

Tim Goodale and His Cutoff: A Major Trail Segment During and After the Fourth Emigration Wave

Irving R. Merrill

The end of the two-year Colorado gold rush and the uncertainties generated by the gathering clouds of Civil War reduced the number of emigrants moving up the Platte River in 1861 to fewer than 10,000.

Many emigrants were already en route to their jumping-off points when they heard of Lincoln's 15 April call for volunteers. From the emigrants and from the U.S. Army regulars leaving the plains to defend Washington, D.C., the news of the Civil War came to the Indians. They assumed that the number of emigrants would remain low until the white men stopped fighting each other. The Indians were mistaken.

The season of 1862 saw 20,000 emigrants along the Platte, a number repeated the following year. In 1864 this number surged to a crest of 40,000, and the Plains Indians began their desperate resistance. Although the Plains were aflame with this resistance in 1865 and 1866, the emigrant numbers remained high at 20,000 and 25,000. These five years constitute the longest continuous wave of migration along the Oregon-California Trail.¹

This wave, like the three that preceded it (two to California, one to Colorado), numbered 20,000 or more during each of two or more successive seasons. The second longest wave was to California, and it lasted only three seasons (1852-1854). Between each of the waves was a trough of one or more

seasons that numbered fewer than 10,000. All four waves were powered by the thirst for gold.

During the California waves emigrants rushed to the Sierra batholith, home of the mother lode. During the longest wave the emigrants rushed to Idaho and western Montana to the Idaho batholith. Both massive uplifts were formed during the same geologic period and rivaled each other in mineral riches. The Sierra and its gold-seekers, the forty-niners, attracted widespread attention. In contrast, the Idaho batholith never gained complete entry into the popular imagination, and the vast number of its gold-seekers was not recognized until 1988.²

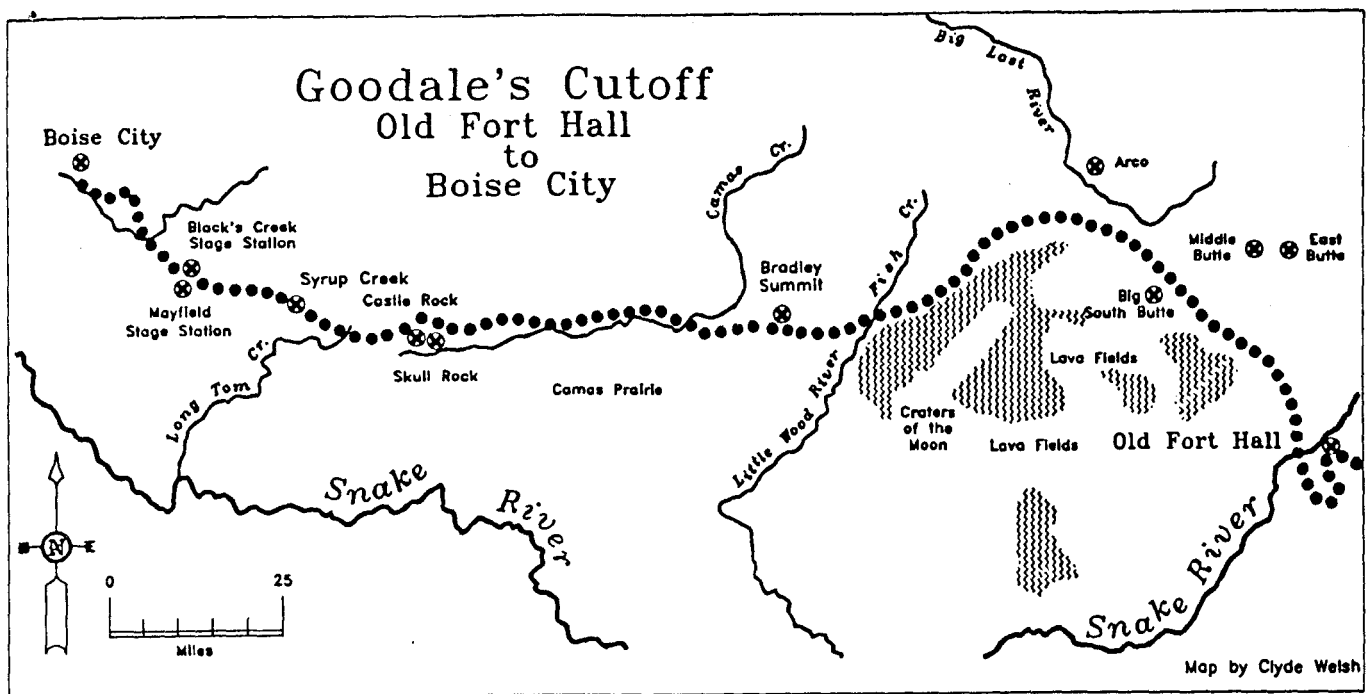
Attention to the Civil War-era gold rush and its destination was diverted not only by the dramatic battles east of the Mississippi but by many trail historians, who until recently focused on the first two decades (1841-1860) of the trail. The Idaho destination required new trail segments, but the war prevented the Department of the Interior and the Army topographical engineers from laying them out.³ The emigrants resorted to a practice most common in the early trail years: the use of guides.

Recent research, newly uncovered journals and meticulous field work confirm that as a western guide Tim Goodale deserves to rank just below Kit Carson and Jim Bridger, and the cutoff named for him was a major trail segment during and after the longest wave.

TIM GOODALE

Tim Goodale will never be ranked among the West's premier explorers because his life in the West began no earlier than 1839, by which time the mountain men Kit Carson (first

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The first section of Goodale's Cutoff between Old Fort Hall and Boise City. The cutoff actually ended at Baker City, Oregon. (Based on a map furnished by the Geography Department of the University of Idaho.)

among peers), Jim Bridger, Thomas Fitzpatrick, Jedediah S. Smith and the Sublette brothers had already established such reputations. Tim Goodale came from Illinois to try his hand as a free (self-employed) trapper, operating out of Greenhorn, a settlement 30 miles south of present-day Pueblo, Colorado. He had proved himself as a mountain man by 1844, when the fur trade was winding down.⁴

Goodale decided to join several enterprising mountain men who were successfully engaged in ventures other than trapping. Based upon what he had already learned about its wildlife, terrain and Indians, he began two decades of activities that would eventually establish his reputation as one of the West's preeminent guides. Goodale and Lucien Maxwell teamed up with Carson and accompanied him to Taos, New Mexico. Two years later Goodale was at Fort Bridger, and on 5 May 1850 he was back with Carson driving 40 or 50 head of horses to Fort Laramie to sell to the emigrants. Carson returned to New Mexico while Goodale went on to California. Three years later he was back in New Mexico for the big sheep drive to California. Beginning in 1854 Goodale spent about two years operating a ferry service over the Green River. It was one of five services along the same stretch, all of them operated by mountain men.

On 24 December 1856, accompanied by William Gerish, Goodale was at Devil's Gate heading west to a destination not yet determined. However, it is known that he then headed back, by way of Ash Hollow, to Kansas City, where he soon was employed before 6 July 1857 as a guide for a surveying and road building party which was assembled to improve the natural trail between Fort Kearny and South Pass. His employer was Superintendent M.F.W. Magraw of the Pacific

Wagon Road Office, part of the recently formed U.S. Department of the Interior. The next year Goodale passed Fort Laramie with 1,800 head of sheep from New Mexico on his way to Camp Scott, Col. Albert Sidney Johnston's Utah Expedition headquarters near Fort Bridger. By this time he was recognized as a celebrated guide.

He found time to range widely throughout southern Idaho, gaining a detailed knowledge of the Shoshoni and their lands. While there he met and gained the respect of Frederick W. Lander, Chief Engineer, Pacific Wagon Road Office. Goodale spent one of the winters after 1856 on a farm near Kansas City, Missouri, but by 1860 he was back in the Colorado Rockies living in a tepee eight miles below present-day Boulder.

In 1861, he was a guide for Maj. E.L. Berthoud's military survey to find a road leading directly west from Denver to Salt Lake City. This survey resulted in the discovery of Berthoud Pass. The *Denver Rocky Mountain News* reported on 15 May of that year that he had come to town to join "Captain [Jim] Bridger," Berthoud's principal guide. The paper identified him as "Capt. Tim Goodel."

Goodale may have received a fairly good education because he belonged to a middle-class family. He once said his father was a minister of the gospel, which may explain why Goodale was given the New Testament name of Timothy. His brother was a Presbyterian minister. Goodale's character and personality were well suited to his reputation as an expert guide. According to various reports quoted in the account of his life, Goodale was described as "a jovial sociable fellow," "a great smoker and talker," with "mild pleasant manners" and a "whole-souled kind-hearted nature." Goodale had other

qualities that characterize a natural leader. An Army officer described him as an intelligent, trustworthy man whose character was reliable and unmingled with false heroism.

It was typical of mountain men to be married to Indian women. In his tepee near Boulder in 1861 was Goodale's attractive Shoshoni wife Jennie, who was about 25 years old, neatly dressed and a good housekeeper. There is a strong possibility that he had Jennie with him in 1862 when he met the emigrants at Old Fort Hall to guide them over what would become known as Goodale's Cutoff. Jennie's presence seems the only credible explanation of why Nellie Slater, one of the emigrant wives, noted, "There is a guide by the name of Tim Gooddle [sic] who is part Indian."

When these emigrants met their guide they faced a man under 60 years of age, perhaps six feet tall, weighing 155 or 160 pounds, who wore his white hair cut long, kept his face clean-shaven and had fair skin and bluish gray eyes. No picture book guide attired in buckskin like Bridger, Tim Goodale dressed, except for his moccasins, in the ordinary clothes of an old farmer.

Amid the first season's rush to the batholith's Salmon River Basin, Goodale's emigrants were eager to avoid the long loop south along the Snake River before making the difficult Three Island Crossing to reach present-day Boise. Once there, they still faced the difficult strike north to the mines.

The appeal of the shorter route attracted at least 1,095 emigrants. Thus, Goodale prepared to lead five per cent of all emigrants on the trail during the wave season of 1862 in one combined traveling company, the largest ever recorded as having followed any segment of the trail. According to Mattes' data on company size or number of wagons, anywhere from eight to 14 separate companies were involved.⁵

As a guide, Goodale faced problems of control, strategy and tactics. In spots where it had to travel single file the combined train at full strength required four hours to pass. He had to lead bone-weary emigrants, many of whom were in the initial stages of scurvy with its accompanying anemia, weakness and bleeding of the gums.⁶ Moreover, there was the renewed danger from the Indians.

Since 1859, when the Colorado gold rush first siphoned off the bulk of emigrant traffic, the Shoshoni had enjoyed their traditional watering place at Old Fort Hall in relative privacy. This year they found an emigrant horde foraging heavily before moving on and Goodale's company sitting in their choicest spot and growing larger by the day. Further down river, other Shoshoni were displaying unmistakable hostility.

Anticipating possible trouble, Goodale made a strategic departure from Old Fort Hall when his company numbered 820, enough emigrants to daunt the Shoshoni and to lay an unmistakable trail of ruts, livestock droppings and discarded emigrant belongings. This departure left behind only a few companies that needed several days' rest, companies that Goodale had carefully arranged to follow after him.⁷ Goodale

had read accurately the growing Shoshoni hostility. Sixteen days after Goodale's departure a small, separate company that chose to follow the earlier route down the Snake River ran into a Shoshoni ambush at a spot known thereafter as Mas-sacre Rocks.

The 23 July departure from the assembly area of the 820 emigrants provides an example of Goodale's trail tactics. As Oliver B. Slater recalled,

There were 50 armed men on horseback riding ahead of the train as guards and 50 more that brought up the rear. The teams were driven by the women and boys so far as possible, and the men marched in squads of 20 each to guard the train and stock. It took this train about three hours to get in camp or to get out.⁸

On the first day Goodale led his company north northwest on a short shakedown drive to water and an evening camp near present-day Springfield, Idaho.

The drive of the second day began at 3:30 p.m. This gave the company captains time to pass on to all their followers Goodale's critique of the first day and his instructions for the second. All livestock were to be thoroughly watered and rested during the heat of the day because there was no water ahead for almost 30 miles.⁹

Goodale led the company due north to the vicinity of present-day Tabor and then turned left on a slow arc to the northern base of Big Southern Butte, where there was enough water for the emigrants but not enough to satisfy the animals. His third drive, northwest for about 10 miles, brought the company to Big Lost River, where there was water for all and feed for the animals. Goodale's drives continued northwest to within about eight miles of present-day Arco before beginning a long arc to the southwest near the foot of the slow rise toward the White Knob and later the Pioneer Mountains, where on 28 July they entered a valley through which flowed the sparkling waters of Champagne Creek not far from the northern boundary of what is now Craters of the Moon National Monument.

By this time the Northern Shoshoni were thoroughly aroused, because they reasoned correctly that Goodale was leading his company along their traditional migration route and through the beautiful valley that took its name from the plentiful Camas plants, whose roots were their choicest food supply. Goodale paused just long enough at Champagne Creek to allow the followers to increase the number of emigrants to at least 1,095 and then brought the entire company and its train safely through to the vicinity of present-day Boise on 9 August.¹⁰

At a camp a few miles further west, Goodale's combined company was preparing to head north to the Salmon River mines, which had been discovered in 1861, when Goodale chanced to meet the George Grimes prospecting party, which had just discovered gold in the Boise River Basin. The party was returning to Walla Walla for the winter. Most of Goodale's combined company decided to throw in with them,

and both groups asked Goodale to guide them over the western part of his new route, which ran through the upper Weiser country to the Snake River at Brownlee, where a ferry was soon established.¹¹ Goodale's route ended where it rejoined the earlier trail near present-day Baker City, Oregon. Some of his grateful emigrant followers started calling the route Goodale's Cut Off, and it was this name that stuck.

Thanks to the Idaho State Historical Society, Goodale's Cutoff is known throughout the state, and the best account of Goodale's life, in a book published in 1969, convincingly documents his accomplishments as a guide through 1861.¹² The omission of his crowning achievement the following year delayed recognition of all his accomplishments as a guide until 1989.¹³

Before the end of the 1862 travel season Goodale left North Powder and returned to Colorado to set up his tepee near the Hogback Mountains, west of La Porte. He remained there until the summer of 1864, when he and his trapper friends moved to Montana's Bitterroot Valley, nestled just west of the Continental Divide. There is no further record of his life, but it is generally believed that he stayed in the Valley and followed the Indian life style until his death, the date of which is unknown.

GOODALE'S CUTOFF

Like most segments of the trail, Goodale's Cutoff began as a natural trail, known first to the Indians, then to mountain men and the fur companies and finally to the emigrants in covered wagons.¹⁴ After being promoted for emigrant traffic by John J. Jeffrey between 1852 and 1854, the cutoff apparently remained unused until Goodale led his party over it in 1862.¹⁵

The exact route of the cutoff's 262 mile section east of Boise has been determined by a field study conducted by the Bureau of Land Management in cooperation with the Idaho State Historical Society. The route is traced on 32 annotated maps that are photographic reproductions of U.S. Geological Survey Topographical Quadrangles.

The maps show three approaches to Big Southern Butte which join in the vicinity of Tabor. Their points of departure are one mile above Old Fort Hall (using the Richard and Massa Ferry, 1862); Ferry Butte 10 miles upriver (the Meeks and Gibson Ferry, 1864); and, in the 1870s, Blackfoot, still further upriver to follow a stage route from the railhead.¹⁶

No comparable field study of the cutoff west of Boise exists, but its approximate route is shown on the Official Highway Map celebrating Idaho's statehood centennial in 1990. Available from Idaho's Department of Transportation, the map also shows the approximate route east of Boise.

Between Old Fort Hall and Boise, the cutoff rises from an elevation of 4,360 feet to reach 5,400 feet on the north slope of Big Southern Butte, declines for the loop south of Arco, crests at 5,960 in Craters of the Moon National Monument, declines about 1,000 feet passing north of present-day Carey, rises to 5,800 feet crossing Bradley Summit near Picabo

before descending into Camas Prairie and passing Castle and Skull Rocks, a stretch that varies between 4,800 and 5,200 feet. The cutoff actually descends slightly during the difficult stretch through the Danskin Mountains before dropping from 3,600 at Mayfield to 2,700 feet at Boise.

More variable in elevation than the first 262 miles up the Platte from Valley City, less unusual than the Lander Road with its 9,113 feet ridge two miles southwest of Wagner Pass, Goodale's Cutoff impressed the travel-worn emigrants as scenic but very challenging.

During the crest year of 1864, Julius Merrill recorded the sighting of Chimney Rock and his explorations of Courthouse and Jail Rocks, Independence Rock and Devil's Gate. But the natural phenomenon that claims the most journal space was the volcanic activity along Goodale's Cutoff, including Big Southern Butte, which he recognized as a volcanic cone, the bed of Big Lost River and the lava fields that include Craters of the Moon National Monument.¹⁷

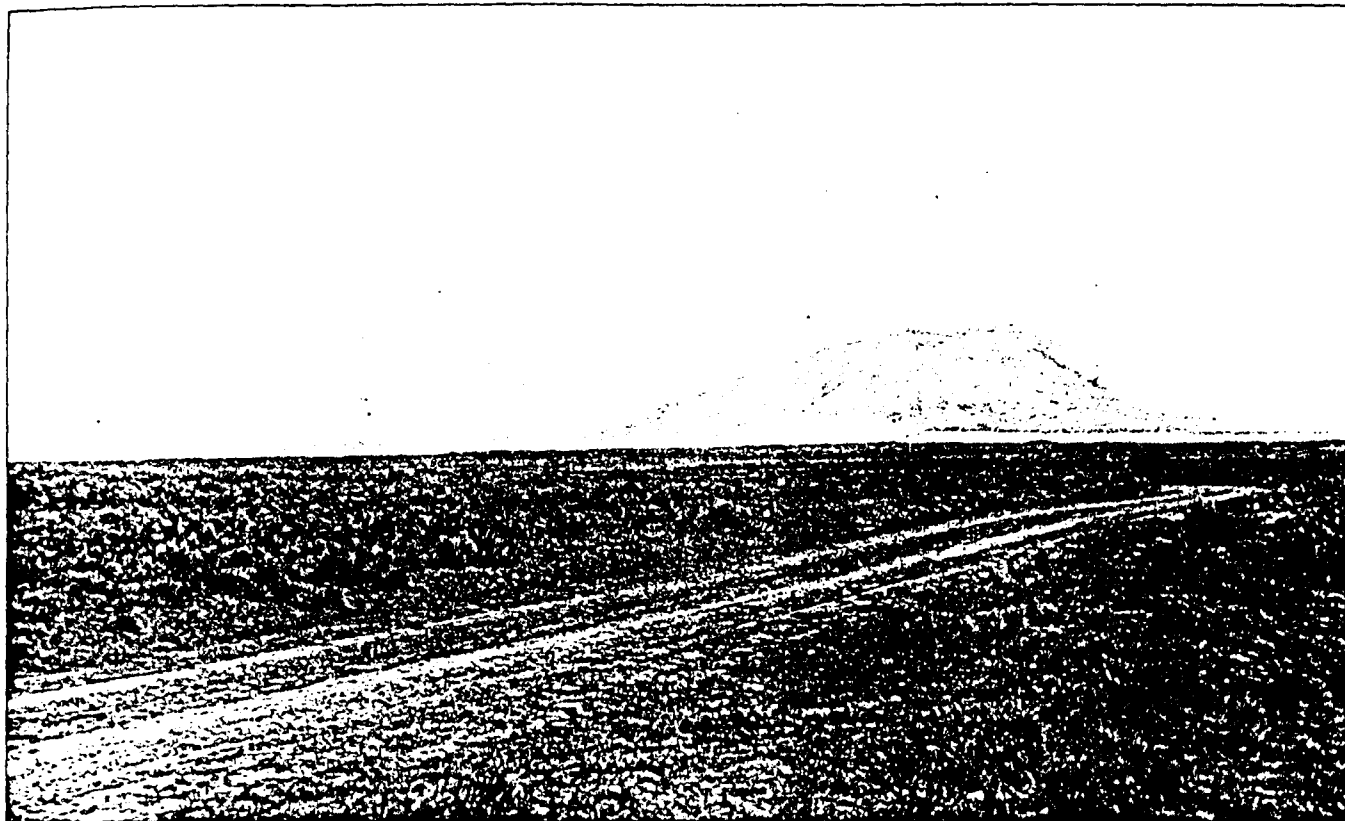
This phenomenon presently attracts countless visitors, many of whom have never heard of Goodale's Cutoff. Modern trail buffs who follow the road from Moreland through Atomic City and continue west to Boise on U. S. Highway 20 find an additional attraction: the cutoff's more than 100 miles that still exist in recognizable condition.¹⁸

Throughout its long history, the route of the cutoff between Old Fort Hall and Boise remained essentially unchanged. The migratory Northern Shoshoni were the first to get it right. Their traditional route was promoted by Jeffries in the 1850s and taken by Goodale in the 1860s. Federal highway engineers then followed it closely through Camas Prairie when they built U.S. Highway 20, which opened a century later. By so doing, the engineers recognized Goodale's thorough knowledge of the territory north of the Snake, thus confirming this aspect of his reputation as a guide.

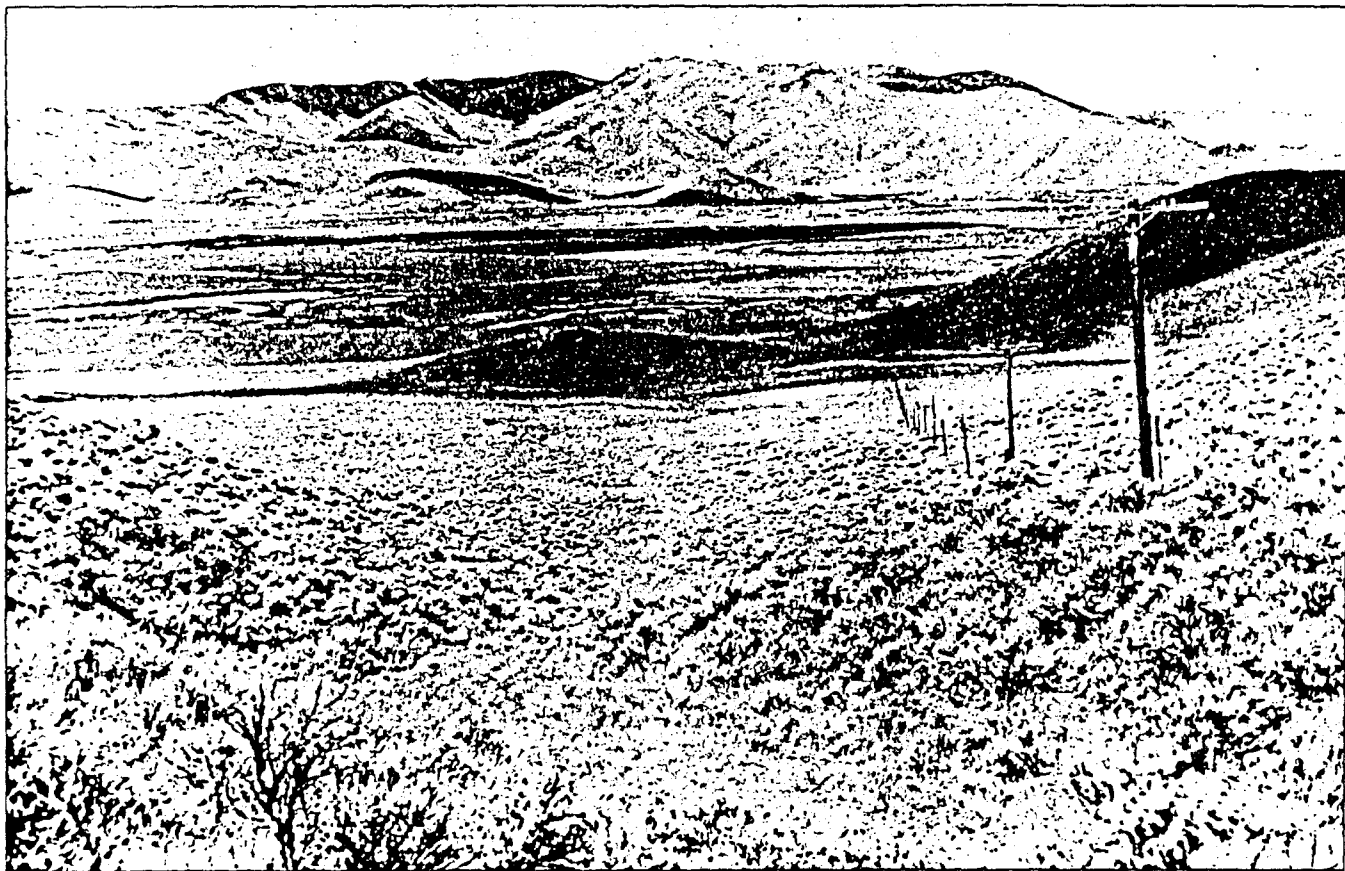
Goodale's successful leadership of the combined traveling company brought immediate acceptance from next year's emigrants and then the territorial government. In 1863, seven of every 10 wagons reaching Old Fort Hall en route to Boise or Oregon took his cutoff.¹⁹

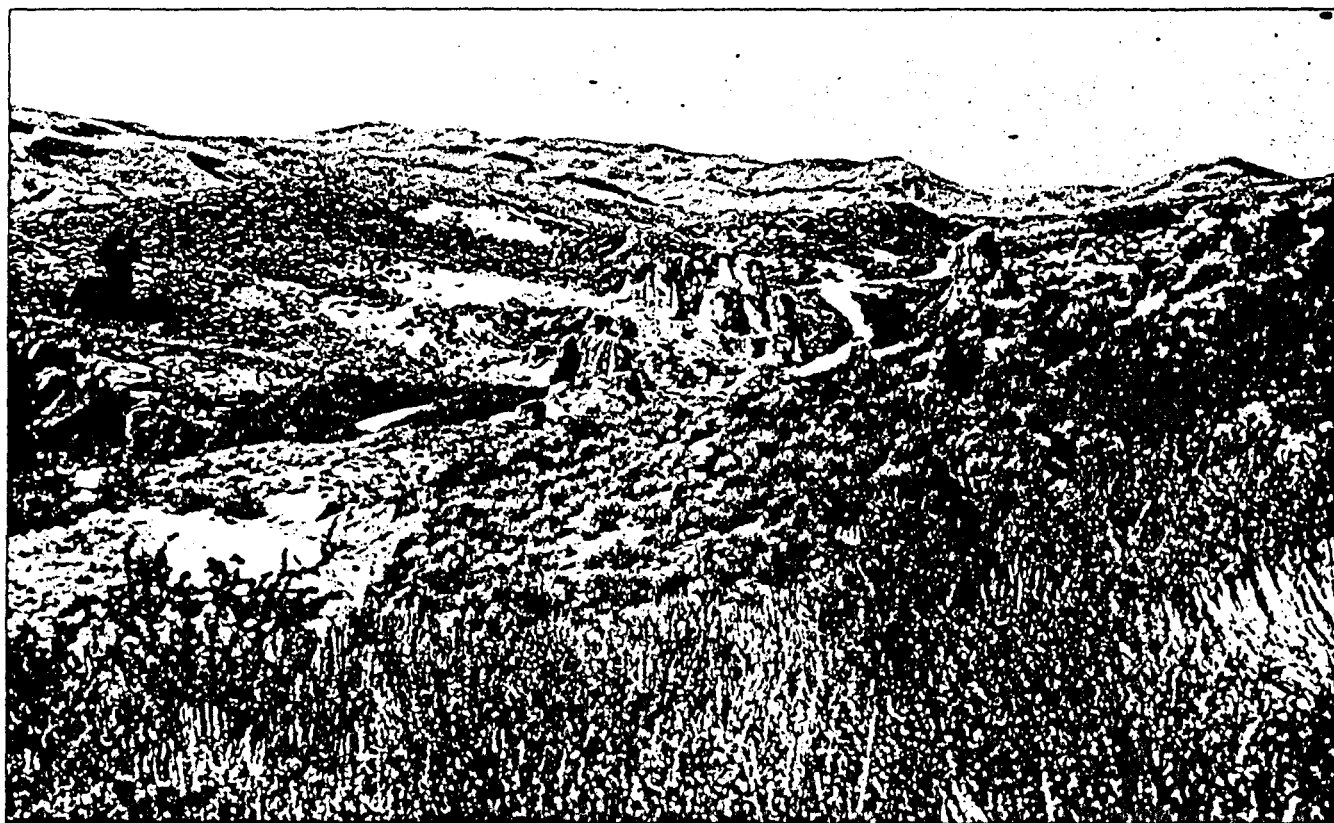
Recognizing that emigrants no longer preferred the Snake River route, the Idaho Territorial Government in January 1864 granted two franchises, the ferry franchise to Meeks and Gibson at Ferry Butte and a toll road franchise to the South Boise Wagon Road Company to build and operate a road from the cutoff to the quartz mines at Rocky Bar.²⁰ When the travel season was in progress, one emigrant en route to Boise did not hesitate to label the cutoff the "...main Oregon Road coming from Fort Hall and now well traveled."²¹ Goodale's success during the longest emigrant wave's first year made his cutoff a major trail segment during the last four years of the trail.

Merrill J. Mattes was the first to make a serious study of any major trail segment, which is defined as one taken by a majority of emigrants en route to the season's major destination.²² The selection of the route up the Platte River was a stunning choice. For every successive season, from the first

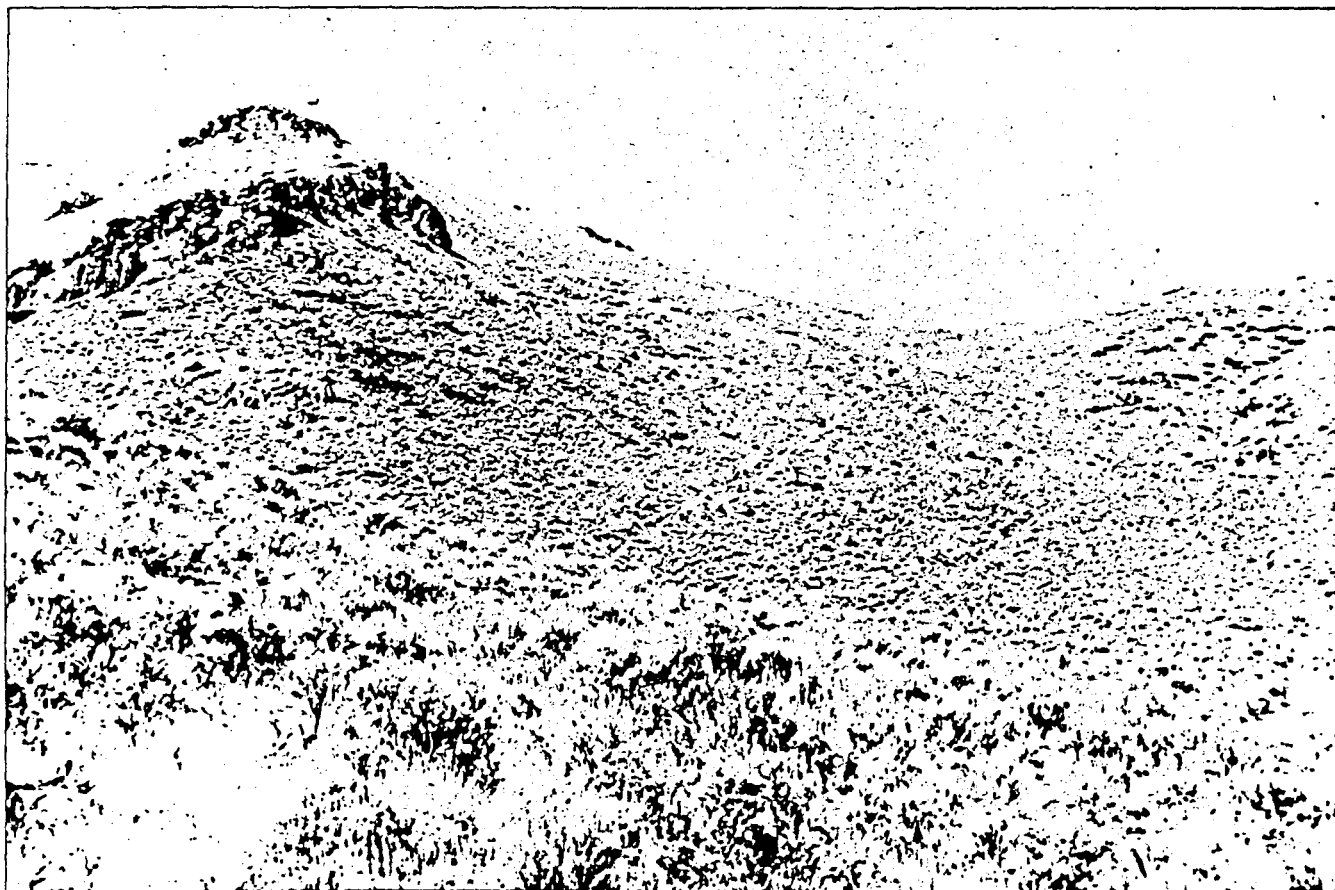


(Above) Big Southern Butte, as seen from the west. (Below) Descent of Goodale's Cutoff to Silver Creek and Camas Prairie from Bradley Summit. (Photographs by Larry Jones)





(Above) Descent of Goodale's Cutoff past Castle Rocks. (Below) Ascent of Goodale's Cutoff from syrup Creek in Daskin Mountains. (Photographs by Larry Jones)



year of covered wagon migration in 1841 through the last, it was a major segment of the trail. Because of its geographical location, it was taken by the majority of emigrants no matter what their season's major destination.

It is also significant that while presenting his revised annual trail migration estimates Mattes indicated each season's major destination.²³ Once that destination is identified, one can determine the major trail segments that make up the main trail for a given season. For example, the main trail in 1864 consisted of the Pony Express Road from St. Joseph to the Kinnekuk Station, the Leavenworth Road to beyond Marysville, the Independence Road to Valley City, the Platte River Road to South Pass Station, the Lander Road to Old Fort Hall and Goodale's Cutoff to Boise.²⁴

It is important to determine the main trail for every year, be it part of a migration wave or trough. John Unruh's definitive study of the first two trail decades rests on his discovery that emigrant activities differed from one season to the next, and some activities underwent general change over time.²⁵

Prior to 1863, the Snake River had been a major trail segment when Oregon was the primary destination. Thus, the switch to Goodale's Cutoff has a certain historical significance. But even more important, any change in the main trail is a clue to look for other changes, such as in relations between whites and Indians, in the political and economic climate as well as changes in the transportation and communications systems west of the Missouri. A main trail change almost always accompanies one or more other significant changes.

Mattes' estimates of annual trail migrations end with the year 1866. Merle W. Wells, Idaho State Historian emeritus, has written that the excitement over the first gold and silver mining in Idaho took place from 1862 through 1869.²⁶ Thus, it is possible that the longest migration wave continued for another three seasons. But the end of the excitement, coupled with the completion of the transcontinental railroad, makes it almost certain that 1870 saw fewer than 20,000 emigrants on the trail.

The railroad helped send the trail into a long number of trough seasons, each of which had the Pacific Northwest as its major destination. Because businessmen and miners preferred to take the stage from the nearest railroad, the trail now belonged to farm families.

What good was a rail line to California for a man moving his entire household to Oregon, Idaho or Washington? He could do it more cheaply and enjoy something of an outing as well if he joined one of the caravans that continued forming during the last decades of the century.²⁷

During the trough years, beginning in 1870, farm families heading their wagons up the Platte probably kept Goodale's Cutoff the major trail segment across Idaho because the cutoff was on the most direct route to their major destination. Trail journals from these decades support this contention; for example, that of Emily Fletcher Towell, entitled "Covered Caravan," records the experiences of a traveling company that

set out from Mercer County, Missouri, drove up the Platte and took Goodale's Cutoff to Middle Valley, Idaho, in 1881. Another describes a family traveling Goodale's Cutoff by covered wagon as recently as 1904.²⁸

No more recent journal reference exists for Goodale's Cutoff, but the last confirmed sighting of a family passing through Boise in a horse-drawn covered wagon occurred in 1910. Not the railroad, it was the automobile and the motor truck that replaced emigrant wagons, Goodale's Cutoff and the Oregon Trail.

NOTES

1. Merrill J. Mattes, *Platte River Road Narratives* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 4,5.
2. Ibid, p. 4-5.
Merrill J. Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1969), p. 23. When compared with Mattes' 1969 annual migration estimates of 1862 through 1866, these revised estimates increase the number of Idaho-Montana-bound emigrants by about 50 percent.
3. W. Turrentine Jackson, *Wagon Roads West: Study of Federal Road Surveys and Construction in the Trans-Mississippi West, 1846-1869*, Reprint Vol. 9, Yale Western Americana Series (New Haven: Yale University Press, [1952] [1965]), p. 197.
4. This account of Goodale's life is taken from Irving R. Merrill, ed., *Bound for Idaho: The 1864 Trail Journal of Julius Merrill* (Moscow, Idaho: The University of Idaho Press, 1989), p. 12-17.
5. Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road*, p 33.
Nellie Slater, "Travels on the Plains, 1861," typescript, Idaho State Historical Society, Boise, p.7.
Nellie Slater, "Travels on the Plains, 1862" typescript, Idaho State Historical Society Library, Boise, p. 7.
6. John Duffy, "Medicine in the West," *Journal of the West*, Vol. 3, No. 5, p. 10.
Merrill *Bound for Idaho*, p. 91.
Slater, "Travels on the Plains," p. 7.
7. Oliver B. Slater, "Memories of Crossing the Plains," Idaho State Historical Society Library, Boise, p. 2.
8. Ibid.
9. Slater, N., "Travels on the Plains," p. 7.
10. Ibid, p. 7-9.
11. Idaho State Historical Society, Ref. Ser. 51, 1972.
12. Harvey L. Carter, "Tim Goodale," Vol. 7, p. 147-152 in Leroy R. Hafen, ed., *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade in the Far West*. 10 Vols. (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clarke, 1965-1972).
13. Merrill, *Bound for Idaho*. Conducted independently and completed simultaneously, this book and Mattes' *Narratives* are mutually supporting of related evidence concerning the longest migration wave and a major trail segment during and after the Civil War.
14. Merrill, *Bound for Idaho*, 20-21.

- Idaho State Historical Society, Ref. Ser. 51 (rev.), 1988.
15. Fred W. Dykes, *Jeffrey's Cutoff: Idaho's Forgotten Oregon Trail Route* (Pocatello: Pocatello Copy Cat, 1989), p. 2.
 16. *Emigrant Trails of Southern Idaho* (Advance Copy) (Boise: Bureau of Land Management in Cooperation with the Idaho State Historical Society, August 1989), p. 59-63, 132-163.
 17. Merrill, *Bound for Idaho*, p. 96-101.
 18. Dykes, *Jeffrey's Cutoff*, p. 11-12.
 19. *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Ser. 1, Vol. 50, Pt. 1. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), p. 220-221.
 20. *Emigrant Trails of Southern Idaho* (Advance Copy), p. 134. Merrill, *Bound for Idaho*, p. 191.
 21. Dykes, *Jeffrey's Cutoff*, p. 4.
 22. Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road*.
 23. Mattes, *Platte River Road Narratives*, p. 1-5.
 24. For an 1864 trail journal giving a detailed description of all six major segments, see Merrill, *Bound for Idaho*.
 25. John D. Unruh, Jr., *The Plains Across* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), p. 4.
 26. Merle W. Wells, *Gold Camps and Silver Cities*, 2nd ed., (Moscow, Idaho: Bureau of Mines and Geology, 1983), p. 1-87.
 27. David Lavender, *The Overland Migrations*. National Park Service Handbook Number 105 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980), p. 87.
 28. Towell, typescript, Idaho State Historical Society. Marilyn Rowley Harbord, ed., *Annie Jane's Journal*, (Chico, Calif.: Glen E. Biggers, 1974).

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