

Hastings Cutoff Fun Trip

Journal of Denise Moorman

WEDNESDAY 18 MAY 2011



Fernley, NV to Winnemucca, NV

We left home late Wednesday afternoon to begin our trip to Wendover, NV for the Hastings Cutoff Fun Trip. We arrived in Winnemucca by 7 that evening. I love traveling Interstate 80 through Nevada because it so closely follows the California Trail. Ever since we started following the emigrant trails, I can't travel anywhere in the West without wondering "what happened here" or what the emigrants were thinking while they were traveling through the same area I am, 160 years later. It always gives me a bit of a chill to think I'm looking at the same hills and meadows they did.

The emigrants who took the Hastings Cutoff eventually joined the California Trail and followed it to Big Meadow, near present day Lovelock, which is about 65 miles east of where we live in Fernley. Big Meadow was the staging area where they rested and fed their livestock before their death defying dash across the Forty Mile Desert. The cemetery in Lovelock is named Big Meadow, an eerie reminder of the area's history.

We also stopped at Rye Patch Reservoir dam to see marker C-71. The reservoir was formed when the Humboldt River was dammed. I'm sure the emigrants would have appreciated the reservoir at this point in their travels. I don't believe I've ever read anything good the emigrants had to say about the Humboldt River!

THURSDAY 19 MAY 2011 Winnemucca, NV to Wendover, UT

We wanted to check out a couple more emigrant sites on our way to Wendover today but the weather wasn't cooperating. The rain started just as we hit the road this morning and before the day was over, we went through lots of rain, wind and even hail. Luckily that didn't stop us from visiting the Emigrant Trail Museum in Wells. They were still setting up after moving to a new location and didn't have all the exhibits up yet, but we were able to see several displays of tools, photos and household items from the era. We were also happy to find out that they were sold out of the Trails West guides they carry and were going to order more!

FRIDAY 20 MAY 2011 Wendover to Wells (HN-1 thru HN-12)

Day one of the fun trip! The weather couldn't have been better or more different than yesterday morning's weather! The sun was bright and the sky was that blue that only a western sky can be. A good breeze pushed brilliant white clouds across the sky. Everyone showed up early at the rendezvous point, so we wasted no time in getting started. Our "wagon master" for the excursion is Bob Black, and his wife Linda, who indicated we had a whole lot of territory to cover today. Bill and Leta Bishell are our other co-leaders. Members of our "train" are Bob and Donna Carlton and Dennis Rogers. We hadn't met Bob and Donna or Dennis before. The first stop was Donner Springs.

Like several other sites along the route the Donner-Reed Party took, the springs were named for them simply due to their infamous event. Just like thousands of other emigrants, the Donners stopped at these springs at the foot of Pilot Peak to rest and to feed and water their livestock before heading across the desert. Even though the springs are on the private property of the TL Bar Ranch, visitors are welcome in the developed area around the spring. I noticed people aren't the only ones attracted to springs in the desert. We saw quite a few varieties of birds including a very striking yellow-headed black bird.

As we were backtracking to the first T-marker at Bidwell Pass, we left the road for a short distance to look at original wagon tracks which parallel the road all the way from Donner Spring to the pass. Bidwell Pass gives the first view of the emigrant route through scrub desert and on to range after range of mountains. (This reminded me that Nevada has over 300 mountain ranges—more than any other state. Poor emigrants!)

Several of us had the same thought at this point; this was kind of a point of no return. It was as treacherous to go back across the Salt Desert as it was to go forward. It must have been terribly overwhelming to stand here and look at all the deserts and mountains and know there was no way out at this point. Quite often throughout the day someone would comment about the tension that must have existed within the parties over the decision to take the Hastings trail. I know from my readings that Tamsen Donner was



definitely not happy about taking the Hastings Cutoff. A stop later in the day confirmed our suspicions. The camp was named "Mad Woman Camp" after a quote from James Frazier Reed (of the Donner-Reed Party). He wrote "Left mad woman camp as all the women in camp were mad with anger" on September 14, 1846.



Nonetheless, I'm often impressed by the humor and optimism expressed by the emigrants in their journals. At marker HN-2 there was a quote on the T-marker by John Wood commenting on traversing "one of the most uninhabitable parts of God's creation." However he finished by writing "but I suppose if it were not for these there would be no pretty places." Me, I would have long forgotten about the "pretty places" and would have been carrying on about the sand and dust, heat, lack of water, etc., etc.

Shortly after descending the pass, the day turned into a journey of dust and mud. When the flats were dry they were sooooo dusty, but when it rained, the mud was almost as deep as the dust had been. Not to mention the formerly

"dry" creeks that were now crossing the desert because of the recent rains and melting snow in the mountains.

Stopped at Mound Springs which was quite interesting. The emigrants commented on how the mound where the springs were shook when someone walked on it. We took turns jumping up and down on it so the others in the group could feel the ground shake too. I can just see the emigrants doing that too! Saw wild irises sprouting on the top of the mound and heard coyotes yipping off in the distance as we were leaving. Everyone stopped talking to hear them, but they stopped at that point, too. I guess they were just joining in the conversation.

The pace today was pretty fast, faster than most of us would have preferred, but Bob was truly worried that the flats would be too muddy to be passable and we'd wind up spending most of the day trying to find a way out. He was most relieved when we got to Highway 93 by 6 o'clock. Took off for Wells and the Motel 6.

SATURDAY 21 MAY 2011 Wells to Elko (HN-13 thru HN-27)

What a beautiful start to the day! Most of the mud and dust is behind us. Today we were on bladed county roads and even some pavement! Plus—the hardest part is behind us as well. We'll be taking a slower pace the next two days.



The first stop was a real treat (HN-13). From the highway you could see across the meadow to the foothills and see the wagon ruts almost to the next marker. However, this was second to the view from T-Marker HN-15 of the Ruby Valley. It was absolutely breathtaking. Even I, as an emigrant, would have had to have said something nice about this remarkable view of the valley rolling to the mountains that took up most of the sky. And the sky was so blue and the snow on the mountains so white!

We stopped at the Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge for lunch. It was still sunny, warm and breezy and a very nice place to “noon.” We debated whether or not to chance the weather and have the potluck here and now, but the vote was to take our chances for later. After lunch we explored a homesteader’s cabin and a nearby grave.

After lunch we drove down the road to the Wildlife Refuge’s headquarters and hiked to Cave Creek Spring at the base of the mountain. The whole Ruby Valley is so lush and beautiful with marshes for all kinds of waterfowl. As in so many other lovely places, I wonder why the emigrants didn’t just say “This is the place. I’m staying here.” I guess most of the traffic going to CA on the Hastings Cutoff was headed to the goldfields, so good grazing wasn’t the big attraction.

Shortly after this stop, the clouds began catching up with us and by the time we reached the Overland Pass area, it was cloudy, windy, sprinkling and quite cool.

Marker HN-22, Overland Pass, is a special marker for Jim and me. It was the first TWI marker we ever saw and look where it has taken us! All the fun and travel we’ve experience following the trails and all the great people we’ve met! We had our picture taken there today. On the way there from HN-21 we took a turn-off and drove on part of the trail that was the Hastings, Pony Express and a stage road. It’s interesting that so many modern day roads closely follow the original trails.

We took a group photo at HN-23, a great spot for a picture as it has a T-Marker and an excellent view of a two-track trail going off in the distance.

As the weather got worse, the pace got faster. The



evening's potluck was looking pretty iffy. When we got down to what was to be the day's last marker, we decided to skip it and head for the campground and our potluck supper instead. By the time we reached the campground the weather had turned nasty and the group voted to skip the potluck and head for Elko and a warm motel, hoping for more agreeable weather by the next day. The more intrepid Blacks and Bishells opted to stay and camp!

SUNDAY 22 MAY 2011 Elko to Elko (HN-28 thru HN-34)

Today was the last day of the trip and our last chance for the potluck. There were only seven markers left to visit, HN-28 through HN-34 and all day to do them. The problem was, after yesterday's and last night's rains, the dirt roads we needed to travel were really too muddy to drive on this morning. The decision was made to spend some time going over Harrison Pass to try to figure out why the emigrants declined to take it and instead travelled 30 miles farther south to Overland Pass. Hopefully by later in the morning the dirt roads would be dry enough to travel.

Coming up the back side of the pass from Jiggs was a breeze. Sure, it was uphill, but the canyon was fairly wide and it an easy ascent. Just as we entered the canyon we began seeing "evidence" of cows having travelled down this road recently. Bob Black announced over the CB radio that we were probably coming up behind a herd of cattle that was being moved to its summer range. When we encountered them, we should wait for the cowboys to lead us through and we should stay bumper to bumper so cows couldn't get between the cars in our caravan. I don't know how far we drove through cows, but it seemed like the herd stretched for a couple of miles, and none of them were happy to see us. All of them turned and bawled at us as we went past, except the one with horns—walk quietly and carry big horns. The farther we drove, the more disorganized the herd became. Toward the end the cows were turning around and heading back the direction they had come. I've always thought the concept of herding cats was challenging, but I think cows are probably at least as difficult and a lot more dangerous!



The view of Ruby Valley from the top of the pass was spectacular. We got out of our cars to enjoy the view in morning sunshine and the springtime breeze. As we started down the side that the emigrants would have come up from the Cutoff, we realized it was a completely different story from the side we had just come up. We understood immediately why they passed it up. You could tell that before the road was build, the canyon was very narrow and winding, sometimes only as wide as the creek running through it.

Nonetheless, we came across the Star Mine camp, a long ago abandoned Tungston mine. It was wedged in between the two sides of the canyon, right at a turn. We stopped to explore it for a while, wondering about the old mattresses and empty Folgers coffee cans left behind. Jim and Bill Bishell hiked up the other side of the canyon to investigate a shack built

over there. They came back and reported it was the powder house that used to house the explosives. Wouldn't want that in the middle of the housing!



By now we decided the roads had dried sufficiently and we headed to markers HN-28, 29, 30 and 31. The road started out pretty good but the farther we drove the worse it got until we were driving through areas that looked like ponds instead of a road and we were almost axle deep in mud! The Bishells brought up the end of the caravan with their big rig just in case someone got stuck, but everyone made it through.

With a certain sense of euphoria for having made it through ALL that mud, we decided not to chance the weather and to have the potluck for lunch instead of dinner. Marker HM-32 was located next to a wide spot along the South Fork of the Humboldt River, a great place to "noon," so off we went across the hills to HN-32.

The potluck was well worth the wait! We found a beautiful, level spot next to the bridge over the river, circled the rigs and brought out the food. What a lunch! Tri-tip roast, two kinds of chili, a delicious Asian salad and several types of wine! Everyone settled in their camp chairs and enjoyed a great lunch and even better camaraderie.

A bumpy ride over some more dirt roads brought us to HN-33 and our afternoon exercise. The plate on the marker had been shot up and needed to be replaced. The men got out the tools and we women decided to take a walk down the road into the canyon through which the emigrants had passed to finally meet up with the California Trail. Amazingly, by the time we got back from our short walk, the guys were just finishing up! They made fast work of that. We took a round of pictures of the new plate and the work crew and took off for the last marker of the trip, HN-34 on the Maggie Creek Ranch.



Unfortunately we weren't able to access the marker. The gate to the road was closed and more significantly, the bridge across the river was falling in. We used binoculars to view the marker and talked about putting together a work crew to move it outside the fence.

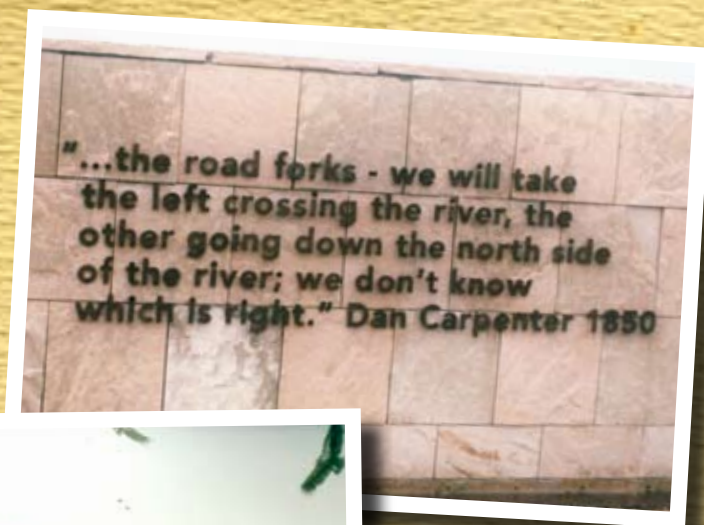
We realized earlier that afternoon that the group

couldn't make it to the California Trail Interpretive Center before it closed for the day, so we contacted the Center and they graciously offered to open Monday morning for a "private tour" for us! I was excited because Jim and I have been trying for years to tour the center, but we've never been in the area on the days that it was open. Unfortunately, not everyone in our group was able to stay over for the tour of the Center, so we said our good-byes that evening. It had been a good trip; we formed new friendships, shared experiences and promised we'd see each other on the next trip!

MONDAY 23 MAY 2011 Elko to home

Talk about excellent timing! It started raining last night and was still pouring when we left this morning. I didn't know any place in Nevada got this much rain! Anyway, it was a great day for touring the Interpretive Center and driving home—hopefully the rain washed off the mud that was still left after we spent \$30 at the carwash last night!

The California Trail Interpretive Center is set up following the course the emigrants took from Independence, MO, across the plains and deserts to California. There are dioramas representing each phase of the trail. Although it's not entirely finished yet (funding problems), most of the scenes are complete and very interesting and enlightening. We had a great time and enjoyed the gift shop/book store that carried some of the Trails West Guide books!



An extra treat was Jacob and Ezra—two oxen who were still at the Center from the Trails Days celebration the day before. We were able to get in the pen with them and they were as gentle as dogs. I was petting one when the other one came up behind me and nudged me in the back. Don't ignore me! According to their handler, oxen continue to grow throughout their entire lives. She had one that reached 6'8" at the shoulders!

At that point the trip was over for us and we headed back to the Forty Mile desert and home. We had a great time, but like Dorothy, for me, there's no place like home.

