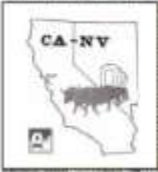


# Trail Talk

*A Newsletter of the California-Nevada Chapter  
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## Emigrant Roads of Truckee Canyon by David Fullerton

Between the Pah Rah Range to the north and the Virginia Range to the south lies the Truckee Canyon. The Truckee River flows approximately 30 miles through this sometimes rugged canyon from the modern city of Sparks on the west to the modern town of Wadsworth on the east. From Wadsworth the Truckee River turns to the north and flows another 20 miles into Pyramid Lake.<sup>1</sup> The topography is shown in Figure 1.

The next challenge was Truckee Canyon. Passage through this canyon presented considerable difficulties to the emigrants because steep ridges intruded onto the Truckee River, forcing the trail first to one side of the river and then to the other.



Figure 1. Truckee Canyon

Emigrants taking the Truckee Trail to California first had to cross the dreaded 40 Mile Desert from the Humboldt Sink to the Truckee River near modern Wadsworth. The next challenge was Truckee Canyon. Passage through this canyon presented considerable difficulties to the emigrants because steep ridges intruded onto the Truckee River, forcing the trail first to one side of the river and then to the other. Those on horses, mules or on foot did not have great difficulties in the canyon, but the steep rocky terrain on the sides of the river was a great problem for emigrants with wagons. There were several possible solutions to the problems posed by Truckee Canyon:

- Avoid the canyon completely and head south 25 miles to the Carson Trail.
- Ford the river back and forth 22 times as ridges blocked first one side, then the other. This was the original route and it remained attractive through the 1850s during dry conditions.
- Bypass rocky outcrops along the river by ascending north into the mountains and then descending back to the river beyond the obstruction. Bypasses were developed from 1850 to 1852 that greatly reduced the risks associated with fording in wet conditions.
- Ford the river back and forth 22 times as ridges blocked first one side, then the other. This was the original route and it remained attractive through the 1850s during dry conditions.
- Bypass rocky outcrops along the river by ascending north into the mountains and then descending back to the river beyond the obstruction. Bypasses were developed from 1850 to 1852 that greatly reduced the risks associated with fording in wet conditions.

The evolution of the Truckee Canyon roads nicely illustrates the complex calculus facing emigrants and how that calculus could flip from year to year and season to season.

<sup>1</sup>I define the Truckee Canyon Road somewhat loosely as the 30-mile section of the Truckee Trail that starts with the first ford of the Truckee River at Wadsworth (the end of the 40 Mile Desert) and ends with passage out of the canyon and beyond Steamboat Creek into what is now Sparks, Nevada. The first three miles from Wadsworth are not formally part of the canyon and are flat, wide and sandy.

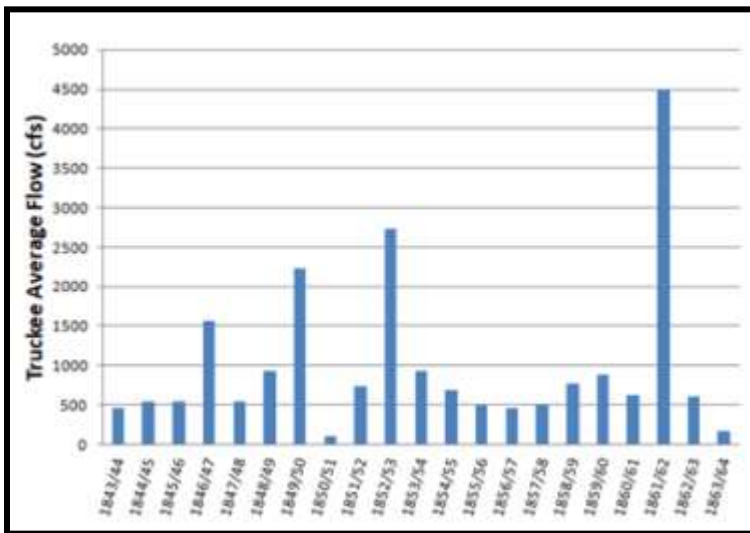


Figure 2. Estimated average Truckee River flow by water year (October 1 – September 30).

### The Hydrology of the Truckee River

Figure 2 is a graph of estimated average annual Truckee River runoff from 1843-44 through 1863-64 in average cubic feet per second (cfs). Of course, winter and spring flow each year would have been much higher than the average while summer fall flow would have been lower. But the graph is a good index of relative flows in the Truckee River and thus of the difficulty emigrants would have had in fording in any given season of any given year.

The estimated Truckee River runoff values are very suggestive. The winters of 1846-47, 1849-50, 1852-53 and 1861-62 were very wet while 1850-51 and 1863-64 were very dry. Other years fell in between. An early winter in 1846-47, of course, is what trapped the Donner Party. Interestingly, 1849, which is commonly thought to be a very dry year, was wetter than the median year.<sup>2</sup>

### The Topography of Truckee Canyon

Moving west from Wadsworth, there are a few miles of sandy soil to just beyond the vicinity of the modern rest stop on Highway 80. West of the rest stop the terrain is very rugged for 10 or 11 miles to just before the USA Parkway (see Figure 1). Ridges running north and south come down to the river on either side. These ridges combined with natural meanders in the Truckee River cause the bottomland with its grass and good surface to shift from one side of the river to the other. Fords are necessary for those wishing to travel along the river. Charles Parke explained the problem well:

Charles Parke, August 25, 1849 *One would suppose this was a very crooked river, on account of having to cross it 7 times in 9 miles, but such is not the case. The trouble is the bluffs butt out against the stream every now and then, compelling us to cross over.*

After the USA Parkway, Truckee Canyon widens out for three or four miles into what was once a lush meadow, called "Little Meadow" by many emigrants. Some of the meadow remains and some has been converted to industrial use. The Truckee River itself has shifted its course and has been rerouted in places here. It is thus difficult to reconstruct what this area would have looked like originally. Little Meadow was a popular place to camp and recruit the animals.

In the 12 miles from Little Meadow to the west end of Truckee Canyon the terrain was less steep along the river except for a few quite difficult ridges. But even so, some eight fords were required to pass through the remainder of Truckee Canyon.

Finally, continuing west out of the narrow canyon was Truckee Meadows, a lush and sometimes mucky wetland drained by Steamboat Creek. Today we can have only a general idea of what the original was like because the Truckee River was lowered in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in order to reduce flooding within the marshland. During wet seasons Steamboat Creek was uncrossable and emigrants were forced to take a 10-mile detour to the south to bypass the marsh.

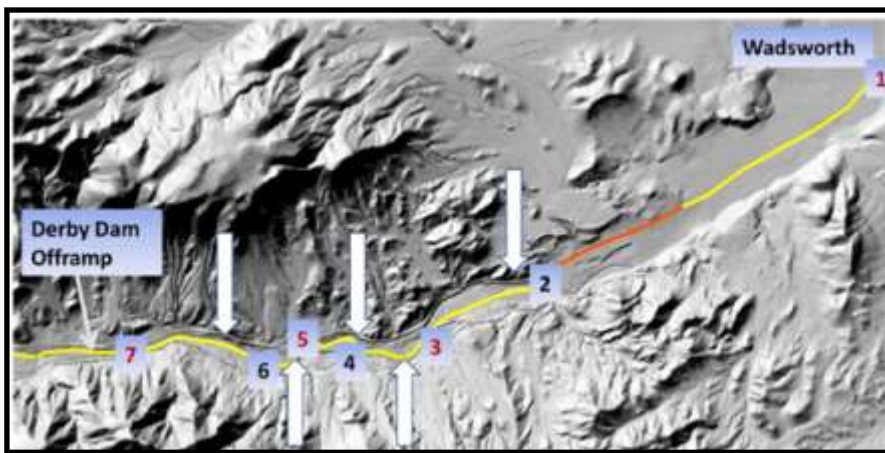


Figure 3. Ford #1 through #7. Wadsworth to the Derby Dam Offramp

The topography of Truckee Canyon along with the approximate locations of the 22 fords is shown in Figures 3 to 5. Red (odd) numbers represent fords from the south side to the north side. Black (even) numbers represent fords from the north side to the south side. Large block arrows show the locations of ridges that forced the road to cross the Truckee River. Yellow lines represent the approximate route. Red lines indicate visible trail. The orange line in Figure 3 is trail that was visible in an aerial photo from 1954, but which has since been destroyed.

<sup>2</sup>Hardman G, Venstrom C. 1941. A 100 year record of Truckee River runoff estimated from changes in levels and volumes of pyramid and Winnemucca Lakes. TRANSACTIONS-AMERICAN GEOPHYSICAL UNION. 22:71-90. See also Victoria M. Harris, Adam Z. Csank, A new 500-year reconstruction of Truckee River streamflow, Dendrochronologia, Volume 79, June 2023. Also, rainfall records measured in Sacramento from 1850 onward correlate well with these flows.

During 1850 and 1852, five bypasses within Truckee Canyon would be developed, reducing the number of fords from 22 to just two. By the mid-1860s even the bypasses had mostly been dispensed with engineered roads cut into the ridges that allowed for travel along the Truckee River right across the ridges.

The remainder of this article will discuss the evolution of the road through Truckee Canyon from 1844 through the early 1860s. The exact route of the road will be discussed in the appendices.

### Early Passage of Truckee Canyon: 1844-1845

The earliest routes through Truckee Canyon can only be guessed at. Moses Schallenberger of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party of 1844 gave a short account of the first emigrant party to pass through Truckee Canyon.<sup>3</sup> His account tells us nothing of their route, however.

In 1845, William Winter passed through Truckee Canyon starting June 1. Winter was traveling east from California on horses and does not mention any fords at all. Although 1845 was relatively dry, Winter was traveling very early and we may suppose he travelled the entire way through the canyon on the south side as did several other diarists in the early years. This would have involved much climbing over ridges along the river. But on horses this would have been infinitely easier than with wagons. Much later in 1845 – around September 17th – Jacob Snyder passed through Truckee Canyon heading to California. Snyder was also packing. However, this late in the season fording would have been relatively easy. Snyder records ten fords on the first day and “many” fords after that. It is likely that Snyder took all 22 of the fords that would become standard in 1849 but we cannot be certain.<sup>4</sup>



Figure 4. Fords #8 through #17. Derby Dam to Patrick.

### Truckee Canyon Road from 1846 through 1847

Many travelers heading back east from California early in 1846 and 1847 continued to take ad hoc trails on horseback because of high water in the Truckee River.

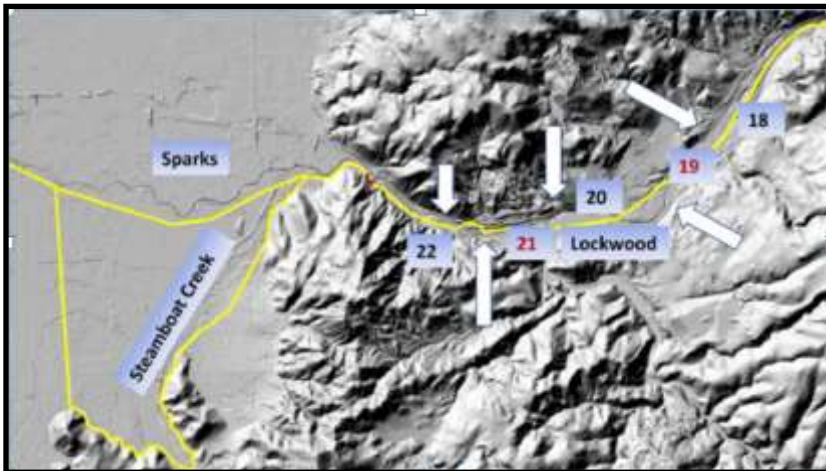


Figure 5. Fords #18 through #22. Patrick to Sparks.  
The Steamboat Creek Bypass is also shown.

James Clyman passed through the canyon heading east on horses from June 6 to June 8, 1846. Though the winter of 1845-46 was relatively dry, we know it was still rather wet this early in the season because Clyman had to make a long detour to get around Steamboat Creek just west of Truckee Canyon. Clyman passed the entire way through the canyon south of the river as William Winter had probably done the preceding year.

In 1847 (after a very wet winter), members of the Mormon Battalion heading east to Great Salt Lake also tried to avoid fording as much as possible. James Pace wrote on September 10, 1847, *we journeyed early[,] travled down the Trucky River shuning every crossing we could as it was vary bad crossing sum of the fords[,] however we suceeded in reaching the last Crossing of the River[,] encamped[.]*

*had good grazing[.]* Unlike Winter and Clyman, Pace appears to have passed through the canyon mostly on the north side and did take a few fords.

However, emigrants on horses or mules or in wagons heading toward California in 1846 and 1847 seem to have established the route that would become the standard route in 1849. This route required 22 fords of the Truckee to cross through the entire canyon. Many of these early diaries are sketchy, but they are consistent with the more detailed diaries of 1849.

<sup>3</sup>Schallenberger, Moses. *The Opening of the California Trail: The Story of the Stevens Party from the reminiscences of Moses Schallenberger as set down for H. H. Bancroft about 1885, edited and expanded by Harace S. Foote in 1888 [1846].* Ed. by George R. Stewart. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1953.

<sup>4</sup>Many of the diaries referenced in this paper are available for download to members of the CANV Chapter of OCTA.

Edwin Bryant started through the canyon on mules on August 22, 1846. Truckee River flows would have dropped considerably compared to when Clyman passed through in June. Bryant describes the canyon in considerable detail.

Edwin Bryant, August 22, 1846. *We travelled at a rapid gait, the trail being good and our spirits buoyant; and at three o'clock, coming to an excellent stamping-ground, with fine grass, water, and wood, we halted, and encamped for the day [probably Little Meadow]. During the day's march we have forded the river about twenty times. This is necessary, in order to avoid the canones, on one side or the other of the narrow valley.* August 23, 1846. *We commenced our day's march about eight o'clock, continuing up the river, the general course of which, as far as we have followed it, is nearly from the southwest to the northeast. Of course, there are many turns and windings which vary from this usual direction of the current of the stream. About twelve o'clock we emerged from the confined limits between the high ranges of mountains, affording us, in many places, room barely sufficient to pass, without leaving the bottom of the river, into a spacious and highly fertile valley, eight or ten miles in diameter [Truckee Meadows].*

We may doubt whether Bryant actually forded 20 times the first day, since the camping ground with fine grass was likely Little Meadow, which required no more than 12 fords to reach in 1849. Bryant does not mention fords the second day but if it took him from 8 AM until noon, then he must have forded quite a few more times. In any case, Bryant is the first diarist to mention large numbers of fords in Truckee Canyon.

David Campbell took two days to pass through Truckee Canyon with wagons around September 5, 1846 and records 25 fords. Nicholas Carriger, with wagons, passed through the canyon from September 12<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> and gives a detailed accounting of the fords, coming up with a total of 22 fords. I give the Carriger account high weight because he does not just rattle off a round number but breaks down the number of fords each day in detail.

Nicholas Carriger, September 12, 1846. *thence up the river crossing the river 5 times [in] 12 miles a sandy road* September 13. *thence up the river 8 miles Crossing it 6 times this day a Very rough road* September 14. *lay by on account of the sickness of Mrs. Wardlaw* September 15. *thence up the river 9 miles this morning... We Crossed the river 4 times and had a very bad road.*

Two weeks later, from September 28-30, 1846 T. H. Jefferson passed through the canyon. Jefferson did not leave an account but was the author of one of the most important maps in American history. His map shows 20 fords through Truckee Canyon, including ten fords on the first day (See Figure 6). Either Jefferson left out two fords or he found a way to avoid two fords used by other diarists.



Figure 6. The Jefferson Map

Chester Ingersoll passed through the canyon around September 14-16, 1847 with wagons and records 22 fords. He gives a very good description of the fords and the geography:

*Truckee river is about the size of ox river, in Illinois, but much more rapid. As you cross the river [the first ford at Wadsworth], there is good grass for about one mile, then 8 miles to good grass, then 10 miles up is good grass; between the 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> crossing, the grass is good; also between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>, and the road not very bad; and between the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>, grass middling good. – This is 24 miles up the river; the river is bordered with ragged hills of volcanic rock. On the 16<sup>th</sup> [of September] we travelled 15 miles and crossed the river the 22d time.*

This diary description is very helpful in determining the location of fords within Truckee Canyon.

I have no Truckee Canyon diaries from 1848.

#### **Truckee Canyon Road in 1849**

In 1849 the number of diaries available to us for Truckee Canyon increases by an order of magnitude as a result of the California Gold Rush. The earliest diary entry I have is by R. B. Laughlin from July 29 and 30. It is very interesting.

R. B. Laughlin, July 29, 1849. *Started at 9 A M encamped at 4 ½ P M. To-day we concluded to take the old road as all the mountaineers that are here are doing so. We are now following Bryants tracks as his Co and 4 or 5 wagons are all that has gone this rout.<sup>5</sup> The other road may be better we are certain of always having grass and water for animals. Crossed the truckee river some 10 or 12 time in some cases it swam our horses. We encamped early today to dry our clothes... July 30 1849. left the road & took a path in order to miss crossing a very bad slough.<sup>6</sup> We went over a swamp 1y [??] miles with grass or rushes as high as the horses and water up to the knees all the time...*

<sup>5</sup>This is the same Edwin Bryant who wrote about passing through Truckee Canyon in 1846 in his book *What I Saw in California*.

<sup>6</sup>This was Steamboat Creek near modern Sparks, NV. Wet conditions forced a long bypass to the south.

The year 1848-49 was not particularly dry (see Figure 2), and Laughlin's diary reflects the difficulties posed by high water. Laughlin and Company decided to take the "old road." This is just the regular Truckee Trail. The alternative was the 1848 Carson road pioneered by the Mormon Battalion that ran from the Carson River to the Truckee River at Wadsworth and thence to the Humboldt Sink.<sup>7</sup> That road might have been "better" because it was safer and had no difficult fords, but the Truckee road guaranteed grass and water for the animals. Other wagons had already headed up the Truckee Canyon without returning. Also the mountaineers (i.e., the experienced travelers) were taking the Truckee. So on balance, weighing difficulty, danger and level of confidence, Laughlin's party decided to stick with the Truckee Trail. If bypasses had been available that would have avoided the more difficult fords, the decision would have been much easier. This entry is a good example of the route selection conundrum faced by emigrants in 1849 and 1850.

We have many diaries from 1849 that describe the road through Truckee Canyon in 1849. A good feel for the road can be gained by reading the account of Augustus Burbank from September 3-5, 1849.

*Sept. 3rd. ... Started on this morning on foot for Sutters, Packed with provisions ... We passed on up the river & at 4 miles we Crossed it [Ford #2], and numerous Crossing Ensued during the days journey. We Camped this Evening at near Sunset on the bank of the river. ... The journey has been over a rough & very rocky road. We Crossed the river 6 times [i.e., camped after Ford #7]. The Crossings are difficult. made So by the loose rock that lay thick in the bed of the river. The valley narrows as we ascended & the road follows the narrow bottoms on the Side of the Stream, whilst the pass is almost a Continual Canyon. The Country is very un-inviting, high mountain Chaines arise on both Sides of the river, and are Covered with brown Sterility & dark volcanic burnt rock. Occasionally a white lime or a ashy Spot is Seen on their Sides as if they had been ventilations for the Subteraneon fires or lava. .... Dist 12 Miles. Sept 4<sup>th</sup>. We Started at 6 Ock. Passed on up the narrow valley. Crossed 5 times and Encamped at 10 O.C.K. A.M. for the remainder of the day [at Little Meadow]. The valley here widens & affords Some good grass. and our Cattle having but little or no feed from the Slough & Sink of the Humbolt River, We determined to give them a good graze here .... The grass was tall & luxuriant. Our journey has been over a rough road & through the Stream. ... The water runs with Such violence at the ripples [where the fords generally are], that man or beast Can hardly keep their feet ... One of our wagon wheels Shed its tire today whilst Crossing a bed of rocks, but no Serious injury was done. Dist. 5 Miles. Sept 5<sup>th</sup>, 1849. We Started at 5 1/2 passed on up the valley & after Sevrel Crossings We nooned near the Stream (grass & Clover good) We passed on and the 22<sup>th</sup> Crossing we found attend with Some difficulty. The road here winds up to the right, passes over Some ledges of loose rock along the Spur of the mountain & desends to the river down a Steep rocky desent. The river is wide here & the bed is full of round & ovaling rock from 6 to 20 inches in diameter, which makes it difficult for a team to pass. Passing on we Soon wound up the mountain Side to the left & desended down an almost pecipitous decent to the valley (the river passes through a Canyon to the right). Passing on we Crossed a Slough [Steamboat Creek] that Comes down through the valley (bad Crossing).*

The 1849 River Road is shown in Figures 3 to 5 above. A more detailed description of the river road is given in Appendix 1.

### **Truckee Canyon Road in 1850**

The 1849 road through Truckee Canyon with its 22 fords plus the Steamboat Creek ford became much less attractive and even dangerous in 1850. If we think of route selection as a balancing act between difficulty, danger and confidence we can understand that high water in the Truckee might have shifted the optimum route away from the river road and into alternative routes – even if those alternative routes had yet to be discovered. The two earliest diarists, perhaps even the first travelers, in 1850 on the Truckee Trail, illustrate the problem posed by high water.

Andrew Woods, July 6, 1850. *Stayed here [modern Wadsworth] till the afternoon of the 6<sup>th</sup> ... Trucky River so high we cannot ford it, some of the boys went up the river some distance to see what the prospect was for getting along up the river without making the crossing The boys belonging with our team concluded the chance of getting along with a team so doubtful that we would not try it So we five with our team thought we would take the chance of striking out for Carsons River and those with the other teams concluded to try Truckee River route; no teams had crossed between Truckee and Carsons Rivers this season but there was an old trail made by teams crossing the year before so we went with our team. [They head south to the Carson River.]*

Joel Cook, July 6, 1850. *Laid in camp all day and recruited ourselves and stock... Here the road crosses the river but the water is so high we intend to look out for a new route. We are the first teams that have come on this route this year. All of the first teams went on the Carson river road, leaving this 2 miles this side of the Sulphur Springs [i.e., at lower Humboldt Sink]. It [the Carson River] is said to be 25 miles south of the place.*

Although these diarists were at the first ford in Wadsworth on the same day, they were not traveling together. Both were in companies that included wagons. Andrew Woods' company sought more information about bypassing the river by sending men upstream. Based on this information and the lack of any known bypass trails they abandoned the Truckee Trail and turned south to the Carson River as R. B. Laughlin had done in 1849.

<sup>7</sup>Other diarists writing before the discovery of Truckee Bypasses also mentioned or took the option of heading south to the Carson from Wadsworth. See Alonzo Winsor, August 13, 1849; John Prichet, August 19, 1849; P. A Athearn, August 20, 1849; Joseph Merrill, August 20, 1849; Joel Cook, July 7, 1850; and others.

By contrast, Cook and company decided to travel through Truckee Canyon, making impromptu bypasses to avoid fords as necessary. Cook and company were successful in passing through the canyon.

Thus, while high water deterred some emigrants in 1850 from passing through Truckee Canyon, others pioneered difficult mountain bypasses. Both sets of emigrants were seeking to avoid fords.

James Evans (August 12<sup>th</sup>) and Warren Hafford (August 18<sup>th</sup>) also appear to have avoided most of the fords in Truckee Canyon by traveling up into the hills. But both were packing and would not have left much of a trail. It is not until August 19-21 that the “standard” trail of 1850 was first described by William Thompson.<sup>8</sup> Thompson took the first seven fords just as other emigrants had from 1846 through 1849. Thereafter, he managed to ford just once more near modern Lockwood, NV at Ford #22. That is, Thompson travelled a new version of the Truckee Canyon Trail that eliminated 14 fords! All later diarists traveling Truckee Canyon in 1850 – and I have about ten such diaries – appear to have taken the same route as Thompson, fording just eight times in total.

We can understand why emigrants continued to take Ford #1 at Wadsworth in 1850. This was an easy ford. The diaries do not complain about any difficulty here, even during wet conditions. Also Ford #22 was necessary because the steepness of the ridge made travel on the north side west of Ford #22 impossible.<sup>9</sup> But why did emigrants continue to take Fords #2 to #7? The answer may lie in the topography of the canyon. From Ford #22 to Ford #7 there is an elevation drop of about 180 feet in 18 miles or 10 feet per mile. From Ford #7 to Ford #2 there is a drop of about 100 feet in 4.5 miles or 22 feet per mile. A steeper gradient meant faster but shallower water which might have been considered safer to ford. Also, there were a number of difficult ridges and ravines running from north to south right across the direction of travel here.<sup>10</sup>

The elimination of 14 fords was accomplished via three separate bypasses. From east to west, I will call them the Lime Bluff Bypass, the Patrick Bypass, and the Mustang Bypass.<sup>11</sup> I define a bypass as starting where emigrants first take a hill trail away from the river road in order to avoid a ford. A bypass ends where the hill road again rejoins or nears the river road such that emigrants could resume travel on the river road if they wanted to.

The Lime Bluff Bypass left the river before Ford #8, just where the Truckee River was about to turn to the east after heading north through the canyon. Today, Lime Bluff is the most pristine of all the Truckee Canyon bypasses. The trail heads west up a narrow canyon which then opens out into a broader canyon. At the top of this ascent the trail crosses a narrow pass where there are heavy lime deposits noted by a number of emigrants. The trail continues west down the other side of the ridge into a broad valley, then turns south over another ridge and back down to the Truckee River in the middle of Little Meadow. Pristine trail is still visible as the trail climbs this second ascent for ¼ mile.<sup>12</sup> All in all, the bypass is about 3.5 miles, approximately the same distance as the river

road. Moreover, the bypass avoids six fords, making this moderately difficult bypass quite attractive. Virtually all diarists from 1850 into the 1860s used the Lime Bluff Bypass, even during dry years. Cyrus Loveland gives a perfect description of the Lime Bluff Bypass on September 7, 1850:

*... we moved on up the river again two miles, then left the river and passed through a narrow crooked hollow between broken mountains, ascended a steep pitch to the top of a ridge, large white rocks on the left, descended to a small valley then up another mountain and down to the river bottom.*



**Figure 7. The Lime Bluff Bypass of 1850. Yellow lines are approximate road. Red lines are visible trail. Orange lines are likely trail under dirt roads. Note the mining operation where the bypass makes its final descent to Little Meadow.**

<sup>8</sup>August 17 ... we Crossed the Desert [from the Humboldt Sink] Crossed Truckie River [Ford #1 at Wadsworth] and encamp August 18 Laid by August 19 traveled 12 miles Crossed the River Six times [Fords #2 - #7]... August 20 traveled 12 miles up truckie River encamp on the River Bank... August 21 traveled 12 miles up truckie River Crossed the River once [Ford #22] ... encamp on a slough [Steamboat Creek].

<sup>9</sup>Ford #22 is just west of Trails West marker T-17.

<sup>10</sup>Even modern vehicles have trouble traversing this mountain section today.

<sup>11</sup>These names are taken from the Trails West Inc. Guide to the Truckee Trail.

The Lime Bluff Bypass is named for thick deposits of lime noted by diarists at the top of the pass. The Patrick Bypass is named for an early railroad siding. The Mustang Bypass is named for the small community of Mustang a few miles downstream of Lockwood.

<sup>12</sup>I found some class one trail on the final slope before the Truckee a few years ago, but it has been destroyed since that time by a mining operation.

The Patrick Bypass was the longest of the bypasses and certainly the easiest. It starts very near where the Lime Bluff Bypass returns to the Truckee River at Little Meadow. The bypass then continues along the north side of the river for about five miles until just past Ford #17, avoiding four fords.<sup>13</sup> The terrain on the north side of the Truckee River is relatively flat in this region with only a single mountain ridge intruding down to the river (between Fords #16 and #17). For this reason, there are virtually no detailed descriptions of it in the diaries. Indeed, it is somewhat surprising that this route was not used earlier than 1850. The Patrick Bypass probably ran near or under modern Highway 80 for much of its length. Virtually all emigrants from 1850 onward took this bypass. See Appendix 2 for more detail about the development and routing of the Lime Bluff and Patrick Bypasses.



Figure 8.  
The Patrick Bypass.

The Mustang Bypass was likely the most difficult of the bypasses discovered in 1850. The bypass began just before Ford #18 with a turn up a dry wash to the vicinity of Highway 80. The road then turned southwest for about a mile and, after passing a striking rock outcrop, turned west up another dry wash. After about a half mile the trail crossed over a divide and came down a steep slope back to the Truckee River. D. B. Andrews has a great entry on August 7, 1852 describing this bypass:

*Starting from camp at a late hour continued up the river on its bottom or valley until 11 o'clock A. M. when the road bore off to the right through an open ravine [climbing toward Highway 80]. In less than a mile came out on to a sage plain road some sandy. Passing over this turning to the right around a large rock [See Figure 9], bore off to the right up rather a steep hill. Descended into an open ravine with exceedingly stony road. Passing through this at its western extremity arose a hill and turned to the left. Descended to the river over a very uneven, steep & stony road to the bottom land of the river. In less than a mile came out on to a sage plain road some sandy. Passing over this turning to the right around a large rock [See Figure 9], bore off to the right up rather a steep hill. Descended into an open ravine with exceedingly stony road. Passing through this at its western extremity arose a hill and turned to the left. Descended to the river over a very uneven, steep & stony road to the bottom land of the river.*



Figure 9. The "large rock" mentioned by D. B. Andrews

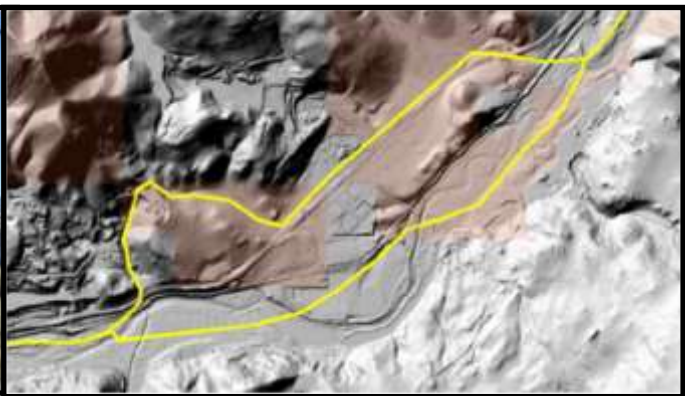


Figure 10. Mustang Bypass

The Mustang Bypass was about 3.5 miles long and avoided two fords. Much of the terrain where the bypass ran has been destroyed by mining operations or more modern roads. Appendix 3 gives more detailed descriptions of the Lime Bluff, Patrick, and Mustang Bypasses.

<sup>13</sup>It is possible that the Patrick Bypass rejoined the river road after Ford #15 and diverged again before Ford #16. If so, the Patrick Bypass is really two short bypasses. I am combining the entire section for convenience.

## Truckee Canyon Road in 1852

I have no diary accounts of travel in Truckee Canyon during 1851. There were few travelers that year and in any case the year was exceptionally dry. However, new changes to the trail had occurred by early 1852. In that year two additional bypasses were added – the Gilpin and the Derby Bypasses. These bypasses eliminated the need for Fords #2 through #7. The earliest indication that these two bypasses were in use was on July 20, 1852 when David Woodman traversed this section without mentioning any fords. However, the first detailed description of the Gilpin and Derby Bypasses was by D. B. Andrews on August 6, 1852.

*...passed up the valley [from Ford #1] over some sand road for near two miles when rising a hill [starting Gilpin Bypass] continued to pass over hills, around ravines & through them, the road being very winding and stony. In about 3 ½ miles the road descends to the river [completing Gilpin Bypass]. Passing along a very short distance again passed over stony hills and again approaches the river [Derby Bypass]. At this point there is some grass...*

Figure 11 shows the Gilpin Bypass. The red segments show visible trail. The orange segments show trail that has had some modern use. The yellow segments are approximate.

Gilpin avoided four fords without an enormous increase in distance or difficulty. Most emigrants took the Gilpin Bypass after it was opened, though the river road tended to come back into use during dry conditions.

The route of this bypass is well known. The Gilpin Bypass remained part of the ultimate road from the 1860s and shows up in the General Land Office (GLO) plat from 1865. What we see on the ground may be from that era. It is a bit surprising that this bypass was not discovered in 1850 when the water was very high.

The Derby Bypass left the river just a few hundred yards west of the terminus of the Gilpin Bypass and avoided Fords #6 and #7. The exact route of this bypass is not totally certain. However, several diaries give enough detail about the bypass that, together with knowledge of the topography, we can make a good guess about the route. The Derby Bypass actually appears to have climbed the hills north of the Truckee, returned back to Truckee, then climbed back into the hills before finally returning to the river road near the modern Derby Dam offramp. We may reasonably ask why the emigrants didn't simply start up the Gilpin Bypass before Ford #2 then stay in the mountains until the final descent after Ford #7. The reason is found in the topography. The north side of the Truckee River from Fords #2 to #7 is cut by a series of sharp ridges that are essentially impassable. Thus, the trail must yo-yo up and down, climbing to avoid ridges intruding on the river but then descending to avoid impassible ravines in the hills (Figure 12). It is no surprise that the Derby Bypass was not discovered until 1852.



Figure 11. The Gilpin Bypass



Figure 12. The Derby Bypass.

See Appendix 3 for more detail on the Gilpin and Derby Bypasses.

### Truckee Canyon Road 1853-1865

Trail selection by the emigrants in the years 1853 to 1859 did not follow a strict pattern. Some emigrants took all the bypasses; some took many or all of the fords. To the extent there was a pattern, it seems to have been driven by the wet

<sup>14</sup>The Gilpin Bypass is named for a railroad siding near the bypass. The Derby Bypass is named for a dam on the Truckee River just below the bypass. The Gilpin Bypass was the subject of an article by Jon Nowlin and myself in Trail Talk, Number 119, Fall 2023.

## Truckee Canyon Road 1853-1865

Trail selection by the emigrants in the years 1853 to 1859 did not follow a strict pattern. Some emigrants took all the bypasses; some took many or all of the fords. To the extent there was a pattern, it seems to have been driven by the wetness of the year and the season. The mid- to late-1850s were very dry so the fords were frequently used.

I have no diary descriptions of Truckee Canyon after 1859 until the Joseph Kennedy and James Yager diaries of 1863 and the George Harter and David Leppo diaries of 1864. Additional improvements had been made to the trail by 1863. The clearest change was an improvement to the Mustang Bypass. The original Mustang Bypass eliminated Fords #18 through #21, but at the cost of a difficult and rocky hill section north of modern Highway 80. What I call "Partial Mustang" started out the same as the Mustang Bypass, but instead of turning north up the dry wash north of Highway 80, it headed southwest down to the Truckee River and then along the river at the base of a steep bluff across the river from modern Lockwood. Yager calls this a "graded" road and it must have been engineered to eliminate sidling. Partial Mustang thus enjoyed the best of both worlds – no fords and an easy bypass. Figure 13 shows the approximate path of Partial Mustang. A strong swale (marked in red) still exists along this pathway and can be seen in aerial photographs from 1954 to the present and in lidar. Field inspection and metal detection would be needed to confirm whether this swale was the road taken by Yager or is more modern.

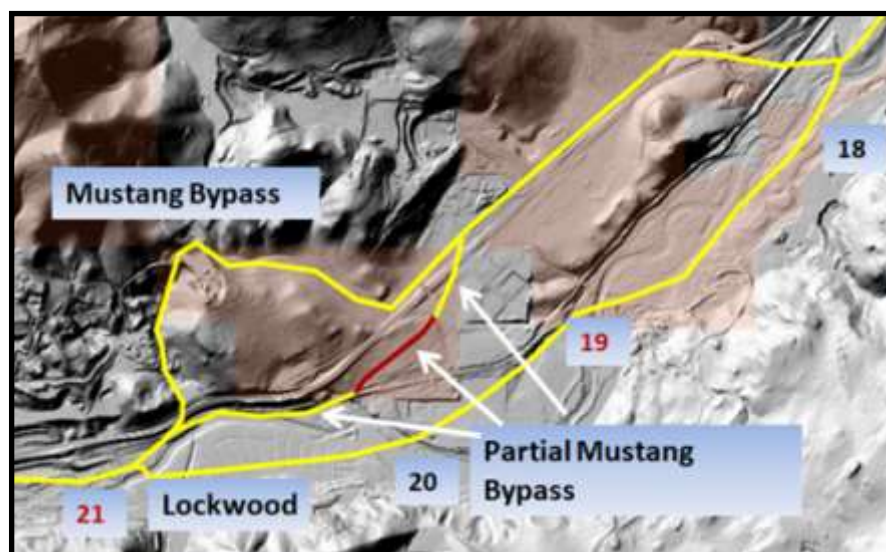


Figure 13: Mustang Bypasses

James Yager, September 1, 1863. *Camp On A Sand Bar Evening. Leaving noon camp we continued up the river one mile to a ranch, three more to another ranch, then turning up the hill to the right, leaving the river, we entered a canyon [i.e., begins Mustang Bypass]; two miles more, and descending a graded road down a hill, found us on the river again [i.e., across from the modern town of Lockwood], & camped for night.*

Note also Yager's references to ranches. Clearly Truckee Canyon had already been settled by Europeans.

Another improvement seen by 1863 is a ferry at Ford #22. This is mentioned by both Yager and Kennedy, though clearly some travelers, such as George Harter, continued to use Ford #22.

In 1865, just a year after Leppo, the first survey of Truckee Canyon was completed by the General Land Office and maps prepared. These maps show evidence of improvements in the roads even since 1864. Just two fords are needed to cross through the canyon, Ford #1 and Ford #22. The Gilpin Bypass is used, but the Derby and Lime Bluff Bypasses are gone, replaced by engineered roads. The Patrick Bypass remains. The partial Mustang Bypass as described by Yager remains. There was probably a permanent ferry at Ford #22. The transition of the road from a DIY emigrant trail to a high quality engineered road is discussed in more detail in Appendix 4.

Thus, the Truckee Canyon road had now evolved from an original road requiring 22 fords and was all but impassable during wet condition to a road with safer but still quite difficult rocky bypasses to its final form – a safe and highly engineered road that required only one or two fords and only one relatively easy bypass. Ironically, in just a few years this road would become largely obsolete with the advent of the intercontinental railroad.

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[dgowens@comcast.net](mailto:dgowens@comcast.net)

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**Trail Talk:**

**Phyllis Smith – Editor**

**Scott Lawson – Assistant Editor**

**Jo Johnston – Proofreader**

**Dee Owens – Compositor**

**Email:** [canvocta@gmail.com](mailto:canvocta@gmail.com)

**Website:** [www.canvocta.org](http://www.canvocta.org)



**President's Message  
By Bill Holmes**

**President's Message**

**Bill Holmes**

The California-Nevada Chapter has had another very active field season. We started by having our Spring Symposium in Truckee at the end of April. We had our President's Reception the evening of the 26<sup>th</sup> with a huge turnout. The chapter members must have heard about the free wine and beer. We started off the 27<sup>th</sup> with our Board meeting followed by an update from the History Expeditions trio of Bob Crowley, Tim Twietmeyer and Hal Hall. As I write this, the History Expedition detectives will soon be re-riding the route the six horsemen took after they split off from the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party near Donner Lake. Not sure if that includes swimming the horses across the American River like the original horsemen. After lunch we had a very enjoyable visit by Mark Twain. I must say, he has held up well over the years. This was followed by Robert Keahey, who is an OCTA member and a member of Sunnyvale Heritage Park Museum (SHPM). He has taken a deep dive into the Hastings Cutoff. He presented on this subject and did a masterful job of explaining the time sequencing of the various wagon trains passing through the Wasatch Mountains in 1846. The SHPM is hosting a trails event October 25<sup>th</sup> and we will be there staffing a booth.

I'm not going to describe the highlight of the Spring Symposium, the field trip to the 40 Mile Desert, because we have an excellent article written by tour guide Jeanne Young. We also have Dave Fullerton's article about his work in Dog Valley.

In June our Chapter, working with the National Forest Lake Tahoe Basin Unit, worked to verify a section of the Luther Pass Emigrant Trail that went from Hope Valley, over Luther Pass, to the Tahoe Valley. Portions of the trail were verified by the Chapter several years ago and the goal was to connect the verified sections. After finding very little during the morning and meeting up with a very protective mother bear with two cubs, the group decided to rethink the route and try another day.



**Bob Crowley  
of History Expeditions**  
photo credit - Steve Knight



**McAvoy Lane  
aka Mark Twain**  
photo credit- Steve Knight



**Luther Pass Field Day**

# Nevada's Infamous 40 Mile Desert

By Tom Young



**First Stop: Humboldt Bar (or Dike)**

The trip to Nevada's infamous 40 Mile Desert was most ably and efficiently led by Jeanne Young. With 12 vehicles in all, the journey was well-attended and filled with enriching historical insights. We could not have asked for better weather, especially considering the past couple of weeks of inconsistent warm and cold, dry and wet, typical of Nevada's ever-changeable spring weather.

Jeanne elected to hit the 'High Points' of the Carson Trail through the 40 Mile Desert, as we had only one day to complete our tour. In a prior trip, it took us three days to cover every section of this trail.

We met at the I-80/US95 rest area and headed to our first stop at Humboldt Bar (or Dike). The Emigrant Trail signs and books refer to the landmark as "Bar," while the USGS and BLM refer to it as "Dike" on their maps. Regardless of its name, this place holds huge historical significance in the Emigrant Trail and pioneer history of the region.

We were fortunate to have Steve Knight, a geologist and general Emigrant Trail expert on this trip. Steve enlightened us with the geologist's current theory on how the dike was formed, along with many other informative bits throughout the day. Jeanne provided detailed accounts of the myriad events surrounding this key landmark in the region's history.

From Humboldt Bar, we headed to Double Wells for a brief stop and a history lesson of this unique spot.

After Double Wells, we proceeded to the Salt Creek Crossing of the Emigrant Trail. Although there isn't much left of the crossing, it remains a worthwhile stop, indicative of the tough crossings faced by the pioneers. The parking area at the crossing and the CR-4/CRR-3 marker are quite small, requiring some creative parking to fit all 12 vehicles.

From Salt Creek Crossing, we had to leave the Carson Trail and head south on US95 to the next stop. Although it is possible to drive on or alongside the trail after Salt Creek, the road dead-ends at a railroad track, which cannot be crossed by vehicles. After crossing the railroad tracks, the original route rejoins current day US95 for a short distance. To avoid a lengthy back-track, we skipped this section.

After leaving the Salt Creek Crossing we headed south on US95 to our next stop, the Pioneer Monument. Installed by a local historical society, the monument stands about a mile south of where the original route diverges from the current roadway of US95. Here, we had a brief stop, to delve into the rich and compelling history commemorated by the monument.

Once again on the original trail, we made our way to the Upsal Hogback. The emigrants relied heavily on this prominent landmark to navigate this section of the desert, which otherwise lacked significant visual waypoints. It provided us not only a historical perspective but also a perfect location for lunch. The terrain here was scattered with remnants of the emigrants' passage, including bits of metal and other artifacts that told tales of the hardships they endured.



**Steve Knight at Double Wells**



**Bill Holmes and Jeanne Young**

From Upsal, we ventured through the sandy hillocks and considerable sand hills tracing the trail. While modern vehicles navigated the sandy terrain with ease, the thin wagon wheels of the past (and motorcycle tires, ask me how I know) faced much greater challenges.

Our journey included a viewpoint where the original trail traversed a salt flat, still flooded by the spring melt. The next area presented the only slick and muddy portion of the trail we encountered on this trip, offering a brief yet entertaining diversion as we slipped, slid, and slung gooey mud high into the air.

Approaching marker CR-10/CRR-7, civilization reemerged in the form of a geothermal plant, complete with canals and pipes for hot water. Skirting around the facility, we reached the last segment of trail for this trip. Jeanne provided us with poignant history about the

trail for this trip. Jeanne provided us with poignant history about the "Dreadful Scenes" mentioned on the CR-10/CRR-7 marker.

Our next destination was an overlook above Soda Lake, a seemingly serene desert oasis. Despite its appearance, the water is non-potable and unsuitable even for fish.

A brief drive through sand and eventually onto asphalt brought our tour to its conclusion at Ragtown, adjacent to US Highway 50. Here, we exchanged pictures and goodbyes, and Jack Greenhalgh gave a short demonstration of wagon parts at the Ragtown Monument.

Overall, the trip was a success, filled with educational insights and enjoyable moments. Big thanks to Jeanne for a well-organized and well-led trip. We look forward to more explorations and historical discoveries on future OCTA trips.



### **We Remember . . . . . Virginia Parks**

Bob Evanhoe has reported that his partner and soul mate Virginia Parks passed away September 25 in Yreka. The cause was abdominal cancer. Bob and Virginia had been friends socially for several years but began to see each other regularly in 2010 after the deaths of their spouses.

Bob introduced Virginia to OCTA at a convention, and she decided to join the organization. That was fifteen years ago. They attended activities together until about a year ago when Virginia's health began to decline.

Virginia began her career as a dental hygienist and later became the office manager of the local medical clinic in Yreka. She retired when the clinic was absorbed by the new Fairchild Hospital and Medical Center in 2001.

Bob and Virginia decided to become committed partners, maintaining their own homes which were about 800 feet apart in Yreka. Virginia had a very organized home while Bob, not so much. They often described their time together as "unmarried bliss."

There will be no services. Her ashes will be scattered on the Oregon Coast which she dearly loved and visited as often as she could.

**Save the Date!**

**OCTA Annual Convention**

**September 13-18, 2026**

**Chico, California**

## Dog Valley Descent

By Dave Fullerton

What a day! It was May 13, 2025, and all of us started out wondering whether we would need to turn around and head home. We met in Verdi around 9:00 with temperatures in the mid 30s and snow falling on us. The hills were coated in white. But the weather report said the snow would stop so we headed over the hill into Dog Valley. Well, the snow did stop. But we were metal detecting through snow and on clear ground under trees to start with. We were looking to confirm that the large swale that drops down into Dog Valley from First Summit was really the original emigrant trail. We started out slow, getting lots of junk near the dirt road. But gradually we started getting hits, especially as we worked our way up the slope. By around noon all the snow had melted and it turned out to be a pretty good day. Among the things we found:



- Ox shoe
- Farriers Knife
- Metal ring that was surely a wagon part
- Part of a lead bar (used to create bullets)
- Horse shoes and maybe a burro shoe (but vintage unknown)
- A clasp or hook made from a cut nail
- An iron hook

It wasn't the artifact-fest I had hoped for, but it was enough to convince me that we had identified the descent into Dog Valley. Thank you to Nathan Gabriel and colleagues from Humboldt Toiyabe National Forest for supervising the day. Here is a picture of our group taken during lunch. To close things off we got heavy rain again as we headed back into the Sacramento Valley so he hit a small window in the weather just right yesterday.

---

## Committee Vacancies

### Awards Committee vacancy

The Awards Committee is looking for a new member! The work is fun and important. The committee receives and reviews nominations and helps with getting any missing background information and photos of the nominee. Committee members then prepare and proofread certificates and plaques, and present awards at the Spring Symposium. It's great if all team members can attend the symposium, but it's not mandatory. The committee meets for about an hour a month from January to April, then puts in extra time to get all the awards ready to be presented. If you are interested, or just have questions, please contact Kathy Buob, [buobctc@gmail.com](mailto:buobctc@gmail.com) or (408) 835-8356.

### Website Liaison needed

Do you like cruising the web? Do you see websites that you wish had updated information and sensible navigation? Do you feel helpless because you're not up on the latest programming languages, but you have ideas for making things better? Join the CA-NV Chapter of OCTA's website team! Steve knows all the languages, but he needs someone to share ideas and provide updated information on chapter activities. We'd love to have you join us! If you are even slightly interested, please call or email Phyllis Smith to talk about specifics. [phylesmith@gmail.com](mailto:phylesmith@gmail.com) or (530) 301-7044.

## 2026 Convention

Many of you have signed up to work at the convention next September in Chico, and we thank you for that! But we have a great need for people to take on responsibilities for planning right now! If you are not sure but want to talk about the options and responsibilities, please contact Dave Freeman at [artois.dave@gmail.com](mailto:artois.dave@gmail.com) or (530) 591-2043.

Risk Manager – Prepare and maintain a list of emergency contacts; coordinate with convention venues and bus companies; determine safety needs for the tours.

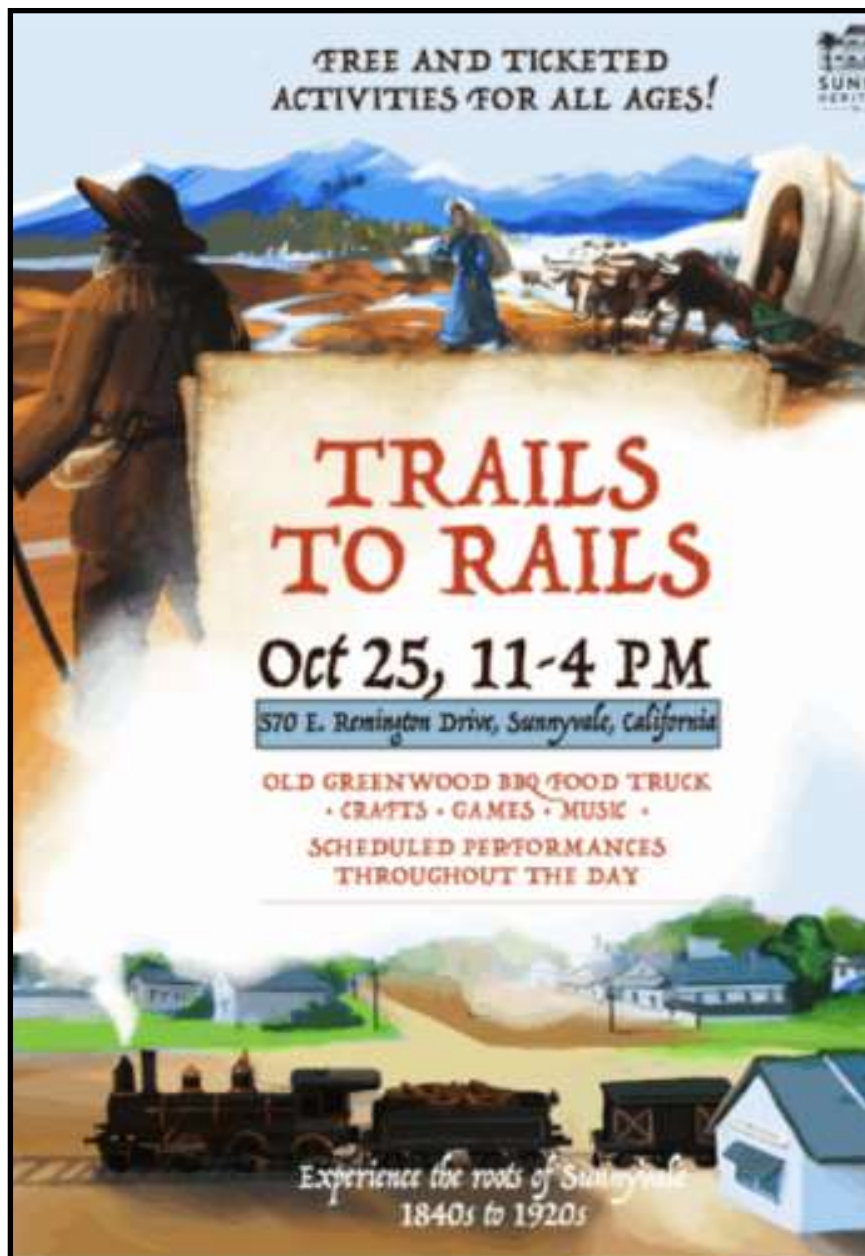
Volunteers – Find and assign volunteers.

Bookroom / Exhibits – Organize the Book Room and any Exhibits displayed. Recruit authors to sell books at the convention.

Registration – Be responsible for the chapter registration process and the registration table and operations at the convention.

Local Food – Find and vet local caterers to provide our lunches and dinners.

National Liaison – Coordinate with OCTA National about our various responsibilities.



## Chapter Awards Given at our 2025 Symposium

### Certificates of Appreciation

#### Abbey of Our Lady of New Clairvaux

The brothers of the Abbey have allowed the search of their historically rich property, leading to the discovery of many Peter Lassen sites and features on the Abbey.

#### Jo Cunningham

Jo, ranch foreman of two properties, has provided essential assistance as we research the Lassen Trail. Jo's efforts have pushed our knowledge of the Lassen Trail to new boundaries.

#### Rumiano Farms/Mount Lassen Farms

Rumiano Farms has allowed unprecedented search and documentation of their Vina property. Historical sites found include a major portion of Benton City (1850-1870) and The End of the Lassen Trail/1846 Fremont Camp.

#### John Grebenkemper, PhD, and Kayle the Border Collie

Dr. Grebenkemper and his Forensic Detection Canine, Kayle, have provided years of service to the Historical Community discovering the grave sites of pioneers along the Emigrant Trails, adding details to pioneer travels.

#### Anne Constantin Birge

For several years Anne has been researching the pioneers and soldiers buried in the Camp Far West cemetery outside of Wheatland, CA. She is a tenacious researcher, never taking no for an answer.



Don Buck Library Group  
Bill Holmes and John Winner

#### The Don Buck Library Group

Our Chapter inherited Don's collection of trail books, diaries, maps and articles. This collection is vital to the understanding of the emigrant trails and the people who traveled them. A dedicated troupe of volunteers has logged well over 1,200 hours and collectively driven over 10,000 miles in their efforts to organize, catalogue and scan these materials.

#### Norine Kimmy

Norine was the Awards Committee Chair for many years. She dedicated her time, energy, and passion to putting the awards together.



Bill Holmes and Anne Birge

### Senior Trail Boss Award

#### Phyllis Smith

Phyllis Smith is a dedicated OCTA and Chapter volunteer. She holds several positions for both the Chapter and the national organization.



### Lifetime Achievement

#### David Fullerton

David has dedicated many years to locating the Truckee Route of the emigrant trail across Nevada and California, which had eluded previous researchers. He interviewed experts, and studied Lidar data, maps and reports, and hiked the trail. He negotiated an agreement with the Tahoe National Forest allowing the Chapter to metal detect and reimburse OCTA volunteers for their expenses. His efforts to protect America's heritage is commendable.



Bill Holmes and Phyllis Smith

CALIFORNIA-NEVADA CHAPTER  
OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ASSOCIATION  
P.O. Box 1521  
Yreka, CA 96097

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Submissions, Membership  
questions or Inquiries,  
contact us at:

[canvocta@gmail.com](mailto:canvocta@gmail.com)

Ca-NV Chapter OCTA  
PO Box 182  
Yuba City, CA 95992