swallow Cañon brings us to the sink of a fine creek [Simpson Creek], which comes from the pass through the We-a-bah Mountains [Diamond Mountains] to which we are tending, which creek I call after Mr. Charles S. McCarthy, the indefatigable taxidermist of the party. We turn southwestwardly up along this creek, and in 2.1 miles, at 1.15, reach a locality where, amid excellent and super abundant hill and bottom grass and good wood fuel, we encamp....Road, to-day, excellent; journey 17.3 miles.*¹⁸

After passing through Devil’s Gate, the expedition continued in a straight line in an easterly direction across the southern end of Diamond Valley. Today’s US 50 veers to the southeast from Devil’s Gate, but the early Lincoln Highway traveled the same straight line that the expedition followed. Aerial photos from the late 1990s show the trace of an old road cutting through the sagebrush in the western portion of the valley, but in 2002, this old trail was destroyed when this area was plowed for farmland expansion. Near the center of the valley, the old road can still be seen, but it has been abandoned.

Nearing the eastern side of the valley, the expedition came to a small creek that was flowing in a slightly west-of-north direction. Here they turned and began to follow the creek upstream. Although Simpson reported that they followed the creek in a “southwestwardly” direction, they were actually heading a little to the east of south. After following the stream for a couple of miles, they made camp for the night at a point about three miles northeast of the town of Eureka. Simpson named the stream after the expedition’s taxidermist, but within a few years it had become known as Simpson Creek.

**JULY 13, 1859**

**JULY 13, Camp No. 16, McCarthy’s Creek [Simpson Creek], We-a-bah Mountains.—**Decamped at 5 minutes of 5. Continue up McCarthy’s Creek....The creek continues to within a mile of summit, which is 6.2 miles from last camp. Pass rocky near summit; grade all the way up very good....We find the descent from pass to valley, east side of We-a-bah range, steeper than we have just come up.*¹⁹
Camp 16-E. On Simpson Creek, northeast of the town of Eureka. “We turn southwestwardly up along this creek, and . . . reach a locality where, amid excellent and super-abundant hill and bottom grass and good wood fuel, we encamp.”

July 13, 1859
**August 2001**

When I made my first attempt to follow the expedition’s trail across the south end of the Diamond Mountains, I missed it completely. I started into the mountains on a well-traveled dirt road, and was well over halfway to the top of the ridge before I realized that I had been traveling in the wrong direction for several miles. Turning around and heading back down the mountain, I was still unable to find the correct canyon. After a while I gave up and went back up the mountain, crossing Newark Summit, and dropping down into Newark Valley. I later learned that my problem was that I had not started looking soon enough. During my next trip to the Eureka side of the mountains, I discovered that the canyon I was looking for begins before the road I had been traveling on even enters the mountains.

**July 2002**

During this trip, I approached the Diamond Mountains from the east. This time I was equipped with my new GPS receiver, and I had decided to see if I could locate the pass from the eastern side. I found a road that led toward the correct pass, and was doing just fine until I ran into a securely locked gate about a mile short of the summit. As it was late in the afternoon and I needed to get home that night, I left the area without doing any additional exploring.

**August 2002**

Nancy was with me on this trip, and we approached the Diamond Mountains from the western side. With the aid of my GPS receiver, I was able to locate the mouth of the correct canyon this time. It was at the very bottom of the mountain, where the main road turns to the east to go over the summit, but once again we were stopped by a locked gate. We drove back to Eureka and stopped at the county courthouse and made some inquiries. I learned that the western gate was under the control of a rancher named James Baumann, whose residence was near the mouth of the canyon. We had already driven by the Baumann place twice, and when we went back, there was no answer to my knock on the door.

After returning home, I made a telephone call and talked to Mr. Baumann’s wife, Vera. I explained a little about my research and told her what I was trying to do. She seemed very interested and said she would talk to her husband about it. I followed up on the phone call with a letter, but time went by and I received no response. About a year later, I called again and Mrs. Baumann apologized for not getting back to me, explaining that there had been a couple of deaths in their families, and they had simply not gotten around to it. She hastened to add that there would be no problem in letting me travel up the canyon, and, as a matter of fact, the gates were all unlocked at that time because of a big power-line construction project that was taking place in the canyon.

**October 2003**

Two days after my telephone call, Nancy and I made another trip to Eureka. After checking into the motel, we drove past the Baumann ranch to Simpson Canyon, and got onto the dirt road that follows Simpson’s route across the Diamond Mountains. Part of the time we were traveling on an essentially abandoned two-track, and part of the time on a well-used construction road. We made it over the summit and down the eastern slope to the Pinto Creek Ranch, where we turned around and returned to Eureka.

About a mile from summit strike a small, swift mountain stream [Pinto Creek]; 3 feet wide, ¼ deep, which we follow down into main valley [Newark Valley], which I call after Maj. Don Carlos Buell, assistant adjutant general…. The stream I call after Capt. Thomas H. Neill, Fifth Infantry. Grass continues abundant in the cañon of this stream. At mouth of cañon, about 1.25 miles from summit, turn northwardly up west side of Buell Valley.

There appears to be a minor discrepancy between Simpson’s description of the route down the eastern side of the mountain and what is shown on his map. In the report, he stated that at about a mile below the summit they came to a stream, and then followed it until they reached the valley. But his map shows his trail crossing the stream at a right angle. Modern maps show a stream called Pinto Creek in this area, and there can be little
doubt that Pinto Creek and Simpson’s Neill’s Creek are one and the same. It also appears to me that the expedition would have no choice but to follow the creek down the canyon for close to a mile before being able to leave it at the mouth of the canyon. This would have been just above today’s Pinto Creek Ranch, where, after crossing the creek, they could have made a turn to the northeast. Today a utility road for the power line crosses Pinto Creek at about the spot where the expedition reached the stream.

**July 2005**

I wanted to check out some additional information that I had noticed while studying aerial photos of the Pinto Creek area. Nancy and I drove to the Pinto Creek Ranch, and then followed the utility road until we came to the creek about a mile above the ranch. Parking at this spot, I began hiking downstream. I crossed the creek and immediately found myself on an abandoned roadbed. This old road follows the west bank of the creek until it reaches the mouth of the canyon just above the ranch. This was exactly the route that I felt the expedition would have used. It would be my guess that the old road was abandoned when the power company cut the utility road into the north side of the canyon.

*Turn northwardly up west side of Buell Valley through an extensive grove of cedars, and in 7.9 miles reach a small stream which I call Bluff Creek on account of the imposing bluffs of the cañon through which it debouches from the We-a-bah range [Diamond Mountains] into the valley. We encamp on this creek at quarter of 1 o’clock, after a journey of 15.5 miles.*

The stream that Simpson called Bluff Creek must have been the stream that flows out of Water Canyon, which is located on the eastern side of the Diamond Mountains, about twelve miles north of US 50. The campsite was probably about a quarter mile east of State Route 892, on the south bank of the usually dry streambed. Simpson also remarked that there was another small stream about three-quarters of a mile to the north of the camp, which may have been the stream that flows out of Sadler Canyon.

**July 14, 1859**

**July 14, Camp No. 17, Bluff Creek [Water Creek].—Raised camp at 10 minutes of 5. Strike eastward across Buell Valley [Newark Valley]…. In 6.4 miles reach a point in mid-valley, where I put a ☞ pointing to mouth of Neill’s Cañon, as follows:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TO GOOD CAMP AND ROAD, 8 MILES.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(A Short cut)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*By this cut-off about 6 miles can be saved.*

Although Simpson said they began the day’s march by heading eastwardly, his map shows that they actually started out by traveling in more of a southeasterly direction. His placement of the sign along the trail once again makes it clear that he was fully expecting that westbound travelers would soon be following his route. His purpose in erecting the sign was to let these travelers know that they would be better off to ignore the trail he had made from Water Canyon, and head straight to Pinto Creek. This raises a question however. If the lower end of Pinto Creek was such a good place to camp, why had Simpson taken the expedition all the way north to Water Canyon?

The journal of Charles Tuttle, one of the few emigrants known to have traveled Simpson’s return route through western Utah and eastern Nevada, indicates that his party reached “Neill’s Creek” on August 21, 1869. He mentioned nothing about the sign, but it seems quite likely that the small group that he was with passed by it and took the shortcut to the Pinto Creek area. On the other hand, a few days later, on August 26, the Edward James Mathews party passed the place where the sign had been erected and either failed to see it, or simply ignored it. Instead of taking the shortcut to Pinto Creek, this group of emigrants turned northwest and followed the expedition’s trail to Water Canyon. Mathews called this stream Bluff Creek, the name that Simpson had used.
Camp 17-E. Water Canyon, on the east side of the Diamond Mountains: “reach a small stream, which I call Bluff Creek, on account of the imposing bluffs of the cañon, through which it debouches from the We-a-bah range.”

July 14, 1859
Looking west toward the Diamond Mountains from the spot where Simpson erected a sign for future travelers: “reach a point in mid-valley where I put up a (sign) pointing to mouth of Neill’s Cañon.” Water Canyon is the cleft in the mountain slightly to the right of center.

October 2002

By plotting what seemed to be the most likely route across Newark Valley, I was able to determine the approximate latitude and longitude of the place where the sign had been erected. On a brisk October morning, I left US 50 at the western base of Little Antelope Summit and headed north on a well-traveled dirt road. At nine miles from the highway, I came to a seldom-used two-track and turned to the southwest. I was now on Simpson’s route. After driving six miles in a perfectly straight line, I came to the spot that I felt was the site where the sign had been erected. It turned out to be near the northwest corner of a good-sized knoll that rises abruptly from the valley floor. From this spot, the two-track turned to the south, heading in a direction that I did not want to go. I did a little scouting around, but was unable to find any road or trail heading toward Water Canyon, so I put on my hiking boots and set off on foot across the western part of Newark Valley. When I reached State Route 892 near the mouth of Water Canyon, I turned around and retraced my steps to where I had left my SUV. This is fairly level country, and it would have presented no difficulties for the wagons. The only exception to this may have been a fairly deep wash, about a mile west of the sign site. However, the soil in this area is all lakebed silt, and is very soft. A few minutes of pick-and-shovel work by the troopers would have gotten the wagons across this wash. After erecting the sign, the expedition turned to the northeast and continued across Newark Valley toward a pass in a low ridge known as Dry Mountain.

Proceeding 6.7 miles farther, we commence going up pass over a low ridge dividing Buell Valley from the adjoining valley lying east of it which I call Phelps Valley [Long Valley], after Capt. John W. Phelps, Fourth Artillery. In 1.8 miles reach summit by a gentle grade, and in 1 mile east foot, also by an easy descent. Then striking northeastwardly, 8.1 miles across Phelps Valley, brings us
to the west foot of the Too-muntz range of mountains [Butte Mountains], dividing Phelps Valley from Butte Valley.⁵⁵

**July 2001**

A little over a year before making the hike from the sign site to Water Canyon, I had driven the expedition’s route going east from the eastern side of Newark Valley. Just as I had done on my way to the sign site in October of 2002, I drove north on the well-traveled dirt road that leaves US 50 at the western base of Little Antelope Summit. After driving the same nine miles, I came to where the expedition’s route crosses the road. Turning to the east this time, I soon began to climb into the foothills of Dry Mountain. After dropping down the eastern side of this low mountain, the road continues in a slightly north-of-east direction across the southern end of Long Valley. Near the eastern side of the valley the old trail crosses White Pine County Road Number 3, which leads from US 50 to Ruby Valley.

*Ascending this range [Butte Mountains] 8.3 miles, by an excellent grade through a winding cañon, we attained the summit of the pass, a quarter of a mile below which, on east side, we encamp, at the foot of a conspicuous bluff called by the Indians, on account of its dark basaltic color, Black Head, or Too-muntz Mountain [Sugarloaf]. Here is an icy-cold spring, and about half a mile farther down, or to the east, a small stream to which we drive our stock. Good grass in vicinity. The spring I call Summit Spring.… The journey has been 32.8 miles, too long a day’s travel, but necessary to get water. Road good. Train reached camp at 8.30 P.M.⁵⁶*

The expedition continued almost due east from the county road, got into Long Valley Canyon, climbed up and over the summit, and made camp at Summit Spring. They remained at this campsite for an extra day while the guides went ahead to look for water. While they were waiting, Simpson hiked to the tops of two nearby peaks to make observations. One of these hikes probably took him to the top of the bluff that the local Indians called Black Head, and which is now known as Sugarloaf.

**July 16, 1859**

*July 16, Camp No. 18, Summit Spring, Too-muntz Mountain range [Butte Mountains].—Move at 5, and continue eastwardly down cañon to Butte Valley. In 1 mile from camp pass a fine gushing spring, which gives rise to the small stream referred to before, which after running a third of a mile, sinks. This spring, creek, and cañon [Thirty-Mile Wash] I call after Pete, the Ute Indian, who has been of so much service to us in our explorations.… In three-quarters of a mile from Pete’s Spring reach mouth of cañon by gentle descent, and in 10.9 miles more cross Butte Valley, with low range of mountains, 5 miles off, limiting it at the south, and strike a stream of pure cold water [Combs Creek] which I call after Dr. Garland Hurt, the late accomplished Indian agent for the Ute Indians.⁵⁷*

**Today** a well-traveled dirt road goes past Summit Spring, heading northeast, then drops into the southern end of Butte Valley. In a little less than a mile, the road passes Thirty-Mile Ranch, where the spring that Simpson named for the Indian guide can be seen at the bottom of a steep hill. After another mile, the road forks and Simpson’s route turns to the east. In another three-quarters of a mile, the main road begins a turn to the southeast, while the expedition’s trail continues to the east on a seldom-used two-track that skirts the southern base of an isolated knoll known as Red Pepper Butte. When the expedition reached the eastern side of this knoll, they turned slightly to the south and headed across the sagebrush flats of the southern part of Butte Valley. Reaching the eastern side of the valley, they came to Combs Creek, which Simpson called Hurt’s Creek, and began following it upstream into the Egan Mountains.

**August 2001**

I left US 50 near the western edge of Jake’s Valley and headed north on Long Valley Road. After driving about sixteen miles, I turned east on Simpson’s trail, and followed it past Summit Spring and the south side of Red Pepper Butte. I then spent the better part of an afternoon in a
Camp 18-E. Summit Spring, near the southern end of the Butte Mountains. “Here is an icy-cold spring, and about half a mile farther down . . . a small stream to which we drive our stock . . . The spring I call Summit Spring.”

July 16, 1859
fruitless attempt to find where the trail crossed the valley. I did find a very faint two-track that crosses the valley in a due east-west direction, but as I was quite certain it was not Simpson’s route, I did not spend any time trying to follow it. I finally managed to get to the eastern side of the valley by following a good dirt road that loops down to the south end of the valley, then turns back to the north. I found the mouth of Combs Canyon, but because it was getting late in the evening, I did not try to follow the creek into the mountains. Turning back to the south, I made by way back to US 50 and left the area.

July 2002

I returned about a year after my first trip into the southern end of Butte Valley, but this time I followed the expedition’s route in the reverse direction, traveling north from Ely and over the Egan Mountains. After leaving the mouth of Combs Canyon, I spent some time looking for the expedition’s trail across Butte Valley, but once again, I was unable to find it. I finally gave up and decided to cross the valley on the seldom-used, east-west two-track that I had noticed during my first trip. Although this abandoned trail does not follow the route of the expedition, it is never far from it. In fact, it appears to me that the routes cross each other near the center of the valley.

Ascending the cañon [Combs Canyon] by a good grade, albeit in some places a little sidling and rocky, 3.2 miles brought us to the summit of the pass of the Mon-tim range [Egan Mountains] dividing Butte and Steptoe valleys… There is an old beaten trail down this cañon, about the largest we have seen on the trip. The Indians say it is the trail of the To-sa-witch band of the Sho-shonees, living about the Humboldt River, who yearly take this route, to trade horses with the Pahvant Indians about Fillmore.28

In his report, Simpson states that he named the stream after Garland Hurt, but on his map, he shows the canyon through which it flows as “Horse Cañon.” Obviously, this name came from the well-worn horse trail that they followed through this area.

Descending the eastern slope by a winding cañon of pretty steep grade for 200 or 300 yards, near summit, 3 miles more in a south direction brought us to a spring [Archie Spring], where we encamped… The guide also reports four more springs within the compass of half a mile from camp. I have therefore called this cañon Spring Cañon… Journey, 19.1 miles.29

What Simpson called Spring Canyon is the upper end of today’s Smith Valley, where a number of springs are located. There is something of a problem here, because none of the springs are exactly three miles from the summit. However, it appears to me that the most likely spot for the campsite would have been Archie Spring. Although this spring is about four miles from the summit, it is the most accessible of all the springs due to its location in the bottom of the canyon. In addition, the area around Archie Spring is relatively level and would make a good campsite, while the others are all located higher up on the slope of the canyon.

July 17, 1859

July 17, Camp No. 19, Spring Cañon.— Decamped at 25 minutes of 6; continued in an east of south direction down Spring Cañon, the grade of which, except near summit, is exceedingly slight. This cañon gradually opens to 2.5 miles wide as you descend to Steptoe Valley, and the cedar on either side is almost inexhaustible… Just at outlet of Spring Cañon into Steptoe Valley, 8.2 miles from camp on north side of cañon, there is a spur from the north wall or mountain of the cañon, through which there is a gap, gate, or cañon, which for salinity, on account of its confining walls, equals, probably, anything we have seen on the route… I call the place the Gate of Hercules [Hercules Gap], on account of its stupendous walls. The echo in it is very fine, and our fire-arms have startled a great number of swallows and hawks.30

Near the south end of Smith Valley, a state prison facility has been built directly on top of an abandoned road, and today’s road passes the prison about a hundred yards to the east. It is
Camp 19-E. Archie Spring, at the upper end of Smith Valley, north of Ely. “3 miles more in a south direction brought us to a spring where we encamped.”

July 17, 1859
my assumption that the expedition followed the route of the abandoned road.

About seven miles north of the city of Ely, the expedition came to a gap that cuts through the low ridge that extends southward from the foothills of the Egan Mountains. Simpson called this gap the Gate of Hercules, but today it is known as Hercules Gap.

Although the wagons passed by the gap about a half mile to the west, some members of the party, including Simpson himself, rode over to it and fired off a few rounds from their rifles or sidearms. Today a paved highway, State Route 490, goes through the gap.

*The road leaves this gate to the left about 0.5 mile, and 1.7 miles further down Spring Cañon brings us to Steptoe Valley, which we follow, on its western side, for 4 miles, in a southeasterly direction, and encamp on a noble creek, which I call after Lieut. Alexander Murry, the energetic officer in command of the escort of my party. This stream heads some 12 miles off in the mountain range, is rapid, and after running in a northeasterly direction, sinks 2 miles below camp.*

The expedition continued in a southerly direction along the west side of the ridge, crossing SR 490 about a mile and a half north of Lackawanna Spring, then dropping down to the floor of Steptoe Valley. It appears to me that the campsite for that night was located on the east bank of Murry Creek, near the northern end of the White Pine County Golf Course.

**September 2006**

After spending a night in Ely, Nancy and I drove to the pro shop of the White Pine County Golf Course, where I contacted the manager and asked for permission to walk across the course. He was reluctant at first because it was a frosty morning, and he was concerned that I might do some damage to the putting greens. I assured him that I had no reason to get onto the greens, and would stay on the cart trails until I got the far side of the course. He finally agreed to my request and I set off, following the probable route of the expedition as closely as I could while staying on the cart paths. At the western side of the golf course, between Hole Number Six and the perimeter fence, I found the dry streambed of Murry Creek and the spot where I believe the expedition camped. Although there is some water in the creekbed about a mile to the southwest, it no longer flows past the campsite area.