

Carson Fun Trip

July 15-18, 2011

This is a trip I've been waiting for! Even though, or maybe because I thoroughly appreciate the comforts of a soft bed at night and air conditioning in July and August, the Carson and Truckee desert routes which the emigrant wagon trains took grab my imagination like none of the other routes. It just boggles my mind to think of crossing the Forty Mile Desert in the deadly heat of August and September as the emigrants did.

But the Carson Route is more than just a desert crossing. Once we get to Carson City, the route swings up into the Sierras and over Kit Carson Pass into the Promised Land of California. How the emigrants must have felt as they finally crossed into California then snaked through the mountains to Placerville and the end of the trail and the gold mines! It must have taken some determination to suffer all those hardships just for the opportunity to try to find gold.



Friday July 15:

We met at the Trinity Rest Stop on Interstate 80 at Hwy. 95 to begin our trip. Already it looks like real desert here. Our start time was 9:00 am, which is later than we plan to start for the rest of the trip, but I think several people drove in from Reno and other towns this morning. Jim and I left Fernley at 8 and arrived at the rest stop about 45 minutes later.

So good to see everyone again. Several of the group are "repeaters" who were on the last fun trip we did over the Hastings Cutoff, but there are some new faces, too, and a new member (!), Dave Readler. Bill & Leta Bishell and Bob Black are the "wagon masters" again; Bob will lead the group and the Bishells will be "tail end Charlie," making sure no one gets left behind. Besides those, the group consists of Don Buck, who will make presentations

along the way (and probably add a lot more than just that), John Winner, Jon Willers, Dick Woodbury and Nancy Drew, Terry Hardwicke and Jim & me. Hopefully before the end of the trip I'll be able to correctly put names and faces together. A couple of the group can only stay of a day or two--but any time on the trail is better than no time on the trail. We started off with Bill giving us a rundown of our plans and a safety pep talk so we will all make it to trails end.

Today we covered Markers CR-1 through CR-17, an ambitious schedule, but the closest campground is at Lahontan Dam Recreation Area, so that's where we needed to end up tonight. On the way to the first Carson Route Marker, Bob Black pointed out what is probably an emigrant hand dug well along the California Trail just before it splits into the

Truckee and Carson Routes. According to the emigrant diaries, the water along here was pretty putrid, although it only got worse as they progressed through the desert. Can you imagine not only cooking supper, baking the next day's bread and finding pasture for the stock when you finally stopped for the night, but digging a well for water too?! The well alone would have been a day's work for me!



CR-1 marks the point of big decision; go left to the Carson Route or right to the Truckee. The majority of pioneers took the Carson Route and that's what

we're taking on this trip. The vastness of the Humboldt Sink here just washes over you and you feel like the breath has been sucked out of you. There's just so much nothingness. Off in the distance, to the southwest, Bob pointed out the Humboldt Bar and marker CR-2. This "bar" was a natural dike or dam during the times the sink had been a lake. It was to this landmark that the emigrants aimed their wagons from here.

CR-2 and CR-3 took us across a stretch of desert to Highway 95 and to the west. I especially enjoyed the trip because we were "off roading" through this section and it really felt like the middle of nowhere (as long as I ignored I-80 off to the right). At CR-2 Don Buck talked about how 1850 was a particularly wet year and the emigrants had to take various detours to avoid the river and slough at this point. (A wet year in the desert! That would have been my luck.)

Following the trail now on the west side of Hwy 95, from CR-4 (SALT CREEK CROSSING) to CR-11 (SODA LAKE), near Fallon, we experienced some the REAL desert.

In the inscription on CR-4, emigrant Cyrus Carrier says the creek “EMITTED AN EFFLUVIA LIKE THE STIRING UP OF AN OLD PRIVY WITH A DASH OF THE SALT MEADOWS MIXED WITH IT.” Imagine walking through that! The smell today was not that bad, but it didn’t take a lot to understand how Cyrus came up with that description. One of the most interesting things we learned was, depending on which area gets the most water, the creek can flow in either direction! We walked along the creek, squinting at the banks trying to pick out ruts and beaten down areas that might indicate where the emigrants crossed.

At CR-7 we left the highway and struck out cross-country again on a worn trail. The emigrant diary inscriptions on the markers are now talking about all the death and destruction they’re seeing. The marker inscriptions have titles like “NOTORIOUS ROUTE,” “TO ROT AND RUST” and “DREADFUL SCENES” and talk of the awful sight of heaps of dead horses and cattle. Anything not carrying water was discarded as dead weight (in more ways than one). Members of our group mentioned that only 20 or 30 years ago there were still all kinds of artifacts from the emigrants spread throughout this area. I didn’t see any today. I wish someone who now has a wagon wheel in their front yard would have left it here for me to see.

About noon we came upon the Westerners Monument, a concrete monument with a large plaque, dedicated to the hearty souls who passed through here. We decided to “noon” here. The Bishells rolled out the awing on their rig and everyone crowded under its shade—the only shade to be seen. As usual, lunch was sandwiches or something easy. Jim & I laid leftovers from last night’s supper on the black hood of our car and had “warm” chicken breast sandwiches for lunch! The best part though, is always the conversation and camaraderie; getting to know members we haven’t met before and catching up on news with the ones we already know.

You can see trees from Marker CR-8, the Upsal Hog Back! The hog back is just a big hill of sand, but in a desert you use what you can for landmarks. I’ve read accounts that as the emigrants approached this edge of the desert oxen would push their noses up into the air and strain to smell the water off in the distance, often before anyone would know how close they were to the Carson River. I’m sure this was most heartening and gave the people hope to keep on pushing. There was still a lot of sand to



cover.

Civilization! Markers CR-10, 11 and 12 took us to the Carson River and into the Fallon area. The emigrants referred to this settlement as “Ragtown” because of the canvas shanties and everyone’s tattered laundry fluttering in the wind. This was a “recruiting” area where the teams could rest and graze and the emigrants could purchase limited supplies.

Between Fallon and Lake Lahontan, are markers CR-13 to 17. Because Lahontan is a modern reservoir formed by the Carson River, it was the Carson River that the wagon trains followed when they came through this area. At Marker CR-17, the route splits. The Carson River Route bends off toward Fort Churchill and the Carson Desert Route, which we’ll take tomorrow, heads out across more desert to Dayton and the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

Saturday July 16:

Markers CR-18 to CR-37. The potluck was this evening, so this will be short so I can get to bed. The Potluck is always so much fun. It’s the weekend and even the primitive campground in Hope Valley where the campers are staying was almost full. They found a stretch at the end of the campground road and everyone piled in. Dick & Nancy and Jim & I are “motel-ing,” so we visited while the others lined up at the Bishell’s portable shower to clean up. For supper we had quite the variety of excellent food and the usual even larger variety of wine. Great meal!

Today the trail swung up from the desert (really excellent swales at CR-26) and into the hills in Dayton at Gold Canyon. Dayton is the site of Nevada’s first gold strike and Gold Canyon was probably the first place the emigrants actually saw miners. I bet the gold fever really kicked in.

From Dayton the trail heads back to the Carson River once the river passes through a narrow canyon. We had a quick lunch at the little park next to the Carson River, where CR-29 is located. This area used to be known as Empire and the Empire Cemetery is nearby. It’s now all swallowed up by the Carson City “metropolitan area.” The river’s still quite high.



We spotted smoke from a wildfire over the hill behind the park and stood in the parking lot for some time watching a small plane circle the area, hoping to see it drop retardant on the fire. No luck.

From this point on the river, the trail skirts what is now Carson City and moves into Jack's Valley, a really beautiful, scenic valley with lush pastures on the valley floor and bounded by the Sierra on the west. At the foot of the Sierras, we stopped at Mormon Station in Genoa for a little sightseeing and a group picture around Marker CR-32.



There's also a monument of Snowshoe Thompson in the park. He carried the mail during the winter from Placerville to Mormon Station, over the Sierra, on wooden cross country skis. He's buried in the cemetery in Genoa. After leaving Genoa and passing Wally's Hot Springs, a stop not only for emigrants, but also the Pony Express, we cross into California! The terrain here is rolling with lots of pasture land, water and forest. Why didn't everyone stop right here?!!

Marker CR-36 is located in the back pasture of a ranch. The rancher and his wife were expecting us and were quite welcoming. We parked in their barn lot and walked about a quarter mile to the marker—had to jump the stream to get there. Like 1850, this has been a pretty wet year. The view from the marker, which is under a giant pine, is just beautiful. I would have told Jim, "This is the place. We're in California now, and we're staying here." Nancy found a rusted piece of metal banding which Don said was part of a barrel hoop! It's so neat to be able to touch something that can pull you across 160 years and into a whole different world!

Last marker of the day—CR-37. We're really in the mountains now. While some of the emigrants complained about the stony trail, there is grass, water and firewood again.

Sunday July 17:

Markers CR-38 to CR-58. Ran into some remaining snow today, so we were forced to skip several markers along Squaw Ridge to West Pass. The diary quotes are beginning to reflect signs of civilization. They're mentioning grogshops, a canvas and brush tent post office and finally, trading posts every five miles.

Highlights of the day:

Marker CR-39: From the marker we took a short hike to a cave that was supposedly used by Snowshoe Thompson as refuge on his winter treks across the Sierras. However, someone pointed out that there is a good chance the enclave is buried by deep snow during the winter.



However, there is a boulder here with great rust stains on the side where the emigrants wagons ground against it. That's pretty exciting.

Marker CR-40: Tried dowsing for graves!!! There's an emigrant grave off the trail here and John Winner demonstrated how to find a human grave using divining rods (in this case bent welding rods). It was definitely spooky. Jim & I were the only ones who tried it and it didn't work. Personally I think it must have something to do with body chemistry. Or maybe we just didn't want it to work...

Marker CR-43 at Kit Carson Pass: The emigrants had to winch their wagons up the side of the mountain here by relaying ropes around trees at the top. After having conquered this climb, a group of emigrants who were members of the International Order of the Odd Fellows inscribed their names and initials on a rock not far from where the marker is placed.

In an attempt to preserve the inscriptions, some organization has traced over the original markings with white paint. Still, it's so inspiring to see a site like this. Big banks of snow are still along the road.

Between CR-43 and CR-58 we covered a lot of beautiful scenery and vistas. The best news of the day was that the Mormon Emigrant Trail at CR-54 is now open. When Jim & I came through here about 10 days ago it was still closed due to snow. This will allow us to cover an important section of the trail without a lot of backtracking. CR-58 has a quote that typifies this whole section of the route: "HERE...WE DROVE SIX MILES OVER THE DAMEDST HILLS OR HILL, IT WAS FOUR MILES UP IT AND TWO DOWN".



Monday July 18:

CR-59 to CR-69. We reach the end of the trail today. The campers found a beautiful spot off a forest road to camp last night and apparently talked well into the night. We stayed in Placerville and had a nice soft bed.



Today's trip started with a descent down Old Iron Mountain to CR-59. A representative of Sierra Pacific met the group at the top of the road to unlock the gate. Instead of returning to the top of the road after seeing the marker, we continued through the valley and the logging area to CR-61. To quote an emigrant, "THE ROAD THIS MORNING HAS BEEN VERY ROUGH AND UNEVEN...AND BEING VERY STEEP IN SOME PLACES." Couldn't have said it better myself!

At CR-61 the trail forked and the right fork led to Placerville or Hangtown. From this point we began moving into more of an urbanized area and gradually slipped out of the aura the emigrant experience. The emigrants began shifting their focus here, too. Forgotten were the death defying river crossings, demoralizing Indian attacks, treacherous mountain ascents, and boiling days in the desert. Diary quotes now talk about entering "AS BEAUTIFUL VALLEY AS EVER I LAID EYES ON," (Pleasant Valley), gold "diggings," small tent cities of gold panners and "...A GOOD MANY CRADLING OUT GOLD, AND WE ARE ALL VERY ENTHUSIASTIC TO GET STARTED."



Finally, at the community swimming pool in the heart of Placerville, buried in the shrubbery, CR-69 proclaims "HERE WE MADE A FINAL STOP AND UNLOADED OUR WANGONS & FELT OF A TRUTH THAT WE HAD AT LAST REACHED THE GOLD MINES". And their destination. They had begun their transition from trail weary emigrant to gold miner, just as I morphed from intrepid trail trekker back to dusty tourist.

