

NOTES, REPORTS, AND INVESTIGATIONS
ON THE
TRUCKEE TRAIL IN CALIFORNIA
FROM THE LAST CROSSING
OF THE TRUCKEE RIVER TO
ROLLER PASS AND STEPHENS PASS

~ 1996 to 1999 ~

by

DON WIGGINS

FOREWORD

Don Buck

Enclosed are the notes, reports, and investigations on the Truckee Trail in California to the summit of the Sierra Nevada written by Don Wiggins of Reno, Nevada, from 1996 to 1999. They are among the most in-depth, detailed studies conducted on any of the segments of the California Trail or its branches. In particular, they demonstrate how effective the application of the general principles and guidelines contained in OCTA's *Mapping Emigrant Trails* Manual can be in determining the location, and verification process, of original emigrant trail segments.

Don Wiggins relocated to Reno in 1985 after retiring from the aerospace industry in southern California as an electrical engineer. Don brought to trail research that inquiring, problem-solving mindset of an engineer. Having a love of history, he joined the Nevada Historical Society shortly after retiring to Reno. As a docent for the historical society, Don led tours on the Truckee Trail in the Reno-Sparks area. To enliven the tours, he used emigrant diary accounts to describe what was thought to be the Truckee Trail. His keen mind quickly began to notice incongruities between what he was reading and seeing. This led to detailed trail research.

At the urging of well-known historian John Townley at the Nevada Historical Society, Don joined OCTA in 1989. Living in northwestern Reno, Don took morning hikes in the nearby foothills where he could see Dog Valley, about 5-6 miles distant, just inside California. Already using emigrant diaries, he realized that emigrants in wagons couldn't have made it all the way up the steep-sided canyon of South Branch Creek to reach the descent into Dog Valley, as conventional thinking had long maintained. The diary descriptions he was reading didn't support the conventional interpretation.

Then the devastating Crystal Peak Fire in 1994 revealed on the ground evidence that confirmed Don's diary research on the route to the descent into Dog Valley. He continued his Truckee Trail research for five years to Roller Pass and Stephens Pass at the summit of the Sierra Nevada. During this period, utilizing OCTA's MET Manual and emphasizing the primacy of diary evidence, Don wrote the enclosed notes, reports, and investigations that covered his trail research.

Trails West was influenced by Don Wiggins trail research. Of the 17 "T" steel-rail markers placed by Trails West from Verdi to the Sierra summit, all but 2 or 3 were based on his research, along with a rigorous confirming process. The location of these markers has been noted in the enclosed investigative reports.

Don Buck, who accompanied Don Wiggins on many of his trail investigations in the field, decided (with approval) to compile Wiggins' notes, reports, and investigations into one source, for distribution to Forest Service, historical societies, research libraries, and serious trail researchers. Herein are the results. ■

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PART I

Truckee River to Second Summit

Report on the Truckee Trail: Verdi to Second Summit

An analysis by Don Wiggins: Nov, 1999

A. The last river crossing:

It has been generally assumed that the trail forded the Truckee River near the one-lane bridge on Bridge Street in Verdi. Prior to 1850, this would be the 27th crossing of the river. Chuck Graydon illustrates this supposed crossing in his book, *Trail of the First Wagons Over the Sierra Nevada*. A river crossing at this point means that the trail would have to continue, after crossing, in a generally westerly direction (and crossing Dog Creek) to enter the South Branch of Dog Creek Canyon. However, numerous diaries indicate that, after crossing, the trail made a sharp turn to the right, or northward, and continued in that direction for from one-half to one mile. Some examples:

1. Edwin Bryant, August 24, 1846: [packing]. . . *We resumed our march at the usual hour. Following the river between two and three miles farther up, we turned abruptly to the right, crossing its channel about the thirtieth time, and, through a ravine or gorge, ascended the range of mountain's on our right . . .*
2. Elisha Lewis, Sept. 15, 1849: [Camped on the east side of river at 27th crossing.] . . . *after crossing the river our road turned abruptly to the right and commenced ascending the mountain. . .* [Note same words as Bryant.]
3. Wakeman Bryarly, Aug. 20, 1849: [Camped on east side of river] . . . *We started at daybreak & crossed the river. The road turned immediately to the right in a north direction & continued for one mile, when it went in a northwest direction, ascending a spur of mountain, one of the chain of the California mountains . . .* [Bryarly not only confirms the sharp turn to the right, but he also tells us that it was in a north direction and continued for about a mile before turning northwest.]
4. A. R. Burbank, Sept. 7, 1849: . . . *This is the 27th & last crossing. We nooned ½ mile from the ford & near a spring branch (a tributary) [Dog Creek], passing on we commenced ascending the mountain through a thick forest of hearty pine timber.* [It is significant that Burbank usually notes when he crosses a "rivulet," or a small stream. This time he only records that they nooned near the branch, indicating he did not cross it. Also, he probably would noon in the river valley where there was grass and water, indicating that at ½ mile he was still in the river valley. Which means the distance traveled to the north after the crossing was between ½ and one mile (Bryarly's estimate).]
5. James Campbell, Aug. 29, 1850: [Camped on east side of river at 27th crossing.] . . . *crossed the River then ascending the mountain covered with pine[.] at the crossing of the River we left the river turned to the right, 5 ms to a spring, some grass . . .*

If the trail crossed the river near the one-lane bridge, a sharp right turn would place it as headed toward, and reaching, the mountains north of Verdi. This does not seem likely, and also implies the trail did not follow the river, otherwise the logical crossing point would have been near the bridge, as has been supposed. The diaries, and the famous T. H. Jefferson map, also indicate the trail was not following the river valley, but was somewhat to the south of the river as it neared Verdi. The only natural opening in the cliffs, east of the north/south flowing river in Verdi, is along the route of I-80. This opening leads down into today's Crystal Peak Park, which is along the river. A crossing here would necessitate a hard turn to the right to stay in the river valley. Nearly one mile away is Dog Creek (Burbank's tributary). Thus, a crossing here provides a close fit to the diaries.

The park, the railroad, housing developments, an ice pond, and the construction of U. S. 40, all in a small area, appear to have destroyed all traces of the trail. However, for additional confirmation, there is a large spring on the west side of the river, a short distance "above" (higher than) the trail. Its flow appears to have been diverted by U. S. 40. Although most emigrants camped on the east side of the river, some crossed over and camped on the west side. Diaries confirm a spring was, indeed, on the west side of the river, opposite the crossing point:

1. J. C. Buffum, Aug. 7, 1849: [Camped in Truckee Meadows] *Crossed to the river and nooned under a very large pine tree by the stream on fine clover. P. M. drove over a hill and came through a most beautiful pine forest to the river and crossed it for the last - 27th time. Camped on the opposite side by a spring and drove our animals one mile and a half south east to good grass in a bottom.*



2. Jacob O. Hays, Aug. 30, 1854. . . [After crossing the river at Crystal Peak Park] *Here a little above the road is a good spring found tolerable feed. Days driver 15 miles. Aug. 31st: Frost this morning, lost one horse last night, made and early start here we leave river, [Road is on lower bluffs above river, but still in river valley.] one mile brings us to a branch of good pure water [Dog Creek], we now strike across the Sierra Nevada Mountains after traveling five miles up gradual ascent road pretty rocky in places you have a very steep rough mountain to descend at the foot of which is a branch of good water and small valley [Dog Valley]. . .*
[Hays crossed the river at the Beckwourth Trail crossing in the Truckee Meadows. Shortly after crossing, this route left the Beckwourth Trail and followed along the north side of the river until reaching the old 26th crossing. (This trail location, north of the river and crossing the N/S line between Townships No. 19 and 20 east, can be found in the GLO surveyor's notes.) There he crossed over to the south side of the river and followed the original trail to the old 27th crossing at Crystal Peak Park. It was possible to follow this new route all the way to west side of the river in Verdi, without crossing the river. However, if the river was not forded, it was necessary to go over the "father of all hills" just north of the river bend in Verdi.]



3. Elisa Ann Mcauley, Sept. 11, 1852. [Crossed at Beckwourth Crossing and stayed on north side of river.] *Drove a few miles till we came to some good grass and stopped until noon. We then drove on over hills until toward evening, when we came to the father of all hills.* [She crossed the hill and camped in Verdi.]

Although no traces remain now, there seems little doubt that the 27th crossing was at Crystal Peak Park.

B. The trail to First Summit:

From the river valley near Dog Creek (exact location has not been determined), the road turns northwest and enters South Branch of Dog Creek Canyon (i.e., South Branch Canyon). Trails West has placed a "T" rail marker at the entrance to the South Branch Canyon. Most have assumed that the trail continued directly up the canyon until reaching First Summit. (See Graydon's map in *Trail of the First Wagons Over the Sierra Nevada*.) This canyon is relatively straight, narrow, and rocky, with a gradual ascent and some nearly V-shaped sections to pass through. Passages in the diaries do not match this description of the trail leading to First Summit. The trail is described as being on ridges, winding, rocky, with ascending and descending elevations, passing through a thick forest, and also very steep in places. For example:

1. Wakeman Bryarly, Aug. 20, 1849: . . . *when it [the trail] went in a northwest direction, ascending a spur [ridge] of mountain, . . .*

2. Heinrich Lienhard, Oct. 1, 1846: . . . *From here our road took us directly up the mountain, through thick forest, across a difficult, rocky, mountain. We were in constant fear that the wheels of our wagon would strike against the giant fir trees on the lower side of the road*

[Through a thick forest and across a mountain does not describe travel up a narrow canyon. Further, his comment about the wheels on the lower side of the road strongly suggest a sidling road around the side of a hill.]

3. T. Beesley, Aug. 23, 1849: . . . *commenced winding up. . . very steep. . . The road is rocky . . .*
4. Joseph Hackney, Sept. 1, 1849: . . . *we wound up by a gradual ascent for 5 miles*
5. Elisha B. Lewis, Sept 15, 1849: . . . *commenced ascending the mountain which we found not so gradual as expressed by Brient but very rocky and in places very steep. . .*
6. J. C. Lincoln, Sept. 15, 1849: . . . *Ascent generally gradual. Some places steep . . .*
7. Ansel M. McCall, Sept. 5, 1849: *The trail wound up a long and difficult hill . . .*

From the above, and many other, diary passages, it can be assumed that the trail did not follow South Branch Canyon all the way to First Summit. A reconnaissance of the ridges on both sides of the canyon reveals a network of non-constructed, old wagon roads. Some had deeply eroded swales, any one of which could be the emigrant road or an early logging road. Oddly, no diary indicated on which side of the canyon they were on, although some diaries did record passing through a ravine to reach the heights above the canyon. Some examples are:

1. Edwin Bryant, August 24, 1846: [packing] . . . *through a ravine or gorge, ascended the range of mountain's on our right. . .*
2. James Godfrey, Aug. 8, 1849: . . . *and leaving the river, ascended the mountain through a ravine.*
3. Isaac Jones Wistar, Aug. 17, 1849: . . . *Leaving it here we took up [ascended] the mountain side through a rough and rocky, but at first not very steep, ravine. . .* [Note the similar words used by all: "through a ravine."]

The four or five old wagon roads noted above all came down into the old town of Crystal Peak without going through a ravine. There were also other problems with each of those roads. To match the diaries, this ravine must be found. It was observed that there were a number of ravines on the northwest side of South Branch Canyon, leading from the heights above into the canyon. None were on the southeast side. Carefully searching the ravines on the northwest side, a short ravine was located about 1/4 mile from the entrance to South Branch Canyon with definite traces of a wagon road leading away from the top of the ravine. A short trace was also found in the bottom of the canyon where the road turned, left the canyon, and went up "through the ravine." A continuation of the road was found winding around, then topping a long, relative flat, ridge. This is the first elevation reached after leaving the canyon. It seems that the wagon road did enter South Branch Canyon, but, when the canyon narrowed, it left the canyon "through a ravine" to reach the ridges above the canyon. Wistar's description of the road through the ravine being, at first, not very steep, is the portion of the road that lies in South Branch Canyon.

From the ravine, a well-defined road around the side of the hill is too narrow, in places, to accommodate both wagon wheels. This forces the left side of the wagon to be off the road and lower than the right side, or a sidling road just as described by Lienhard.

Only small traces of the road can be located on top of the ridge, as the surface has been worked over by a bulldozer blade. At one location where a small swale could be detected, pottery shards were found.

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Only small traces of the road can be located on top of the ridge, as the surface has been worked over by a bulldozer blade. At one location where a small swale could be detected, pottery shards were found.

After traveling west along this first ridge, or elevation, some distance, the wagon road climbs uphill again, winding around small hillocks to reach a short section of an abandoned, old road. Few traces of the trail can be found in this uphill section as the bulldozers have been at work again "restoring the forest to its natural condition." Such a winding road is consistent with the diary descriptions, described above. On reaching the abandoned road, the second (and highest) elevation is also reached. The road now continues generally westward on a sloping hillside but at a constant elevation. A Forest Service road now covers most of the old road. The most significant diagnostic feature along this second elevation is a small stream that crosses the FS road from left to right. It comes from a spring further up the hill. Burbank noted this "rivulet" in his diary and also observed that it was "on the top of the mountain" (highest point of the trail) and crossed the road from the left.

A. R. Burbank, Sept. 7, 1849: . . . *passing on [from nooning along the river] we commenced ascending the mountain through a thick forest of hearty pine timber. Passed over two high elevations & passed to the North [or right] of the third & highest elevation. Passed a small spring rivulet on the top of the mountain, it crosses the road from the left, descending & passing through a very rocky ravine [upper South Branch Canyon]. We soon came to the mountain descent [to Dog Valley] long & precipitateing. . .*

About 400 yards west, after crossing the "rivulet," the road comes to a higher ridge, running perpendicular to the Forest Service (and emigrant) road. The emigrant road must either go over this ridge, or go around it to the north. A well-defined wagon road was found going around this ridge to the north, as described by Burbank above. This wagon road is above and paralleling the FS access road. (Trails West has placed a "T" rail marker at the beginning of this well-defined wagon road.)

After passing around this ridge, the road descends to a graded, county road along the west side of South Branch Canyon. A worn oxen shoe was found along this county road, indicating that an older wagon road was underneath. In about two hundred yards, the wagon road can be found separating from the county road and crossing from the left to the right hand side of the "very rocky ravine" (South Branch Canyon). The wagon road can now be followed on up to First Summit, which is just ahead. Wagon scarred rocks can be found along this last section and along the section going around the third elevation.

Besides the trail remnants and artifacts found, all landmarks noted in the diaries can be found in this, roughly, three mile section of trail: the ravine; rocky, steep sections; sidling; winding; small stream crossing trail, left to right; three elevations; trail leading around the north side of the third, and highest, elevation; trail descending and crossing rocky ravine. Finally, all landmarks, artifacts, and trail segments combine to form one continuous, coherent section of trail. OCTA's Carsonite markers have been placed along this section of trail, from the entrance to South Branch Canyon to First Summit.

C. First Summit:

At First Summit, the trail descends down into Dog Valley. Diaries are not consistent on the distance from the river to the Dog Valley bottom. Some reach Dog Valley after a five mile travel from the Truckee River and others after a seven mile, or more, travel from the river. Examples are:

Five Miles to Dog Valley:

1. Jos C. Buffum, [Aug.] 8, 1849: *Left the river and passed over a steep mountain covered with fine timber. Steep descent. 5 miles from the river came to a fine bottom and a spring and nooned. P. M. Turned here to the left down the vally in a southerly direction*

2. A. R. Burbank, Sept. 7, 1849: . . . *we descended to the Small beautiful valley and Encamped along Side of the dog Springs. . . Our mats lay on Short grass. (The Springs are 5 miles from the river).*

Seven miles, or more, to Dog Valley:

1. T. Beesley, Aug. 23, 1849: . . . *with much difficulty we reached the summit of the first ridge seven miles from the Salmon trout river descended a very steep difficult Mountain into a level valley up which we travelled a Southwest course between the two ridges. . .*

2. Zimri Garwood, [Sept.] 15, 1849: *clear and cold. After breakfast we started up the side of the mountain, alone which the road stretched for seven miles to the summit. This part of our road was shaded by a heavy growth of pine cedar and fir timber. At the summit we descended the mountains on the other side of the Mountain which [was] short and abrupt, the road winding its way among the heavy pine and fir trees. At the foot of the mountain we came into a open grass valley with a fine spring of water*

3. David Carnes, Aug 29, 1849: . . . *Commenced immediately to ascend the mountain to the 2nd level. This road is up hill for the first 5 miles through a dense forest of pines, firs, cedars, etc. Thence 2 miles down hill to valley. [Dog Valley] Here are springs & some grass.*

As noted above, many diaries record the mileage as about five miles from the river to the spring, but, a surprising number record the distance as seven miles, or more. Although mileages in diaries are sometimes misleading, this does open the possibility that there may have been more than one descent location. The descent location that matches the Burbank diary, and others, has been identified by a Trails West "T" rail marker. From the TW marker, an apparent wagon swale can be followed down to Dog Creek. This trail was identified with the OCTA's Carsonite markers.

A second possible descent location is along a descending ridge to the north. An old wagon road leading away from near the base of this ridge toward Dog Creek was found, but may have been a logging road. Unfortunately, the ridge itself is terraced with planted pines and no traces of a road can be found leading down the ridge. There is anecdotal evidence that an early automobile road, which may have used an earlier emigrant road, descended down this ridge. This is not confirmed.

The view of Dog Valley was as impressive to the emigrants as it is today:

1. Edwin Bryant, Aug. 24, 1846: . . . *We reached the summit of the gap that afforded us a passage over the mountain, about eleven o'clock, and descended a long and very steep declivity on the other side, bringing us into a small, oval-shaped and grassy valley, with a faint spring branch of pure cold water running through it. This hollow is entirely surrounded by high mountains. The soil is rich, and the grass and other vegetation luxuriant. The impersonations of romance and solitude could scarcely find a more congenial abode than this beautiful and sequestered spot. . .*

2. James Godfrey, Aug. 8, 1849: . . . *In the afternoon, we descended a very steep, though not difficult hill into a lovely valley, comprising some 50 or 60 acres, surrounded on all sides by tall pines, presenting one of the loveliest views I have seen.*

In the 1860's, First Summit was a hot bed of activity as the Henness Pass Turnpike and the Dutch Flat road passed over the summit. Besides a sawmill, there was a large hotel located on the summit. In 1864, emigrant George Harter camped on the summit near the hotel as he traveled on the later Henness Pass Road to Marysville:

George Harter, 1864:

From Crystal Peak [town] over three miles up a steep, but fine winding grade along the mountains and at the top we came to the Bower's Hotel, a large two-story building right in the woods. Here was a large crowd of teamsters in the business of freighting from Marysville to Virginia City and other mining towns in Nevada. These teams were from two to ten animals in a team and from one to three wagons to the team which was quite a sight and waking to our ideas of California business.

This camp was the first on the trip where we had all the wood we wanted to pile on our fire and it was highly enjoyed as it was quite cool. I bought half a bail of hay and turned the mules into a corral.

D. Dog Valley:

After a steep descent into Dog Valley, the trail reached a spring, called Dog Spring by some, and a creek (Dog Creek). The trail then turned to the southwest (the emigrant's left) and headed for Second Summit, about two miles away. Emigrants that had camped near the 27th crossing of the Truckee River at Verdi would usually noon in Dog Valley, and then proceed on toward Second Summit. The ones that had camped further east, such as in Mogul (26th crossing), would usually camp in Dog Valley.

Although the descent into Dog Valley was steep, no one recorded lowering the wagons with ropes, or chains. However, A. R. Burbank, who camped in Dog Valley and stayed over for a day implies they locked the back wheels and "slid down like otters."

A. R. Burbank, Sept 8, 1849. *We lay in Camp all day and grazed our Cattle which are much fatigued & worn down. quite a number of teams have Came into the valley today (they have Slid down the mountain like otters).*

At the base of the descent was a stream (Dog Creek) and a fine spring of water. It has been speculated that Dog Valley may have gotten its name from packs of wild dogs observed by early settlers in the valley. However, the original name was Dog Spring Valley, so called by 1849 emigrants and apparently named for Dog Springs, located near the bottom of the descent. However, Dog Springs have not been located:

1. A. R. Burbank, Sept. 7, 1849. . . . *we descended to the Small beautiful valley and Encamped along Side of the dog Springs.*
2. M. A. Violette, Aug. 30, 1849. . . . *crossed the river the last time Struck across the Sieren Ovada mountains & came to dog Spring Valley at noon found good grass and water . . .*
3. Zimi Garwood, Sept. 15, 1849. . . . *At the foot of the mountain we came into a open grass valley with a fine spring of water and plenty of grass in the ravines*
4. Cyrus C. Loveland, Sept. 11, 1850. . . . *Then descended to a little valley, grass and a cold spring branch. Nooned here, distance from the river five miles*

Although flowing near the base of the descent, the stream could be seen from First Summit:

James Scott Abell, Aug. 29, 1849. . . . *We reached the Summit of the mountain range and looking ahead to the valey beneath we saw another fine stream of water flowing through it, which stream we reached and encamped.*

After reaching the Dog Springs and Creek, the trail turned sharply to the left (southwest):

1. Wakeman Bryarly, Aug. 20, 1849. . . . *we opened upon a beautiful little valley with a very steep hill to descend to it. . . . The road here took a south direction, having travelled northwest this morning. . .*
2. A. R. Burbank, Sept. 7, 1849. . . . *The road runs N. W. to the valley & Springs. Then turns Short to the South. . .*
3. Elisha B. Lewis, Sept. 15, 1849. . . . *we remained on this bottom 2 hours then continued our march our road turning to the left and runing nearly in a southern direction . . .*

From the point where they turned southwest and then south, it was about two miles to Second Summit. The road was closer to the base of the western mountains than to the eastern mountains. About half-way to Second Summit, there was a large spring on their right. The trail crossed the runoff from this spring:

1. Cyrus C. Loveland, Loveland, Sept. 11, 1850. . . *After dinner ascended a gradual rise of two miles to the top of the ridge [Second Summit]. . .*
2. James Scott Abell, Aug. 30, 1849. . . *At the upper end of the valley there was a beautiful spring from which a nice stream of [?]elid water flowed down through the center of the vale and through a gorge at the foot of its valley. . . We followed the valley up (south) through a pine forest between two and three miles. . .*
3. A. R. Burbank, Sept 9, 1849. . . *We passed up along the base of the Western mountain & through a pass between the two ranges [Second Summit]. Crossed a Spring rivulet (near a Spring on the right & 1 mile from the valley).*

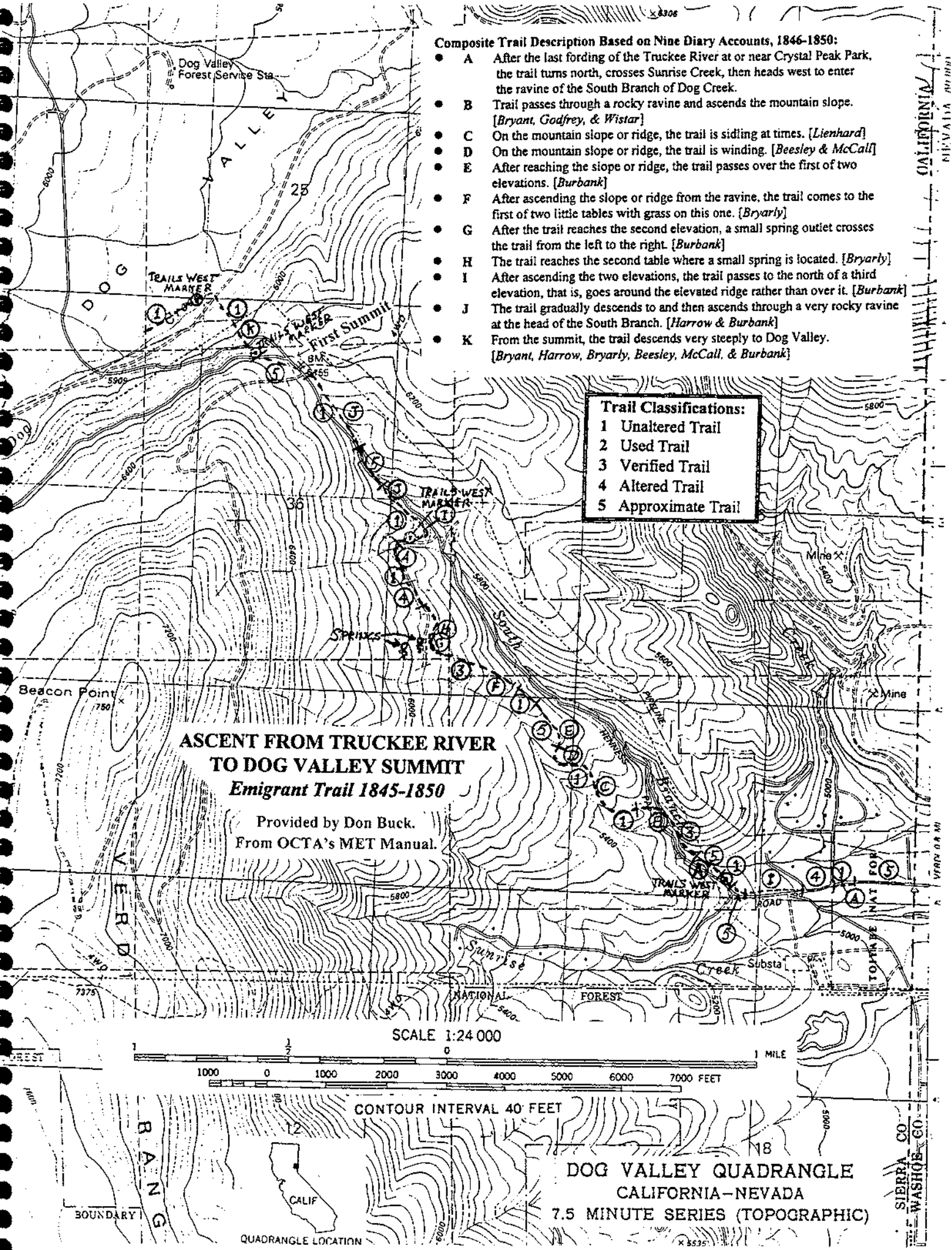
A short distance from where the trail descended and turned left, a few hundred yards of an old wagon swale was found. It runs southwest, the direction of the emigrant trail in that location and is in line with the descent point and route to the Second Summit. This pristine section of trail is now marked by Carsonite markers and at its beginning by a Trails West "T" rail marker.

E. Second Summit:

At Second Summit, all roads merge. A railroad, the Dutch Flat and later Henness Pass Roads, the emigrant trail, the early automobile road, and even a pipeline all pass over the summit near the same point. OCTA's Carsonite markers have been placed from about where Burbank crossed the "spring rivulet" to Second Summit. Over much of this trail leading out of Dog Valley, the later Henness Pass Road appears to be on top of the emigrant trail. At one point there is a distinct separation where a constructed wagon road cuts across an old wagon swale. In the section of wagon road leading out of Dog Valley to Second Summit, the road is destroyed in places as it weaves back and forth across the path of the later constructed pipeline.

Near the top of the trail ascending to the Second Summit, on an original trail segment, Trails West has placed a "T" rail marker.

DEW:11/99



PART II

Second Summit to Little Truckee River

Notes on the Hoke Valley Route of the Truckee Trail from Second Summit to the Little Truckee River

By Don Wiggins

Background:

The only published document that attempts to define the actual emigrant route along this section of the trail is Chuck Graydon's *Trail of the First Wagons Over the Sierra Nevada*. He interviewed many of the prior researchers and had use of some of the maps of their findings.

The Nevada Emigrant Trail Marking Committee, N.E.T.M.C., placed a marker at the Second Summit and one along the old Dutch Flat Road, between Stampede Valley and Russel Valley. Neither their maps nor the text attempted to locate the trail between Second Summit and the Little Truckee River.

Graydon's map shows the trail following a ravine down hill from Second Summit to the intersection of the small creek (no name) that leads into, and flows through, Hoke Valley. The trail then follows along, or near, this creek all the way through Hoke Valley until it intersects Davies Creek. It then follows Davies Creek, generally south, until at, or near, the junction with the Little Truckee River. The Little Truckee is flowing east at this point. The distance from Second Summit to this junction is about 4.4 miles. The projected line of travel has been all down hill through Hoke and then Davies Creek Valleys to the Little Truckee.

From the junction with the Little Truckee River the trail then heads east, through today's dam, then turns south following the Little Truckee Valley until exiting to Russel Valley at about three miles from first striking the river at Davies Creek junction. The trail is still relative level, following the flow of the Little Truckee along the wide valley. Until leaving the Little Truckee Valley, for the ascent into Russel Valley, there has been no ascent or descent to speak of all the way from Second Summit.

ANALYSIS

1. Did the emigrant trail follow the Little Truckee for about three miles?

In reviewing over 60 diaries, although some provide little detail, no one describes striking the Little Truckee (called a tributary of the Truckee, or earlier Wind River) and traveling **any** distance along its course, much less three miles. Further, Bryant and William Winter describe striking a **southeast** flowing stream. (This would be a magnetic bearing, meaning the stream would be flowing south with reference to true north. Winters actually stated northwest but I agree with Morgan and Kelly. He meant **from** the northwest.) This means they struck the river downstream from the dam, not upstream as depicted on Graydon's map.

If, after striking the Little Truckee, they didn't follow it what course did they take? Bryant tells us: "Crossing the stream we travelled in a south course, over low hills and a rolling or undulating country,..." His south is of course a true bearing or closer to the southwest, or at least 45 deg. to the right of the stream's direction. Harrow also tells of arriving at the same stream on Aug. 18, 1849: "At 1 ½ we came to and crossed a small but swift tributary of Truckies river. After crossing we ascended a long, rough hill." Burbank also gives us some insight into the arrival at the Little Truckee on Sept. 9: "... we **descended to a valley** & tributary of the S. Trout river. Here we nooned. This is a beautiful Stream 15 feet wide rocky bottom with clear coal water. Grass had been good, but it is grazed down. We **ascended the range** & passed 4 miles to a valley..." He not only ascended the range, as Harrow had described, after crossing, but he further tells us he had to **descend** to reach the valley. This doesn't sound like travel down Davies Creek to reach the Little Truckee!

2. Where did they strike and cross the Little Truckee?

The logical crossing would be about 0.6 to 0.75 miles below the Stampede Dam, between where the overhead power line and underground gas pipeline cross the river. There is an easy descent and ascent both to and from the river at this point. Crossing at any other point would mean a much steeper descent and/or ascent and would probably involve some river travel until an ascent point could be found.

3. If travel to the Little Truckee was not down the Hoke and Davies Creek Valleys, then where?

The description of travel between Second Summit and the Little Truckee indicates at least some of the travel was **not** down open valleys. The following are some diary descriptions of the trail between Second Summit and the Little Truckee:

(1) *Godfrey, Aug. 9, 1849:*

"...over an undulating country with occasionally fine little openings..." [Referring to the entire trip from Dog Valley to the Truckee River.]

(2) *Harrow, Aug. 20, 1849:*

"...We sometimes ascend, then descend into small valleys which we cross and ascend again on the opposite side."

(3) *Abell, Aug. 30, 1849:*

"... after ascending and descending several hills we came to another nice valley..."

(4) *Van Dorn, Sept. 2, 1849:*

"followed over a succession of hills."

(5) *Hackney, Sept. 2, 1849:*

"journey... over mountains and hills"

(6) *Lewis, Sept. 15, 1849:*

"over a rolling and uneven surface of country"

(7) *Perkins, Sept. 14, 1849:*

"through pine woods & rolling country"

(8) *Steele, Sept. 14, 1850:*

"crossed a series of low pine covered ridges"

(9) *Loveland, Sept. 11, 1850:*

"through a heavily timbered country of pine, fir and cedar" [fir and cedar not usually found along, or near, Hoke and Davies Valley bottoms]

(10) *Bryant, Aug. 24, 1846:*

"...over a rolling country, heavily timbered with pines, fir, and cedars, with occasional grassy openings"

(11) *Mathers, Sept. 5, 1846:*

"road generally good--passed [not followed] several patches of grass and creeks..."

(12) *Snyder, Sept. 20, 1845:*

"The best guide is a mountain on the left, bare of timber.... By keeping the Bald Mountain on the left and pursuing the most eligible route, Truckee's River cannot be missed."

[In the latter statement, he is referring to either Granite or Verdi Peak. If Graydon's route were followed, after striking the Little Truckee, the trail would be going directly towards these peaks, for about 0.2 mile, rather than keeping them on the left.]

(13) *Leinhard, Oct. 2, 1846:*

"...We drove through **high** forests **alternating** with open, usually moist meadows. ..."

(14) *Hillyer, Aug. 17, 1849:*

"we began to travel **over spurs** of the mountains, and then into little valleys, rich in grass and water, and yet the roads have been very rough, almost too rough for a horse to travel over without any load, and then to think of getting wagons over them, and it seems almost impossible."

(15) *Clyman, May 2-4, 1846, eastbound:*

"[May 2]...we made a short days travel and encamped on Johns creek...[May 3]...Proceeded on Early about 4 miles to a fine vally of green grass [Russel Valley]whare we unpacked again for the day...[May 4]...packed and ware early on the way crossed Quite a large creek which has been called wind River a tributary of Truckeys River and proceeded to **cross a considerable of a ridge and desended again into a small rich vally** 8 miles [5 miles to Little Truckee and 3 miles on to "rich vally, thus not Dog Valley."] from our former encampment... [May 5]...A cool night proceeded S Easterly about 4 miles [Party had traveled on to Dog Valley during the day.] and came to the main Truckies River whare it first leaves the timbred mountains and Enters the open Bald hills... "

[The "small rich vally" is same distance as Bryarly's camp (in one of the small valleys) was from the Little Truckee, or about 3 miles. Note, also, that he crossed the Little Truckee and proceeded to cross a considerable ridge, not follow a valley, or series of valleys to Second Summit. This account also tells us that the emigrants (westbound) did not encounter the ridge, or series of ridges, until about 3 miles before reaching the Little Truckee.]

There seems little doubt that the trail, at some point, went over ridges (spurs), probably relatively low, and with steep ravines or small valleys in between. At least some of the ravines had water, or creeks, running in them. There is a series of such ridges and ravines to the east (or southeast) of Hoke Valley and continuing on along east of the Little Truckee, after it turns south. Many of the ravines are deep and narrow and crossing them by wagon would have to be selective, but spots could be found that would allow a wagon road. [Beesley, Aug. 23, 1849 seems to be one of the very few voices that could be interpreted as traveling the Graydon route. After leaving Dog Valley, he "Nooned three hours in the pine forest and drove the ball[ance] of the day up the valley through the pines road very good and level encamped on a small stream with a fertile bottom..."]

A reminiscence by an 1853 emigrant gives some additional information. Reminiscences written so long after the fact are not generally helpful in locating trails, and information is sometimes suspect. However, other information of a personal experience nature, both before and after traveling along this section of the trail is consistence with known facts. Quotes are from manuscript of Kate McDaniel Furness, 1853, (Dictated when she was 86 years old):

"... The streams were all flowing southeast and the tracks followed the streams [?] as we were the first to cross over this tough trail in 1853, we had a slow trip. The trail was used only for pack mules. [?] Many times our train was held up while the men felled trees and built bridges over the deep, narrow gulches which had been washed by the melting snows. Many places the men were able to take the wagons by hand down the steep banks; Then drive the cattle and horses down anywhere they could slide down. As the animals would scramble up the other side, they would have to dig their feet deep into the soil, pulling themselves up by great effort. Sometimes they would have to slide back and then would have to try again." [end of Chapter XV.]

The deep, narrow gulches are a good description of the country encountered when leaving Hoke Valley and cutting across the hills directly to an excellent crossing of the Little Truckee. Although the diaries indicated they went this route, it was difficult to imagine an emigrant road down, across, and up the sometimes steep ravines. This reminiscence not only indicates the road went this way, but describes how they coped with the ravines. Compare this description with Hillyer's comments about seeming almost impossible to get a wagon over them. Her comments about the trail only being used for pack mules and following the southeast flowing streams may be based on hearsay over the years and not be factual. Her other comments are consistent with the 1849's description of the trail between Second Summit and Little Truckee.

4. Where did the trail cross (or did it) Hoke Valley?

Although it would be feasible to go southeast from Second Summit directly to the head of the Hoke Valley creek and follow it down a ways before taking to the ridges, the ridges are much higher and sidling than further down stream a mile or two. There is some evidence of early roads going this route, but perhaps logging, or related, roads. The more logical route (and there is supporting evidence) is for the trail to follow the wide ravine that leads directly down from Second Summit to it's junction with Hoke Valley creek. About 1/2 to 3/4 of a mile on down the creek, the valley opens up. Crossing the valley in a southern direction (or southeastern?) at this point leads across the series of low ridges and ravines directly to the crossing of the Little Truckee, about three miles distant. This agrees with Clyman's mileage where he descended into the "small rich vally." Crossing this series of low ridges and sometimes deep ravines are consistence with the dairies and also Furness's description of travel. This is also where the power and the gas lines cross Hoke Valley and follow the same general route, directly to and the shortest distance, to the Little Truckee. As it is thought the Henness Pass road followed either the exact, or the general path, of the emigrant trail from here north to Dog Valley, this is the point where it would separate from the emigrant road.

5. How does this route compare with the eyewitness accounts?

A. Distance to Little Truckee crossing:

(1) *Burbank, Sept. 9, 1849*: After leaving his camp in Dog Valley, thought to be two miles from Second Summit, he records: "... After passing through a forest some 7 miles, we descended to a valley... ." This places the crossing approximately some **5 miles** from Second Summit.

(2) *Loveland, Sept. 11, 1850*: After nooning in Dog Valley, he "...ascended a gradual rise of two miles to the top of the ridge... ," from there it was "**Five miles** more to a beautiful little bottom..."

(3) *Mathers, Sept. 4, 1846*: After camping by a spring in Dog Valley, he "traveled 7 m to a creek..." Allowing two miles to the summit would again place the crossing at **5 miles** from Second Summit.

(4) *Henry Smith Turner, June 23, 1847*: Eastbound with Kearny. After camping on Greenwood's Creek (Prosser), "Cross Greenwood's Creek & Wind River (Little Truckee),... After a march of 20 miles encamped on Trucky river..." [without crossing]. Estimated mileage from Prosser to Little Truckee (over ridges, not Graydon's route) is from 8 to 9 miles. Mileage from Dog Valley to Truckee, via 1846 route is from 5 to 6 miles. This leaves the distance from Second Summit as from **5 to 7 miles**.



(5) *Buffum, Aug. 8, 1849*: "...came to a fine bottom and a spring and nooned. [Dog Valley] ... 6 miles brought us to a branch where we camped... ." He estimated only **4 miles** summit to Little Truckee? Could he have camped on one of the ravine creeks to be crossed **before** reaching Little Truckee or just have underestimated?

(6) *Chamberlain, Aug. 11, 1849*: Leaving camp in Dog Valley, he writes, "came in about 7 miles to a tributary of Truckee river... ." Again about **5 miles** from Second Summit to Little Truckee.

(7) *Abell, Aug. 30, 1849*: Leaving camp in Dog Valley, he followed "the valley up (south) through a pine forest between two and three miles...came to another nice valley through which runs grass Creek... haveing traveled about twelve miles this morning we stopped to feed and dinner." Mileage seems to be in error (handwriting very clearly twelve). His next mileage (to presumably Prosser Creek) is about right (ten miles). Twelve miles would be about right for the distance from his last camp in Verdi.

(8) *Van Dorn, Sept. 2, 1849*: After leaving Dog Valley, "in about 8 or 9 miles we came upon a beautiful stream, said to be a branch of the Truckee." After driving on 5 miles and camping (Russel Valley), he records total mileage as "say 13," or **6 to 7 miles** from summit to Little Truckee.

(9) *Hackney, Sept. 2, 1849*: "...made 12 miles...nooned on a small stre[am] that runs into truckye river camped in another small valley... ." Camped in Russel Valley, about 4 or 5 miles from Little Truckee, or **5 to 6 miles** summit to Little Truckee.

(10) *Lewis, Sept. 15, 1849*: From Verdi [camped just before crossing 27th time] to a "branch of Truckee river" was 14 miles. No estimate of distance from Verdi to Dog Valley, so assume 5-6 miles. This leaves summit to Little Truckee as **6 to 7 miles**.

(11) *Bryarly, Aug. 20, 1849*: After nooning in Dog Valley, he traveled south: "**Occasionally** [indicates he did not travel Graydon's route] we struck a little valley with good grazing & water. Four miles we encamped in one of these valleys. ...Aug. 21... three miles brought us into a larger valley than usual... This is one of the tributaries of Truckee..." This is a total distance of seven miles, or **5 miles** from summit to Little Truckee.

The consensus estimate is 5 miles, with some estimates as high as 7 miles, from Second Summit to Little Truckee. With a rough trail over ridges and down ravines, it seems some emigrants would tend to overestimate the distance. There could even have been alternate roads developed, attempting to find easier ravine crossings.

The measured distance, using a GPS unit, or straight line distance, is 4.5 miles, Second Summit to near (within a 100 yds.) the crossing of Little Truckee. A measured distance from a 7.5 minute map, and using a straight line distance (the power line) from the assumed crossing in Hoke Valley, is 4.8 miles. The actual route traveled would not be straight line and would more likely be at least 5 miles, or perhaps more. (However, the 4.8 miles measured would probably be recorded in the diaries as 5 miles.) The Graydon route is down valleys and can be measured from a map with less difficulty than the route (exact route unknown) over ridges and down ravines. His route is measured as 4.4 ± 0.1 mile. This would be recorded as either 4 or $4\frac{1}{2}$ miles. Only one diary indicated a distance of under 5 miles, and this one is suspect.

Although mileage estimates are subjective and sometimes imprecise, the sheer weight of the diary evidence points to a route other than Graydon's route based on mileage alone.

6. How far to the Henness Pass junction from Second Summit?

The Henness Pass road was first used in 1852. There are at least two diaries that indicate where the turnoff was:

Hays, Aug. 31, 1854: After leaving Dog Valley on a "very good road, heavy timber to a narrow valley good feed here we noon a spell. 3/4 mile the road forks and we leave the Truckee road and take the right called the Downeville Route." If it is assumed that the emigrant road went down the ravine directly at Second Summit, at about 0.8 mile (GPS distance) the Hoke Valley creek is reached. This junction could be described as "a narrow valley." About 0.65 miles (GPS distance) further on down the valley, it opens up into Hoke Valley proper. The junction point should be near here, or 0.65 to 0.85 miles from the junction of the "narrow valley."

Henness, Sept. 11, 1852, [The Mountain Echo]: "...thence up the old Nevada road to the junction of roads...4 miles; (here the Downieville roads leads to the right);" Depending on just where in Dog Valley the 4 miles began, it would be between 1.6 and 2.0 miles down from Second Summit.

The exact Henness Pass Road junction, where it branched off the Truckee Trail, has not been found. However, remains of a very old wagon road, extending for about 1/3 mile southwest and west toward the county Henness Pass Road, appear to be the beginning of the 1852 Henness Pass Road. Extending east 1/3 mile from the first indication of this old trace would intersect the Truckee Trail heading south into Hoke Valley.

Near this probable junction site Trails West has placed a "T" rail marker. It is reached by a FS west-to-east dirt road (just north of and paralleling the old trace) that comes in from the county Dog Valley Road (1/10 mile northeast of the county road junction of the Henness Pass and Dog Valley roads).

PART III

Little Truckee River to Russel Valley

Notes on the Little Truckee River to Russel Valley

By Don Wiggins

Background:

Chuck Graydon's book (see notes on the Hoke Valley section) describes the emigrant trail as running south below Stampede Dam along the east side of the river. After about two and one-half miles, it leaves the Little Truckee Valley and enters the east end of Russel Valley. He indicates this was also the route suggested by Earl Rhodes, who left buffalo blazes along the trail.

Summary of Conclusions:

The Graydon route seems feasible and logical. Old roads, although impacted, were found to support this route, but old roads are very numerous in this entire area. Artifacts found along some are even of 19th century origin. Most are logging roads dating from the 1860's through the early twentieth century. The problem is that, as in Hoke Valley, the diary evidence does not support this route. The emigrants did not follow the Little Truckee River. They crossed it and traveled over "undulating country" about 4 or 5 miles to reach the next valley with water and grass. This valley appears to be Russel Valley, although some descriptions suggest they entered by way of one of the smaller valleys entering Russel Valley from the north.

Diary analysis further suggests that the entrance to Russel Valley was via a small valley shown in section 5, T 18N, R 17E. Exit was to the right and across the valley via one of the narrow valleys on the south side of Russel Valley.

Supporting Analysis:

1) Distance from Little Truckee (LT).

4 to 4 1/2 miles: Markle; Parke; Burbank; Loveland (4 1/2); McCall (implied)

5 miles: Mathers; Van Dorn; Hackney (implied)

6 miles: Chamberlain (packing: may not be in Russel Valley); Bryarly ("large stream" not consistent with other descriptions of Russel Valley. From this stop to the Truckee was only 4 miles, hence was probable Prosser. Mileage to Russel can not be determined, and 6 miles should be discounted.)

Under 4 miles: Loveland (3 1/2 mi. "small valley," 1 mile on to stop in another valley [Russel Valley, presumably].); Harrow (packing; 1 hr. came to valley, but 1/2 hr. further to noon stop in valley. Only records time in 1/2 hr. increments. Roughly agrees with Loveland, if he descended to a small valley first and went on to noon in Russel Valley.)

Of the 9 diaries (not counting Harrow, and discounting Chamberlain and Bryarly) that gives mileage from LT to Russel Valley, all are between 4 and 5 miles. From the assumed crossing of the LT down Graydon's river route to Dry Creek in Russel Valley is about 2 3/4 miles. Following the Graydon route from reaching the LT (west of dam) to Dry Creek, it is about 3 1/2 miles.

Conclusion: Based on mileage, the emigrant road did not follow the Little Truckee.

2) Direction traveled from Little Truckee to Russel Valley.

South: Bryant; Mathers (SSW); Garwood

It is assumed these are magnetic bearings. This is implied by Bryant's reading of the Little Truckee's flow as being southeast.

Conclusion: Based on direction traveled, the emigrant road did not follow the course of the Little Truckee.

3) Type of terrain crossed.

Ridges and/or hills: Markle; Bryant; Bryarly ("same sort..."); Harrow; Hackney; Steele; McCall; Burbank ("high")

Rolling Country: Bryant; Chamberlain; Parke; Burbank (undulating); Lewis

Pine forest: Markle ("thick"); Chamberlain ("heavy"); Hackney ("covered with"); Lewis ("heavy"); Steele ("dense"); McCall; Garwood

Any direct or implied travel along Little Truckee: None

There are 12 diaries that use terms not consistent with travel along the Little Truckee to enter Russel Valley. No diaries have been found that describe any travel down or along the LT. Conclusion: Based on descriptions in the diaries, the emigrant road did not follow the Little Truckee.

4) Description of Russel Valley.

Classic description: about four miles long and a half a mile in width, as level as a floor, ... Through its centre, gracefully coursed a silver stream. ... the lower part of the valley shows a heavy deposit of the finest alluvion, perfectly smooth and level,... In a mile or so you come to a coarser material of sand and gravel growing coarser as you proceed until at the upper end large stones and boulders appear as at the head of a rift: McCall

Small valley of grass and springs: Mathers; Van Dorn (small spring branch); Hackney;

Long but narrow: Burbank (with small spring branch)

Other descriptions usually just referred to it as a valley with grass and water.

5) Description of entrances to Russel Valley.

From a pine covered hill and struck into: McCall

Over a rolling country into: Parke

Passed from the range to: Burbank

From a small valley 200 yds. wide, 3/4 mile long with small spring branch: Loveland

Came to (saw), 1/2 hr. later (packing) stopped in it: Harrow

Emerge into: Van Dorn

Descriptions indicate they did not enter from either the extreme east or extreme west ends of the valley. Loveland gives the best clue. There are two north trending small valleys on the north side of Russel Valley that are approximately 3/4 mile long (the more western valley is longer, with extensions.) and approximately 200 yds. wide. He indicates it's one mile on to Dry Creek in Russel Valley. Harrow roughly confirms this, if one assumes he saw the large valley from the heights, descended into the small valley and proceeded on to Dry Creek to noon. McCall's description of the valley being 1/2 mile in width and of proceeding toward the upper end indicates entering Russel Valley at about it's center, or lower center. [The valley opens up at the lower, or eastern end, and is much wider than 1/2 mile.] Burbank also referred to it a long and narrow. McCall also implies he turned right (toward upper end) and traveled a mile or so before leaving the valley. The distance on to Prosser, about 4 miles, indicates, also, that they left the valley near, but perhaps toward the western end, the center. [The nearest, practicable route, from the western end to Prosser, would seem to be about 5 miles. It would make no sense to enter the valley near the center and travel two miles to the upper end for a longer route that would be no easier.] If they entered the narrow, north trending valley furthestest to the west, then one mile, as

described by McCall, would put the road near the west end of the valley, not near the center. Conclusion: It is probable that the emigrant road entered Russel Valley through the larger, north trending, valley shown in section 5, T 18N, R 17E on the 7.5 minute Boca topo map. A pipe line runs through this valley, and across Russel Valley.

6) Hypothesized Route from LT to Russel Valley.

Shortest route from LT crossing, ascending ridge SW along power line, across ridge to the small valley, and out valley to Dry Creek in Russel Valley, is 2 1/2 miles. Assuming the road then traveled up the middle of the valley for one mile (unlikely), the distance is still less than the lowest estimate found in the diaries.

The only route that satisfies the 4 to 5 mile distance is one that starts out along the power line, then swings to the right, or more westerly, ascends to top of the ridge (easier ascent than along power line), then loops around south and southeast before turning back southwest and entering the small valley from the **eastern** side. It is assumed the small valley is reached in 3 1/2 to 4 miles, and Russel Valley exit (the stream is near the south side of the valley at this point) is about 1 mile further on. This route would be consistent with all diaries.

A possible route would ascend the ridge (instead of following the power line a short distance) to the northwest and loop around as the other route. This route is probably better, but would cross the river and in a few hundred yards would turn northwest, instead of continuing southwest (true north) as recorded in the diaries. The **total** route would be to the south.

Diary Descriptions:

Markle, Aug. 9, 1849: Leaving a creek (Little Truckee), "...**4 miles** more brought us across a ridge to another valley where we are encamped, and the grass and water very good. ... This morning after crossing the creek, we got into a thick pine country..."

["Across a ridge" and a "thick pine country" is not consistent with following the Little Truckee to Russel Valley. It is consistent with ascending and crossing the ridges to the southwest between LT and Russel Valley.]

Bryant, Aug. 25, 1846: Camped before crossing the LT, "...Crossing the stream we travelled in a south course, over low hills and a rolling or undulating country..."

Mathers, Sept. 4, 1846: "Traveled 7 m to a creek[LT] and from thence to a small valley of grass and Springs **5 m**. [Russel Valley] road good general course S. S. W. 12"

[General course of SSW indicates he did not travel south (or southeast, MN) for two miles along LT. "Small valley" also does not sound like eastern end of Russel Valley. Suggest Russel Valley entered further to the west, perhaps by way of one of the small valleys to the north.]

Ingersoll, Sept. 18-22, 1847: "...travel 7 miles to grass, then **5 miles** [Russell Valley] to grass and water..."

Chamberlain, Aug. 11, 1849: "...came in about 7 miles to a tributary of Truckee river [LT], crossed several small grassy valleys & at noon came to a [sic] another fork of or the main river where we stopd to feed about 13 miles [Russel (or Prosser?) Valley] from our morning starting place- the road has been over a rolling heavily pine-timbered country."

[13 - 7, or **6 miles** places him well into maybe past Russel Valley. Description of road into Russel Valley, again, does not indicate travel along valleys, especially LT travel.]

Bryarly, Aug. 21, 1849: "... We rolled **6 miles** over the same sort of country [i.e., "through woods, valleys, & up & down hill..."]... & came to another large valley with a larger stream running through it--another tributary to Salmon Trout."

[Description sounds like Prosser, and after nooning, they only traveled 4 miles to the Truckee.

The six miles would place them past, but near Russel Valley, not all the way to Prosser. The recorded six miles seems in error. Description of travel is very explicit, they traveled up and down hill, not up and down valleys.]

Harrow, Aug. 20, 1849: "... After crossing[LT at 11 1/2] we ascended a long, rough hill. Kept on over rough road until 12 1/2, when we came to splendid feed in a valley. We drove to it and stopped to rest and feed... 1 p.m."

[Harrow was not at the valley at 12 1/2. It took 30 minutes, or 1/3 of the total time from LT to the stop in Russel Valley, to drive to it and stop at 1 p. m. This suggest he entered by way of one of the north trending valleys on the north side of Russel Valley.]

Parke, Aug. 30, 1849: "... We soon left S. T. Valley [LT] and traveled **4 miles** over a **rolling country** into another valley where we nooned [Russel Valley]..."

Van Dorn, Sept. 2, 1849: "... Driving on **5 miles** further we **emerge** into another bottom section, a small spring branch running through ..."

[Emerge into the valley is consistent with coming out of a canyon, or small valley, into the valley, not descending from a ridge or even a small hill into the valley..]

Hackney, Sept. 2, 1849: "... Resumed our journey this morning and made 12 miles over **mountains and hills** all covered with the largest kind of pine trees we nooned on a small stre[am] that runs into truckee river [LT] camped in a nother small valley [Russel Valley] and found good grass and plenty of spring water..."

[12 miles from Dog Valley to camp, therefore, approximately **5 miles** from LT to Russel Valley. Does not indicate traveling down the LT after striking it, implies mountains and hills all the way.]

Burbank, Sept. 9, 1849 "... We ascended the range & passed 4 miles to a valley & small spring branch. ... camped... The valley is long but narrow. ... The country is high & undulating. **Sept. 10:** "... We started at sunrise. ... I spent the night with Dr. A. **down** the valley with our herd (we bivouaced by a small camp fires). we passed **up** a narrow valley & ascended the forest elevation..."

[Russel Valley opens up on the east end and is narrow on the west end. Diary suggests he entered the valley near the center, perhaps closer to the west end, and camped. The cattle were taken down the valley toward the east (there would be more grass), and the next morning they turned right, or up the valley to the west, to exit.]

Lewis, Sept. 16, 1849: "... our travels to day [from LT] were over a **rolling country** and through a heavy timbered pine forest road to day much better to day than yesterday passed over several small grassy bottoms through which small brooks made there way about 3 oclock decended a steep declivity and struck the main Truckee river..."

[Not much info, but travel was over a rolling country, not along LT valley. He did not indicate, on the 15th, that the roads over that rolling country was bad, but comments today indicate they were! This agrees with steep ascents and descents others mentioned.]

Loveland, Sept. 12, 1850: "... Three and a half miles to a small valley two hundred yards wide, three fourths of a mile long. grass good. Had a small spring branch. Four and one half miles to another valley with a very pretty branch running through it. Nooned here; grass good. After leaving this, three and a half miles to another little valley [Prosser] with a small branch running down a ravine to the right.

[This sounds like reaching the long northward trending valley on the north side of Russel Valley, then following this valley about a mile to Russel Valley].

Steele, Sept. 15, 1850: After camping at "a large creek" that probably, although not a certainty, was the Little Truckee, left early the next morning and "The road crossed a **succession of ridges** mantled with a dense pine forest, rising gradually as we neared the summit of the Sierra Nevada, ... Although the road was rough, and in **some places steep**, the air was cool, and we traveled about **twenty miles**, camping near one of Captain Donner's old cabins on the last branch of Truckee."

[The travel of 20 miles and the adjective "large" is the basis of concluding the camped at the LT on Sept. 14. The steep road is consistent with the ascending the first ridge after crossing the LT, and perhaps descending off the ridge into Russel Valley.]

McCall, Sept. 5, 1849: "...In the afternoon moved on over a pine covered hill and struck into the sweetest valley mortal eye ever rested upon. It was about four miles long and a half a mile in width, as level as a floor... Through its centre, gracefully coursed a silver stream. ... the lower part of the valley shows a heavy deposit of the finest alluvion, perfectly smooth and level... In a mile or so you come to a coarser material of sand and gravel growing coarser as you proceed until at the upper end large stones and boulders appear as at the head of a rift. We encamped here, having made fifteen miles...."

[Although he gives no description of the afternoon travel after leaving Dog Valley, except the above passage, This is one of the best descriptions of Russel Valley found in the diaries. The mileage indicated (from his camp near Verdi, and after crossing the Truckee) is consistent with 4 miles, LT to Russel Valley, if it is assumed they camped near Dog Creek after crossing the Truckee. The precise description of 4 miles long (about the right total length) and half a mile in width (about right if he entered the valley through the long, narrow, northward trending valley as is thought) is right on. His further description of the lower part of the valley, where it is widens (and he could not see the much wider width at the lower end) and is alluvium filled is also accurate. The real gem described is the proceeding about a mile or so to the coarser material in the upper end of the valley. This tells us that he turned right after entering the valley and traveled a mile, more or less, before camping and leaving the valley the next day.]

Garwood, Sept. 16, 1849: Camped at LT: "... We started early in the morning and **continued our course south**. Our road to day lay across open pine woods intercepted by small grass valleys and some small streams of fine water. Late in the afternoon we struck Truckee's River again. ... "

[Same south course as Bryant after crossing the Little Truckee. Note they **continued** the course south. According to Graydon's route they would have been traveling east then southeast along the LT when they crossed and left it. This route would not have been described as **continuing** south when they crossed the LT.]

[Trails west has placed a "T" rail marker near the probable emigrant trail crossing area of the Little Truckee River, about a quarter-mile south of the Stampede Dam from the river outlet.]

Notes on the Truckee Trail To and Leaving Russel Valley
By Don Wiggins

A. How far to Russel Valley from Little Truckee:

A. R. Burbank, Sept. 9, 1849: [Leaving Little Truckee River] ... We **ascended the range** & passed 4 miles to a valley [Russel Valley] & small spring branch...

[Burbank did not follow the river valley, "he ascended the range," and in 4 miles he was at the stream in the center of the valley.]

B. Where did they enter Russel Valley?

Ansel McCall, Sept. 5, 1849: ... In the afternoon moved on over a pine covered hill and struck into the sweetest valley mortal eye ever rested upon. It was about four miles long and **a half a mile in width**, as level as a floor, and completely embosomed by green hills sweeping up from their base as thousand feet, densely covered with pine, cyprus and cedars. Through its centre, gracefully coursed a silver stream. It had evidently once been the bed of a mountain lake, which had at some time burst its barriers permitting its waters to excape into the great basin below. This is made apparent from the fact that the lower part of the valley shows a heavy deposit of the finest alluvion, perfectly smooth and level, covered with luxurious grass three feet high, that would yield, at least, three tons of hay to the acre. **In a mile or so** you come to a coarser material of sand and gravel growing coarser **as you proceed until at the upper end** [the west end] large stones and boulders appear as at the head of a rift. We encamped here...

[McCall estimated the valley width as about one-half mile. At the lower, or east end, the valley is one mile, maybe two, miles wide, but near the center it narrows to about one-half mile in width. So he must have entered somewhere near the center of the valley. He traveled at least a mile or more toward the upper (west) end and camped. It is not clear from his diary if he camped at the extreme upper end, or was just describing the valley as he did on the east end. But as there is no easy exit south (from the extreme upper end) without returning back down the valley and leaving via one of the side valleys to the south, it can be assumed he entered the valley near its center, went west (up the valley) for about a mile, or so, and camped. The most likely place to enter Russel Valley would be the small north/south valley where we find our friend, the gas pipeline. The northern extension of this valley fits descriptions in some of the other diaries.]

C. Leaving Russel Valley:

From McCall's assumed camping spot, there are two possible south-trending valleys that lead toward Prosser Creek. No diarists pinpoint the exact route of the emigrant road out of the valley, but Burbank gives the most information:

Sept 10th, 1849. We started at sunrise. The night & morning has been very cool. Ice froze in our buckets & we shivered around the fire. I spent the night with Dr. A. down the valley with our herd (we bivouaced by a small camp fires). we passed up a narrow valley & ascended the forest elevation & at 3 (1/2?) miles we descended to a valley. Crossed a beautiful mountain stream 10 feet wide (a tributary of S. Trout). [Prosser Creek]

[Burbank confirms he was camped toward the west end of the valley. (He took the cattle **down** the valley to graze.) South of this approximate camp site is a long narrow valley. (The western most one.) An old road runs along the eastern side of this valley. At the southern end, an old road can be found leaving the valley and "ascending the forest elevation." At that point it is about 3 1/2 miles to Prosser Creek. This valley is the best guess as to the location of the emigrant road leaving Russel Valley.]

[End]

PART IV

Russel Valley to Prosser Creek

Notes on the Truckee Trail from Russel Valley to Prosser Creek By Don Wiggins

Background:

Russel Valley is an east/west trending valley. The west end terminates into a small north/south valley. At this point Russel Valley is about 0.3 to 0.4 miles wide. As one goes east, the valley opens up from about 1/2 mile midway to about 1 mile, or greater, at the eastern end leading into Boca Reservoir. As indicated by the previous "Notes on the Truckee Trail To and Leaving Russel Valley," the emigrants did not enter Russel Valley by way of the open east end, but by way of one of the narrow north/south valleys on the north side.

Analysis:

Although the Little Truckee to Russel Valley field research is incomplete, it appears the entrance was through the small valley in which the gas pipeline is located. This is corroborated by Loveland's diary. His description fits the upper end of this narrow valley. The width of Russel Valley at this canyon entrance is about 1/2 mile, same as described by McCall.

Where is the exit point for the trail to Prosser Creek? Roads can be found not only in each of the small valleys, but also on the ridges leading out of the valley. Burbank tells us that the exit was up one of those narrow valleys, not up one of the ridges, but he doesn't say which one. The long, narrow valley just east of the pipeline is the route of choice by all prior researchers. If the trail led out of the pipeline canyon into the valley, it could turn left, or east, and exit up that same canyon, although entering from a different direction than previously supposed.

Burbank also tells us that Russel Valley was **long** and **narrow**. At the entrance to the presently supposed route, the valley is no longer narrow, but opens up to where it may not even be considered a valley. By sending the cattle **down** the valley to the more open area, where there is presumably more grass (see McCall), strongly implies he is camped toward the western end of the valley. This means a right turn on entering the valley. This is supported by McCall, who describes the geology of the valley as he proceeds from lower end towards the upper end. This would also necessitate a right turn upon entering Russel Valley.

The diary mileages from Russel Valley to near Prosser Creek (Near, because we usually don't know the exact reference points of the mileage indicated.) is approximately 4 to 5 miles, with an average about 4 to 4½ miles. If the exit was at the extreme western end of the valley, the indicated mileage would be 5½ to 6 miles, or greater depending on a practical route found. There are only two possible valleys left that fit the diary descriptions. These are in the upper, middle of the valley. Taking McCall at face value ("in a mile or so"), the western most one is the likely choice.

Field Results:

The lower end of this valley is on government land and there is an old two track going up the valley on the left side. The upper end is private, being built on, with NO TRESPASSING signs at the upper entrance. The good news is what appears to be an old wagon road coming up out of the canyon on the county public road side. From there a series of traces can be found all the way to near the water at Prosser Reservoir. Trails West has placed two "T" rail markers along this 2+ miles of trail.

[continued on next page]

Diary Passages Used in This Analysis

Snyder, 1845: It is 9 miles to Wind River from the spring branch where we camped, 9 miles from Wind River to Johns River [Prosser], & 6 miles from Johns River to the waters of Truckees River (Truckee). [*4½ to 5 miles to Russel Valley, leaves 4 to 4½ miles, Russel to Prosser.*]

Winter, 1845 (eastbound): At ten miles, we crossed the North branch of Truckies River [Prosser Creek], a stream of considerable size. We traveled eight miles further, to the head of a stream, running to [from] the North West, which we called Snow River [Little Truckee River]. [*3½ to 4 miles Russel to Prosser*]

Carriger, 1846: 19 thence to John Greenwoods Creek 9 miles... [*4 to 4½ miles*]

Clyman, May 3 1846 (eastbound): [From John's Creek] Proceeded on Early about 4 miles to a fine vally of green grass ... [*4 miles*]

Abell, 1849: [nooned at Little Truckee] After dinner we went about ten miles and stopped for the night on the banks of a nice creek. [*5 to 5½ miles*]

Burbank, 1849: Sept 10th: We started at sunrise. ... I spent the night with Dr. A. down the valley with our herd (we bivouaced by a small camp fires). we passed up a narrow valley & ascended the forest elevation & at 3 (1/2?) miles we descended to a valley. Crossed a beautiful mountain stream 10 feet wide (a tributary of S. Trout). fair grass here. we passed a fine spring on 1/2 a mile & to the left. [*Began descent to Prosser at 3½ miles. Assume 1 mile on to Prosser, or 4½ miles to creek. Spring must be Woodchoppers Spring. There are 3 or 4 narrow valleys he could have left through. One clue. They went down (or to the east) the valley with the herd. So, they must be camped in the middle, or western end, of the relatively small valley.*]

McCall, 1849: ...It was about four miles long and a half a mile in width, as level as a floor, and completely embosmed by green hills sweeping up from their base as thousand feet, densely covered with pine, cyprus and cedars. Through its centre, gracefully coursed a silver stream. It had evidently once been the bed of a mountain lake, which had at some time burst its barriers permitting its waters to escape into the great basin below. This is made apparent from the fact that the lower part of the valley shows a heavy deposit of the finest alluvion, perfectly smooth and level, covered with luxurious grass three feet high, that would yield, at least, three tons of hay to the acre. In a mile or so you come to a coarser material of sand and gravel growing coarser as you proceed until at the upper end [western end] large stones and boulders appear as at the head of a rift. We encamped here, [a mile or so?] having made fifteen miles. [McCall strongly implies they entered the valley about the center (where it's a half mile wide), turned west, and camped in a mile, more or less. Grass described at lower end is where Burbank grazed stock. Don't think he camped at upper end, probably explored after camping.]

Van Dorn, 1849: Sept. 3, ... In about 5 miles we made another branch of Truckee of considerable size with a fine bottom of nutritious grasses but did us no good-- too early to noon [*5 miles from Russel Valley.*]

Loveland, 1850: Thursday, 12. ... Three and a half miles to a small valley two hundred yards wide, three fourths of a mile long [*upper end of pipeline valley, lower end enters Russel Valley.*] grass good. Had a small spring branch.... Four and one half miles to another valley with a very pretty branch running through it. [Prosser] Nooned here; ... [*4½ miles*]

Baker, 1852: 8/25 Traveled 16 miles, road good; nine miles from where we started crossed another branch of the Truckey [Prosser], seven miles from where we camped between two small creeks;... [*4½ to 5 miles--7 miles on to camp between Coldstream and Donner Creeks.*] [End]

PART V

Prosser Creek to Truckee River Valley

An Investigation of Emigrant Trails in Section 1 (T 17 N – R 16 E)
[Old Greenwood resort, east of Truckee, between I-80 and Truckee River]
By Don Wiggins, June 1999

Purpose:

The purpose of this investigation is to locate, verify, and document any emigrant trail segments in Section 1. However, in order to verify isolated trail segments, a continuous sequence of linear trail segments, supported by documentation and physical evidence, must be shown both before and after Section 1, from Prosser Creek to Truckee River Valley.

Background:

The first emigrant wagon train through the Truckee Town area was a train captained by Elisha Stephens in 1844. Arriving at the Humboldt Sink, they were led to a river flowing eastward out of the Sierra Nevada Mountains by an Indian they named Truckee. Following this river westward, they arrived at today's community of Verdi. From there they continued following the river through the rugged, upper canyon all the way to the junction of Donner Creek and the Truckee River. The trip through the canyon in early November almost proved to be disastrous with little feed for the animals, some snow, and much travel in the cold, boulder filled waters of the river itself. Eventually the party all arrived safely at Sutter's Fort. This was the opening of the California Trail.

Serving as guide for the party was an 81 year old mountain man named Caleb Greenwood. Greenwood was commissioned to return to Ft. Hall in 1845 and bring more emigrants into California, now that a wagon road was opened. Greenwood, and party, returned eastward in 1845. On arriving at the Truckee River again, he knew that the canyon route was not a practical wagon road. He would have to find an alternate route. Leaving the river valley, he and his party laid out a route in a northeast direction, reaching Dog Valley and then dropping down into the river valley again at Verdi. A member of his 1845 party, William Winter, tells the story:

Leaving the lake, [Donner Lake] and the river which flows from it, to the right, we bore off to the North East, for a wide, deep gap, through which we supposed that we could both pass, and leave the mountains. At ten miles, we crossed the North branch of Truckies River [Prosser Creek], a stream of considerable size.

Greenwood did succeed in bringing about 50 wagons and some packers back to Sutter's Fort in 1845. At Verdi he followed his new Truckee Canyon Bypass northwest into Dog Valley and then southwest into the Truckee area. This general route was then used by future travelers until U. S. 40 was opened from Truckee to Verdi in 1925 along the original route used by Elisha Stephens in 1844. Over the years, the exact route changed, somewhat, from the route used by the early emigrants. In 1864/65, construction of the Dutch Flat Wagon Road, a freight and passenger road, was continued from Truckee to Verdi. Although in the same corridor, it generally did not follow the original emigrant trail. Later an automobile road, used by a branch of the Lincoln Highway, followed this same general corridor, but also deviated, in places, from both the Dutch Flat and the emigrant trail. As settlement and logging developed along the bypass route in the 1860's and 1870's, other wagon roads were developed to serve those interests.

In general, the 1845 route was followed until at least 1850, when easier or alternate routes began to be developed all along the Truckee Trail. The major changes for emigrant travel were the Nevada City road that opened from Bear Valley in 1850, and the Beckwourth and Henness Pass roads that opened in 1851 and 1852, respectively.

One major change did occur in 1846 when the original trail over the Sierra Nevada crest, between Mt. Stephens and George Stewart Peak, was abandoned for a new road over the pass between Mt. Judah and Mt. Lincoln, or the Roller Pass road. Minor, undocumented, changes may have occurred in the trail between Prosser Creek and Donner Lake valley in the 1850's.

Report Guidelines:

Although all early wagon roads are historically important, the focus of this report is to locate, verify, and document the route of the original emigrant trail between the years 1845 and 1850. This is necessary in order to establish the possible emigrant origin of the wagon ruts in Section 1.

To aid in this task, the guidelines and rules established by the Oregon-California Trails Association in their *Mapping Emigrant Trails (MET)* Manual, third edition of 1996, will be followed. In particular, this includes the four Cardinal Rules of Trail Verification:

1. Coherence Rule:

There must be a linear uniformity so that trail segments form a continuous sequence, i.e., the trail segment under investigation has to link coherently with the trail segments that precede and follow it.

2. Corroborative Rule:

There must be confirming documentary evidence of the trail: i.e., the trail segment under investigation has to have valid written or cartographic evidence to support its authenticity.

3. Collateral Rule:

There must be accompanying physical and/or topographical evidence of a trail: i.e., the trail segment under investigation has to have some geomorphic or artifact evidence to support it as an authentic emigrant trail.

4. Correlation Rule:

There must be overall agreement between all types of evidence: i.e., the evidence resulting from the first three cardinal rules have to be mutually supporting (not contradicting one another) in order to verify the location of a trail segment.

Likewise, the closer the evidence is to the actual happening, the higher weight it receives: i.e., diary accounts recorded the day of actual travel is rated higher than a later chance finding of an old wagon road or the unsupported testimony of "old timers," whose memory trails, like the wagon trails, may have grown dim with time.

The procedures established in the MET manual are especially important in verifying trails along the Truckee River Route, as this trail exists today only in short, isolated segments. It is unusual to find continuous, identifiable trail segments over 1/2 a mile long. Most are much shorter. Many times a highly visible, pristine trail segment will end abruptly for no apparent reason and the continuation will be found some distance away.

Prior Trail Research in the Prosser Creek to Donner Lake Valley Area:

With the 19th Century growth in the area and the development of newer and better roads, the location of the original emigrant trail seems to have been forgotten over time. Although, the GLO plat map of

the area, dated 1865, shows an "old emigrant trail," this indicated trail is considered unreliable. For example, it follows along the north side of Prosser Creek far into the mountains to the west, where it branches into three other trails, none of which fits any emigrant diary descriptions.



The Weddell Route: The earliest trail researcher, of record, was P. M. Weddell, who marked a trail with wooden signs beginning in the early 1920's. He also placed the trail as following Prosser Creek west, but left the creek in a southern direction a few miles before the trail shown on the GLO plat map crossed the creek. He also located the Donner Family Camp site and placed one of his trail signs on the "George Donner Tree" as an indication of the trail route. His version of the trail then followed a circuitous route up the west branch of Alder Creek into the mountains then down into Donner Lake Valley without ever nearing the Truckee River.

In an article written for the *California Historical Society Quarterly*, in March, 1945, he offered two proofs of George Donner camp site and the "Donner trail" leading to it:

- (1) Old, high tree stumps: He reasoned that the stumps were proof that the camp was nearby.
- (2) Documentary proof: John Markle's diary.

Markle was an 1849 emigrant that visited the Donner Family camp site. However, the trail Markle was on did not follow Weddell's route and did not go by the George Donner tree. Instead of questioning the accuracy of his purposed route, Weddell assumed Markle had "*left the Donner trail at Prosser Creek, and traveled along the course now taken by the highway between Prosser Creek and the town of Truckee.*" He further states that "*from the high ground on this road, the site of the Donner Family Camp can be seen in the distance [about 1½ miles away]. Markle refers to this view of the camp in his journal and estimates the distance quite accurately.*"

Other investigators have also referred to Markle seeing the camp from his vantage point. On page 56, *The Archeology of the Donner Party* by Donald Hardesty, it is stated, "*He [Markle] wrote in his diary that the remains of the Alder Creek camp were visible. . .*" This common perception that Markle wrote in his diary that he could see the camp site, and was, presumably, the reason he visited the site will be challenged later in this report.

Further, Weddell never located a trail coming "over the hill" from Prosser Creek. He merely accepted C. F. McGlashan's word that a road used to be there but must have disappeared. His version of the trail then continued up the west branch of Alder Creek. No documentary proof was ever offered that the trail he marked up Alder Creek itself was used by emigrants, nor has any proof been found by other researchers.

However, the main problem with Weddell's route is the fact that many diarists recorded travel along the Truckee River before reaching the Graves cabin. Over 25 diarists, from 1845 through 1850, explicitly record striking the Truckee River before reaching Donner Lake Valley. Weddell's roundabout route never reached the Truckee River.



Using the four Cardinal Rules, Weddell's route fails on all counts. Regardless of the obvious problems in the verification of the Weddell Route, this route was accepted without question until recently.

It is also interesting that in a reprint of C. F. McGlashan's *History of the Donner Party*, the editors, in

1940, noted that "*Donner Lake was misnamed 'Truckee Lake' by early travelers and cartographers, who missed the junction of Donner Creek and the Truckee River and concluded that Donner Lake was the source of the latter.*" They did not elaborate on the reason for missing that junction. That reason is important because it uniquely illustrates the route of the trail between the Truckee River and Donner Lake Valley.

The Entrance into Donner Lake Valley:

The Truckee River/Donner Creek junction was not seen because the early trail went through the Town of Truckee, left the river valley and turned right through the small valley, that was the later route of U. S. 40, and entered Donner Lake Valley that way. A hill stands between that small valley and the junction of the river and creek. The emigrants mistakenly thought that Donner Creek was a continuation of the Truckee River. Some even called this the south branch of the Truckee while Prosser Creek was considered the north branch. Edwin Bryant probably caused most of the confusion in his much read 1846 journal, published in 1848, when he wrote:

The trail runs along this stream [Truckee River] a short distance, and then leaving it on the right hand, winds under a range of high mountainous elevations, until it strikes again the same watercourse, in a distance of a few miles. About two o'clock, P. m., we suddenly and unexpectedly came in sight of a small lake, . . . The sheet of water just noticed, is the head of Truckee river, and is called by the emigrants who first discovered and named it, Truckee Lake.

Numerous other emigrants describe leaving the river valley on their left and turning right into a small valley before entering Donner Lake Valley. This, in itself, is enough to discredit Mr. Weddell's route.

The Graydon Route:

The first published documentation to discount the Weddell Route was Charles Graydon in his book, *Trail of the First Wagons Over the Sierra Nevada*. In his 1996 third edition, he states that "no first-hand historical evidence of this route [the Weddell route] being used by emigrants can be located." Graydon purposed a route that crossed Prosser Creek near the junction of Alder Creek, then followed south along a ridge generally parallel to the south branch of Alder Creek before it dropped down into the Truckee River Valley near the town of Truckee. This is basically the route of the old Dutch Flat Wagon Road, constructed in 1864. Although this route solves one of the major diary problems by showing some travel along the Truckee River, his route continues along the river to reach the junction of Donner Creek. This is valid for the 1844 Stephens Party but, as indicated above, later parties left the river before reaching that river/creek junction. However, the Prosser Creek to Truckee portion may still be valid and must be evaluated.

Little evidence is presented in the 1996 edition of Graydon's book to support the emigrant use of this route between Prosser Creek and the Truckee River. However, in the original edition, published in 1986, he also used the Markle diary to point out that the Donner Family Camp site was about 1½ miles away (which agreed with Markle's estimate to the site) and was only visible from the road on the ridge east of Alder Creek Valley. Presumably, then, using Markle's diary, the location of the camp site proved the location of the emigrant trail. The 1845 Jacob Snyder diary also was used to prove descent into the Truckee River Valley before reaching Donner Lake Valley. However, physical evidence along this route is lacking.

In conversations with Mr. Graydon a few years ago, he pointed out that this is a much more logical route than the Weddell route and that development, road construction, and logging probably had destroyed all traces of the emigrant trail. It is a straight, relative level route with no ravines to cross and no hills to climb. This was a valid argument and many diaries seem to fit this route although none are diagnostic except, perhaps, the Markle diary. However, an alarming number of diaries offer contradictory evidence of a different route.

Problems with the Graydon Route:

1. A number of diaries describe a route that descends into the Truckee River Valley and then goes a number of miles before reaching either the Graves cabin or the crossing of Donner Creek.

An example of mileage to the crossing point:

Alexander Love, Aug. 22, 1849. . . *Drove about 12 m. to the main branch of the river [Truckee River] and nooned. Here is a steep rocky bluff that the road passes down. Started at 3 drove 4 m. crossd a stream and campd. This is the outlet of Truckee lake. Our camp is within 60 rods of the bur(n)t Cabbin [Breen cabin] where the unfortunate Dona [Donner] party perished. . .*

An example of mileage to the Graves cabin:

T. J. Van Dorn, Sept. 3, 1849. . . *Passed on [from Prosser Creek] and in 4 miles made the river again. Nooned here, . . . Truckee here is rapid, with a rough and rocky bed-- 150 to 200 feet about its average width. Remaining here 2 ½ hours we passed into the valley, tolerable roads, and in about 2 1/2 or 3 miles came to Campbell's [Cannibal] Cabins at the foot of Truckee Lake.*

The first cabin reached after entering Donner Lake Valley was the Graves double cabin. Many referred to it as the cannibal cabins. About ¾ to 1 mile further west was the crossing point of Donner Creek. The burned cabin (Breen cabin) is near that point. This places Van Dorn as traveling about ¾ to 4 miles after reaching the river to the Donner Creek crossing point. Good agreement with Alexander Love. For reference, many recorded the crossing point as 1 mile east of the lake, although some had it as near as 1/2 mile from the lake.

The Graydon route drops down into the Town of Truckee. After modifying his route to enter the small valley at the west end of town, it is about 1½ miles on to the Graves cabin and another ¾ to 1 mile on to the creek crossing, or less than 2½ miles total compared to the ¾ to 4 miles shown above.

2. Then there is the matter of a small creek that some diarists recorded following for some distance after reaching the Truckee River:

James Scott Abell, August 31, 1849. . *came to Truckees River, leaving it to our left we followed up a little creek some distance when we made noon halt. After a short stop we proceeded up the creek about two miles when we came to the noted cabins [Graves' cabins] . . [Note: It is assumed that when Abell came to the Graves cabins two miles after his noon halt, he was no longer following the creek.]*

Graydon's route would have to cross Trout Creek in the Town of Truckee to reach the river. The creek enters the town a short distance from where his route drops down into the town. If the trail followed it, even this short distance, the small valley through which the trail entered Donner Lake

Valley would be just a short distance ahead. To reach the river the trail would have to swing south, reach the river, then abruptly turn back north to enter the small valley. Even then the trail would follow the creek *before* reaching the river, not *after* as Abell described.

3. Also, the trail made a left turn, and descended the "steep rocky bluff" described by Alexander Love, to within a hundred yards of the river before turning west again. The river water, with rocks showing in the river, was visible during the descent and turn to the west. Wakeman Bryarly describes the scene August 21, 1849. . . . *Four miles, the road turned left. Here, upon our left, distant some hundred yards from the road was Truckee River in all its glory again, splashing & dashing over the rocks. . .*

The hundred yards distance was confirmed by an 1850 diarist:

M. Littleton, Sept 27, 1850. . . . *6 miles more you come within less than 100 yards of T River again and take of to the right up a little valey and come over into the valey where Donor and his company wintered and Suffered and Starved. . .*

At the point of descent of Graydon's trail, the river is about 500 to 600 yards away and water cannot be seen "splashing & dashing over the rocks."

4. There's also a small hill to be crossed after leaving Prosser Creek: Nicholas Carriger, Sept. 19 & 20, 1846. *19 thence to John Greenwoods Creek [Prosser Creek] 9 miles verry good road [Sept.] 20 crossing a small hill thence a goof[d] [road] to the foot of the mountain 12 miles*

This has always been a mystery to trail researchers because the mountains on Weddell's route could not be accurately described as "crossing a small hill," and Graydon's route was relatively level and did not cross a hill of any description.

5. Another problem diary is that of A. R. Burbank in 1849: Augustus Ripley Burbank, Sept. 10, 1849. . . . *Crossed a beautiful mountain Stream 10 feet wide contributory of S. Trout, fair grass here. we passed a fine Spring on 1/2 a mile & to the left. we ascended again & after Some 4 miles we descended to the valley & neared the S. Trout river. . .*

Trail descriptions in this diary have been extremely helpful in locating segments of the trail at other locations. He particularly notes springs and other bodies of water. In this case, after crossing Prosser Creek (tributary of S. Trout), he records seeing a "fine spring" about ½ mile after leaving the creek. He further notes that the trail has not yet ascended the heights above Prosser Creek Valley when he passes the spring. This indicates that the spring, and the trail, are still in a valley at more than 1/2 mile from Prosser Creek.

There are only two valleys in the area that fit that description: Alder Creek Valley (the south branch) or Station Creek Valley, both of which lead toward the Truckee River. If in Alder Creek Valley, this indicates the trail is in the valley bottom, passing near the junction of the two branches of the creek, not on the ridge where Markle could "see" the family camp site. Now, the distance from the trail to the family camp site, which seemed about right from the ridge road east of the valley, appears a bit

too near from the valley bottom. Also, it has been shown that the route following the south branch of Alder Creek, the Graydon route, has a number of contradictory problems that make it an unlikely candidate. This leaves the Station Creek possibility to check out.

Referring to the four Cardinal Rules again, there is some documentary evidence according to rule 2, but the Graydon route fails on rules 1, 3, and especially 4, the correlation rule. This does not rule out the route, but places it on a very low probability. The John Markle diary cited by Weddell, Graydon, and Hardesty appears to be the main documentary evidence used to locate this trail with respect to the Donner Family Camp. The Burbank diary questions this evidence.

Investigation of the Station Creek Route:

Note: Refer to the map Original Emigrant Trail, 1845-1850: Prosser Creek to Truckee River (Fig. 1), at the end of this Investigation, for the location and linear relationship between the following three items discussed below.

1. Station Creek Valley:

Both physical and documentary evidence were found to support the existence of the trail in the Station Creek Valley. Near the junction of Station Creek and Prosser Creek, indications were found on both sides of Prosser Creek that an old wagon road had crossed the creek at this location. Following up on the west side of Station Creek a dim, but unmistakable, short section of an old wagon road was located in pristine condition. It appeared to have been used only by wagon traffic and later by animals. At about 0.6 miles, in the east branch of the valley, a fine spring was bubbling away, matching Burbank's description. An old wagon road was found leading away from the spring to the heights above. Although in pristine condition, this section of road may have been used by other than emigrants. It is very distinctive, more so than other segments found in this valley, although there are no indications that auto traffic contributed to its good definition.

The south branch also may have been used by emigrants. It looks doable with wagons, and is a shorter route, but no physical evidence was found to substantiate the existence of a wagon road. At about 0.6 miles a spring was also found, but would be more aptly described as a small spring, rather than the "fine spring" in Burbank's diary.

Mileage estimates by emigrants and early travelers tend to support the use of the east branch of Station Creek, rather than the direct, south branch. For example William Winter, in 1845, estimates the distance from the east end of Donner Lake to John Greenwood's creek [Prosser Creek] to be 10 miles. Using a hypothetical, winding road and going through the old Truckee airport to reach the east branch of Station Creek, the measured distance is about 9 miles. A little short, but the south branch route is even shorter. Some diarists do indicate a slightly shorter route of 8 to 9 miles.

2. Truckee River Valley Descent:

A point of descent into the Truckee River Valley was also found by matching descriptions and mileage estimates found in a number of emigrant diaries. Using estimates from a number of diaries, such as the before mentioned Love and Van Dorn diaries, it was estimated that the descent was about $3\frac{1}{2} \pm 1$ mile east of the crossing of Donner Creek.

One document located in this study was a Trail Guide published by John Steele in 1854. Steele was an 1850 Truckee Trail traveler. On the front page Steele describes the guide as:

CONTAINING A CORRECT DESCRIPTION OF THE ROAD, WITH THE DISTANCES
BY ACTUAL MEASUREMENT, ENTERING CALIFORNIA BY CROSSING THE
GREAT SIERRA NEVADA, AT THE HEADWATERS OF THE YUBA RIVER.

Steele's "measured" mileage is actually slightly longer than the average emigrant estimate, but his guide contains a mileage break down of each section of the trail between Prosser Creek and the Donner Creek crossing. As many others have, he also describes leaving the river valley and entering Donner Lake Valley through a small ravine (the small valley).

This is his guide for the Truckee area. The first number is the distance traveled in that segment. The second number is the miles from the Missouri River:

... *After leaving this [Prosser Creek] the road is level, with the exception of the descent into the next valley, which is very steep [to]*

Rock Valley. 5 1886 ½ [Truckee River Valley] You follow up this valley a short distance, then turn to right up a ravine, [later U.S. 40 route] and strike the valley near [to]

Donner's Cabin. 3½ 1890 [Graves Cabin] This is one of the cabins built by that ill-fated party, who, being overtaken by the snow on the mountains, nearly all perished by cold and starvation. The remainder of the cabins were built about a mile above this at Truckie's Lake, but they were nearly all burned by order of Gen. Kearney. [to]

Last crossing of Truckie's River. 1 1891 [Donner Creek crossing]

This is near Truckie's Lake. It is a delightful place to camp. . .

Steele's "measured" mileage from reaching the river to the Donner Creek crossing is 4½ miles, a little higher than most estimates but tends to confirm a length of travel along the river valley before leaving that valley. In his 1850 diary, Steele records that his camp, at the crossing, was about ½ mile from the lake, or 10 miles total the same as William Winter's estimate in 1845.

Using 3½ miles as a reference, a natural opening is found in the cliff faces on the north side of the river valley almost exactly 3½ miles from the approximated Donner Creek crossing point. This opening leads down between two large rock outcroppings. A wagon road descending here would approach within about 100 yards of the river before leveling out to turn west again. A number of large rocks can be seen in the river at that point with the water splashing over and around them, exactly as described by Wakeman Bryarly in 1849. Also diagnostic is the fact that a short distance to the west, the direction of travel, Trout Creek junctions with the Truckee River. Undoubtedly, this is the "little creek" that James Abell was referring to when he left the river on his left and followed a small creek for "some distance."

Although the physical landmarks, with the confirming diary descriptions, uniquely identify this location as the trail descent, a pipeline at the exact descent location makes identification of trail remnants difficult. Confirming evidence is needed to remove all doubt. This was found by way of a pristine, rock-lined trail, of wagon road width, running east and west on a hill-side slope leading directly to the descent site. In a sandy, sage-covered area just before the descent, a pristine, although dim, wagon-wide trail can be seen turning left into the descent site. The pipe line makes further trail

identification questionable. However, the diary descriptions and landmarks, cited before, at this point are strong enough to make further physical trail evidence of the descent location unnecessary.

Now that two parts of the Prosser Creek to Truckee River Valley puzzle are solved, the beginning and the end, the long distance in between, about 4 to 5 miles, make it desirable to find a connecting link in order to satisfy the Coherence Rule. There also remains the problem of the small hill and the Markle diary that was used to justify the Graydon Route.

3. Section 1 Trails: (Figure 2 is an enlarged map of the swales found in Section 1.)

In a reconnaissance of the area between Station Creek and the descent point, a small hill, about 30 ft. high, was noticed in section 1. It is actually a narrow, short ridge running in about a NW/SE direction and appears as a small hill when approached from the direction of Station Creek. In searching this hill, a well-defined wagon swale (or ruts) was found going over the hill. It is on line and between the Station Creek segments to the north and descent point to the southwest. Wagons approaching this hill would come to, and go directly over the hill, or "cross" the hill exactly as described by Nicholas Carriger in 1846. Emigrant diarists normally use the words "ascend" to describe going up a high hill, a mountain, or a mountain spur and "descend" when coming down again. Carriger's parsimonious use of words in this case exactly fit the occasion. Although several old wagon roads trending in a generally west or southwest direction from the hill were found, none could be verified as connecting to the trail over the hill.

However, on the northeast side of the hill a well-defined wagon road was found leading directly to the trail crossing the hill. Further, this road had two branches, one coming from the direction of the south fork of Station Creek. The other branch comes from a direction consistent with travel through the east branch of Station Creek, or from a generally easterly direction and across the old Truckee airport site. The east branch disappeared near section 1's eastern boundary. The north branch continued a bit further, but also disappeared well inside section 1's northern boundary. The road leading to the hill, but not going over it, appears to have had some use after the emigrant period.

The steepness of the hill, about a grade of 16%, makes it unlikely later commercial activities in the area such as logging and charcoal suppliers would routinely haul supplies and/or product over the hill. A much easier road is found going around the northwest end of the hill, just a short distance away. Further, no charcoal ovens were found on the hill. However, emigrants typically follow the nearest route, even if it means going directly over a small hill rather than going around it. The steep grade would cause no problems for the emigrants, who would be going up much steeper grades over Roller Pass in a couple of days.

The hill in the southeast 1/4 of section 1 appears to be the missing small hill mentioned in the 1846 Carriger diary as indicated by:

1. The physical evidence of an old wagon road leading to and crossing over the hill
2. The agreement with the Carriger documentary evidence
3. The fact that no other such hill along a possible trail route was found anywhere in the area
4. The hill is on line with identified trail segments that both precede and follow it.

The three supporting segments of the trail, described above, satisfy the Coherence Rule of the MET

Manual. The only problem left is the oft quoted Markle diary that was used as proof of the Graydon route.

The Markle diary:

Mr. Weddell used this diary to support his location of the Donner Family Camp, although he indicates that somehow Markle must have wandered off his "Donner Trail." He reasons that the ridge above Alder Creek valley, and about 1½ miles to the east, was the only place Markle could be and see the camp site. Mr. Graydon used the camp site location to support his location of the trail, the ridge again being the only place Markle could be and see the camp site. The fact that the trail must be where the camp site could be seen was assumed by all, presumably because Markle would not have wandered 1½ miles off the trail unless he knew where he was going.

Strange, no other diarist records going by the camp site, visiting it, or seeing it in "the distance," or leaving the trail. Why? The fact is that Markle never said he saw the camp site from his vantage point on the trail. This is Markle's diary entry that Weddell, and others, are referring to:

John Markle, Aug. 20, 1849. *Today we traveled about 10 miles and encamped in a valley at the base of the mountain about 3/4 of a mile east of Truckee Lake. The first 2 miles brought us to the valley where Donner encamped. [Prosser Creek Valley] 1 mile more brought us opposite to where his cabins were, which were situated about 1 or 2 miles from the road on the right hand side. There were a number of fragments left, but more human bones than anything else. 6 miles more and we came to where the Graves family wintered and all perished except 5 and 2 of them died after they got through. 1 mile more and we came to Fosters [Murphys] and Breens cabins where we encamped. The road now leaves them on the right, but the old road run just past them leaving them on the left.*

Even if he could "see" the camp site, it is doubtful that he could see "fragments" 1½ miles away in tree and brush cover. How would he have known that the "George Donner Tree" he saw 1½ miles away was the camp site? Also, the Station Creek Valley trail, which we have just described, entered Prosser Creek Valley just west of the dam, but then turned east and crossed the creek in less than a mile. One mile would put Markle across the creek, but still in Station Creek Valley below the ridge line. He could not possibly see the camp site.

But if Markle did not see the site, how did he know how to find it and why was he the only diarist to record going to the site? Simple. He had a guide. A Donner Party survivor, William Graves, was in the same party as Markle. Graves would have known where the Donner Family Camp was located and shown Markle the way. The day before reaching Prosser Creek Valley, Markle even went hunting with Graves:

August 19, 1849. *21 miles today. This morning immediately after starting we crossed the river, when Graves, Steiner, and myself left the wagons and crossed the mountain which the road wound around leaving it on the left, in search of game; but found it very scarce.*

It's probably no accident that after spending the previous day hunting with Graves, Markle stopped and visited the Donner Family Camp even though he could not "see" it from the trail. He did not have to see it with William Graves as his guide. Therefore, the implication that the trail had to be on the high ground above Alder Creek in order for Markle to "see" the camp site is false. Likewise, the

trail verification provided by the Markle diary is not valid. There is also no reason to doubt that Markle was on the same Station Creek Trail as everyone else in 1849. It's highly doubtful if William Graves would lead his party off the correct "Donner Trail" route to test a new route, after the problems the Donner Party had using short-cuts.

As far as the location of the Donner Family Camp is concerned, accordingly to Markle's mileage estimates the camp site should be in Alder Creek Valley under the waters of Prosser Creek Dam. It is left up to others to determine if John Markle was in error when he estimated the site was "1 to 2 miles from the road on the right hand side."

Using the four Cardinal Rules again, the Station Creek Route is the only route that satisfies all four rules.

Conclusions:

The long accepted route for the emigrant trail, as defined by P. M. Weddell, is obviously in error. Absolutely no evidence can be found for the any emigrant use of this route.

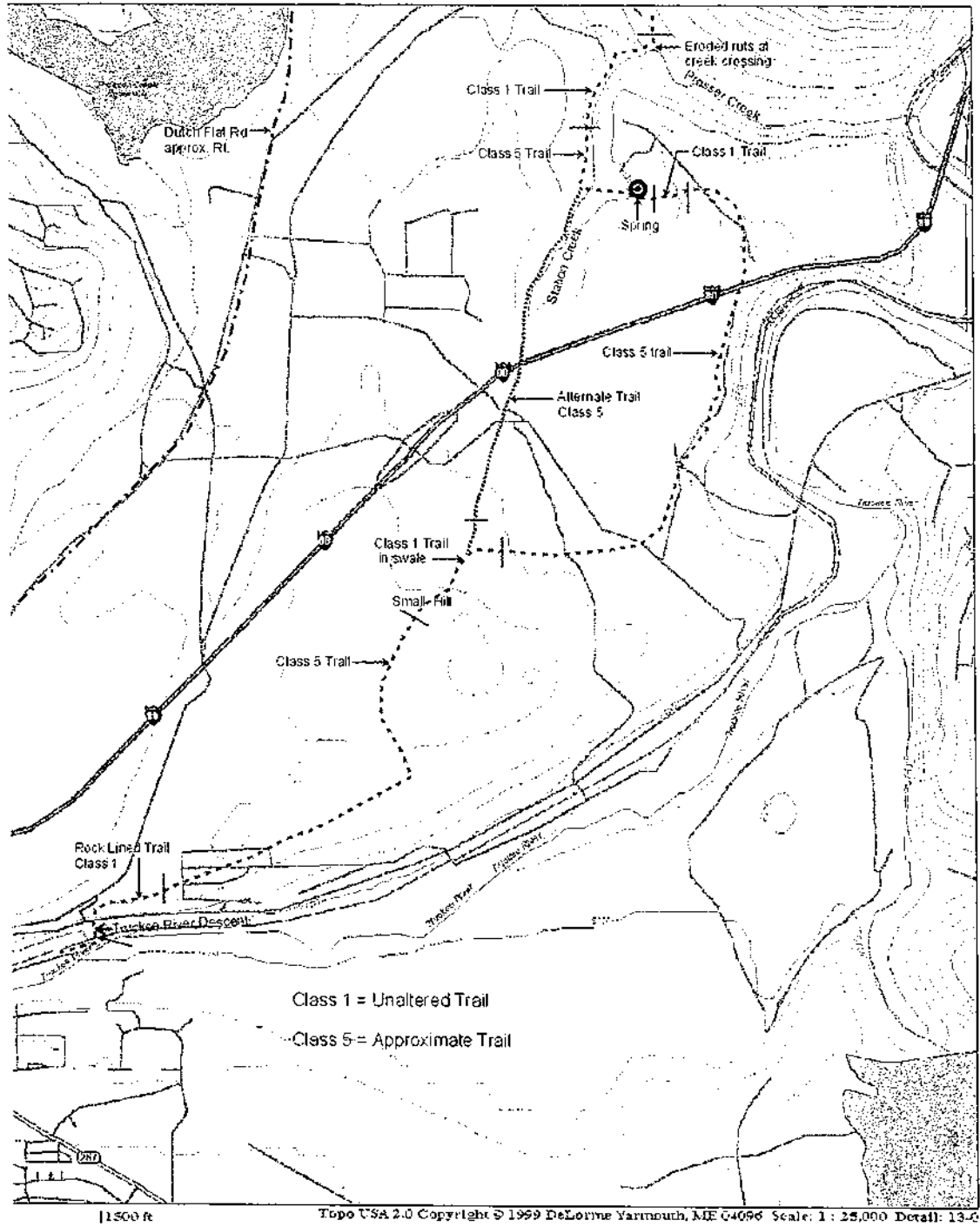
The presently accepted route, as defined by Charles Graydon and shown on a Forest Service map, likewise is lacking in documentation, physical evidence, or any verification that it was used by emigrants between the years 1844 and 1850. There is a possibility this general route may have been used before the Dutch Flat Road was constructed in 1864. One such piece of physical evidence is in the form of an old wagon road, easily seen today, that branched off from the Station Creek Road and ascended the heights to the present dirt bike course. It cannot be followed past the dirt bike course, but may have intersected Graydon's Route at some point.

In contrast to the other two routes, the Station Creek Route has unmistakable, pristine, wagon traces that form a continuous sequence, with physical characteristics and documentation supporting this route. Further, no diary before 1850, out of the over sixty analyzed, can be interpreted as ruling out this route, i.e., there are no problem diaries. The landmarks along the route, such as the small hill, the creek crossing, the diagnostic physical features at the river descent, and the trail segments are all mutually supportive with no contradicting evidence. Therefore, it is concluded, to a high degree of probability, that this was the exclusive route of the original emigrant trail from 1845 through at least 1849. It was definitely used in the 1850's, but alternate routes also may have been developed during this time.

By way of interest, the two trail segments located within the Town of Truckee area represent two different trail characteristics sometimes found along the California Trail, but are rare on the Truckee Trail segment. Those are: (1) a few hundred yards of rock-lined trail at the river descent, and (2) the hill swales, or ruts, going over the small hill in section 1.

Original Emigrant Trail, 1845-1850 Prosser Creek to Truckee River

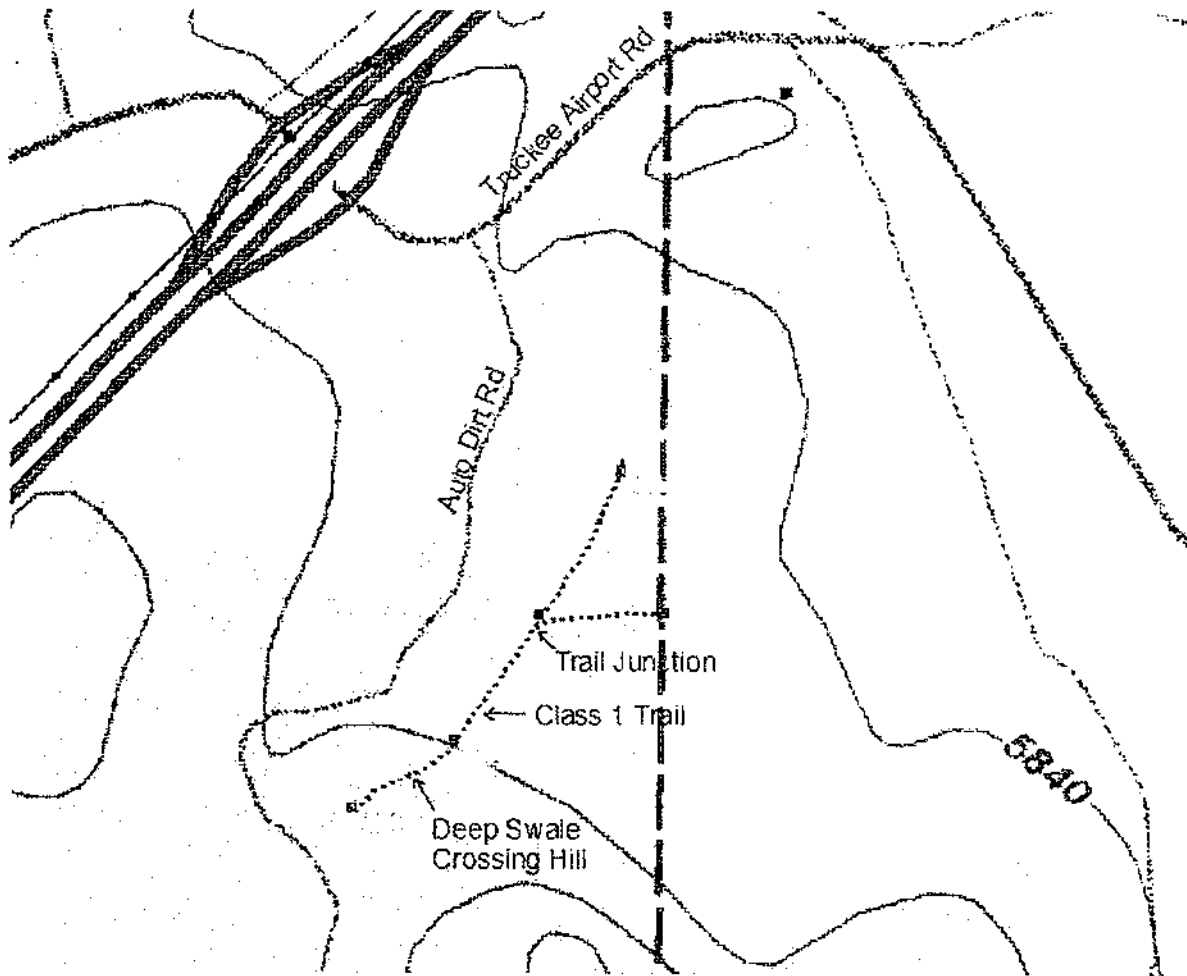
Figure 1



Trail Crossing Small Hill

Section 1, T 17 N, R 16 E, MDM

Figure 2



PART VI

Coldstream Valley to Roller Pass

Investigation of Emigrant Trails Over Passes South of Donner Pass

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Investigation of Emigrant Trails Over Passes South of Donner Pass
Interim Report by Don Wiggins, Principal Investigator
November, 1996

I. Objective:

The objective of this investigation is to define and map any remaining segments of the emigrant trails leading over the passes south of the original (Donner) pass.

II. Purpose:

The purpose is twofold: (1) OCTA has expressed an interest in publishing the diary of Augustus Ripley Burbank. A cursory reading of his diary indicates he used one of the passes south of Donner Pass. In order to add accurate editorial comments, his exact route should be determined. (2) Because past logging has destroyed much of the trails leading to the passes, and because of continuing logging, the Truckee Donner Land Trust has expressed the desire for someone to investigate and determine the present status of emigrant roads in the area so they could be protected.

III. Summary of Results:

The pass between Mt. Lincoln and Mt. Judah, commonly called Roller Pass, was the main, and probably only, emigrant route from it's opening in September of 1846 until at least 1855. This is documented by over thirty emigrant documents and by physical evidence found. A small, but significant, piece of the 1847-constructed, first-section of the road leading to the summit was located. The final access route to this pass, undocumented by trail historians in recent years, was re-located. It is felt that this pass is a significant historical site.

No support for the use of the pass between Mt. Judah and Donner Peak, commonly called Coldstream Pass, by emigrants was found. Still old roads leading to, and over, this pass may have historical value.

The access route to Roller Pass was via Emigrant Canyon, not Cold Creek Canyon, as some had proposed.

October snows suspended further work in Emigrant Canyon for this year.

IV. History:

The first emigrant party to move wagons over the mountains in the Donner Lake area was the Stephens party in 1844. This was accomplished by disassembling the wagons just west of Donner Lake and hauling them up over the summit of the pass. One of the last, and better, accounts of travel over this pass, later called Donner Pass, was by Edwin Bryant¹ in August of 1846. Soon after, in about the third week of September, the Aram² party spent "three days" before finding a better pass where they "might make a crossing." The access to this pass, between Mt. Lincoln and Mt. Judah, was reached via Coldstream Valley. By placing animals on top and using a "one hundred and fifty foot rope" to assist the animals pulling the wagon, they were able to reach the summit of the pass. Shortly thereafter (?), on Sept. 22, 1846, the Carriger³ party improved on the technique by using a log roller to prevent the rope, or chains, from digging into the ground. Hence, the name used today - Roller Pass. [Note: The documentation is not clear on the sequence of arrival. Irene Paden⁴ believes the Carriger party, with Greenwood as guide, arrived first. Others, such as Ruth Hermann⁵, believes that the Aram party, with Chief Truckee as guide, was "about a week" ahead of Carriger. Thought to be originally together, the two parties may have split up at the Sink.]

Present day trail historians believe that some time later, exactly when is uncertain, a new pass, commonly called Coldstream Pass, was opened between Donner Peak and Mt. Judah. The access route to this pass was easier and was the route most used thereafter. Ruth Hermann gives, without proof, an approximate opening date of, "In the same year, 1846, and about the same month, September, . . ." This trail branched off the older Roller Pass road and went northwest toward Coldstream Pass.

According to William Trubody⁶, the Charles Hopper party, in 1847, spent "about a day fixing the road up the mountain." He does not give any details as to the location of the road they fixed, or constructed. After constructing the road, "they doubled teams putting seven or eight yoke of oxen to a wagon with men pushing behind and three or four men with ropes on the upper side of the grade to keep the wagons from upsetting they passed over the divide & down to the timber line on the other side." Therefore, we do know it was near the summit of a pass, the road was very steep and sidling. George Stewart⁷ believed that the improved road led over Donner Pass. He writes, "Hopper's company decided, for some reason, not to go around by the route discovered in '46, but to reopen the original trail." No further speculation on the location of this improved road has been found.

The heaviest emigrant use of the Coldstream Valley route was in 1849, before the migration swung north through the Black Rock Desert that year. By 1852 other, easier, routes were opened to California, including, for the faithful followers of the Truckee River route, the Beckwourth and Henness Pass routes. Accordingly, emigrant diaries, with their eyewitness descriptions, become much less in 1850, and dry up almost completely after 1852. [Don Buck came up with a rare 1855 diary, A. J. Mothersead, that provided a typical 49'er description of the ascent up Roller Pass.]

In 1864, railroad interest constructed the Dutch Flat road over Donner Pass. This new improved road, with the coming of the railroad two or three years later, probably shut down any remaining emigrant wagon traffic over the south passes. However, timber needs for the Comstock mines and the railroad ensured that wagon traffic remained in the area. It can be assumed that access roads to lumber camps, timber harvest areas, and possibly to railroad construction camps on the south side of Donner Lake were constructed. After the wagon era, timber harvests have continued. Other users, and land owners, have also impacted the area. In view of the limited access routes in some areas, it

can be assumed that some, if not most, of the original emigrant trail segments have been impacted by later users, both wagons and motor vehicles.

Over the years, various individuals and/or organizations have attempted to map or place identifying signs along what they presumed to be the emigrant trail. One of the earliest was P. M. Weddell⁸ of San Jose, California. He began placing wooden signs along the trail leading to Coldstream Pass in the early 1920's, before much of the Twentieth Century impact. His wooden signs can still be found along the trail, or presumed trail. Organizations, including the Nevada Emigrant Trail Marking Committee (NETMC) and Trails West, have also left their signs, or markers, at various places. Emigrant trail markers can be found today in both Emigrant Canyon and upper Cold Creek canyon, south of Emigrant Canyon, with most of the markers in Emigrant Canyon. Even the trail markers found in Emigrant Canyon are sometimes at variance with one another.

Unfortunately, no information or documentation has been found to indicate what method was used by these differing trail buffs to verify, or separate, emigrant roads from non-emigrant roads, with one notable exception. About 1950, the state of California considered establishing a State Historical Monument along the emigrant trail from Donner Memorial State Park to Chicago Park. A detailed report⁹, with references, was written in late 1949 by the Division of Beaches and Parks. An on-site investigation was made and surveying and mapping begun. Although the surveying abruptly ended at Kidd Lake, their maps are complete from Donner Memorial Park to that point and are used in this investigation. Fortunately, Norm Wilson, an OCTA member and a retired Parks employee from Auburn, California, kept and made available a copy of the report for this investigation.

V. Use of Primary and Secondary Sources:

In prior work on the Truckee River Trail, it was found that the problem was not in finding old roads, including old wagon roads, along the trail corridor, but in determining which was the emigrant road, or roads. The most objective, and possibly the only, method found to this end was to rely on the subjective observations found in the emigrant diaries. The more the better, as some will contain little or no useful information.

It is fortunate that in the last decade, or so, many more^{of} these diaries have become available. For example, in the Division of Beaches and Parks study "as many emigrant diaries and manuscripts as possible were studied." With the resources of the state behind them, they were able to come up with only 12 primary documents, nine of which were actual diaries. Only two of the nine were 1849 diaries. At the end of this report, excerpts from thirty primary documents, selected from, an estimated, over sixty used in this investigation, are reproduced for the readers reference. Twenty of these are 1849 diaries, the year of heaviest use and usually the most descriptive. These excerpts are arranged by years, in alphabetical order. Additional primary documents used in this report include two maps: (1) the 1866 GLO plat map of Township No. 17, north, Range No. 15, east, and (2) the 1846 T. H. Jefferson map¹⁰.

In such an impacted area, greater reliance will be placed on primary documents, mostly the emigrant diaries, than in secondary documents, reminiscences, and undocumented testimony from "old timers" and later investigators. The latter information, while useful, must be supported with other, independent evidence before an emigrant trail can be declared to be "found." Previously, all types of non-emigrant roads, even old railroad beds, have been found marked as the "Emigrant Trail."

The secondary documents found to be the most useful are the maps generated by the California Division of Beaches and Parks, and a map generated by trail mapping expert Don Buck, both, of which, are based on physical and diary evidence.

VI. Research Methods:

The first step in this study is to use the primary documents, topographical maps, and a field reconnaissance of the area to establish a general route, or corridor, of travel. Then, using composite descriptions from the eyewitness accounts found in the diaries, a close field investigation is made, looking for physical descriptions or landmarks that "fit" the diaries, and any individual trail segments remaining. It is at this point that the work of prior investigators can be most useful, as persistent logging efforts have obliterated segments of the trail seen, not only by Weddell in the 1920's but also seen and mapped by Don Buck in the 1980's. In this last phase, and most time consuming, an effort is made to identify all old road traces in the trail corridor, noting any possible link to an emigrant road.

VII. General Route of Travel:

A. Background

Most present day trail historians, such as Charles Graydon¹¹, believe the emigrants crossed the Donner Lake outlet and traveled in a generally southern direction through Coldstream Valley. Leaving Coldstream Valley the trail ascended the north side of Emigrant Canyon for about 1 ½ to 2 miles. There the trail branched. The original trail continued on generally westerly toward Roller Pass, while the newer, easier trail took a more northerly course toward Coldstream Pass. This latter route is marked with the Weddell wooden signs, and is shown on his map as the "emigrant route." The NETMC also placed one of the railroad rail markers¹² on Coldstream Pass summit in 1973. Ruth Hermann describes the trail by Donner Peak [Coldstream Pass] as "usually crammed with emigrants rushing West." E. W. Harris¹³, in 1979, also writes that "This route over the pass [Coldstream Pass] was still easier for wagons and was most used by the emigrants, including the Forty-Niners thereafter."

The older road that continued westerly was not marked by Weddell, although it is shown on his map as a "southern route." According to Hermann, shortly before his death in 1952 he started marking the trail that continued on up Emigrant Canyon Creek. None of these markers were found. Trails West has placed a railroad rail marker on the summit of Roller Pass. There is also a large wooden marker on top, with text, recounting the early emigrant use of this pass.

Hermann, and others, also believed another access route to Roller Pass was used by emigrants. This was a route through upper Cold Creek Canyon. She writes that this was a "far less rocky route [Than Emigrant Canyon] --almost without rock at all--for emigrants. But a later-day lumber mill destroyed Coldstream Canyon and obliterated all traces of the old emigrant trail." [Must have been quite a lumber mill to have destroyed nearly three miles of trail.] Weddell searched for, but could not find any traces of this trail. Harris lists the two most probable routes to Judah-Lincoln Pass as:

"(1) Via Emigrant Creek and Canyon to its headwaters near the foot of the Pass."

"(2) Via Cold Creek to its headwaters and the foot of the pass."

The Division of Beaches and Parks also show this route on a map labeled "Beginning of Trail Investigation." Their later, surveyed, maps do not show this route.

B. Analysis:

A field reconnaissance to the two passes seemed to confirm that the access to Coldstream Pass was easier than the seemingly, almost impossible ascent to Roller Pass, and was probably the most heavily used. In fact, any use of Roller Pass after the opening of Coldstream Pass seemed highly doubtful. However, a carefully reading of the diaries told a different story. Roller Pass was not only still being used in 1849, and later, but also it was being heavily used. The diaries are explicit and conclusive in the use of this pass after 1846:

1. The post-1846 use of Roller Pass by emigrants:

- a. The Roller mechanism, or windlass, used to haul up the first wagons up to the summit was seen and recorded in some of the diaries. The need for such a windlass on Coldstream Pass is not evident.

D. Jagger, Aug. 22, 1849: At the same time we saw the windlass with which the first emigrants to California drew up their wagons.

James Scott Abell, Sept. 1, 1849: At the summit and near where our road made the top was a windlass which had been used by Colonel Fremont or some other party to haul up their wagons and loading. The windlass was supported by two trees which were about 5 feet apart.

J. Elza Armstrong, Sept. 13, 1849: We did not go all the way up the old road, but a short distance we went a little to the right of the old road. They had to haul the wagon up with a windlass.

- b. The road constructed by the Charles Hopper party in 1847 is now located. It is the steep switch back from the base to the summit of Roller Pass. The forty-niner diaries describe it in unmistakable terms:

A. R. Burbank probably gives the best overall description of this constructed road:

A. R. Burbank, Sept 11, 1849: We put 8 yoke of our best oxen to a wagon & took up one at a time. The road is now made winding to the right or north & is dug in the soft loamy earth & the small loose rocks, that is up the first ascent. Then a short distance on a bench that is studded(?) with pine trees. Then a wind to the left over a ledge of loose round rocks & up the steepest ascent & the hardest pulling. Then a gradual rise for a few rods. brings one to the top of the summit. We got all up (three wagons) in some 2 ½ hours. We put each team to its wagon then descended. The first descent is steep & short, over rocks & loose earth. Here in an open ravine in the range & the old road comes up on the left, up an almost precipice over some rocks no wagon could get up here only by pulling with ropes. A loose animal would not be safe in climbing up, without a rope around its head or neck, so as to give it aid. No travel now up this pass.

The bold words are diagnostic and an almost perfect description of the switchback that one can follow today. The first ascent has been almost completely covered with debris from the steep slope above, except for one small section, near the beginning of the ascent, which is recognizable as being dug into the hillside. The upper-most switch back (to the south) is in pristine condition, and includes a nice wagon swale along the "first descent." This "first descent" ends near the Trails West marker at the head of "an open ravine," where the "old road comes up."

c. Concomitant data to support the later switch-back road:

J. Elza Armstrong, Sept. 13, 1849: We did not go all the way up the old road, but a short distance we went a little to the right of the old road

Charles Ross Parke, Aug. 31, 1849: but after dinner we [made] the ascent. There are two of these about ½ a mile in length, the first being a little the longest and lands you on a table about 80 yards in length. The second ascent starts from this table and lands you on the summit of the Sierra Nevada over a terrible road. Steep 45° and winding.

[Compare with Burbank's description. We now know the length of the bench, or table.]

Elisha Perkins, Sept. 15, 1849: the road going up to its very base turns short to the right & ascends by a

track cut in the side of the mountains till two thirds up when it turns left again & goes directly over the summit.

d. Concomitant data to support the constructed road theory:

James Godfrey, Aug. 10, 1849: . . . we soon came to the last ascent. This has been much improved of late. Formerly it was almost impossible for teams to negotiate this ascent with wagons attached. We had no difficulty by doubling teams.

Elisha Perkins, Sept. 15, 1849: . . . the road going up to its very base turns short to the right & ascends by a track cut in the side of the mountains. . .

T. J. Van Dorn, Sept. 4, 1849: The road is now improved and takes a slanting shute up the ridge.

[Burbank, above, also recorded that the road was dug in the soft, loamy earth.]

e. The "slanting shute up the ridge" (Van Dorn) is estimated to be at an angle of 45 deg. across the face of the ridge: [Note: Zero deg. would be straight up as in 1846, while 90 deg. would be around the slope at a constant level.]

Charles Ross Parke, Aug. 31, 1849: Steep 45° and winding

John Banks, Sept. 13, 1849: From this point the road is desperate, perhaps an angle of forty-five degrees, strong and sliding

Ansel McCall, Sept. 7, 1849: A great wagon with 16 yoke of cattle attached was here being slowly and painfully dragged up the naked cliff at an angle of forty-five degrees. . .

f. The base of the roller portion of the road (where the animals were removed) was some distance up the steep hill (Aram used only a 150 ft. rope.) The constructed road (1847) then started abruptly in a northward direction (and at a 45 degree angle across the slope as described above) from the base of the old road to the switchback point on a table above:

Mary A. Jones, 1846: . . . The way we climbed the mountain we hitched nine or ten yoke of oxen to a wagon and drove them as far as they could go and a chain that worked over a roller, on top of the mountain and a man at each wheel did the work. . .

Elisha Perkins, Sept. 15, 1849: . . . the road going up to its very base turns short to the right. . .

Charles Ross Parke, Aug. 31, 1849: We drew our wagons part way up the mountain with 4 yoke of cattle and the aid of a long rope round the end of the wagon, extending up by the side of the oxen and beyond. The men pulled on the rope and aided materially not only in the ascent but in keeping the oxen in line until we arrived at the most difficult point of ascent. Here we were obliged to double teams, putting 8 yoke on the wagon and two yokes to the end of the rope that was continued on up to the table above.

Thus, it seems clear that Roller Pass was heavily used in 1849, two years after a supposedly easier route was opened. Also, the evidence seems conclusive that the road construction work done by the 1847 Hopper party was the improvement to the road up Roller Pass.

The obvious questions that one must ask are: 1) Why did fifty men (per George Stewart) spend a day with pick and shovel in 1847 building such a difficult road if a better road already existed? 2) Why, if a much easier road existed over Coldstream Pass, were many emigrants still using this extremely difficult, sidling road two years later?

How difficult was this constructed road? Elisha Perkins in his 1849 diary described the difficulty:

. . . One wagon had already started with 13 yoke of cattle attached, the load in the wagon not exceeding 600 lbs. & they could get but a few yards at a time stopping to rest their teams. They were about half way up when in an inclining place the wagon began to slide over the precipice! The men seizing hold at all points stopped its progress to destruction, & by some management it was placed upon the road again. Had it got a fair start over the hillside it must have dragged all the cattle with it down upon the rocks below. . .

It is enigmatic that most later-day, published accounts that champion the early use of the Coldstream Pass route, and its heavy use in 1849, use excerpts from the 1849 Perkins diary. It is as if they think it is an 1846 (Most do list the year as 1849.) diary, or that he was ascending Coldstream Pass, rather than Roller Pass. Charles Graydon, in his first edition, actually states that it was an 1846 diary. (This may have been corrected later?)

2. The use of Coldstream Pass by emigrants:

No diary has been found that explicitly supports the use of Coldstream Pass by emigrants. Although isolated passages can be found in some of the diaries that could be interpreted as using Coldstream Pass, other passages in these same diaries strongly imply the use of Roller Pass. Steele's 1850 diary is an example. He climbed a "granite peak." This sounds like Donner Peak, however, his ascent up the pass is typical of Roller Pass: "After resting awhile, most of the oxen were attached to a single wagon, and with difficulty it was drawn up the precipitous ascent." Likewise, his descent is typical of descriptions of the Roller Pass descent.

There are certain physical differences in the Coldstream Pass route that one would expect to see in at least one or two of the diaries. These are:

1) The route passes a small lake (Lake Mary) after about one mile of descent. Bryant mentioned this lake in 1846 and noticed some emigrant camps around the lake. No diary, after the opening of Roller Pass, has been found that even mentions this small lake¹⁴, much less as camping there. [See the Burbank and Van Dorn diaries for a description of the descent from Roller Pass. Burbank gives details about the road, while Van Dorn describes, in unmistakable terms, the head of the creek and canyon in the Sugar Bowl ski area.]

not
certain

2) The Donner Lake Valley and part of Donner Lake are visible on the trail leading to Coldstream Pass. Although some of the emigrants climbed a nearby peak after they reached the summit and recorded seeing the valley and lake, it is strange that no one records seeing it on the way up to the summit. [The nearby peak, that Burbank and others climbed, was probably a portion of Mt. Judah, rather than Donner Peak.]

3) The final ascent up a ravine, or draw, does not look to be excessively steep, definitely not "precipitous" as described by John Steele in 1850. The last 100-200 yds. appear the steepest, but it is doubtful if doubling teaming would be required, even here. Even if so, the time required would be a matter of a few minutes, not one hour, with four mules pulling (Littleton, 1850), or 1 1/2 to 2 hours for an ox team (Perkins, 1849). Eliza Ann McAuley's description of "doubled teams" and climbed one of the peaks as the "teams were toiling slowly up to the summit" is more indicative of Roller Pass than the last 100 or so yards up Coldstream Pass. Kate Furness remembered her 1853 trip as having to "wind our zigzag way up a very steep mountain. Again a good description of the Roller Pass ascent, not Coldstream Pass. Mothersead's description of a "very bad hill half mile long" indicates Roller Pass was still being used in 1855.

But see
Reynolds 1849
(who says "left"
7th time)

It is interesting that in reviewing published documents that purport to describe the emigrant trails over the south passes, none mentions more than one pass before the Hermann book in 1972. Irene Paden, in her 1949 article, only referred to the one pass, and that between Mt. Judah and Mt. Lincoln. Although Morgan had the descent wrong, he only referred to one ascent, and one pass--that between Mt. Judah and Mt. Lincoln. George Stewart, although he

placed the improved 1847 road over the original pass (and had some 49's using the pass), never referred to a second southern pass.

The 1866 GLO plat map shows only one emigrant road, that over Roller Pass. No road is shown leading over Coldstream Pass, emigrant or otherwise.

Accordingly, unless more diaries are found that indicate differently, and more have been identified but not acquired, it must be concluded that Coldstream Pass was not used by emigrants. Even the Steele diary, conceded by the 1949 study, is not conceded here. All other passages in the Steele diary indicate he crossed Roller Pass, with, perhaps, some variation on the approach to the pass.

In fact, it seems that there is nothing except Weddell's early, commendable but unsubstantiated, work to indicate that the main emigrant route was over Coldstream Pass. Both Hermann and Harris used Weddell as their "proof." Later writers, reluctant to be critical of earlier "experts," may have accepted Hermann and Harris as their "proof."

There is evidence of an old road leading up to Coldstream Pass, but its age or purpose is unknown. However, after appearing in print and being accepted for so many years, legend takes a life of its own. It is likely to be quoted and re-quoted, and, for some, the main route for the forty-niners will always be over Coldstream Pass. As someone said, "When legend replaces fact, print the legend."

C. The Division of Beaches and Parks Study:

The 1950 study by the Division of Beaches and Parks concluded that through 1852 the road over Roller Pass [Their South or Lincoln Pass] was the one most used by emigrants. This study was one of the first to use composite descriptions from a number of diaries to aid in locating the trail. Their study included a number of interviews including ones with Irene Paden, Wendell Robie, P. M. Weddell, and H. A. Mason, who operated a sawmill "on the emigrant trail" [where?] in 1880. Mason told them that the South Pass [Roller Pass] was used the most until the Dutch Flat/Truckee toll road was built in 1854 (sic) [1864].

They conceded that the Coldstream Pass road may have been used, some, by emigrants. They rationalized this concession by the fact that one diary, John Steele's, mentioned climbing a granite peak, and that this may have been Donner Peak.¹⁵

This effort to incorporate, or accommodate, Weddell's Coldstream Pass work into a trail used by the early emigrant led to a paradox. Steele's descent is very similar to the Roller Pass descents described by other emigrants. (Again, there is no mention of passing a small lake.) How do you get Steele from Coldstream Pass to the descent road from Roller Pass, without taking the road by Lake Mary? They resolved this paradox by proposing a new trail, in their "beginning of trail investigation" map, similar to but the reverse of Morgan's description of Carriger's descent. This proposed trail is shown as descending in a southwest direction from Coldstream Pass, but instead of turning northwest to pass by Lake Mary, it continues westerly to intersect the Roller Pass road near Summit Valley. This road segment is not shown in their later work, nor does any other trail researcher suggest such a road.

D. General Route Investigation Conclusions:

The emigrant diaries, with the supporting physical evidence, prove that Roller Pass was the main, and probably the only emigrant route, over the southern passes until at least 1855. No better example of the resourcefulness and the resolve of those early pioneers can be found than in the ascent up Roller Pass, both with the early, innovative use of "rollers," and the later construction, and use, of a road up an impossible mountainside. Although discounted by some professional historians, the individualism, determination, and a can-do attitude characteristic of a people just emerging from the "Jacksonian Democracy" era is seen here. A. J. McCall puts in words the attitude displayed in other emigrant diaries:

A. J. McCall, Sept. 7, 1849: A great wagon with 16 yoke of cattle attached was here being slowly and painfully dragged up the naked cliff at an angle of forty-five degrees, amid a storm of shouts and blows. The sight fairly appalled the doctor. He threw himself down on a rock in despair, and exclaimed: "We can't do it." I sought to reassure him by saying, "We have not yet tried: what others have done, we can do."

This pass, with its two unbelievable ascents, scenery, many rich diary descriptions, and remaining segments of pristine trail is a significant historical site. Positive steps should be taken to prevent further intrusions of any type, except foot traffic.

E. Emigrant Canyon or Cold Creek Canyon?:

The diaries are not explicit about where they left Coldstream Valley and headed for the summit. As usual, Burbank, Sept. 11, 1849, gives more description of the route than the rest, but does not give mileages. After entering Coldstream Valley, he writes:

"Then followed up a narrow valley between the foot of the range and a small stream on the left. our ascent was gradual for some distance, angling to the right. Soon we found a steeper ascent. . ."

This seems to imply that he left the small stream (Cold Creek) and went off to the right, perhaps through Emigrant Canyon. J. C. Lincoln, Sept. 18, 1849, entered the valley and traveled "along a small valley but no camping place for 2 miles where we commenced ascending the mountains. . . " Two miles after entering the valley would place him near Emigrant Canyon.

Both Emigrant Canyon and upper Cold Creek Canyon were explored. The latter canyon seemed it would be an easier emigrant trail for a mile, or so, but then would present extreme difficulty in getting wagons up the heights to the north of the canyon for access to Roller Pass. At least two layers of logging roads were found, but nothing to suggest an emigrant road. Hermann's contention was that this would be a less rocky route. Right, but the problem there is that the emigrants described such a very rocky road, before reaching the foot of the pass, a road such as found in Emigrant Canyon:

A. R. Burbank, Sept. 11, 1849: One that was not acquainted with wild mountains roads would of readily pronounced that no team could pass over these obstacles. Some of the rock was as large as the topstone of a pair of mill burs. & our wheels had to pass over them & possible from one to another, twist or wind about among the large pine & spruce trees that cover this side of the mountain with thick forest.

Zimri L. Garwood, Sept. 18, 1849: Our road lay through heavy pine timber and large stone.

Alexander Love, Aug. 23, 1849: Drove over granite rocks for 6 m. and came to the base of the Mt.

A road up Cold Creek to near the foot of Mt. Lincoln would require travel to the north when leaving that canyon and approaching Roller Pass. The pass would then be on their left as they approached. A casual remark by Ansel McCall, Sept. 7, 1849, makes this seem unlikely:

" . . we heard a great halloring and noise, and as we came to an open space, we looked to the right, from whence it came, and there before us loomed up the bare and rocky summit of the Nevadas."

An approach from Cold Creek would require them to look directly ahead, or to their left, to see where the noise came from. The approach through Emigrant Canyon is westerly, and a little

north of the pass proper. However, near, but before reaching the pass, and in an open space, the trail swings southwest for a ways before turning back west and then north west to approach the pass. This turn, in the open space, is beneath the switchback point, or table, on the zigzag ascent to the pass. This is close enough to hear shouting and would require a look to the right to see, exactly as described by McCall.

Finally, the Jefferson map indicates a camp at about two miles up Coldstream Valley, near the creek. The next camp is at the base of Roller Pass. The route between these two camps is shown as leaving the creek and traveling westerly somewhat north of Cold Creek. Although this map cannot be used to plot exact routes, it has been very accurate in showing general routes of travel. In this case it clearly shows separation between what is obviously Cold Creek and the line of travel. With a mountain between the two narrow canyons, this line of travel can only be up Emigrant Canyon.

The 1846 Jefferson map and many 1849 diaries strongly indicate Emigrant Canyon was the canyon used by the emigrants. No evidence has been found to support an emigrant trail through upper Cold Creek Canyon. The idea that maybe some rogue emigrant wagon trains left the main trail, in some unknown year, and somehow found their way up this canyon to Roller Pass because it "looks" easier, should be discounted. The fact is that, after the Donner Party disaster, emigrants tended to play follow-the-leader in this type of mountainous country, rather than experimenting with new routes.¹⁶ Jos C. Buffum probably stated it best:

Aug. 9, 1849: . . . This is a warning to emigrants to keep the known trail and make diligent progress on their journey in order to reach California before winter sets in upon the mountains. . .

It is concluded that Emigrant Canyon was the emigrant access route to Roller Pass.

VIII. Trail Segments Found:

Detail trail work was done mostly between the small meadow along the Emigrant Canyon trail and Coldstream and Roller Pass summits. The map following the last page of this report, shows this meadow and other features mentioned below. Work to the east of the meadow will not be completed until after the winter snows are gone.

Besides passing over and around large rocks, or boulders, mentioned earlier, the following trail descriptions are significant:

- 1) They passed over a long shelf, or ledge, of granite rock with no vegetation:

A. R. Burbank, Sept. 11, 1849: . . . Soon we found a steeper ascent & over a long ledge of large round & flat gray granite.

Elisha Lewis, Sept. 17, 1849: . . . and some of the time our trail led us over bear ledges of granite rock. . .

- 2) About one mile from the summit, **past the granite rocks**, was a small opening, or valley, with grass and a small spring on the left side of the road. The trail turned south at this point and was near enough to the lower switchback to hear the shouts of teamsters on the slope. The small meadow, shown on the map, is about 1 3/4 miles from the summit. The meadow at the base of the pass is a large meadow, and is within 1/2 mile of the summit (using the switchback road). Neither seem to fit the following descriptions:

A. R. Burbank, Sept. 11, 1849: A small spring is found about half way up the mountain (over the rocks or the worst part of them) that affords water sufficient for stock & C. it is close to the left & in an open space of ground:

James Godfrey, Aug. 10, 1849: We nooned a short distance of the summit in a beautiful little grassy opening, surrounded by tall noble trees; a beautiful spot.

T. Beesley, Aug. 24, 1849: . . . encamped at dark within one miles of the Summit in a pretty little green

valley plenty of grass and a fine spring of cold water.

Ansel McCall, Sept. 7, 1849: ... As we jogged on thus merrily, we heard a great halloring and noise, and as we came to an open space, we looked to the right, from whence it came, and there before us loomed up the bare and rocky summit of the Nevadas. A great wagon with 16 yoke of cattle attached was here being slowly and painfully dragged up the naked cliff at an angle of forty-five degrees, amid a storm of shouts and blows. ...

The long granite ledge described above, and the only granite ledge found to meet that description, was located (see map) on the north side of Emigrant Canyon creek. The trail then continued west, along the north side of the creek (crossing the section line of 27/28) until reaching the grassy opening, shown on the map. A short section of swale, and a couple of shorter sections of well defined wagon road, are the only visible signs of the trail before reaching the small opening. At one point the road dropped into the creek bottom for twenty, or so, yards.

In the small opening, the road turned southwest (not visible now) and crosses Emigrant Canyon creek. A small ravine, in the center of the opening has worn banks at one point, indicating a possible wagon crossing. Just to the left of this crossing point is a small spring, draining into the creek. This small spring on the left of the road matches Burbank's description. (Topo maps incorrectly show Emigrant Canyon creek tailing off to the northwest, east of this small open space.)

Although recent logging has impacted the area south of the creek, by continuing southwest, from the opening for a few hundred yards, a class 1 trail can be picked up and followed on to the southeast end of the large meadows at the base of the pass. Along most of this trail there is no evidence of recent logging.

The 1950 Beaches and Parks map follows closely the route just described. Weddell's late "Southern Route" addition also follows this general route. The 1866 GLO plat map seems a little off, even when just considering the section lines. The route between sections are sometimes just speculation on the surveyors part. But, even some ravines and natural drainage channels shown on this map, and on the section line, cannot be reconciled with the topo map, or a field walk of the area. There may have been some misinterpretation, or ad-libbing, of the field notes when the map was drawn.

IX. The Coldstream Pass access route:

Signs of an old road branching north from the Roller Pass road in the vicinity of the "long granite ledge" can be seen. This road branches, one going up a draw (perhaps the Weddell route) to the series of meadows north of Mt. Judah, the other circling around to the east and reaching the same meadows. Both of these branches cross the well-used trail going to Coldstream Pass and seem older than that trail. This suggests an early origin to the roads leading to Coldstream Pass. These roads have been impacted by recent logging, so it is difficult to ascertain their age or original use, and, as stated before, no emigrant diary describes the physical features found along these trails.

Near the end of the series of meadows, a distinct old road (east of the summit) can be found going up the ravine to Coldstream Pass, keeping to the west of the small, usually dry, creek. Some features noted, such as a long, linear cut, or ditch, down slope from the summit where the creek widens, are not emigrant related. The size of this artifact implies access by road. The old road, located by Weddell and connecting to Lake Mary on the west side of the pass, may be

related to the railroad building in the 1860's, although this speculation has not been pursued. Rust marks found on the **top point** of rocks along the east side road are more indicative of a tractor tread, or scrapings from the underside of a motorized vehicle, rather than a wagon tire. Similar rust marks on rocks have been found on roads in this area that were made in the latter half of this century.

Without more positive evidence, the roads between Emigrant Canyon and Lake Mary via Coldstream Pass should not be used as an example of The Emigrant Trail. However, they may have historic value, especially if they can be linked to the construction of the transcontinental railroad, or early logging in the area.

X. Lower Emigrant Canyon:

Although only preliminary work was done in this canyon, there are some questionable areas to be addressed later. The trail markers left by Weddell, although missing in many places now, seem generally correct. The questionable areas are:

- 1) The location of the trail from west of the section 26/27 north/south section line all the way to the small meadow. This trail section was unexpectedly logged while the Coldstream and Roller Pass sections were being investigated. Prior logging already had impacted this trail. This recent logging may have destroyed any hope of finding the actual meadow crossing point. A Weddell sign, seen on the south side of a prior logging road, may have been moved from its original location. There are signs indicating two different entry points into the meadow, as does Don Buck's map.

- 2) The 1950 Beaches and Parks map present an interesting alternative to just where the trail left Coldstream Valley and entered Emigrant Canyon. A junction is shown in the survey of the trail right-of-way, before the trail enters the canyon. One branch enters the canyon on the north side of the creek, while the other branch continues south for about ½ mile then doubles back over a hill and enters the canyon on the south side. The two branches again merge on the north side of the creek. No explanation for the two branches has been determined from the survey documents, nor gleaned from the diaries. Although not knowing the situation in the 1840's, the straight through road, today, seems more practical, although some, possible, diary support can be found for the southern branch. Both the diverging and the converging road junctions were found.

- 3) The road leaving the above mentioned small meadow on the west ascends an elevated area, along a well-used trail, through a boulder field. Another possible route up part of this rise was located. It has been impacted by logging, but contains a length of possible old wagon swale.

- 4) In 1850, and more so in 1852, (even excluding the major, new Hennes Pass and Beckwourth Trails) minor trail branches began to appear along the Truckee River route. There is some evidence to suggest there may have been some changes in the final approach to the base of Roller Pass beginning in 1850. This will be investigated further when the field work resumes.

Notes

1. Bryant, Edwin. *What I saw in California*. 1848. Reprint, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1985.

not
certain

Bryant described Lake Mary as "a small dimple on the top of the mountain, in the centre of which is a miniature lake, surrounded by green grass." Summit Valley (he called Uber) was a few miles away with a small stream (South Yuba River) running through it.

2. Aram, Joseph. *Across the Continent in a Caravan: Reminiscences . . . 1846*. Edited by James Tompkins Watson. Reprint, Fairfield, WA: Ye Galleon Press, 1987.

3. Dale L. Morgan, ed. "Diary of Nicholas Carriger." *Overland in 1846*. Georgetown: Talisman Press, 1963. Reprint, First Bison Book, 1993: 143-158.

Carriger wrote his autobiography in 1874. This is described and quoted from by Morgan in his introduction to the diary. Some details not noted in his diary are filled in.

4. Paden, Irene. "Facts About the Blazing of the Gold Trail, Including a Few Never Before Published." *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 18 (Feb., 1949): 3-13.

5. Hermann, Ruth. *The Paiutes of Pyramid Lake*. San Jose, CA. 1972: 61-89.

6. Trubody, William Alexander. "William Alexander Trubody and the Overland Pioneers of 1847." *California Historical Society Quarterly*, Vol. XVI. No. 2 (June, 1937): 122-143.

7. Stewart, George. *The California Trail*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1962.

8. Ruth Hermann makes numerous references to Weddell's work and includes his map on page 76.

9. California Department of Natural Resources, Division of Beaches & Parks. *Report of Investigation on Location, Cost of Acquisition & Development of Overland Emigrant Trail*. Filed December 1, 1949 by A. E. Henning, Chief, Division of Beaches & Parks.

A set of maps, scale 1" = 200', were drawn up in 1950 and early 1951. These maps purport to show the route of the main emigrant trail and indicate the right-of-way necessary to be acquired in support of the project. An overall map shows the project as beginning at Donner Memorial State Park and continuing on to Chicago Park. The surveyed, detail maps end at Kidd Lake, where the project was apparently canceled.

10. This map is reproduced in Dale Morgan's *Overland in 1846*. This map contains an amazing amount of detail of physical features along the trail and has been found to be surprisingly accurate, considering the scale. This is an 1846 map. Jefferson passed through this area just after the opening of Roller Pass and before the Donner Party arrived.

11. Graydon, Charles K. *Trail of the First Wagons Over the Sierra Nevada (A Guide)*. St. Louis: The Patrice Press, 1986.

This is the first book that attempts to show the exact emigrant route on a 7.5 minute topographical map. For reference, these maps may be easier to read than the hand drawn maps in this document.

12. Nevada Emigrant Trail Marking Committee, Inc. *The Overland Emigrant Trail to California - A*

Guide- Reno: Nevada Historical Society, nd: Marker T.R.R. # 24.

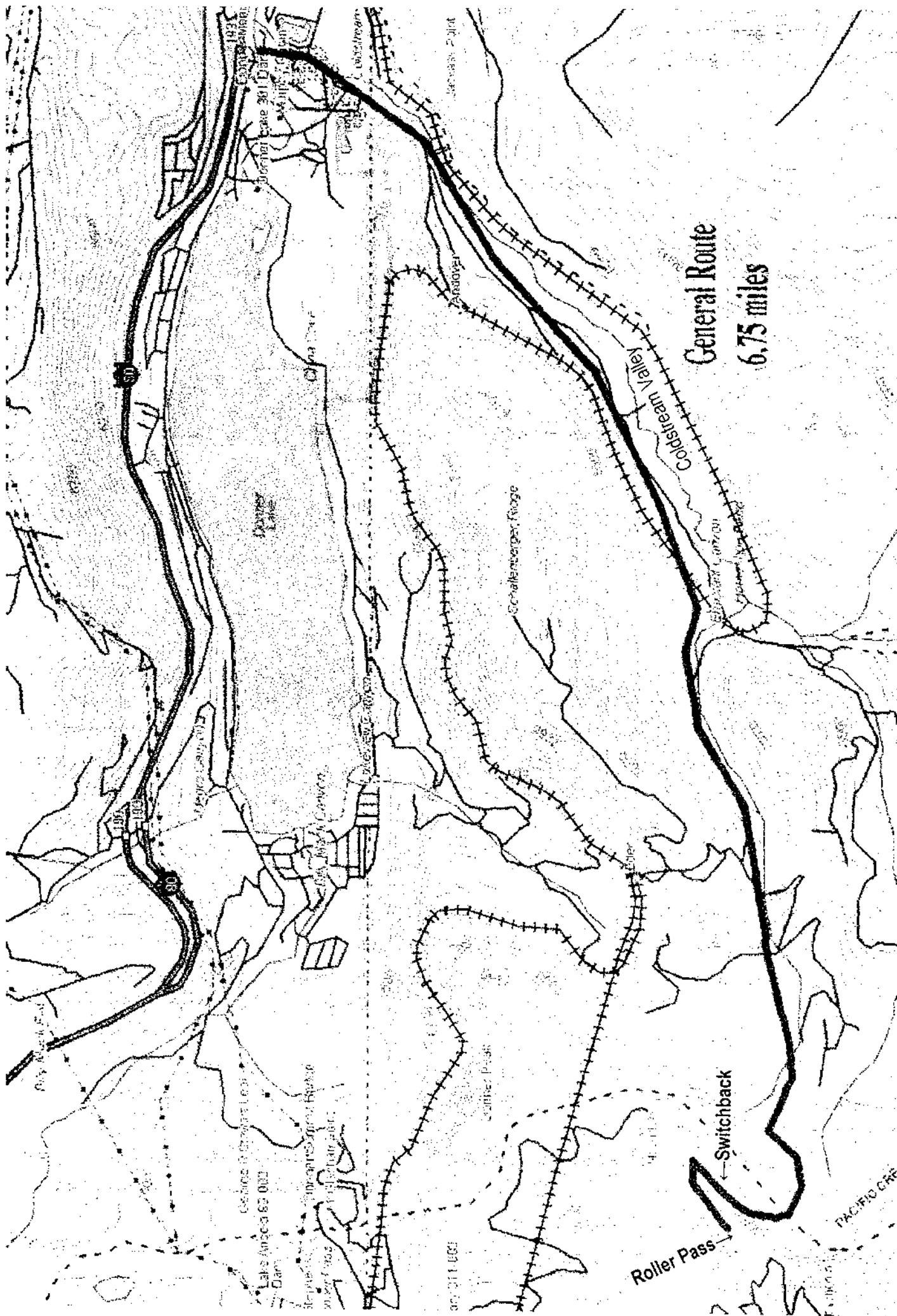
The text on this marker reads: Coldstream Emigrant Pass. Elevation approx. 7850 feet. Highest Point on Truckee River Route. The switchback route on Roller Pass may be higher, as the road went higher than the low point of the pass, then dropped down to the pass elevation.

13. Harris, E. W. "The Early Emigrant Pass Between Mt. Judah and Mt. Lincoln." *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, Vol. XXII, No. 1 (Spring, 1979): 33-39.

14. Historian Dale Morgan blows it big time in *Overland in 1846*. In his editorial comments on the Carriger diary, he sends the Carriger party up the pass between "Mt. Judah and Mt. Lincoln," per Irene Paden, but brings them down by Lake Mary. He assumes Carriger made an "obvious" mistake in his diary when he recorded, on Sept. 24, that "we traveled 8 miles to the lake" after reaching the summit, because Lake Mary was only one mile away. Lake Mary is only about one mile away from Coldstream Pass, but, the lakes shown on the Jefferson map, near Kidd Lake, and recorded in many emigrant diaries, are about eight miles away, just as Carriger stated. Morgan, perhaps knowing of Weddell's work, may have reasoned that the earlier Roller Pass trail, after passing over the summit, joined the older Donner Pass trail at Lake Mary. Weddell's "easier" route over Coldstream Pass was then actually a short-cut and joined both older trails near Lake Mary, thus eliminating the more difficult Roller Pass loop. No other, serious, trail researcher, even the early work of Weddell, has ever found, or suggested, that an emigrant road connected Roller Pass directly to Lake Mary. This literary faux pas may have confused later trail historians. Paden's use of the terms "Coldstream Trail" and "Coldstream Road," when referring to the road through Coldstream Valley, but leading to Roller Pass, also may have contributed to the confusion.

15. After this interview and an exchange of information, probably in 1949, Weddell may have also conceded some emigrant travel over Roller Pass. His last map update was October, 1951, which was after this interview. He shows the Roller Pass route as continuing on west, after branching off from his Coldstream Pass route, along the north side of Emigrant Canyon Creek. It then crosses the creek, making a dip to the south before swinging back north to the pass. This is similar to the route purposed by the Beaches and Park study, and the route verified by this investigation. It is speculated that he began his Roller Pass work after the above interview, found such a road, and at that late date, in his life and in his investigation, just labeled it a "Southern Route."

16. This tendency to follow proven routes, and the act of traveling in groups, or trains, usually in some type of organized structure with regulations and rules of conduct, have caused some historians to conclude that the highly touted emigrant individuality and independence acclaimed by some is a myth. This follow-the-pack syndrome is also evident in the Lassen Trail shift in August of 1849, and the deadly Forty Mile Desert to Carson River shift back again in 1850. In these cases, most, although not all, abandoned proven routes to follow the main stream of the migration. This tendency may also be one reason why the seemingly easier Coldstream Pass route was not used by the emigrants. This would not explain why Aram chose the Roller Pass route in the first place, after three days of investigation.



Coldstream Pass Vs. Roller Pass: A Final Report
By Don Wiggins
February, 1999

Reference: *Investigation of Emigrant Trails Over Passes South of Donner Pass*: Interim Report by Don Wiggins

Introduction

In my interim report written in Nov., 1996, it was reported that no evidence was found linking the use of Coldstream Pass, located between Mt. Judah and Donner Peak, by the early emigration (1844 to about 1852) into California. This finding was in contrast to the popular conception that after 1846, the Coldstream Pass route replaced the Donner Pass and Roller Pass routes as the most popular emigrant route into California.

The reported use of the Coldstream Pass route by emigrants first appeared in print in Ruth Hermann's book, *The Paiutes of Pyramid Lake*, in 1972. The route had been marked by P. M. Weddell beginning in the early 1920's. Weddell, as far as can be determined, left no reasons for his believing the old traces of wagon roads he was following were first traveled by emigrants. For reference, trail historians now believe that the Alder Creek route he also marked was a false emigrant trail.¹ It appears that Hermann merely accepted Weddell's route without further proof and publicized it. Likewise, she presented no proof of her, apparently original, assertions that the Coldstream Pass road opened "in the same year, 1846, and about the same month, September . . .," nor how she even arrived at that date, nor how she determined that this route "was usually crammed with emigrants rushing west." Anyway, after publication of her book, it became commonly accepted that there were three passes over the Sierra Nevada used by emigrants, with the most widely used the Coldstream Pass route. Formerly, trail historians like Irene Paden, Dale Morgan, George Stewart, and Tom Hunt only referred to two passes: Donner and Roller.

It was also noted in the referenced report that although over 60 diaries had been analyzed at that time, there were a number of others had not been seen. Perhaps some of those would shed some light on the use of the Coldstream Pass route by emigrants. At this point an additional 30, or so, diaries, and/or reminiscences, have been examined for information that would give clues to the passes used by the emigrants. This report updates the interim report on the question of the validity of Coldstream Pass as an emigrant route.

Physical Characteristics of Roller and Coldstream Passes

The major difference, as far as wagon traffic goes, between the two passes is the steepness of the ascent to Roller Pass in the last few hundred yards. The slope quickly changes from a 10 to 15 % grade at the foot of the pass to at least a 30% grade near the top.² This steepness on an already slippery slope made it necessary for the first users of the pass to somehow get their animals up to the top of the pass and use chains and ropes to then pull the wagons up. Soon a windlass, or roller, was constructed to aid in this operation. In 1847 a large party of emigrants constructed a bypass, or switchback, road around this steep slope. This new road, itself, reached the top of the pass in about 1/3 mile, although most emigrants recorded distance from the foot to the top of the pass as being about 1/2 mile.

The east side of Coldstream Pass, on the other hand, is a more gradual, firmer slope. It doesn't have the steepness, nor the slippery loam and shale characteristics of the Roller Pass slope. It appears there would be firm footing for the animals and the slope grade would not require double teaming. In any respects, a long switchback would not be necessary, so the time to ascend the pass would be short.

The above observations are obvious with a field trip to the east side of the two passes. In lieu of a field trip, a 7.5 minute topographical map will provide much the same information by observing the contour lines on the map.

The 1847 bypass road

The first section of the new road, or switchback, was constructed (to the north) across the face of the slope at a 45 degree angle, (the slope itself is steep; in the 20 to 30 % grade category) but at a much less grade than the old road. The first section ended on a bench, or table approximately 80 yards long. At the north end of this table the road ascended up a 100 feet, or so, to the second switchback which was in a southward direction back to the pass. This ascend from the north switchback to the south switchback was the steepest part of the new road.

Observations diagnostic to Roller Pass, noted in the interim report

1. The 1846 windlass, or roller, was still intact in 1849 and noted by some diarists.
2. Sections of the switchback road were located in 1986. Described by some diarists.
3. Double teaming required. If wagons were not partially unloaded, up to 16 yoke of oxen needed to pull up to summit.
4. A long, tedious, steep final pull to the summit. Times of from 1 to 2 hours to gain the summit were recorded.
5. The distance of the final pull to the summit was usually described as about ½ mile.
6. An area of level, open ground near the foot of the pass to rest in before the final ascent.

Observations diagnostic to Coldstream Pass looked for but not found

1. Any reference to Lake Mary between the summit and arriving in Summit Valley. The Coldstream Pass trail, if it existed, went along the shore of Lake Mary. No post-1846 diary keeper ever recorded seeing a lake along the down hill road to Summit Valley.

Review of the additional diaries

Although some of the additional diaries and reminiscences analyzed contained no useful information regarding which pass they crossed, many did. However, their descriptions of their crossing point confirmed the earlier conclusions: All were describing a route over the difficult Roller Pass road. None could be construed as describing a route up the moderate Coldstream Pass ascent. There was no mention of a route by a lake, or near a lake, until leaving Summit Valley and arriving in the vicinity of the Cascade Lakes area. Typical examples:

1. Evens Jones Bonine, *Saturday Aug. 25th [1849]* *We started early in the morning for the summit which took us until noon we had to put 10 to each wagon. We passed above many heavy snow banks. This was a tall climb for a wagon. We then passed down into a valley and encamped. The descent was not so great as the other side. Here was a fine stream of water which we supposed to be a branch of feather River. [South Branch of Yuba]*

2. John F. Lewis, 1849. [Sept.] 2. . . . *We were now ascending 4 miles farther over a weary rocky road brought us to the mighty hill called the elephant. We here by putting 9 or 10 yoke of cattle to a waggon, we, after labouring hard for several hours, we succeeded in reaching the summit and screamed to the top of our voices rejoicing at our victory. . . .*

One diary gives an interesting insight to the difficulty the 1846 emigrants must have encountered in gaining those last few hundred feet to the summit. With the top of the pass directly ahead and so close, Emigrant Darwin decided to try a frontal assault on the pass, disdaining the easier, but longer, switchback road:

Charles Darwin, August 26, 1849. . . . *The mountain is passed & while others afar of were going to church we were climbing up & [?] down the dividing wall between the two great Oceans of our planet. the old road is abandoned [The 1846 road] & a more practible one selected by winding further the hillside I however took the old road while my commrads went the new I save much distance but had a 1/4 mile of so steep precipice that my hand & fingers & all shrubs & stones were requested to assist me & I thought my poor pony would be unable to make the height. I came up not as Napoleon is represented on his bounding charger but on my all fours & now behind my horse whipping him on & now before him shouting & pulling on his bridal with one hand while with the other I held to a rock or shrub & if one gave way as in some cases reeling I went sideways down till by throwing myself flat I could arrest my downward progress at last the top was gained. . . .*

Additional diaries record seeing the windlass, used by the 1846 emigrants. One, by an east bound Mormon, proves Roller Pass was being used by east-bound, traffic as early as 1847:

Henry W. Bigler, 1847. [Sept.] Sunday, 5th. *To-day we passed over some banks of snow more than two feet deep and reached the summit of the main chain of the Sierra Nevada mountains, where we found a windlass that emigrants had made to haul their wagons up over a very steep ascent from the east side. . . .* [This strongly implies that the new bypass road was in place then.]

[Note: In June of 1847, General Kearny, east bound, appears to have used the original road between Mt. Stephens and George R. Stewart Peak to reach Donner Lake. This was before the Roller Pass switchback was constructed by emigrants later that year.]

Even non-diary keepers that described their experiences later in life used the Roller Pass route: Felix Coats, 1849. (reminiscence written in 1915). . . *Our next problem was climbing the rugged summit of the Sierras which rose before us. After much labor we took our wagons as far as possible then unhitched all except one yoke of oxen and took them to the top of the mountain and fastened chains fifty feet long to the tongue, and pulled the wagons up one at a time.*

Coats is remembering the ascent from the table to the second (southbound) leg of the switchback. Augustus Burbank had described it this way in his daily diary: . . . *Then a winde to the left [from the table] over a ledge of loose round rocks & up the Steepest ascent & the hardest pulling. . .*

Conclusions

Including the initial study, over 100 primary documents have been reviewed and carefully analyzed for clues as to the passes used by emigrants in the early migration period (1844 to about 1852). The supply of known diaries has been nearly exhausted. The diaries, and reminiscences, found cover the years from 1845 through 1855 and appear to be randomly distributed through out the migration season. Although a few parties have more than one diary keeper, most are not aware, or know, of the other diarists. Generally, the words used to describe flora, fauna, and physical land features differ in each diary. Each seem to be an independent rendering. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that with a random distribution, these 100 samples would be representative of the whole, to a first order anyway. Thus, if presented a choice between two passes, there would be a statistically significant distribution of decisions made, some choosing Roller Pass and some choosing Coldstream Pass.

As such, the evidence is overwhelming:

Roller Pass was by far the main route, and probably the only route, between Donner Lake Valley and Summit Valley, after about the middle of September, 1846, to at least the middle 1850's. For all diaries that could be attributed to one pass or the other without question, 100% used Roller Pass. None pointed to the use of Coldstream Pass. This is confirmed by the 1866 GLO plat map showing the emigrant road over Roller Pass, with no indication of a road over Coldstream Pass.

Absolutely no primary evidence was found to indicate Coldstream Pass was ever used as an emigrant route. Any speculation that Coldstream Pass was an early emigrant route appears to be based entirely on P. M. Weddell's dedicated, but undocumented work. The assertion, made later, that this was the main emigrant route is without foundation. Supporters of this route are left with the untenable proposition that somehow all diary keepers were routed onto the Roller Pass route, while non-diary keepers were allowed to use the easier Coldstream Pass route.

Roller Pass itself is a rich historical resource and should be protected from all intrusions. It is a monument to human determination, resourcefulness and achievement and is well described by many diary passages. Some describe sitting on the top of the pass and looking both east and west and marveling at the view. Although there are modern intrusions in the distance, one can experience virtually the same view today. In easy walk from the pass to the north, traces of the old switchback leading down to the top of the pass can be seen.

1. See Charles Graydon's book, *Trail of the First Wagons Over the Sierra Nevada*, third edition, and *An Investigation of The Emigrant Route from Prosser Creek to the Truckee River Valley*, an unpublished manuscript by Don Wiggins, July 1997
2. Harris, E. W. "The Early Emigrant Pass Between Mt. Judah and Mt. Lincoln." *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, Vol. XXII, No. 1 (Spring, 1979): 33-39

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Excerpts From Primary Documents
Coldstream Valley Route
Compiled by Don Wiggins

Joseph Aram, Reminiscences, 1846: . . .

The next day we reached the Sierra Nevada Mountains. We spent three days there exploring the mountains to find a pass where we might make a crossing. A party of us took our horses and went to the summit, and trace it both ways and finally decided on the place to make the crossing. It was quite an undertaking to get our wagons up. We put about five yoke on a wagon, and had as many men with it as was necessary to keep it from sliding sideways. Then with five yoke on the summit letting down our long one hundred and fifty feet rope, and hitched it with the leaders that were on the wagon, by this process, we succeeded in getting all the wagons up safely, and was soon ready to push ahead on our journey. . .

Nicholas Carriger, Diary, Sept., 1846:

21 up the mountain distressing bad 8 miles to the foot of the high California mountain and got 8 waggons

22 we we made a roller and fasened chans to gether and pulled the wagons up with 12 yoke oxen on the top and the same at the bottom

23 halling wag[on]s

24 we traviled 8 miles to the lake distrissing bad road

Mary A. Jones, Recollections, 1846:

We had much hard road on the way and passed the fated Donner party, the best equipped party on the road. their family car or wagon was fixed up in all the convenience of a parlor. Grandmother was with them and she must be comfortable. But they had to abandon that wagon and Grandmother died. But bye and bye we reached the great mountain and pitched our tent at the foot of it. In the morning my husband got up and looked out and said, "Mary, it is snowing, and we are doomed to stay in this place all winter." I said, "oh no. It will quit snowing pretty soon," and we got up the mountain before dark. I carried one baby and led the other most all the way up. The way we climbed the mountain we hitched nine or ten yoke of oxen to a wagon and drove them as far as they could go and a chain that worked over a roller, on top of the mountain and a man at each wheel did the work. The chain broke with one wagon on it was turned over, but it did little damage for it had little in it. We camped on the mountain that night, and oh, how cold and windy it was, and the men to go down a mile or more to get water before we could get supper. But we had our supper after awhile and went to bed and were soon all asleep, for we were all very tired. We got up the next morning and started on, and it still looked like snow, and about noon it did begin to snow and it snowed all that afternoon. Two men passed us on horseback who told us they were from the Donner party and that Jim Reed had killed his hired man, and the company was delayed for one day at least to bury him. We found out after that, that it was Jim Reed who passed us that day. He had left his company for fear of being lynched for the murder. He had stabbed the man to death over Mrs. Reed's shoulder, I learned after that. The young man was a great favorite in the company.

James Scott Abell,

Sept. 1, 1849: . . . We crossed the little stream by these cabins and went as it were direct tords the foot of the main ridge of the mountains after we went, went some four or five miles and encamped near the foot of the main ridge. . .

Sept. 1, 1849: 1st. . . We left camp a little before sunrise and proceeded up the dividing ridge to the summit-- after offering \$25 to have our wagon hauled about one fourth of a mile to the summit we were obliged to unload our wagon and lift at the wheels in order to reach the summit, after which we were obliged to carry our loading by hand which was very laborious for it was very steep. -- At the summit and near where our road mad the top was a windlass which had been used by Colonel Freemont or some other party to haul up their wagons and loading. The windlass was supported by two trees which were about 5 feet apart. . .

J. Elza Armstrong, Sept. 13, 1849:

Yesterday we passed some cabins where Donner and his party suffered. It is at Truckee Lake. The lake is about eight miles from the summit. We camped one mile from the foot of the mountain. It was quite hard work to get up; we had eight yoke of cattle to the wagon. We did not go all the way up the old road, but a short distance we went a little to the right of the old road. They had to haul the wagon up with a windlass. We got up and down on to the valley of Yuba Valley. It was very rough. We thought we had got over the worst then, but a man by the name of Childs, he was from the mines, he had been a soldier for four years, he said the elephant was before us. Distance nine miles.

John Edwin Banks, Sept. 13, 1849: [With Armstrong]

The appearance of the mountain is not as grand as I anticipated. The quantity of snow is small in comparison with the Wind River Mountains. The first of the ascent is gradual but rocky. Within three hundred feet of the summit there is considerable piece of bottom land well watered. The whole mountain is covered by a noble forest of pine. From this point the road is desperate, perhaps an angle of forty-five degrees, strong and sliding [sidling]. By double teaming and hard work we reached the summit without accident. Here we dined; our fare was low but our position lofty, being more than nine thousand feet above the sea. The prospect is limited by mountains on either side. The whole country is a series of lofty mountains and deep chasms, with small bottoms. Encamped in valley, grass and water good. Distance ten miles.

T. Beesley,

Aug. 24, 1849: ... About ½ mile from this place [the Donner cabins] we commenced the ascent of the main ridge of the Sierra 5 miles from this to the Summit we managed by the hardest kind of labour to shove our teams up the about 4 miles of the roughest and worst road I ever saw encamped at dark within one miles of the Summit in a pretty little green valley plenty of grass and a fine spring of cold water very cold to night plenty of frost and ice.

August 25th. - Commenced the last Ascent this morning at six oclock and arrived at the Summit at 12 distance one Mile over the most horrible road ever travelled by waggons. by putting 12 mules to a waggon and all the Men that could get around it we managed by the hardest kind of work to push all the waggons up Safely. Crossed the mountains and descended into this part of the long looked for California. encamped in a beautiful valley on a tributary of the Yuba River. (Bear river) [added by transcriber?]

Wakeman Bryarly, Aug. 22, 1849: ... [Camped near Graves cabin]

Early everything was in motion. In one mile we crossed a little stream to the left, which runs from the Lake. Here we stopped, & cut sufficient grass for a feed. After rolling one mile farther we struck the foot of the mountain. The road was very rough & in many places steep both going up & coming down. Every now & then there was a little table upon which was a little grass. We rolled thus 2 miles when we nooned (or rather rested, not taking our mules out) upon one of these tables. We stopped 2 hours, when we ascended a steep & very rocky road with many short turns around the large rocks & trees. One mile brought us to the foot of the "Elephant" itself. . . . We immediately doubled teams, & after considerable screaming & whipping, thus arrived safe at the top. . . . We rolled down the mountain 4 miles, the road being rough & steep half way & then striking a valley, where it was good. We passed through a grove of woods & then emerged into a beautiful valley & encamped.

Jos. C. Buffum, Aug., 1849:

[Aug.] 9. Drove to another branch and nooned on good grass. P. M.

Passed one of the huts built by the unfortunate Donner party, Skulls and bones were lying there. By the stump of trees cut by the sufferers the snow would seem to have been 20 or 25 feet deep. This party who came out in 1846 were delayed by trying to reach California by a new route and were overtaken by the snows in October among these mountain. They eat everything in the shape of food that they had with

them even the skins of their cattle and finally were forced to eat the bodies of such as perished by hunger. They were at length relieved by parties sent from Sutter's Fort with provisions. Out of 100 men, women, and children, but 40 lived to reach the Fort. This is a warning to emigrants to keep the known trail and make diligent progress on their journey in order to reach California before winter sets in upon the mountains. Passed down the creek and went on some miles expecting to come to Trucky Lake but were disappointed having gone to the right of it: finding no grass when we reached the foot of Sierra Nevada we camped in the timber and drove our stock back to Trucky's waters to grass. Cool Night.

[Aug.] 10. Ascended about 5 miles and nooned on good grass. A. M. came to snow. Doubled teams and rolled slowly to the summit of the Sierra Nevada. Difficult ascent. Five miles down the other side brought us to a fine vally of good grass with a small stream of water said to be the head waters of the Yuba river.

Augustus Ripley Burbank, Sept. 11, 1849:

... We soon commenced ascending a rocky ridge or the foot of the Sierra. Then followed up a narrow valley between the foot of the range and a small stream on the left. our ascent was gradual for some distance, angling to the right. Soon we found a steeper ascent & over a long ledge of large round & flat gray granet. One that was not acquainted with wild mountains roads would of readily pronounced that no team could pass over these obstacles. Some of the rock was as large as the topstone of a pair of mill burs. & our wheels had to pass over them & possible from one to another, twist or wind about among the large pine & spruce trees that cover this side of the mountain with thick forest. After a long toil we reached the foot of the main Summet [?] or backbone at about 1 O.C.K. P. M. Several teams was ascending & the mountain valley & forest beneath echoed & resounded with the voices of the teamsters & the loud popping of the ox whips. This part of the range is quite barren & has but little timber on it, but piles of rock & some spots of L [?] lodged in the fissures, rocks & in places that are screened from the sun. We stopped & nooned here, we rested our cattle, but could not find them any grass. about 3 ock P. M. We commenced climbing the reald [?] Sierra. it looks like a wall between two worlds. We put 8 yoke of our best oxen to a wagon & took up one at a time. The road is now made winding to the right or north & is dug in the soft loamy earth & the small loose rocks, that is up the first ascent. Then a short distance on a bench that is stunded [?] with pine trees. Then a winde to the left over a ledge of loose round rocks & up the steepest ascent & the hardest pulling. Then a gradual rise for a few rods. brings one to the top of the summet. We got all up (three wagons) in some 2 ½ hours. We put each team to its wagon then descended. The first descent is steep & short, over rocks & loose earth. Here in an open ravine in the range & the old road comes up on the left, up an almost precipice over some rocks no wagon could get up here only by pulling with ropes. A loose animal would not be safe in climbing up, without a rope around its head or neck, so as to give it aid. No travel now up this pass. We then ascended a little & passed to the S. W. through a thick forest of spruce trees & descended on down the 2th descent over a steep & rocky road. Then winding on down a gradual descent for ½ mile crossed a small spring rivulet, & then made the 3rd descent down a steep but loamy & deep dusty road. Passing on down a gradual descent through a pine forest we made the 4th descent (short & steep). Then down a long incline & through the heavy forest to the base of yuba Valley. passed down the Valley ¾ of a mile & encamped to the right of the road, near the forest & opposite the small stream (a tributary of feather River) that comes down from near the mountain top & passes along through the valley...

A small spring is found about half way up the mountain (over the rocks or the worst part of them) that affords water sufficient for stock & C. it is close to the left & in an open space of ground: and 200 yards to the left of the road at the foot of the summit ridge is also found a very small spring (no water for stock). There is water in a rivulet. I think that heads beneath snow banks to the left. . . from the foot to the summit of the mountain is some 6 miles (some say more) and 2 miles or over down . . .

Zimri L. Garwood, Sept. 18, 1849: [With Lincoln]

Clear and cool. We hitched and bent our course the sumit of the mountain. Our road lay through heavy pine timber and large stone. We arived at the foot the maine ridge a little after noon. Here we doubled teams for a half a mile to pull to the sumit of the Siera Nevada, which was steep stony and sideling. This

we looked upon as achieving grand obstacle, and had anticipated as being farly in Callifomia. At the foot of the of the mont we found some good water which was very acceptable as it was quite warm. The mountain here is narrowed up to a much less width and lower than any other place I saw. Snow was at sevrul points near to us. We immediately took the decent on the other side which was much more graduel and easy of descent, though rocky. We drove five miles through heavy pine and fir timber crossing a number of spring branches and came to an open grass valley and a small deep stream which Bryant calls the Uber. Here we camped.

James Godfrey, Aug. 10, 1849:

... Finding ourselves ascending a very difficult hill, owing to the huge rocks that lay upon either hand, as in the way, I had almost begun to surmise that we were mounting the elephant. We had made some progress on our way up, when some of the advances of our party came back and assured us that our surmises were correct. We nooned a short distance of the summit in a beautiful little grassy opening, surrounded by tall noble trees; a beautiful spot. Continuing on, we soon came to the last ascent. This has been much improved of late. Formerly it was almost impossible for teams to negotiate this ascent with wagons attached. We found no difficulty by doubling teams. The descent was rough, tho' not as bad as upon the other side. We proceeded down a valley some three or four miles, following a small stream, a tributary of the Feather River, where we encamped for the night in the midst of fine firs. Distance 12 miles.

Joseph Hackney, Sept. 4, 1849:

To day we commenced the assent of the mountain a short drive of 3 miles brout us to the foot of the mountain by a gradual assent of four miles over as rocky a road as one can well immagi[ne] we arrived at the main difficulty from hear to the summit one mile it is as steep as the roof of a house we doubled teams and by the hardest kind of scratching got our wagons up we then had to desend and bring up the rest former emigrants always unloaded and hauled the wagons up by roaps from the summit we desended four miles to a small valley and found good grass and camped for the night very well satisfied with out days work distanc to day 12 mile [s]

Edward Harrow, Aug. 22, 1849:

...we crossed the Truckee River [Donner Creek outlet] again, now a small and almost tranquil stream. We here left Truckies lake to the right, and took a west course. After ascending a short, rough hill, we kept along a rough and crooked road until about 9 a.m., when we commenced the ascent of the last ridge over the roughest and worst road I ever saw. At 10 ½ we had reached the snow, when we ascended a nearly perpendicular hill and reached the top of a dividing ridge of the Sierra Nevadas. About 11 a.m. from a clear spot on this summit, I had a good view of the valleys, forests and snowcapped mountains we had crossed and passed on the east, and the mountains and beautiful valleys of California on the west. The snow-covered peaks on the north and south shut the surrounding prospect from my view. After resting a short time, we commenced the descent into the valleys of our destination, over a very rough, rocky road. At 11 ½ we struck and crossed the head waters of. . . River.

D. Jagger, Aug. 22, 1849:

We passed the highest of the Sierra this morning without accident and stopped for dinner in a beautiful valley with a little stream formed by various springs in the neighborhood said to be the source of the Yuba. In the afternoon we followed down the Yuba and commenced ascending the highlands towards Bear River. At night we encamped on a hill over looking a little lake of clear water. Our road was filled with enormous granite boulders this afternoon. (travelled 16 miles) At the summit we collected a quantity of snow which was made as a delicious drink today. At the same place we saw the windlass with which the first emigrants to California drew up their waggons.

Elisha Lewis, Sept. 17, 1849:

... our trail led us through a forest of pine and spruce timber 5 miles from camp brought us to where we commenced ascending the mountain. and now we had got to the Elephant although our ascent was gradual however extremely rocky and some of the time our trail led us over bear ledges of granite rock we arrived to the last and steepest ascent about 3 o'clock P M the length of it is some 400 yards we doubled our teams putting 8 and 9 yoke on a wagon and made the ascent but it was all we could do Our cattle would frequently break their foothold and fall back We now stood on the Summit of the great S Nevada mountains and above snow 1000 ft We descended from the Summit into a valley 4 Miles distance and camped finding good grass the descent is precipitous and rocky this valley is 1 mile in width and several miles in length with a fine stream of water running through it and is covered with nutritious grasses we did not arrive in camp until...

J. C. Lincoln, Sept. 18, 1849:... [with Garwood]

Our road at this place [crossing Donner Creek] turns to the left for 1 mile then over a point of bluff & along a small valley but no camping place for 2 miles where we commenced ascending the mountains which we found extremely rocky & some very short turns in the road which renders it dangerous to wagons & hard on teams. 4.2 [?] miles brought us to the foot of the steep (water here left of the road ½ mile & passed water in one or two places) at this point we had to double teams & even then found the ascent very difficult for ½ mile which placed us on the summit. Here we had a view of Yuba Valley. Yuba is a small stream which heads near the summit of the mountain & is a tributary of Sacramento. Descent from the summit very steep in some places & wagons have formerly been let down with ropes. 1 mile brought us to head waters of Yuba & w [typing error, probably tried to strike 2 key] miles more water timber & grass plenty. Timber large & very heavy. 2 miles more to our encampment on the Yuba. Good camping.

Alexander Love, Aug. 23, 1849: [Camped by Donner Creek]

Left at daylight. Got under way first for the pass. Drove over granite rocks for 6 m. and came to the base of the Mt. then double teaming we drove over the heights of the Sierra Nevada and it rained on us all the time on the Mt. We passed down into Yuba (Yuba) Valley 3 m. and camped. I went hunting on the south over a Mt. covered with snow and in the valley 2 lakes surrounded with timber.

John Markle, Aug. 21, 1849:

Today we traveled 12 miles. Soon after starting we crossed the Southeast end of a mountain. The road then was very good for three or four miles when we commenced climbing over rocks and stones. 10 miles brought us to the summit of the long dreaded Sierra Nevada. We came within about ½ mile of the top when it became so steep that we had to double team. The ascent was difficult but not so much so as I expected. We had all the wagons on the Summit by 1 o'clock P.M. 2 miles more brought us down into a valley where we encamped. The descent was gentle with some places pretty steep, but not so rough as the ascent. The view from the peak on the south side of the gap was magnificent . . .

Ansel McCall, Sept. 7, 1849: . . .

As we jogged on thus merrily, we heard a great halloing and noise, and as we came to an open space, we looked to the right, from whence it came, and there before us loomed up the bare and rocky summit of the Nevadas. A great wagon with 16 yoke of cattle attached was here being slowly and painfully dragged up the naked cliff at an angle of forty-five degrees, amid a storm of shouts and blows. . . When we reached the ascent the doctor stopped to await the wagon, while I proceeded to the summit with the pack horses and stopped there to await the coming of the company. . . We commenced the descent and found the road by no means bad, but quite winding and encamped on the head waters of the Yuba, having made ten miles.

Charles Parke, Aug. 31, 1849:

Left camp at sunrise and traveled 5 miles to the foot of the mountain, . . . Five miles farther [from camp] brought us within ½ mile of the summit, where we in fact found "the Elephant." At this place there is a small area of level ground where we rested our cattle for the ascent.

We reached this point at noon and watered our stock at a little brook by the roadside, fed by the melting snow which covered the mountain sides. Karr's Missouri train being in front of us, we were detained somewhat, but after dinner we [made] the ascent. There are two of these about ½ a mile in length, the first being a little the longest and lands you on a table about 80 yards in length. The second ascent starts from this table and lands you on the summit of the Sierra Nevada over a terrible road. Steep 45^B and winding. This road is over a material comprised of clay, and small rolling stones, which roll under the feet of the cattle, making it almost impossible to get up themselves let alone draw the wagons.

Some of Capt. Karr's wagons had 15 yoke of cattle attached at one time, and even then stuck fast at times. We drew our wagons part way up the mountain with 4 yoke of cattle and the aid of a long rope round the end of the wagon, extending up by the side of the oxen and beyond. The men pulled on the rope and aided materially not only in the ascent but in keeping the oxen in line until we arrived at the most difficult point of ascent. Here we were obliged to double teams, putting 8 yoke on the wagon and two yokes to the end of the rope that was continued on up to the table above. In this way we were enabled to get all our wagons on the summit an hour by sun and without a single mishap. After giving three cheers, we started for the valley on the west side, all delighted with our success. Three miles and a half brought us into the valley where we are now camped. Grass and water good. Timber nearly all fir.

Elisha Perkins, Sept. 15, 1849:

The ascent to the pass from Donner cabins is about 5 miles over rocks & steep bluff & through majestic forests of fine cedar. . . The trees . . . were six feet in diameter & standing so densely together that I could hardly get myself & mule through them. The road in finding a passage through the trees & among the rocks lengthened the distance to the foot of the pass at least one half.

Up, up, we toiled wondering every five minutes how "the dickens" ox teams & wagons can get over here, & it is a wonder indeed, until at 3 P.m. we arrived at the foot of the terrible "Passage on the backbone." For half an hour before arriving we could hear the shouts of teamsters urging their cattle up the steep & when we were near enough to see through the forest we could look up nearly over our heads & see wagons & cattle looking like pigmies, & as if almost suspended in the air. The "Pass" is through a slight depression in the mountains being some 1500 or 2000 feet lower than the tops in its immediate vicinity. As we came up to it the appearance was exactly like marching up to some immense wall built directly across our path so perpendicular is this dividing ridge & the road going up to its very base turns short to the right & ascends by a track cut in the side of the mountains till two thirds up when it turns left again & goes directly over the summit.

The distance to the top of the pass I should judge to be about ½ mile, & in this short space the elevation attained is somewhere near 2000 feet! The mountain is mostly rock. . . Where the road is cut tho' it is red clay & stone, which by travel & sliding of animals feet has been much cut & powdered up making a deep dust on the first half of the steep. At the foot of the ascent we found the Missionary Train from Indiana, preparing for the Enterprise. One wagon had already started with 13 yoke of cattle attached, the load in the wagon not exceeding 600 lbs, & they could get but a few yards at a time stopping to rest their team. They were about half way up when in an inclining place the wagon began to slide over the precipice! The men seizing hold at all points stopped its progress to destruction, & by some management it was placed upon the road again. Had it got a fair start over the hillside it must have dragged all the cattle with it down upon the rocks below. We leading each his mule, began to scramble up sometimes upon "all fours" like our animals, glad enough were we to stop "to blow" several times before reaching the top.

At last the summit was gained . . . Descending the west side of the Pass was, tho, very steep nothing compared to the Eastern ascent, we encamped some 2 or 3000 feet below our recent elevation, near a

large train which crossed the day previous, at 6, distance 15 miles. The time usually occupied by an ox team to get to the top of the pass is from 1 ½ to 2 hours. . .

T. J. Van Dom, Sept. 4, 1849:

This evening we feel as if we had achieved a victory, having today completed the great work of making the pass over the Sierra Nevadas. As is usually the case with points on our route, this pass is not any worse than had been represented to us, as it is now is-- for it is evident a great deal of work has been done by the emigrants in ascending the great ridge where the old track went up, it would be impossible to get a waggon up with all the oxen in the train, for it would be quite all they could do to get themselves. The road is now improved and takes a slanting shute up the ridge, so that with 8 and 12 yoke on each waggon, we made the summit with safety and without difficulty and not taking out any part of our loading, tho this is now but little exertion. In about a mile or so from camp (which is 7 miles from the summit), we commenced ascending, making the first stop [step, or steep?] after which for 2 miles the rise was very gradual, when we reached the foot of a still greater (stop)- the way intolerably rocky, which continued in sections until we reached the foot of the main ridge. This ridge may be called the hog-back of Creation, being a wall of granite near a 1000 feet above the surrounding region. To our right and left still higher peaks were in view and from this point was delightful and overlooked a large extent on both sides of valley and mountain. The valley which we had followed for some days was plain in view, giving a better idea to the pass than one could naturally form in following it. In making that summit I am not sure we followed the usual route which had been represented to us as making by the Truckee Lake, which we avoided by over ½ mile. To the right of the point when we reached the summit, I noticed a canon distant about 2 miles, which I rather conclude as making from the head of the lake and following the passage through. The ridge over which we passed is very narrow, not more than ½ to 1/4 of a mile when we immediately descended into the opposite valley to a level nearly with the one we had left--covered in sections with the finest pine I have yet seen--with beautiful mountain springs putting in from all sides, forming in a short distance, a clear and rippling brook. We nooned a short distance before making the ascent of the main ridge, on a small spring branch to afford our cattle rest for the great work, stopping for about an hour or longer we drove up to foot. The steep of the main ridge is not more than 1/3 of a mile. By 4 o'clock P. M. we were all safely up when we arranged our teams and made a descent into the opposite valley 5 miles from the summit and encamped for the night on a beautiful bottom of rich grass and in a plenty, and clover I noticed here in abundance again. Immediately after descending the first steep, we had most picturesque view in the world, a bold escarpment of naked granite 5 or 800 feet perpendicular, from the foot of which makes a deep chasm forming the head of a valley. Now on this side we feel safe and encouraged by our near approach to the El Dorado and safely on the Summer side, as Dan Marble would have it. Truckee Lake does not come from the source of that river. Our men out a hunting crossed it more than 5 miles south and west of this lake and apparently as large as when we first struck it. The maps are either wrong or else we are off the track as described to us. Put the distance for the Pass near 12 miles.

Micaja Littleton, Sept 28, 1850:

left this morn. 7 o'clk from Doners camp you cross the creek made from the lake here you go over to another more Southward both considerable creeks you take up this creek and begin to assend the mountain through rocks hills and valey Small but some Steep and very rough having very large rock in the road you wind around however and go on without much danger 6 miles you reach the Sumit. about a mile befor you get to the Sumit you reach a little branch very muddy then 1 or 2 hundred yds you begin to a assend the Steep part but you can make it all easy enough by takeing time we rolled up with 4 mules in one hour with about 400 pounds in we reached the Sumit at 20 minutes after 11 o'clk A M the decent is also bad and requires care and patience 4 miles you come down into a valey Some grass Small distance further you take off to the left out of the valey travel over much bad road the rock is all through the wood looking like waggons white cows and Sheep 6 miles to our present encampment there is 2 or 3 lakes quite large or rather 3 to 400 yds wide the water is clear and good considerable grass all around

Cyrus Loveland, Sept. 13, 1850:

After leaving the Cannibal Cabin, six miles brought us to the foot of the main ridge of the great Sierra Nevada or Snowy Mountains where we paused to take breath before attacking the Great Elephant of the Overland Route to California. After dinner we doubled teams and moved on to conquer the last great difficulty. About one hour and a half took us to the summit, distance of one mile. Here we had a grand view and most beautiful prospect. We beheld vast quantities of snow both above and below, spread over a wide stretch of the most rugged and mountainous region that I had ever beheld, rearing upwards their lofty peaks caped with perpetual snow in majestic grandeur to the skies. . . Three and a half miles from the summit to a beautiful little valley at the foot of the mountain, where we camped. Plenty of green grass and water. (10 miles)

John Steele, Sept. 16, 1850:

From our camp to the summit, over seven miles, the road was very steep; in places passing over large granite boulders. Consequently we climbed slowly, and at noon stopped at a large spring, half a mile from the highest point. After resting awhile, most of the oxen were attached to a single wagon, and with difficulty it was drawn up the precipitous ascent. This was repeated until all the wagons were on the mountain top. . . A short distance north of the pass I climbed the dizzy heights of a granite peak. The view was magnificent. Perennial snow, rock, chasm, forest, lake and stream; a veritable map of one of the wildest, grandest parts of America, spread out on every side.

By making a series of acute angles, our road down the precipitous western slope was quite easy; and from thence, following a mountain gorge about four miles, we came to a small valley, overgrown with grass and clover, and belted around by a dense pine forest.

William Baker, Aug. 27, 1852:

Traveled 13 miles over some of the roughest road we have yet found; got over the summit of the Sierra Nevada mountains; we had to double teams to get up the last half mile; altitude said to be 9400 feet; the summit is seven miles from where we started in the morning, then six miles down into Yuba valley, where we camped; found grass and water plenty

Eliza Ann McAuley,

Sept. 13, 1852: . . . Donner Lake, a beautiful sheet of water, not far from here, was named in remembrance of the party. We camped in a small valley, about three miles west of this place.

Tuesday, September 14th, 1852. This morning we began the ascent of the main ridge, which is very steep and rough. About nine o'clock we doubled teams and began the ascent of the summit, and by one o'clock we all arrived in Summit Valley on the western slope, where we remained the rest of the day . . . While the teams were toiling slowly up to the summit, Father, Mr. Buck, Margaret and I climbed one of the highest peaks near the road, and were well repaid for our trouble by the splendid view. On one side the snow-capped peaks rise in majestic grandeur, on the other they are covered to their summits with tall pine and fir, while before us in the top of the mountains, apparently an old crater, lies a beautiful lake in which the Truckee takes its rise.

Kate Furness, 1853: reminiscences, Chapter XVI:

1 mile to the top. We would have to travel about six miles going up because it would be necessary to wind our zigzag way up the very steep mountain.

A. J. Mothersead, Sept. 15, 1855:

Had a very bad hill half mile long. Doubled teams [.] at top of hill is the summit of Sierra Nevada mountains. 3 ½ miles farther come to summit valley and camped. Country very broken, road very rough. Grass, water and wood fine at camp. Killed a black-tailed deer.

[End of Diary Accounts]

PART VII

Donner Summit (Stephens Pass)

Investigation of the Emigrant Route over Donner Summit

By Don Wiggins

Background

It is usually acknowledged that the original emigrant road, beginning with the Stephens Party in 1844, went around the north side of Donner Lake to the west end of the lake. From there, it is about two miles to the summit. The first mile, or so, doesn't seem particularly difficult, but after that first mile, steep granite barriers, that continue all the way to the summit, seem to make wagon passage impossible. It also seemed that way to Edwin Bryant on Aug. 26, 1846 as he wrote, "Standing at the bottom and looking upwards at the perpendicular, and in some places, impending granite cliffs, the observer, without any further knowledge on the subject, would doubt if man or beast had ever made good passage over them." That statement is still true today.

Modern trail researchers have tried in vain to reconstruct a feasible route over this last mile of trail to the summit. George Stewart probably spent more time than anyone in looking for the route, and this before the underground utility lines were laid down. In *U.S. 40*, he comments as follows:

"Exactly where the emigrants made their crossing is now probably beyond sure determination. The author, working on the history of the Donner Party and also out of mere interest in tracing old trails, has scrambled around the pass on many occasions in the past twenty years, but the record has been so badly obscured by the later work of the builders of highways, railways, and pole-lines that he has been able to discover little. Always he has returned, not only having failed to find actual indication of the route, but also overwhelmed with amazement that wagons could ever have been across the pass anywhere. Presumably they were brought to the level spot to the right of the picture and were taken across to the level spot at the left of the picture [the rocky basin], which would have served as a jumping off place for the top of the pass. In between, it seems impossible that they could have been taken along the boulder-filled stream-course paralleling the present highway, or by the equally boulder-filled ravine spanned by the bridge, also impossible that they could have been hauled up the rough and steep granite slopes. Yet somewhere they went over." To date, no one, to my knowledge, has been able to add to, modify, or discredit Stewart's statement.

More recently, the late Chuck Graydon has mapped a route over the summit, using the Donner Pass route. However, he merely traced the route of the constructed, Dutch Flat Road into the rocky basin lying below the Chinese Wall. In the *Trail of the First Wagons over the Sierra Nevada*, Graydon states that from the lake, the road took the general course of the jeep trail, but "whether the emigrant trail continued up the jeep trail or took some other course has yet to be determined." He, as Stewart before him, failed to find a feasible route into the basin, and only assumed, as others before him, that once in the basin the only way out had to be near the Chinese Wall.

Interestingly, no information has been found to suggest that anyone has been able, or even tried, to hypothesize a feasible route over that entire last mile to the summit, except the default route over the Dutch Flat Road. This investigation attempts to do that.

The Investigation

I. Documentation Search.

Emigrant diaries over this route are rare because of the short period of use and the limited number of emigrants using the trail during that time. Only four first hand accounts were found: Jacob Snyder, 1845 (packing); Edwin Bryant, 1846 (packing); William Taylor, 1846; and Elisha B. Lewis, 1849. The Lewis diary is unusual because he came over Roller Pass, camped early in Summit Valley, and then decided to go find "Brients Pass." Lewis finds the pass and goes all the way down to Truckee Lake (Donner Lake). A number of reminiscences and recollections were used, including those of Moses Schallenberger, Benjamin F. Bonney, David Hudson, Luella Dickenson, and William B. Ide and his daughter, Sarah. The most useful was probably that of the Ides, which was based partly on an interview in 1849, only four years after the event.

II. Document Analysis.

An estimation of the total number of wagons using this route was made, as that would affect the amount of physical evidence that could be expected to be found. The total number of emigrant wagons using this pass is estimated to be only 63. That includes 11 in the Stephens party 1844/45, 50 (per Stewart) in 1845, and only two in 1846 (the Craig and Stanley party; William Taylor diarist). The next documented wagon train behind the Craig/Stanley party was that of Joseph Aram. He opened Roller Pass around the middle of September, 1846.

After arriving at the west side of the lake, it took two days, including road building, for wagon to travel the two miles to the summit. Most of the time being consumed in the last mile up the granite slopes:

Sarah Ide Healy, 1845 (quoted by Simeon Ide). *It took us a long time to go about 2 miles over our rough new-made road up the mountain. . .*

W. B. Ide, 1845 (Recollections from 1849 interview by Simeon Ide). . . . And at the close of the **second day** after their arrival at the foot of Sierra Nevada, these then well educated mountaineers found their entire retinue of wagons, "goods and chattels" safely landed at the summit-level.

William Taylor, Aug. 28, 1846. *travelled 1 mile up the worst mountain that wagons ever crossed sevier frost Tem 28*

[Aug.] 29 *got up the mts. Distance 2 miles* [Two days. Presumable, two miles from lake.]

The diaries give us some indication of the kind of road to expect:

Jacob R. Snyder, [Sept.] 21. . . . *At this lake we commence ascending the rugged side of this mountain. It is composed of masses of granite. In many places large detached pieces are thrown in the way, rendering it almost impossible for horses to get a foothold, & in many others it is so smooth that it is as bad for the animals as the more rugged parts. We were obliged to lead our horses until we arrived at the summit.*

James Clyman, May 1, 1846 (eastbound). *Got under way early the [snow] was hard Enough to bear up handsomely some 2 miles when we arived at the summit of the, mountain (the snow being from 3 to 8 feet deep) here we commenced the desent over steep Pricipices rough granite Rock covered in many places through the chasms with snow 15 or 20 feet deep and luckily for us we lost no horses allthough we had to force them down several perpendicular cliffs afer about 3 hours unpacking and repacking we succeeded in clearing the steepest pitches of the whole length of which is not one mile*

Bryant's pack train was first over the summit in 1846. This is after a wagon road, of sorts, had been constructed in 1845. He described the last mile of the road as:
we commenced the steep ascent, leaping our animals from crag to crag, and climbing in places nearly perpendicular precipices of smooth granite rocks

David Hudson also gives us some insight in his letter to H. H. Bancroft in 1872. He was with the loose group of wagon parties guided by Caleb Greenwood in 1845. Not finding a road when they arrived at the base, Hudson was with some of the men that went up the mountain to look for a way up:

When we reached Sierra Nevada mountains they looked terrible. There was no sign of any road or trail. I went up the mountain with others to look out the best way. and we all pronounced it impassable for wagons. But before we got back some of the wagons had passed some of the places we had considered impassable.

From the above descriptions, we can get some ideas, or general impressions, of the road. First, it is not an obvious route or Hudson's group would not have decided there was no way to get wagons to the summit. This would tend to rule out the obvious routes up the ravines leading under the Donner Summit bridge and along the Dutch Flat Road. George Stewart arrived at this conclusion also. The other common theme in these diaries, and confirmed in other documents, is that the road would come to vertical cliffs ("pitches" or "perpendicular precipices") at numerous places in the road. Between these cliffs, the road allowed Clyman to repack his animals and move on to the next "pitch," while other documents show animals drew the wagons between the cliffs. This indicates that some type of open benches, although steeply inclined (The elevation gain was over 800 feet in that last mile), were found. The general impression, then, is that at least part of the road is like some sort of a stepladder, or somewhat level for a ways, then a step upward. Again, not like travel up either of the two rocky ravines leading to the summit.

Of particular interest is the height of these vertical cliffs encountered. The diaries and recollections help here:

Moses Schallenberger, recollections. *When about half way up the mountain they came to a vertical rock about ten feet high.*

David Hudson, letter. . . . *we came to benches of rocks six and eight feet, straight up and down*
Elisha Lewis, diary, 1849. *there being some place 8 ft perpendicular where rock had been rolled in to fill up making a passway for the waggons wheels*

Schallenberger's estimate, made later in life, of ten feet is the highest. Lewis's estimate (the only detached observer and only diary entry), which agrees with Hudson, should be considered the most accurate. The highest cliff encountered, then, was under 10 feet and probably closer to eight feet. Schallenberger also tells us this highest bench was about half way up the mountain. Interestingly, Lewis notes that there was rocks piled up along the base of the cliff where the wagons were pulled up. This was part of the road constructed by William Ide.

The next issue is, how did they get the wagons up a route that was "impassable?" It has been depicted by artists and writers, including this writer, that, on encountering these vertical cliffs, the wagons were emptied, disassembled and, using animals, hoisted up by ropes and pulleys to the next level. The wagons were then reassembled moved to the next level and the process repeated. The emigrant recollections and diaries, like Lewis's, tell a slightly different story. [See appendix I

for more on disassembling the wagons.] The Bonney's were the first of the wagon parties guided by Caleb Greenwood to arrive at the west end of Donner Lake in 1845. Finding no road, they waited until Greenwood and the rest of the wagons came up.

Sarah Ide Healy tells what happened then:

*At night we camped at the foot of the rocky mountain— the Sierra Nevada: and were told by the Pilot that we would have to **take our wagons to pieces**, and haul them up with ropes. Father proposed to build a bridge, or sort of inclined railroad up the steep ascent, and over the rocks, but few of his companions would listen to any such scheme. So he went to work with the men and fixed the road.*

William Ide's biographer, Simeon Ide provides some detail on this road building:

Mr. Ide found on the line of the ascent several abrupt pitches, between which there were comparative level spaces, for several rods distance, where the team might stand to draw up at least an empty wagon. Accordingly, he went to work, with as many of the men as he could induce, by mild means, to assist him— removing rocks, trees, etc. and grading a path 6 or 7 feet wide, up the several steep pitches and levels to the summit.

The several abrupt pitches with comparative level spots between again discounts travel up either of the two ravines, and confirms more of a step ladder approach to the summit. William then describes to Simeon the method by which they moved the wagons up. Note: the wheels are still attached:

*The next thing for them to do was to get a team of 5 or 6 yoke of cattle up onto the first inclined grade or semi-level. This was a tedious process. **The first pitch was longer and more abrupt than any of the others.** I think Mr. Ide told me they had to take one ox at a time, and by the help of men, with ropes assist him up the first steep grade. After having, by this process, their ox-team of 5 or 6 yoke in order, on the first "level" (as we call it) they then, by the use of ropes and chains, attach a wagon to it, haul it up one "hitch," then block the wheels, "back" down the team, take another hitch and another start forward— and they thus continue the operation till the wagon is on the first "inclined grade." It was then, by a similar, but less tedious process, drawn up over the remaining steppes or "pitches," to the level plain above— and the same operation was repeated with all their wagons.*

Lewis's description of seeing the rocks used to draw the wagons up, the method of blocking the wheel after one "hitch," the use of the terms, "inclined railroad" and "inclined grade," all make it obvious that the wagons were not disassembled in order to be moved to the next level. The wagons were emptied right enough, which makes it less likely that any physical evidence can be found of their passage. David Hudson provides even more detail on the methods of negotiating the cliffs and another way of providing an incline up the slope:

when we came to benches of rocks six and eight feet, straight up and down we would unyoke our oxen, drive them round to some low place, get them above the bench yoke up the oxen. In the mean time some of us would cut some long poles strong enough to bear up the wagons and lay them up on the rocks. Then take enough chains to reach back to the wagons, hitch to the end of the tounge, and pull the wagon up, in this way we reached the top of the mountain.

Besides the vertical cliffs and large rocks in the road, another section of the road was over a smooth granite surface. Sarah Ide Healy:

It took us a long time to go about 2 miles over our rough, new-made road up the mountain, over

the rough rocks, in some places, and so smooth in others, that the oxen would slip and fall on their knees: the blood from their feet and knees staining the rocks they passed over.

We now have descriptions of the type of trail, or more properly a route, to look for, but no precise landmarks to mark the location of any portion of the route. However, two diaries give us clues as to the physical location of the summit, or pass:

Edwin Bryant, Aug. 26, 1846: *After congratulating ourselves upon the safe achievement of our morning feat, and breathing our mules a few minutes, we proceeded on our journey. A mile brought us to a small dimple on the top of the mountain, in the centre of which is a miniature lake, surrounded by green grass. It was some time before we could determine our course down the Sierra on the western side. The emigrant wagon-trail was here entirely effaced. Around the small lake we saw the traces of encampments; but beyond it, in no direction, could we discover any signs that man had ever passed. . . . we returned to the lake, and found that our party had all left it. . . . Searching about, we ascertained, by the fresh trail of our party, that they had left the lake on the right hand, over a small rocky elevation; on the other side of which, we could discover the indentations of wagon-wheels made last year.*

From Bryant, we find that (1) the pass is about one mile from Lake Mary (the small dimple) (2) there are no wagon tracks around the lake (3) wagon tracks are found on the other side of a rocky elevation lying on the right (north) of the lake.

Elisha B. Lewis, Sept. 18, 1849. *At noon I left camp in company with several of our men to find Brients Pass which is distance from the pass which we came over 2 miles North . . .*

Lewis came over Roller Pass, which is about 1.4 miles south of Donner Pass, and was camped in Summit Valley. On his way up the mountain, east, to "Brients Pass," he was in clear view of Roller Pass, Donner Pass, and an unnamed pass about ½ mile north of Donner Pass when he made his estimate. This unnamed pass is about 1.9 to 2 miles north of Roller Pass, amazingly close to his estimate of 2 miles.

Finally, a bit more information can be gleaned from the documentation. According to William Ide, "The first pitch was longer and more abrupt than any of the others." From Moses Schallenberger's recollections, this first pitch, or his "vertical rock," was about half-way up the mountain. If Schallenberger meant half-way up from the beginning of the steep ascent, or the last mile up the summit, then we can expect a number of these "pitches" in the last half-mile of the ascent and none in the first half-mile of ascent. Further, when these "pitches," were encountered, they were spaced relatively close together with level ground between, or as Ide phrased it: "*comparative level spaces, for several rods distance.*"

III. Physical Reconnaissance of the Summit Area.

A. Dutch Flat Road.

As it is commonly assumed that the emigrants crossed the summit over Donner Pass, near, or on, the path of the Dutch Flat Road (DFR), a feasibility search was made here first. Descending from near Lake Mary, this route seems doable until the roadbed of the Central Pacific Railroad is reached. There is a rocky basin lying over a hundred feet below the CP tracks, seemingly enclosed by steep cliffs all around. The DFR passed through this basin and came up on a road constructed along the face of the cliff to the level of the CP tracks. Emigrant wagons could not travel this

route. To the east, near what is called the Chinese Wall, is the remains of an old county wagon road constructed in the 1870's. If it is assumed that somehow emigrant wagons found their way into the basin below, then this is the only way out. Besides climbing up an inclined granite slope for some hundreds of yards with wagons, the last barrier would be a vertical rock over 8 feet high. This route out of the basin and over the summit is questionable. No wonder Stewart was "overwhelmed with amazement" that they got wagons across Donner Pass. The main problem with this basin and a possible way out, though, is that it simply doesn't fit the emigrant descriptions of their last half-mile to the summit; i.e., no succession of six foot, or less, of vertical cliffs with a relatively level road in between.

Continuing downhill, past the basin, the DFR runs into more serious problems as far as being a candidate for a feasible emigrant route. Around one curve, the inside rock has been blasted away and the roadway underneath filled in to make barely enough room for a wagon to pass. There is no indication that there was a ledge wide enough for a wagon before the fill. However, the coupe de grâce to this being a feasible emigrant wagon road is a box canyon the road passes over. It is over 15 feet deep with vertical sides and it ends in a steep vertical face. There is no way around this canyon. Wagons would have had to be let down with ropes and pulled up the same way on the other side. The road builders filled in building a rock wall, similar to the Chinese Wall, and the DFR passes over this wall. Further down, along the creek leading to Donner Lake, there are still more barriers to a wagon road, unless it was constructed.

Besides the obvious physical problems in bringing wagons along the route of the DFR before the road was constructed, this entire route doesn't fit the emigrant descriptions. This is a route with a more gradual grade, winding around hillsides. Discounting the filled-in ravines and the possible, miracle ledges, there is no succession of "several abrupt pitches, between which there were comparative level spaces, for several rods distance," nor can be seen any place where Bryant's animals were forced to leap from "crag to crag." It is no wonder that George Stewart never bothered to mention the fact that emigrant wagons could not have traveled over the path of the DFR leading into the rocky basin. It was obvious.

B. The Ravines.

The next possible route for wagons would be directly up either of the two ravines leading into the basin. One of which is the stream paralleling the DFR, and the other is the ravine that runs under the Donner Summit Bridge to enter the rocky basin. In surveying these routes, one can only agree with George Stewart again: "it seems impossible that they could have been taken along the boulder-filled stream-course paralleling the present highway, or by the equally boulder-filled ravine spanned by the bridge."

C. Another Route, Another Pass.

It was speculated in the document analysis, above, that the route may not have been an obvious one, even then. Probably more so today. In the general reconnaissance of the area two things were noted:

(a) There are a number of fissures, or benches, in the otherwise smooth granite surface that are wide enough for wagons to pass through. There is usually trees, or smaller vegetation growing in these benches. Although some of these benches terminate abruptly, or are otherwise incompatible

with wagon travel, desperate emigrants may have found a way to construct a trail using combinations of these benches. The Ide's spoke of road building and removing trees, this would be compatible with the bench concept.

(b) Although Donner Pass is the lowest and most obvious, there is another pass visible as one ascends the summit. To reach this pass, wagons would bypass the rocky basin and pass to the north of the Donner Summit Bridge. This would solve the problem of how did they get wagons into the basin. Simple, they didn't! This pass also resolves the distance problems found in the Bryant and Lewis diaries. The summit of this pass is about one mile from Lake Mary, just as Bryant indicated. It is about 1.9 miles north of Roller Pass, just as Lewis indicated. Wagons descending from this summit would not go by Lake Mary. They would just follow down the ravine, or valley, to Summit Valley. This would explain why Bryant did not find wagon tracks near Lake Mary, but did find them over the ridge separating Lake Mary from this valley.

Some time was spent in trying to determine if a feasible wagon route could be found, first, from the level area along old highway 40, just east of the bridge, up to the second pass, and then from the base of the steep granite barrier to tie in to the level area along the highway. Because of the limited wagon travel, and because of numerous fruitless searches such as those by Stewart, it was not anticipated that any physical evidence of emigrant wagon use would be found. It was not. However, a feasible, or doable, route was found that fit the emigrant descriptions in almost all cases.

IV. The Route Defined.

(a) The Bottom Half. Beginning at the base of the granite cliffs, an inclined bench was found, with easy wagon access, and adequate for wagon travel with some bushes and trees removed. This bench was in a southwest/northeast direction and continued on, with some terrain changes, to intersect the path of the DFR. This route continued along the DFR for a short distance, then turned north, then more westerly to cross the path of old highway 40, near the private house. The area along the DFR appeared wide enough before construction to support wagon traffic. Before reaching the highway, a smooth granite surface was crossed. Ordinarily, this stretch would not be considered a feasible wagon road, but this was no ordinary wagon road. However, this section did fit Sara Ide Healy's description of a surface, "so smooth in others, that the oxen would slip and fall on their knees: the blood from their feet and knees staining the rocks they passed over."

(b) Schallenberger's Vertical Rock. One landmark spoken of in most of the accounts was the first vertical cliff, or pitch. This was a natural barrier, about eight feet high, and, if on the right trail, should still be found today. Schallenberger placed it at about half-way up the mountain, but was this half-way between the west end of the lake and the summit, or half-way between the beginning of the granite wall and the summit? There was no eight foot vertical cliff at the beginning of the bench, above, so it should be found about half-way from there to the summit, or about where the private home is located. Sure enough, just west of the house is a vertical cliff, about eight feet high. The road must go over that cliff to get on the next level, or go around it through another bench leading north. This other, possible route is blocked by a large boulder. Animals can pass, but not wagons. This appears to be the "rift in the rock" described by Schallenberger as the way they got their animals around to the top of the ledge. Ide described a different way of getting their

animals on top: "they had to take one ox at a time, and by the help of men, with ropes help him [the ox] up the first steep grade." Just to the north edge of the level top, the ledge is broken and a jumble of rocks piled up at the base. This would meet Ide's description of how he got animals up to the top of the cliff.

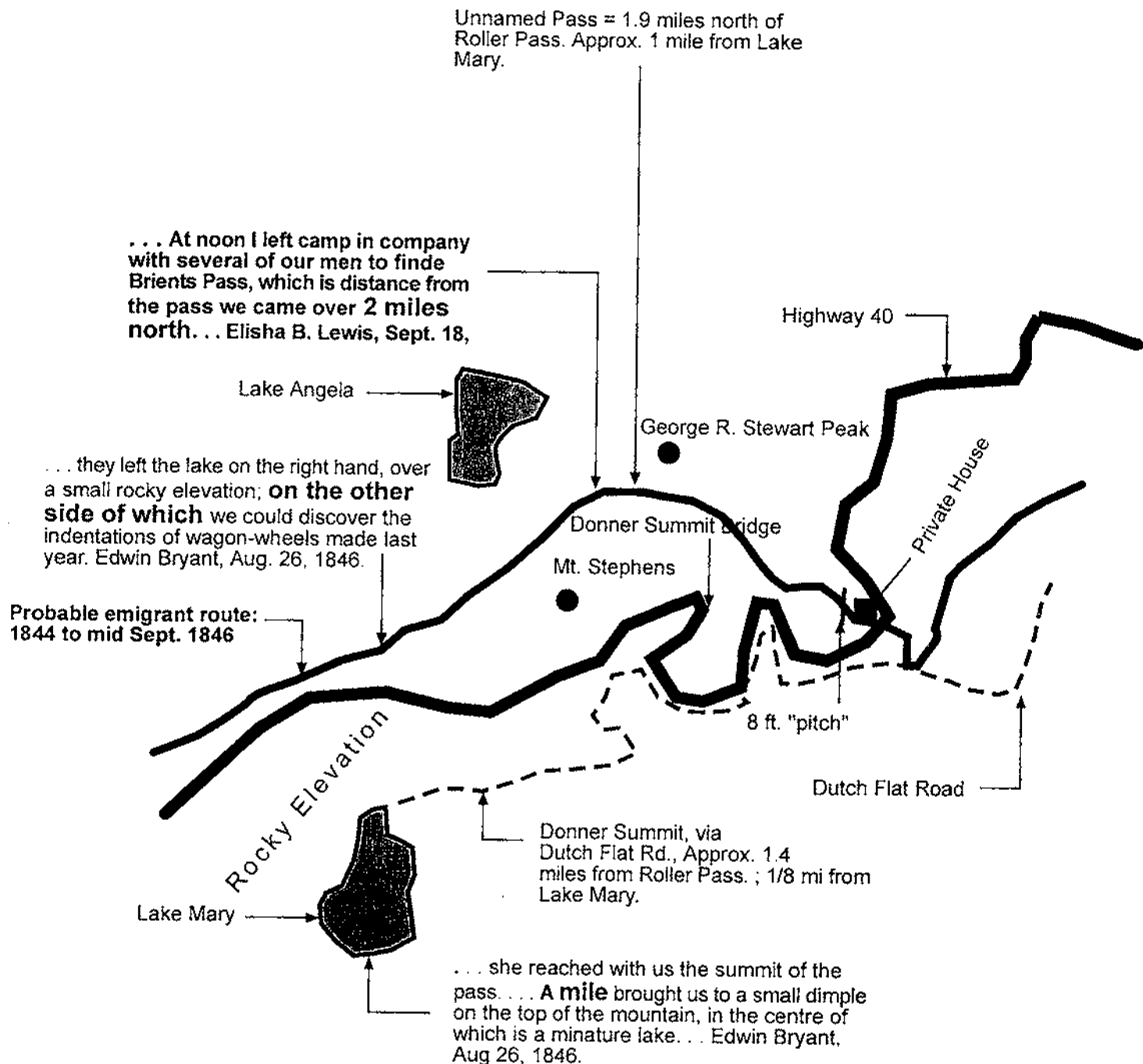
(c) The Last Half. Instead of entering the rocky basin, the emigrants continued to the northwest, around the present Donner Summit Bridge, aiming for the second, and higher, pass ahead. The final ascent is equally, if not more difficult, but, again fits emigrant descriptions of the trail. The successive, though smaller, cliffs with a "few rods of level ground" in between are found here. One can imagine Bryant's mules leaping from lower to higher levels here, or from "craig to craig," and the wagons, with poles or rocks underneath, being pulled up by oxen to the next level, while men lift up the wheels. This is no wagon road, but it is a doable route for desperate emigrants.

Conclusions

In prior work on the Truckee Trail, it has been found that one should find a trail that fits the emigrant descriptions, rather than ignoring some passages, and forcing, or reinterpreting, others to fit a preconceived notion of the trails location. Hence, in considering the alternatives and the vivid descriptions given by the emigrants, the route shown on the map, and described above, is, in my opinion the route taken by the emigrants over the Sierra summit. Although no physical trail evidence remains, all significant trail descriptions left by the emigrants that actually crossed here can be found along sections of this route. Bryant's estimate of the distant from the summit to Lake Mary, with independent confirmation by Lewis of the pass location, is not easily explained away. Conversely, no evidence was found to even suggest emigrants traveled over the pass we call Donner Pass. It was all negative; No wagon traces around Lake Mary; No way of getting into the rocky basin below the Chinese Wall; Questionable way of getting out of the rocky basin; No fit to many emigrant descriptions; No fit to the Bryant and Lewis locations. It seems appropriate that George R. Stewart Peak and Mt. Stephens both look down on the emigrants' final ascent on the summit. It is also ironic, or perhaps poetic justice, that the pass named in honor of George Donner, a questionable leader that some think should not have been so honored, is the wrong trail. In the end, this may be the proper honor for one noted for taking the wrong trail.

[Note by Don Buck: Believing "Don Wiggins was on the right track with his research for the pass crossing," historian Chris Wray in 2013 located physical evidence of the emigrant trail leading to what has become known as "Stephens Pass," where Trails West has located a "T" rail marker. Wray took numerous photos and GPS readings of the physical evidence which appear in his *Emigrant Road Building Evidence on Donner Pass* (2013).]

Rough Sketch of probable emigrant route over Sierra Nevada summit



Appendix I

If the wagons were not disassembled, why the perception?

Why the common perception that wagons had to be disassembled and hauled up to the summit? William Ide explicitly states they would "block the wheels," when pulling the wagons up the first vertical cliff, and this would be the highest cliff they had to cross. Therefore, the wagons, in 1845, were not disassembled. If the wagons were not "taken apart," why the widespread misinformation that they were? The most likely source is a reminiscence by Benjamin Franklin Bonney, written by Fred Lockley:

*After a day's traveling, we came to a rim rock ledge where there was no chance to drive up, so the wagons were **taken to pieces** and hoisted to the top of the rim rock with ropes. The wagons were put together again, reloaded, and the oxen which had been led through a narrow crevice in the rim rock, were hitched up and we went on. Once again in the Sierras we came to a rim rock that could not be mounted, and repeated the process of hoisting the wagons up. It took us four days to reach the summit of the mountains.*

Both Sarah Ide and her father William also remembers that Greenwood told everyone that the wagons would have to be "taken to pieces" and hauled up with ropes, the same words Bonney used. Bonney was 7 years old at the time and may just remember the words Greenwood used, not what actually happened. It seems significant that only young Bonney, too young for the laborious task of helping to lift wagons over the rocks, was the only emigrant that claimed the wagons were taken to pieces. All that were involved in the actual labor claimed otherwise. The Ide's were adamant that they did not follow Greenwood's advice. Lewis saw their inclined ramps in 1849. Why would others prefer to take their wagons apart at each cliff rather than use the ramps, or cut poles as Hudson did?

By his use of those words, Greenwood implies that the 1844 party disassembled their wagons. But, Schallenberger has another version. After reaching the first cliff and finding a rift in the rocks, he writes:

*There the yokes were replaced, chains were **fastened to the tongues of the wagons**, and carried to the top of the rock, where the cattle were hitched to them. Then the **men lifted the wagons**, while the cattle pulled at the chains, and by this ingenious device the vehicles were all, one by one, got across the barrier.*

Using the wagon tongue to haul up the wagons means the running gear was still attached. Instead of using poles, or piles of rocks, to guide the wagons up the cliff as the 1845 emigrants did, they used brute force and lifted the wagons up while the animals pulled on the wagon tongue.

The only incident found of emigrants even partially disassembling wagons was in a disjointed, second source account by Luella Dickenson. She states that the G. D. Dickenson wagon train, 1846, removed the wagon wheels to cross the summit. She mixes up facts through out the account and will not be analyzed here, but all indications are that the party crossed over Roller Pass.

Appendix II The Route Around the Lake

Although the source is unknown, speculation has been heard that the original wagon road was not around the north side of Donner Lake. This may be due to the fact that at certain points along the north side it would appear that a road along the shore may have been too sidling for wagons.

A review of the documentation reveals that this was, indeed, the case, with the road being in the lake, itself, part of the way; however, Bryant's journal is explicit in placing the road around the north side of the lake:

Edwin Bryant, Aug. 25, 1846. *We experienced considerable difficulty in making our way round the northeastern side of the lake, the steep side of the mountain being in many places so boggy that our mules sunk to their bellies in the mire.*

Besides Bryant's pack mules, wagons also were forced to enter the lake:

Sarah Ide Healy, 1845, (quoted by Simeon Ide in W. B. Ide's biography. Sara was 18.). . . . *we came to Truckee Lake: then, after traveling along the Lake— some of the way being obliged to drive our wagon on the edge of the Lake; some of the time the water coming almost up to our feet— keeping the women in constant dread of being drowned. It was a fearful time for the timid female passengers, both young and old.*

As 1849 diaries also point to the north side as being the "old" wagon road, and with no evidence to the contrary, it is concluded that speculation of another route around the lake is just that.

DEW:1/98