



YELLOWSTONE NATURE NOTES

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SPURGINS' BEAVER SLIDE

by Ranger Naturalist Wayne Replogle

The "skilletts" who made the roads through the dense Yellowstone forests under the leadership of Captain Spurgin, while General Howard pursued Chief Joseph, certainly deserved the name "engineers" with highest honors.

On July 3, I sought out these section of road leading from the terraces west of Alum Creek across the short section of the plateau which was the only means at that time of getting from Hayden Valley to these Otter Creek Valley, some distance above Chittenden Bridge. It was the section traversed by Captain Spurgin and his wagon train.

My findings were tremendously interesting. The train having ascended the terraces and on to the plateau, found the going hard, no doubt, for a great number of trees were necessarily cut with what appeared to be four inch blades, none too sharp. Most stumps left standing were about three feet in height, which probably permitted the high axled wagons to pass over them without trouble. Several shallow gulleys were crossed and in each case they had been crudely filled with dirt with a stone center for drainage purposes. In one or two places there had been some grading done to insure a safer descent or ascent from a gulley fill.

The trail was marked by long narrow blazes, ten to twenty inches long, cut by an axe, and I presume the same type of axe used to blaze the trees as was used to fell them. The old blazes are in many cases obliterated save for a slight bark scar, while others are from one to four inches in depth. The blazes are followed from east to west and may be traced in a continuous line although the trail is overgrown and in many cases trees have reached a diameter of eight inches or more.

Having followed the trail to the brink of the plateau above the famous slides, I then began the search for the famous rope burns, which resulted from the wrapping of ropes around trees to slowly let down wagons some 600 feet below, by slipping the rope "dallys" (wrappings). I found eight prominent trees with well preserved burns, stationed from top

to bottom some 75 to 150 feet apart. Some burns had been eradicated by the growing of uninjured bark but for the most part there were as many as three circle burns on each tree. The living trees with burns are from ten to twenty inches in diameter with burn marks apparently having been made by one-half or three-quarter inch ropes. In the descent many adjacent trees were scared or bent as the many wagons were let down over the lengthy precipice. It must be remembered that the feat was one of the most remarkable in early Yellowstone history and although given a peculiar name by the soldiers for no particular reason at all, we should remember that Spurgins' Beaver Slide is yet traceable and has not completely degraded into the long list of early history mysteries.

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