

THE EMIGRANTS' POST OFFICE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE APPELEGATE TRAIL  
Don Buck

One of the unique features of overland travel was the ability of emigrants to communicate with one another as they moved along two-thousand miles of trail over very desolate and rugged terrain. This was especially so during 1849 when the trail experience was still a novelty with many unanswered questions. A common means of passing the word along to those behind was at the emigrants' "post office." Because it was such a major decision on whether or not to take the Applegate Trail at the big bend of the Humboldt River in 1849, emigrants left numerous letters and notices and described their post offices variously as a split stick, post, bill-board, and finally even a red barrel painted in black letters, POST OFFICE. The following diary accounts describe the various types of "Post Offices" where the Applegate Trail branched off the main California Trail in the vicinity of the east of modern Rye Patch Reservoir in Nevada.

Henry C. St. Clair, Aug. 19, 1849: We passed Myers company and camped at the forks of the road, that is the South Oregon Road. There was what we term a Post Office, that is a board set up with papers of information nailed on it.

Joseph Sedgley, Aug. 25, 1849: Two miles more, along the river, brought us to a road which turned to the right, and was called a "cut-off." At the forks of the road there was a kind of Post-office, with cards and letters of companies who had taken this supposed cut-off, which proved to us to be the very opposite, and nearly caused us to starve.

George J. Kellogg, Sep. 3, 1849: Took the right hand road as notice put up said that it was hundreds of miles nearer to the mines, but it proved hundreds of miles farther, the object was to get part of the emigration to strike Sacramento river higher up so the Californians could buy up our poor cattle for nothing.

Simon Doyle, Sept. 5, 1849: we reached the forks of the road and took of(f) to the right starting on to the desert of 90 miles about 2 P.M. At the forks were various posts & bords covered with notices from persons ahed to their friends behind saying which road they had gon(e) on. Several trains were there; men quarling about which way they should go; women and children crying. We hurried on to get away from the busel.

Pardon Dexter Tiffany, Sept. 12, 1849: Came to where the new road branches off to the right & found here a general Post office that is a great many letters & notices of the trains who had passed stuck in split sticks written on slips of paper, cards, & boards &c.

Amos Batchelder, Sept. 14, 1849: At a quarter past one o'clock we started for the point where the roads separate, and reached it in an hour and a half. Many notices were posted at this place, relating to distance by the new route, feed, and various other matters of interest to those who might be travelling through this part of the country. There should be a guide board erected at this place pointing to Oregon, as we afterwards learned to our great disappointment, instead of to California, or the gold region. It proved to be some three hundred miles farther by this, than by the old route to the diggings.

J. Goldsborough Bruff, Sept. 19, 1849: On the right, about a hundred yds. from the Bend, the Desert route branches off, and in the forks of the road, I observed a red painted barrel standing. —I rode up, to examine it.—It was a nice new barrel, about the size of a whisky-barrel, iron hoops, and a square hole cut in the head; and neatly painted in black block letters, upon it, “POST OFFICE”. On looking in, I found it half-full of letters, notes, notices, &c.—Near this was a stick and bill-board, also filled with notices.—These were chiefly directed to emigrants in the rear, hurrying them along, giving information about route, telling who had taken this or the southern route, &c. By these I ascertained that few had taken the Southern road. I inscribed a card and left, here, *for the benefit of all whom it might concern*, as follows: —

“The Washington City Company,  
Capt Bruff, pass’d, — on the  
Right-hand trail, Sepr  
19<sup>th</sup> 2 P.M. 1849.”

Some emigrants even left trail guides or copies of them at the Post Office for others to copy. On Aug. 22, 1849, Charles Hinman wrote that he had reached the fork of the Applegate Trail “which we expect to take, and I am 4 miles ahead of the Teams to Copy a Guide Book of the Road, have found and copyed one and am wa[i]ting for the Teams to come up, which will be Soon.”