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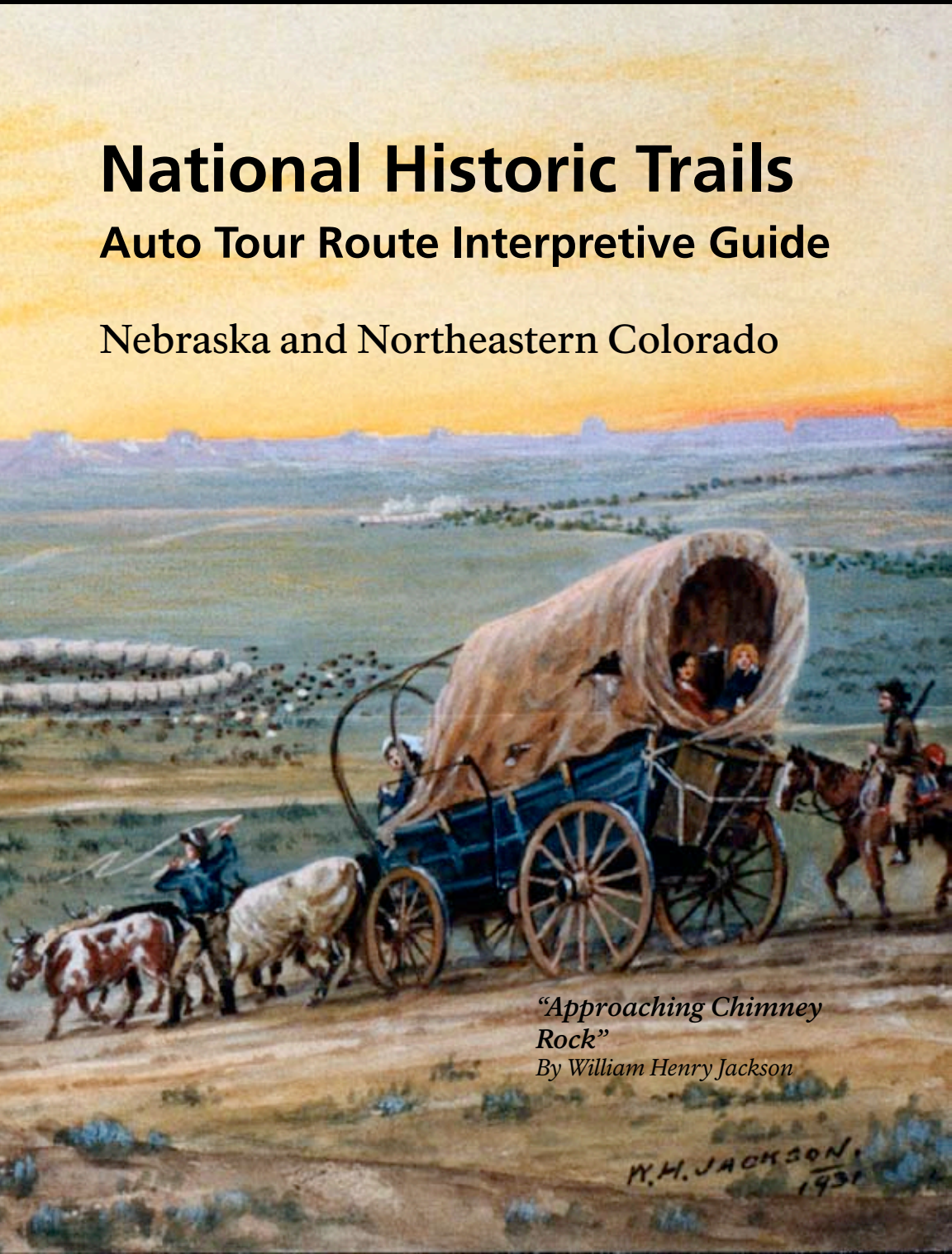
National Historic Trails

Auto Tour Route Interpretive Guide

Nebraska and Northeastern Colorado



"Approaching Chimney Rock"
By William Henry Jackson

Chimney Rock, in western Nebraska, was one of the most notable landmarks recorded in emigrant diaries and journals. *Photograph is courtesy of The Wagner Perspective.*

NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAILS

AUTO TOUR ROUTE INTERPRETIVE GUIDE

Nebraska and Northeastern Colorado

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INTRODUCTION

Many of the pioneer trails and other historic routes that are important in our nation's past have been designated by Congress as National Historic Trails. While most of those old roads and routes are not open to motorized traffic, people can drive along modern highways that lie close to the original trails. Those modern roads are designated as Auto Tour Routes, and they are marked with highway signs and trail logos to help today's travelers follow the trails used by the pioneers who helped to open a new nation.

This interpretive publication guides visitors along the Auto Tour Routes for the Oregon, California, Mormon Pioneer, and Pony Express National Historic Trails as they approach and parallel the Platte River across Nebraska and cut across the northeastern corner of Colorado. Site-by-site driving directions are included, and an overview map is located inside the back cover. To make the tour more meaningful, this guide also provides an historical overview of the four trails, shares the thoughts and experiences of emigrants who followed those routes, and describes how the westward expansion impacted native peoples of the Great Plains.

Individual Auto Tour Route interpretive guides such as this one are in preparation for each state through which the trails pass. In addition, individual National Park Service interpretive brochures for the Oregon, California, Mormon Pioneer, and Pony Express National Historic Trails are available at many trail-related venues, and can be requested from the National Trails System Office at 324 South State, Suite 200, Box 30, Salt Lake City, Utah 84111. These brochures provide more detailed information about each of the trails. Additional information on each trail also can be found on individual trail web sites. Links are listed on the title page of this guide.

THE GREAT PLATTE RIVER ROAD

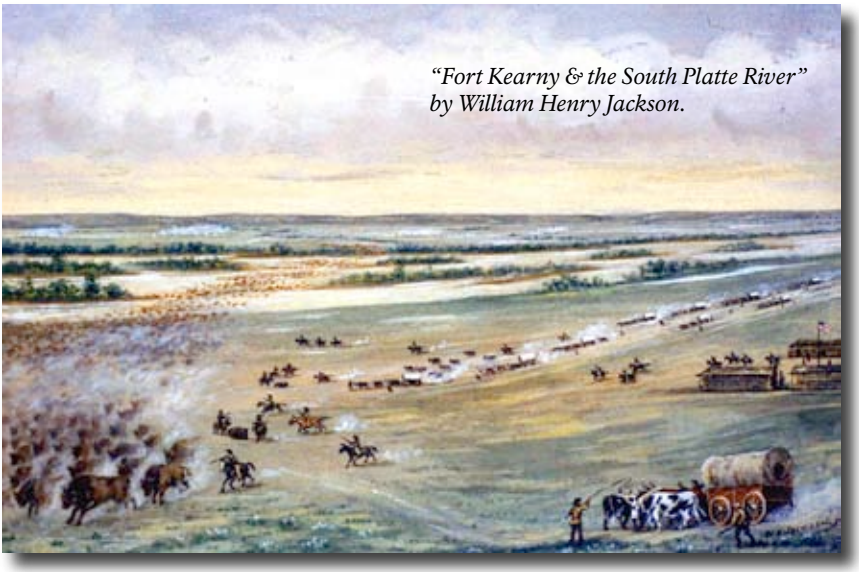
"Too thick to drink, too thin to plow, too pale to paint." "A mile wide and an inch deep." "A stream flowing upside down."

Covered wagon pioneers of the 19th century liked to joke about Nebraska's Platte River, a stream unlike any they had known back East. But the Platte, strange as it looked, was no joke. A summer shower could send it raging over-bank and through camp; its soft quicksand bottom could swallow up an ox team. River crossings were ordeals to dread.

The river's setting, too, seemed strange. Surrounding prairie, frequently cleansed by wildfire, was burned bare of trees right up to the water's edge, and a line of low sand hills, looking like a storm-wracked beach, rimmed much of the river valley.

Yet the yellow Platte, that treeless "Coast of Nebraska," was an emigrant's lifeline—a water source that snaked 800 dusty miles between the Missouri River and the uplands of central Wyoming.

Though a choked and sandy disappointment of a stream, the Platte always was and still is a natural east-west corridor across the central plains. Migrating game and moccasin-clad feet wore paths through the



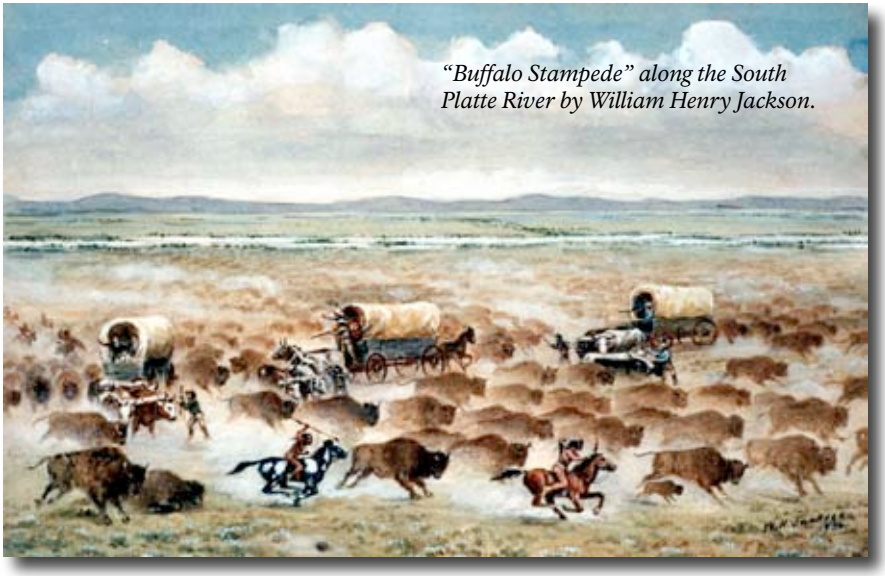
"Fort Kearny & the South Platte River" by William Henry Jackson.

valley thousands of years before any white man ventured there. Like those first travelers, covered wagon emigrants and their slow, plodding oxen found water, grass, and fuel along the river. They also found the valley floor to be fairly level and smooth, a fine setting for roads in the 21st century as well as the 19th. When you drive the riverside routes of today's Highways 26, 30, and I-80 across Nebraska, you are following the footsteps of native explorers, hunters, traders, and fighters, and of mountain men, soldiers, and countless pioneers.

This broad highway along the Platte River was known in the 19th century by a variety of names, depending on a traveler's purpose and destination. Some native peoples called it the Great Medicine Road; other travelers called it the Oregon Trail, the Mormon Trail, the Pony Express Route or the California Road.

But taken all together, the footpaths and wagon ruts that flanked the roiling, yellow Platte into Wyoming now have one name in common: The Great Platte River Road.

> *[The Platte River] was fearful to look at, - rushing and boiling and yellow with mud, a mile wide, and in many places of unknown depth. The bed was of quicksand – this was the worst difficulty.*
> — Margaret A. Frink, emigration of 1850



"Buffalo Stampede" along the South Platte River by William Henry Jackson.

FROM PATH TO HIGHWAY

Supply caravans hauling supplies to the annual fur trappers' Rendezvous began following Indian paths along the Platte River and into the Rocky Mountains in the 1820s. Their pack trains and wagons wore rough tracks, or "traces," along both sides of the river across Nebraska and up the North Platte into Wyoming. In May 1840, as the profitable fur trade in beaver pelts drew to an end, emigrants Joel and Mary Walker took four children and two wagons to join up with the last supply caravan leaving Independence, Missouri, for the final "Trappers' Rendezvous." From the Rendezvous site in western Wyoming, the Walker family continued westward with, a group of missionaries and trappers, reaching Oregon's Willamette Valley in mid-September. They were the first emigrant family to cross the continent on what would become the Oregon Trail, and their trek marks the beginning of the overland emigration era.

In 1841, the first full wagon train of west bound settlers, known to history as the Bidwell-Bartleson Party, headed up the Platte. More wagons set out the following spring, and the next, and the next, gradually beating a well-defined wagon road along the south side of the river and into the Rockies. Maps of the emerging emigrant trails were published in 1843 and 1845 government reports prepared by explorer John C. Fremont, who was delighted to encounter pioneers using his work to guide them west. Fremont's mapping expeditions for the U.S. Corps of Topographical Engineers made him a national hero, and the dashing young officer inspired many Americans to start across the Nebraska prairie.

The neglected old teamsters' trace along the Platte's north bank was revived in 1847, when a purposeful party of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) began developing its own road, apart from the main Oregon and California migrations. Thus began a distinct and separate current of the westward overland movement along Nebraska's Platte River.

After years of conflict with anti-Mormons across several states, church leaders decided to move their people West to live and govern themselves according to their beliefs. Church President Brigham Young led the first phase of the Mormon emigration from Nauvoo, Illinois, to Winter Quarters (Omaha), Nebraska, in 1846. (The Nauvoo-to-Omaha trek is described in the Auto Tour Route Interpretive Guide for the Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trail Across Iowa.)

Mud and hardship dogged the Latter-day Saints across Iowa in 1846, leaving them exhausted, sick, and hungry by the time they reached the Missouri River. Unable to go on, the Mormon pioneers built temporary shelters and settled in for the coming winter. At Winter Quarters and scattered settlements in Nebraska and across Iowa, more than 700 Mormon emigrants perished from exposure, malnutrition, and disease over the winter of 1846-47.

During those brutal months, Brigham Young and his advisers prepared carefully for the final push over the Rocky Mountains, studying maps and reports and gathering equipment and supplies. Young left Winter Quarters in mid-April 1847 with a handpicked company of 143 young men, three women, and two children. For safety and efficiency, the group formed two large divisions, which were later divided into companies of fifty and ten. This well-disciplined lead party would trek across the prairie and through the mountains to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake to begin preparing a place for the thousands of faithful to follow during the coming summer.

> *. . .we found that the River we had seen in the distance was none other than the celebrated "Platte," the highway of our future journey, which caused joy & rejoicing in my Soul. . .* —Thomas Bullock, 1847 Mormon emigration

Keeping to the north side of the Platte River was key to Young's emigration plan. The trail along the south bank would be easier and grass for the cattle seemed to grow thicker there, but the Mormon leader wanted to avoid further clashes with anti-Mormons who might be emigrating along the Oregon and California road. Young's north-bank trail remained the primary route taken during the ongoing "Gathering of Zion" that spanned the next two decades, although many later Mormon parties did follow the Oregon-California Trail on the south side of the valley, instead.

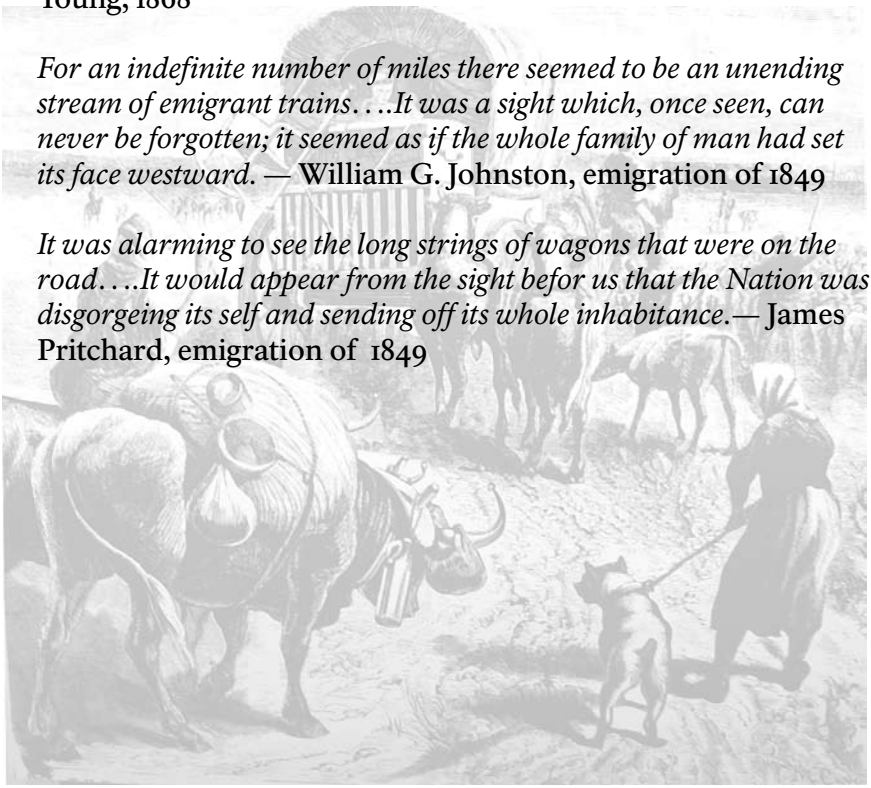
Despite a tense encounter with Omaha Indians, the loss of two horses to Pawnees, and a prairie fire that forced the travelers to seek safety on a Platte River island, the Nebraska leg of the 1847 Mormon journey went smoothly. Along the way, Young's party improved the road, set up trail markers every 10 miles, built ferries, and measured and made notes of the route to aid those who would follow. When the first Mormon wagons arrived in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake on July 23, 1847, the tired travelers immediately began breaking ground to plant potatoes

and turnips. Over 2,000 Latter-day Saints were expected to arrive in the valley that summer. They would need food to survive the winter.

In the spring of 1848, a third company of nearly 2,500 Mormon emigrants set out along the Mormon Trail across Nebraska and Wyoming to the settlement that would become Salt Lake City. Although the Mormons abandoned Winter Quarters at that time, later Mormon emigrants would continue to "jump off" at Missouri River crossings near today's Council Bluffs/Omaha through early the 1870s.

Brigham Young's hope of keeping Mormon emigrants safely segregated from other travelers was soon disappointed, though. Discovery of gold in California in 1848 opened the floodgates of emigration the following spring, when tens of thousands of men and women, the "49ers," rushed westward along both sides of the Platte River.

> *. . . When we left the Missouri River we followed the Platte. And we killed rattle snakes by the cord in some places; and made roads and built bridges til our backs ached.* —Church President Brigham Young, 1868



> *For an indefinite number of miles there seemed to be an unending stream of emigrant trains. . . . It was a sight which, once seen, can never be forgotten; it seemed as if the whole family of man had set its face westward.* — William G. Johnston, emigration of 1849

> *It was alarming to see the long strings of wagons that were on the road. . . . It would appear from the sight befor us that the Nation was disgorgeing its self and sending off its whole inhabitance.*— James Pritchard, emigration of 1849

Gold-seekers swarmed the trailheads, or "jumping-off places," in the spring of 1849. They competed in frenzy for oxen, gear, and supplies, and those without wagons or draft animals set out on horseback or on foot —some even pushing wheelbarrows—to find their fortunes in California. The 49ers stampeded up the trails, mobbed the established river fords and ferries, and crowded into trailside campgrounds. Their livestock stripped the corridor of grass, and starving oxen dropped dying in their yokes. Travelers abandoned dead animals, extra food, all sorts of belongings, and sometimes even their wagons, turning the Platte River Valley into a long, stinking junkyard. The trail also became a cemetery: cholera, a deadly intestinal disease spread by contaminated water, raced the 49ers up the Platte, taking hundreds, maybe thousands, of victims to their graves.

> *Oh! The sacrifice of wagons, clothing, fire arms, beds, bedding, Buffalo skins, trunks, chests, harnesses, and in the loss of life. The road to gold is strewed with destruction, wretchedness and woe; and yet, thousands and tens of thousands follow on in the way with the hope of securing the wealth of this world.* —Orson Hyde, Mormon emigration of 1850

Despite these troubles, some 25,000 Americans went West in 1849—more than the previous nine years combined! The next year, nearly 50,000 souls set feet and face toward the Pacific, lured by the hope of riches in California and the promise of prime farmland in Oregon. The flow of emigration peaked in 1852 when some 60,000 people hit the trails, and then continued in fits and starts—surging during economic hard times and during later Western gold and silver rushes, and dwindling when wars loomed.

The one-time Indian footpath had become a permanent highway, with the Platte River for a centerline.

> *The trail was nearly a quarter of a mile wide- that is, a row of wagons fifteen-hundred feet across, and extending in front and to the rear, as far as we could see…a vast sea of white flapping wagon covers, and a seething mass of plodding animals.*—John K. Stockton, emigration of 1852

"A WHIZ AND A HAIL" — THE PONY EXPRESS

Adding another strand to the twisted braid of trail along the Platte was a crack team of young saddle-toughs who carried mail across the continent for the Pony Express.

The Pony Express was a cross-country relay of horses and riders carrying letters and dispatches in both directions between St. Joseph, Missouri, and San Francisco, California. In those pre-telephone, pre-telegraph days, news going to California via regular mail could take up to six months to arrive. For a premium fee (about $85 per half-ounce in today's money), "the Pony" could deliver that letter in ten to sixteen days, depending on weather conditions.

This was a private business venture launched in 1860 by partners William Russell, William Waddell, and Alexander Majors, who together also ran a freighting operation out of Nebraska City. Hoping for a profitable federal mail-delivery contract, the partners established a string of stations across the West, stocked them with fast, hardy horses, and hired around eighty skilled riders to relay the mail between stations. Each rider would carry the mail pouch (called a mochilla) along his leg of the route, thrilling emigrants and stagecoach passengers with a "whiz and a hail" as he galloped past them.

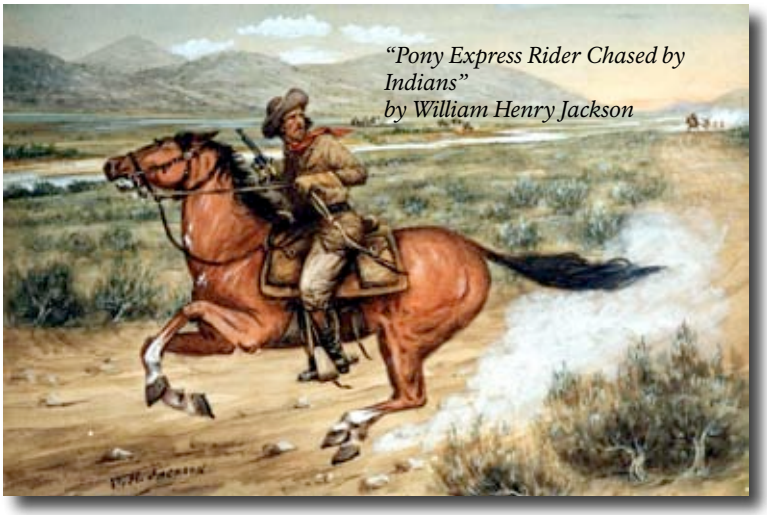
> *Driving slow oxen seemed pretty tame compared with jumping on spirited ponies and going full tilt along the old trail, past the emigrant trains and freight outfits, or even bands of Indians.*
> —William Campbell, Pony rider in Nebraska

The Pony Express riders would head out with the post as soon as they received the mochilla, any time of the day or night and in all weather. Pony Expressman Richard Cleve rode seventy-five miles across eastern Nebraska through a raging blizzard, only to find that his relief rider at the next station was too sick to sit his horse. Cleve remounted and floundered on through whiteout conditions, snowdrifts, and sub-zero temperatures for another seventy-five miles. Man and horse stumbled into their final station after thirty-six hours on the trail. Other riders completed similar death-defying runs, and stories of their bravery and endurance were repeated across the nation.

> *I. . .found it impossible to find the road. I would get off the horse and look for the road, find it and mount the horse, but in five yards I would lose it again.*—Pony Express Rider Richard Cleve

Despite their one-time celebrity, those riders are known to few today. Only two names still loom above the unsettled dust of Pony history: James Butler "Wild Bill" Hickok and William "Buffalo Bill" Cody. Hickok was a Pony Express stock-tender at Rock Creek Station, Nebraska, where he launched his career as a gunslinger in a brutal shootout over a Pony Express business debt. Cody, on the other hand, was a showman who told exciting tales about his adventures as a teenage Pony Express rider, and even re-enacted those events in his touring Wild West show. His stories seem unlikely, though, and it is doubtful that Cody ever worked for the Pony at all. Accurate or not, Buffalo Bill's Wild West performances captured the spirit of the Pony and branded its legend deep into the nation's identity.

These days it is hard to separate truth from the myth of the Pony Express. The enterprise was so short-lived that it left little in the way of business records, and most of those – letters, receipts, payroll logs, etc. – have disappeared. History is further muddled by romanticized accounts, faulty memories, and outright hoaxes. Researchers today disagree on who was the first rider to leave St. Joseph with the first mochilla full of mail, and where exactly he left from, and whether he ended his trip in Sacramento or San Francisco. Students of the Pony debate trail routes, argue the authenticity of "original Pony Express stations," and even

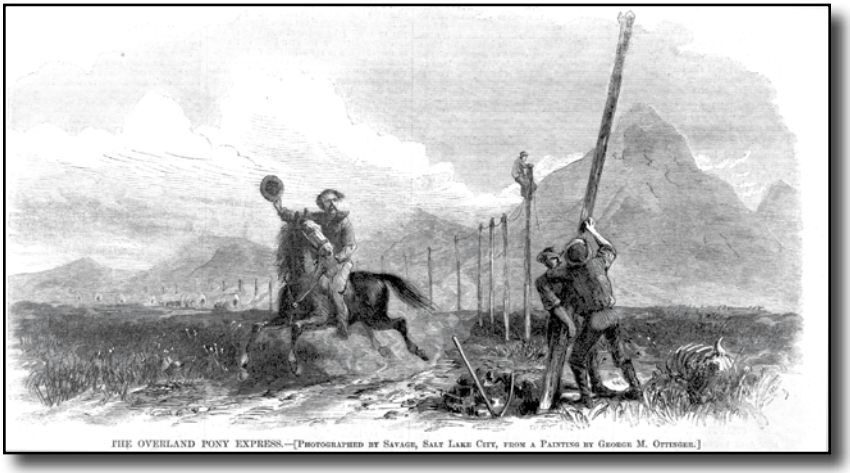


"Pony Express Rider Chased by Indians"
by William Henry Jackson

wonder if some Pony riders were women disguised as boys. Serious researchers are still sifting through the lore, sorting sweet fables from sweaty reality and discovering long-lost nuggets of factual Pony history.

But this much is sure: The Pony Express ran its owners into scandalous financial ruin within 18 short months. The operation quickly racked up expenses while the hoped-for government contract shyly stayed beyond reach. Completion of the transcontinental telegraph system on October 26, 1861, made the debt-ridden Pony obsolete. Riders finished their last run on November 20, 1861.

> *Ere long, the "Pony Express" must give place to the telegraph, and not many years can elapse before the Pacific Railroad will supersede the overland express to California.* —George Ellis Baker, 1860

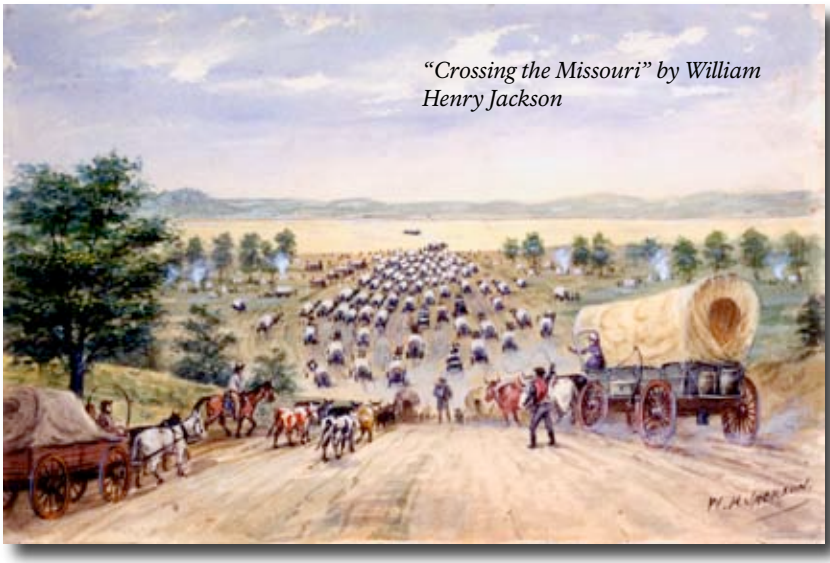


Completion of the transcontinental telegraph system on October 26, 1861, made the Pony Express obsolete. Illustration is courtesy of the Library of Congress from Harpers Weekly.

A "FRAYED ROPE"

The Great Platte River Road was no neatly engineered lane where prairie schooners rolled prettily in single file, but an evolving, rowdy free-for-all of multiple ruts scoring the river valley. Traffic went both ways as emigrants, commercial freight caravans, stagecoaches, and postal relay riders moved back and forth between East and West. New tracks were created as ox-drawn wagons and mule trains passed each other and spread out three, six, or more abreast to escape the choking dust kicked up by those ahead. New cutoffs were developed as travelers sought out the shortest, safest, and fastest ways into and through the Platte River Valley.

On maps, the road's eastern end took on the appearance of a frayed rope, with strands funneling traffic into the Platte Valley from numerous "jumping off places" along the Missouri River. Several strands of the rope brought overland traffic from the southern departure points at Independence, Westport, Kansas City, Leavenworth, Atchison, St. Joseph, and Amazonia. These feeder routes, heavily used in the early years of the migration, led across northeastern Kansas and into the valley of the Little Blue River. The main trail followed that stream northwestward into Nebraska, crested a 20-mile-wide divide, and then dropped to the Platte.



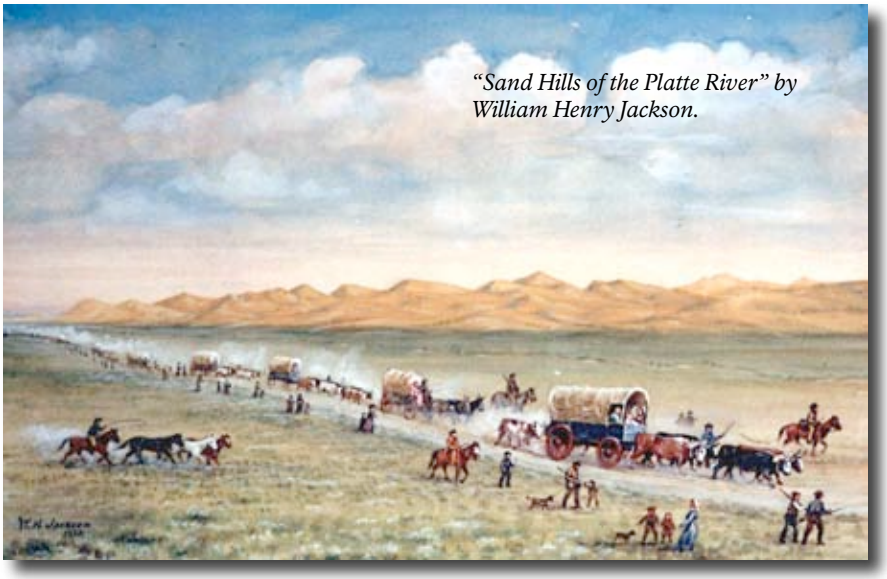
"Crossing the Missouri" by William Henry Jackson

More strands of trail led directly into the Platte Valley from Omaha/ Council Bluffs, Bellevue, Plattsmouth, Old Wyoming, Minersville, Nebraska City, and other northern "jumping off places." By the early 1850s, most emigrant traffic set out from the northern Missouri River ports, cutting off nearly 200 miles of overland travel across Kansas. Commercial and military traffic, much of it from St. Joseph and Fort Leavenworth, continued to use the Kansas feeder routes into the Platte Valley.

Parties setting out from Council Bluffs and Omaha on the Mormon Trail (also called the Council Bluffs Road) north of the Platte had to ford the Elkhorn and Loup Rivers and cross some broken country, but overall found easy traveling. Where the river forks near today's city of North Platte, those travelers kept to the north, following the Mormon route along the North Platte River into today's Wyoming.

> *. . . You would be surprised to see the ways of travel. Large trains of carts with one ox on a cart, some wagons with 8 yoke, wile go hundred horse teams, mule teams, sail wagons goes by wind and steam wagons and hand carts and whele barrows. So wags the tide of life.* —**Squire Lamb, Nebraska stage station operator, 1862**

Trail strands coming into the south side of the Platte Valley braided together into a single main road just east of Fort Kearny, a military

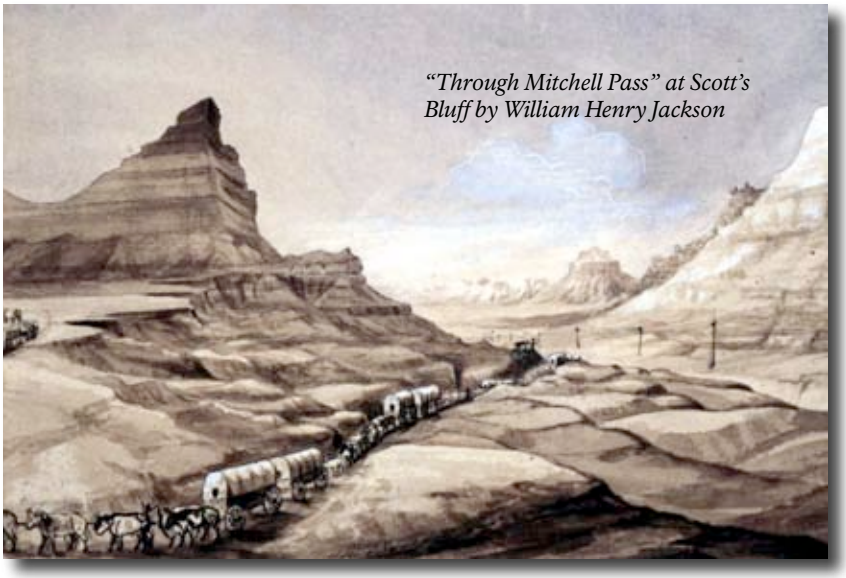


"Sand Hills of the Platte River" by William Henry Jackson.

outpost established in 1848 to aid the Oregon emigration. South-side travelers continued from Fort Kearny along mostly smooth and level terrain to the confluence of the North and South Platte Rivers. Some parties crossed to the north bank of the South Platte somewhere near the confluence, but most continued on the south side to O'Fallon's Bluff. That three-mile-long obstacle at the river's edge forced wagons up and over the bluff, where they wore ruts that are still visible today.

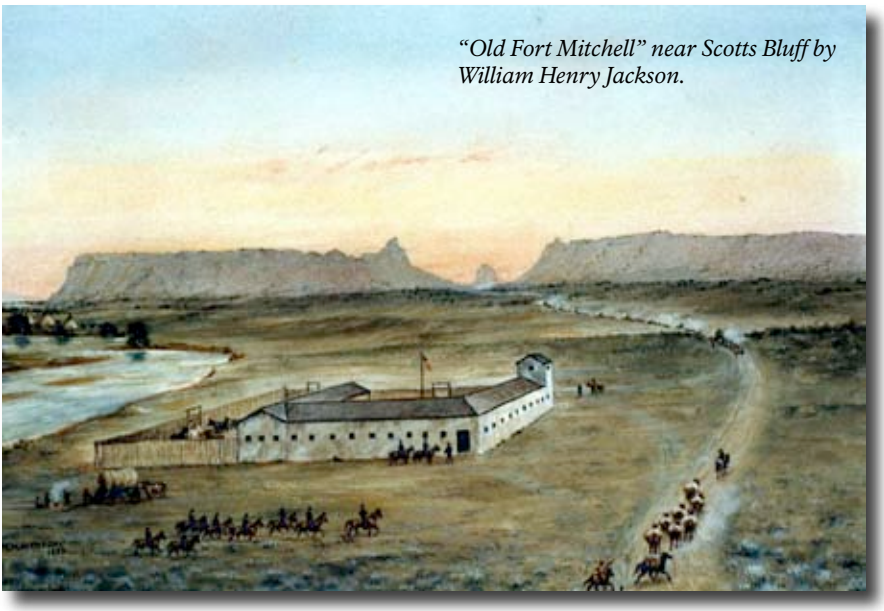
> *[The sand hills are] broken into separate and rugged peaks and elevations, like some gigantic ocean breaker dashing its immense volume into a hundred different waves.* —James Meline, emigration of 1866

From O'Fallon's Bluff, travelers continued along the South Platte a short distance to one of several river fords. There, wagons could cross over to the North Platte and follow its south bank—paralleling the Mormon Trail on the opposite side—to Fort Laramie. Two of these South Platte crossings forced wagons on a steep, difficult climb up California Hill and then a steep, dangerous drop down Windlass Hill—and all three routes dipped into pleasant Ash Hollow, where the unwary sometimes were confronted by Indians. By 1860, most travelers, including Pony Express riders, avoided those hazards by following the South Platte all the way to Julesburg, Colorado, and then cutting northwest to rejoin the Great Platte River Road near Courthouse Rock.



"Through Mitchell Pass" at Scott's Bluff by William Henry Jackson

From Courthouse Rock, the south-bank road continued northwest toward the spectacular spire of Chimney Rock, the most famous landmark on the combined emigrant trails. The route then went around (later, through) Scotts Bluff before continuing into Wyoming. Many travelers paused to explore, sketch, and carve their names into these features. Those following the Mormon Trail on the north side of the river also could see Courthouse Rock, Chimney Rock, and Scotts Bluff, and often described them in their journals.



"Old Fort Mitchell" near Scotts Bluff by William Henry Jackson.

THE PLATTE EXPERIENCE

Otoe Indians called this region "Nebrathka," meaning "flat water," and the French word "Platte" means the same. The defining flatness of the broad Platte River Valley, which averages five to seven miles wide, made it ideal for animal-powered travel on both sides of the stream. Besides being "good wheeling," the long Platte River stretch of trail also provided plenty of water and native grasses for game and livestock. Many emigrants later recalled it as the easiest, most pleasant part of their westering journey.

> *. . .As prity a rode as I ever saw. . . .it is level and smooth as a plank floor.* —Dr. A. H. Thomasson, emigration of 1850

> *We traveled through the most level plains I ever saw in my life. Here is such a scenery of beauty as is seldom witnessed.* — Joseph Williams, circa 1842

> *The sight of a tree is out of the question. It is seldom we see so mutch as a bush.*—Levi Jackman, Mormon emigration of 1847

North or south of the Platte, travelers shared similar experiences. Some were delighted by the open, treeless expanse while others were dismayed by it. Many wrote of the flowers, animals, sand hills, and rock formations they encountered along the trail. Nearly everyone complained about the dirty water, the quicksand, and the swarming, biting insects. Most were thrilled by their first sighting of bison and their first taste of buffalo steak, but not so happy about having to collect and cook over "buffalo chips" due to the scarcity of firewood.

Bison, or American buffalo, had been hunted out of their range in the eastern United States by the early 1800s. In the first decades of the emigration, Easterners saw their first buffalo along the Platte in vast numbers, herds of thousands and tens of thousands that covered the plains like a brown, woolly blanket. The massive herds sometimes blocked wagon trains for miles, and occasionally charged through a wagon train or trail side camp, frightening livestock and wrecking wagons. Professional buffalo hunters slaughtered bison to sell their hides for industrial uses, soldiers killed them to provision their forts, and emigrants shot them for food as well as sport. By the early 1860s, travelers saw few buffalo in the Platte River Valley.

Plains wildlife, natural beauty, and minor complaints aside, trudging in the choking dust with ox-team and wagon under the hot Nebraska sun was no picnic. Many noted in their journals the furious storms that raged over the plains, stampeding livestock and terrifying travelers—even killing some. People died from accidental gunshot, slipping under wagon wheels, injuries caused by unruly oxen, drowning during a stream crossing, and from complications of pregnancy and childbirth. Cholera took many lives, leaving single parents to carry on alone, hundreds of miles from home, with a wagonload of youngsters—or worse, leaving frightened orphans to depend on the kindness of strangers. Many of the dead were buried in unmarked graves on the wagon trail itself, in hopes that neither wolves or Indians would rob their final resting place.

> *The [buffalo] dung was thick in most places, and like chips and score blocks – for this and the sake of softening a hard word they go by the name of Buffalo chips.* —Oliver Boardman Huntington, Mormon emigration of 1847

> *There came up a storm in the afternoon. The wind blew very hard and on the opposite side of the river a tremendous hurricane. We saw trees flying on the air and water blown out of the River as high apparently as the clouds.* —James John, emigration of 1841

> *. . . instead of a single fork or chain [of lightning] a dozen would burst from the dark mass & rush in every direction like serpents from a rocket. . . .at times the whole heavens would appear to be as a blaze for several seconds during which time the minutest object could be discovered.* —William Henry Tappan, civilian draftsman at Fort Childs (Fort Kearny), June 1848

> *The team behind us stop[ped] in mid-stream. . .and the treacherous sand gave way under their feet. They sank slowly, gradually, but surely. They went out of sight inch by inch, as the water rose over the moaning beasts. Without a struggle they disappeared beneath the surface. In a little while the broad South Platte swept on its way, sunny, sparkling, placid, without a ripple to mark where a lonely man parted with all his fortune.* —Luzena Stanley Wilson, emigration of 1849

Indians were a huge worry for many travelers, though for the most part emigrant encounters with Native Americans on the trails across

Nebraska were peaceful, even enjoyable. In the early years of the emigration, in particular, native people viewed the "Great Medicine Road" as a kind of grand market where they could trade for goods and visit with travelers. Emigrants and Indians, including the much feared Pawnees, exchanged many acts of personal kindness; and the Sioux, who controlled most of the Platte River Valley, allowed the wagons to pass in peace.

Still, most emigrants entered Indian Country expecting the worst. Their fears of Indian attack were fueled by rumors, hoaxes, and lurid half-truths in newspapers and popular books—but also by a long history of very real, very violent Indian and settler conflicts in the East. Rumor, history, and experience likewise gave native Plains people reason to be wary of white Americans. When the first great flood of humanity and beasts rushed up the Platte Valley in 1849, stripping the countryside of grass and driving off the buffalo and other wild game, that wariness began to turn to resentment.

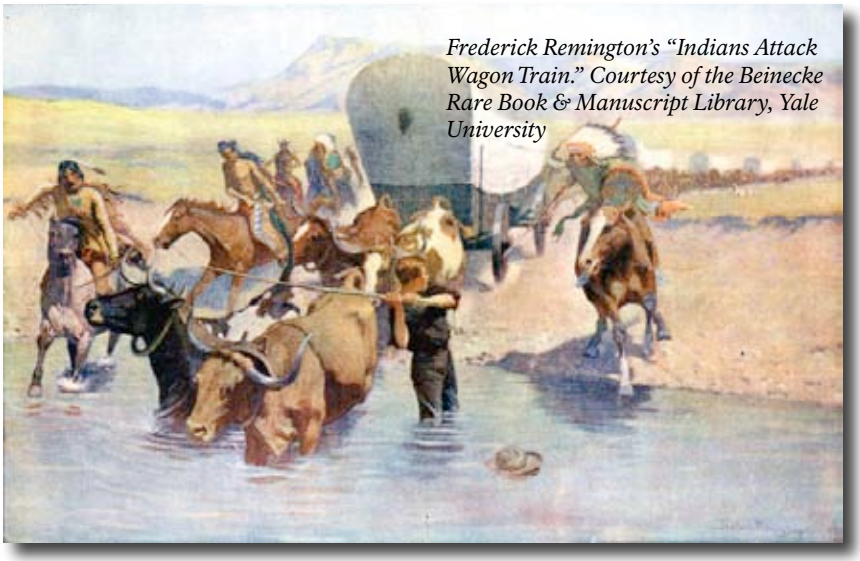
"Teepees on the Plains" Lantern Slide by Walter McClintock. Image is courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University.

NATIVES AND NEWCOMERS: A GATHERING STORM

As American settlers surged westward across the eastern woodlands and prairies in the early 19th century, they pushed Native Americans out of their ancestral homes. The U.S. government resettled many of those displaced Eastern tribes—the Kickapoos, Delawares, Pottawatomies, and others—in congressionally designated Indian Territory west of the Missouri River and south of the Platte. The resettled Eastern tribes were among the first Indians encountered by emigrants passing through northeastern Kansas.

Settlements for the Eastern tribes were carved out of territories already occupied by the Kanza, Otoe, Missouria, Osage, Pawnee, and other Missouri River tribes. Those groups, in turn, were forced to move, giving over their traditional hunting grounds and village sites to the Eastern groups. Their relocation often put them closer to enemies such as the Cheyenne and Sioux, powerful Indian nations that had moved out onto the Nebraska plains from their eastern woodland and prairie homelands.

The Pawnees of northern Kansas and east-central Nebraska were one of many tribes displaced by white settlement. Pawnees were settled village dwellers who lived in earth-lodges, raised garden crops, and ranged onto the plains to hunt buffalo. In 1833, they agreed in a treaty with the

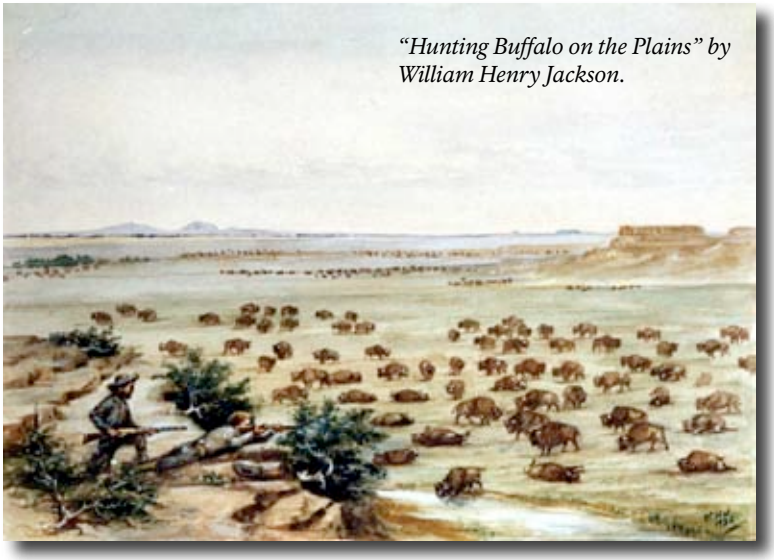


Frederick Remington's "Indians Attack Wagon Train." Courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University

U.S. to surrender their weapons, give up their lands south of the Platte, and relocate their villages to make room for displaced Eastern tribes. In return, the United States promised them protection.

The move put the Pawnees closer to territory controlled by the Lakota Sioux, their traditional enemies. In lightning attacks, Lakota fighters began systematically striking Pawnee settlements along the Loup River. The promised Army protection, if it came, was too little and too late. The Pawnees moved their villages back to the south side of the Platte to buffer them from their Plains enemies, but hostilities continued. As the Western emigrant trails opened in 1841, the Pawnees and Lakota—both fierce and eager fighters—were engaged in total warfare. At the same time, the Pawnees also battled other Missouri River tribes, such as the Kanza and Osage. In the early years of the emigration, war parties crisscrossed the wagon trails, clashed in bloody conflicts, and carried war trophies home past unnerved pioneers. While those war parties did not attack white settlers, they seemed an uneasy omen of troubles to come.

The river of white-topped wagons flowing across their lands certainly brought troubles to the tribes. Cholera, influenza, smallpox, and measles carried by sick travelers spread to Native Americans along the trail. Pioneers slaughtered bison and turned out their livestock to graze on



"Hunting Buffalo on the Plains" by William Henry Jackson.

the buffalo feeding grounds, causing the great herds on which the tribes depended to retreat from the Platte Valley. As years passed, more and more emigrants left the Platte River Road to settle in Nebraska, where many hungrily eyed "empty" Indian lands. Some settlers trespassed on tribal property to steal timber and game, and others boldly built illegal homesteads on Pawnee lands north of the Platte.

> *These Indians have long held undisputed possession of this extensive region, and. . .they consider themselves entitled to compensation, not only for the right of way through their territory, but for the great and injurious destruction of the game, grass, and timber, committed by our troops and emigrants.*— Luke Lea, Indian agent, 1859

Practical and shrewd, the Pawnees demanded that emigrants pay to cross their ancestral lands and use their resources. Refused fair payment, they were known to take travelers' belongings or raid their livestock— their skill and daring in stalking emigrant herds was legendary. Pawnees could be threatening, even dangerous, when confronting white travelers, and they were blamed for a number of killings along the Nebraska trails. Many a pioneer approached Pawnee country with fear and a ready rifle.

> *All of the Pawnee nation are noted for their love of plundering travelers of their horses and mules, but not often anything else.*— William Clayton, Mormon emigration of 1847

By the late 1850s, the friction between whites and Indians led settlers to demand that the Pawnees be removed from Nebraska Territory. Instead, in 1859 the tribe reluctantly signed away the rest of its land and moved its villages to a reservation north of the Loup River—once again on the outskirts of enemy territory. The Lakota and their allies, the Cheyenne and Arapahos, stepped up their attacks on the Pawnees' reservation villages, striking at least eight times that year.

Pawnees, Sioux, Arapaho, Cheyenne, and emigrants all would soon collide in warfare on the Nebraska frontier.

> *A smothered passion for revenge agitates these Indians, perpetually fomented by the failure of food, the encircling encroachment of the white population, and the exasperating sense of decay and impending extinction with which they are surrounded.*—William Bent, trader and Indian agent, 1859

WAR ON THE OREGON & CALIFORNIA TRAILS

> *[The white man] takes our property without paying for it! He kills our game, he eats our meat, he burns our wood, he drinks our water, and he travels our country, and what does he give the red man in exchange for all this?*—Marto-cogershne, Sioux chief, as reported by fur trader Rufus B. Sage, 1841 emigration

Once-friendly Western tribes watched with mounting anger as emigrants helped themselves, often wastefully, to their game, grass, water, and wood. Indian agents warned of bloody conflicts ahead if the issues between native peoples and emigrants were not soon resolved. In response, the U.S. government called for a treaty conference to be held near Fort Laramie, Wyoming, in September 1851. Some 12,000 members of eleven different Northern Plains tribes answered the call, gathering at Horse Creek in western Nebraska for the "Big Talk." Over a period of about three weeks, native leaders and government representatives pounded out an agreement, the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851, to guarantee a long-term peace along the trails.

The agreement was undone three years later by a stray cow. In mid-August 1854 just a few miles east of Fort Laramie, a cow from a Mormon

"Indians on the Wagon Trail" by Charles M. Russell. Courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University

emigrant train bolted into a trailside camp of Brule Lakota, who slaughtered it for food. In response to complaints by the cow's owner, Lt. John Grattan led a detachment of soldiers out of Fort Laramie to confront the Indians in their camp. Grattan provoked a firefight that ended with his entire thirty-one man command—and the respected Brule leader, Conquering Bear—dead.

As punishment for the Grattan defeat, U.S. Army troops under General William Harney surrounded and destroyed a Brule Lakota village at Blue Water Creek, Nebraska, in September 1855. Many fleeing women and children as well as defending warriors died in the attack. This and similar military actions against the Plains Indians over the next several years fanned smoldering resentment into burning outrage. Small bands of young warriors struck back in 1862-63 by opportunistically attacking isolated homesteads, work parties, and freight teamsters in Colorado and Nebraska. Then, for twelve sweltering August days in 1864, Indian military strikes forced travel on the Great Platte River Road to a halt.

> *The Platte valley is ours, and we do not intend to give it away. We have let the white man have it so that he could pass, but he has gone over it so often now that he claims it and thinks he owns it. But it is still ours, and always has been ours.* —Brule Sioux Chief Sinte-Galeska (Spotted Tail), 1864

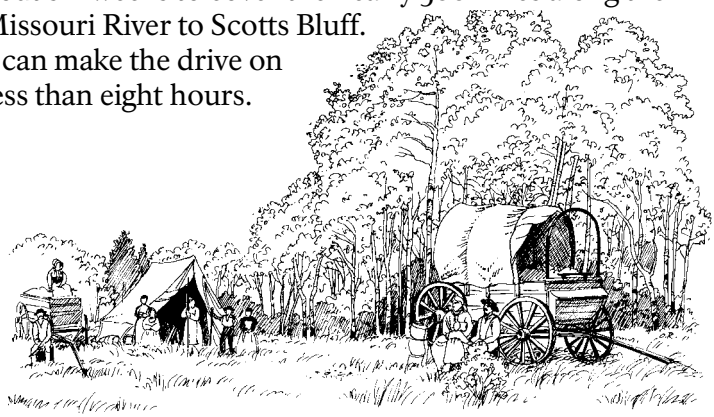
Along the Little Blue and up the Platte River to Julesburg, war parties of Cheyenne, Lakota, and Arapaho fighters made coordinated attacks on emigrant wagons, freight teams, and stagecoaches on the emigrant trails. They particularly targeted lonely homesteads, stage stations, and road ranches—simple hostels that served travelers on the wagon trails—along the Little Blue River. There, warriors killed fifty-one white adults and children and took seven hostages, several of whom died during captivity or shortly after their release months later. The number of Indian fighters killed is unrecorded.

The U.S. Army could ill afford to divert soldiers from its Civil War fronts to the Nebraska frontier. The company sent from Fort Kearny to secure the emigrant trails was outnumbered, out-horsed, and out-distanced by the Indians. Pawnee men, though, were glad to help the Army fight their old enemies, and more than 100 of them volunteered for duty as frontier scouts.

> *The Indians have committed terrible depredations along three hundred miles of the route, burned and pillaged everything, destroyed six thousand bushels of corn at Julesburg, burned hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of wagons, merchandise, &c...* — Demas Barnes, passenger on Overland Stage on the Oregon-California Trail, 1865

Fighting continued across Nebraska, Colorado, and Wyoming the next year, with native leaders now targeting telegraph lines, stage lines, railroads, forts, and settlements in their effort to halt the emigration and regain control of their native territory. In response, entire Army regiments were assigned to protect the trail, with soldiers stationed at small outposts, road ranches, and telegraph stations along the road west of Fort Kearny. Attacks and counter-attacks by both sides flared over the Plains through the 1860s, causing many established settlers to flee Nebraska. Despite the danger, emigrants still poured into the West. The fighting did not truly end until the Lakota and Cheyenne people were finally forced onto reservations in the 1870s. The Pawnees, though they fought for the U.S., fared no better: white settlement pressures, starvation, and a final, disastrous battle with the Lakota forced them out of their Nebraska homeland. The tribe moved to Oklahoma in 1873-75 and sold its Loup River reservation.

Most of the overland trail traffic ended in 1869 with completion of the transcontinental railroad, which provided a faster, safer way West. The era of the overland wagon was drawing to a close, and the era of the fuel-powered steam engine and the automobile was dawning. Some of those who traveled the Great Platte River Road with ox and wagon would live to see their dusty, rutted trail become a modern paved highway. Those pioneers took about six weeks to cover the nearly 500 miles along the Platte from the Missouri River to Scotts Bluff. Today's travelers can make the drive on Interstate 80 in less than eight hours.



CORRIDOR TO DESTINY

Nebraska's Great Platte River Road was a vital, throbbing artery that carried freight, communications, and hundreds of thousands of people—both west and east. At the same time, the road was a trespass that led to the taking of Native American homelands, resources, and self-governance. Physical traces of this mixed legacy still abound along the four historic trails that followed the Platte River west across Nebraska.

There are trail ruts, worn into the earth by the passage of hundreds of thousands of hooves, feet, iron-clad wagon wheels, and stepping-stone walkways to long-gone cabins. There are the hollows where teepees once nestled and black-haired children played, wooded creek-banks that concealed painted warriors, and still-grassless, hard-packed earth where pawing ponies long ago awaited their mochilla and rider. There are gravestones and lonely windblown fields where men and women, emigrant and Indian, died defending home and family. There are the iconic landmarks, open skies, and expansive landscapes of the Western frontier. Through and among them still winds that corridor to destiny, the Platte River.

"Westward America" by William Henry Jackson, along the Great Platte River Road of Nebraska.

SITES AND POINTS OF INTEREST

Auto Tour Routes for the Oregon, California, Mormon Pioneer, and Pony Express National Historic trails enter Nebraska in three locations and come together near the city of Kearney. From there, the routes follow the Platte River and North Platte River west into Wyoming. Watch for Auto Tour Route markers with trail logos along each of the routes.

If you are mostly interested in Pony Express, the earliest routes of the Oregon and California Trails, and the Indian uprisings of the 1860s, follow *Auto Tour Segment A* to Kearney as described below. If you wish to trace the steps of the 1847 Mormon pioneers from Winter Quarters or follow California and Oregon emigrants who started out from the vicinity of Omaha and Council Bluffs, see *Segment B (starting on pg. 34)*. Many later Oregon, California, & Mormon emigrants "jumped off" from other places along the Missouri River. The "cutoff" trails from those places are not included in this driving guide because they are not congressionally authorized segments of any current national historic trail. If you are interested in freighters, early Western military history, or emigrants who started their trek from Nebraska City along the Oxbow Trail, follow *Segment C (starting on pg. 41)*. *Auto Tour Segment D (beginning on pg. 43)* follows the combined trail corridor from Kearney to the Wyoming border.

Many of the historic stops described below are on private property, but are interpreted and can be viewed from the roadside. Please respect private property rights: do not cross fences or enter sites without the landowner's permission.

Caution! *Many Nebraska county roads have well maintained dirt or gravel surfaces. Although the roads are suitable for two-wheel-drive passenger sedans, vehicles can get stuck when the roads are muddy.*

AUTO TOUR SEGMENT A: ODELL TO KEARNEY
(Oregon, California, and Pony Express Trails)

Begin this segment of your Nebraska auto tour of the Oregon, California, and Pony Express National Historic Trails near the Nebraska/Kansas border at the junction of Kansas Highway 148 and Nebraska Highway 8 west of Odell. This is where Pony Express riders and the first Oregon and California emigrants out of Independence, Missouri, entered Nebraska. (Their routes through Kansas are explored in the *Auto Tour Route Interpretive Guide: Western Missouri Through Northeastern Kansas*.) Much of Auto Tour Segment A entails travel on maintained dirt roads.

Rock Creek Station State Historic Park.

A-1. Rock Creek Station State Historical Park (57426 County Road 710, 5 miles east of Fairbury) is best known as the place where Pony Express stock-tender "Wild Bill" Hickok gunned down three men. The station also was a road ranch that served California and Oregon emigrants. The 350-acre park offers Pony Express exhibits, reconstructed buildings, pioneer graves, and trail ruts. Grounds are open summer, 8 a.m.-8 p.m.; other seasons, 8 a.m.-sunset. Visitor Center is open from mid-April through late September, daily, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; and on weekend afternoons in Ocxtober. To arrange off-season and after hours tours call (402) 729-5777. Admission is $3/vehicle; annual Nebraska state park passes are also available for $17. For more information, contact the park at rock.creek.station@ngpc.ne.gov.

Directions: Take state road 8 west toward Endicott and follow signs to Rock Creek Station State Historical Park on county road 710.

Also of Interest: **Homestead National Monument** (8523 West state road 4, four miles west of Beatrice) is off the auto tour route, but is worth a detour. The monument commemorates the Homestead Act of 1862 and the life of the prairie pioneers. Attractions include historic buildings, restored tall grass prairie, antique farming equipment, museum exhibits

and videos, and hiking trails. A new Heritage Center is scheduled for completion in May 2007. Open year-round, Mon.-Fri., 8:30 a.m.-5 p.m.; Sat.-Sun., 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Closed Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1 . Free admission.

Homestead National Monument at Beatrice, NE.

Directions: From Rock Creek, go east on county road 710 for ½ mile, then north on 575th Avenue for 5 miles. Drive east on U.S. 136 toward Beatrice and the junction of state road 4. From there, follow signs northwest to Homestead National Monument.

A-2. George Winslow Grave (4 miles north of Fairbury). 49er George Winslow's trek to California ended here, where he died of cholera. His original gravestone is part of a larger monument that marks his burial place; a nearby interpretive sign tells the story. Multiple wagon ruts and swales of the Oregon and California Trails run southeast-to-northwest across the property, which never has been plowed. The ruts are best viewed in the autumn and winter months, after haying. The site is privately owned, but visitors are welcome and may enter by vehicle when the gate is open, or on foot when it is closed. Be sure to close the gate after entering on foot as livestock may be using the pasture. Open at owner's discretion.

George Winslow Grave site near Fairbury.

Directions: From intersection of U.S. 136 and state road 15 in Fairbury, drive north on 15 for four miles. Turn west on county road 716 for approximately 1.25 miles. (If you cross the creek, you've gone too far.) The monument is visible about 200 yards from the road, in a hayfield on the north side of the road. Park and walk in if gate is open. Return to Fairbury to continue auto tour.

A-3. Warpath on the Little Blue, Deshler-to-Oak Section. Several attacks took place on this stretch of the trail along the Little Blue River during the Indian war of August 1864. Roadside historical signs tell of the events that occurred in the vicinity, but exact sites are mostly unmarked and inaccessible on private farmlands. Even so, the route and countryside are steeped in history and are well worth the drive.

Directions: From Fairbury, take U.S. 136 west to Deshler. Proceed as directed in individual site entries below. Oregon Trail and Pony Express highway markers will help you find your way along these country roads.

A-4. Kiowa Station (7 miles northwest of Deshler). A granite marker commemorates the site of a one-time Pony Express station and later location of a stagecoach swing station. Several settlers were killed in this vicinity during the 1864 Cheyenne and Lakota attacks along the Little Blue. Site is now an agricultural field. Please do not enter private property.

Directions: At Deschler, turn north on NE-5 and continue five miles to the first intersection north of the Little Blue River. Turn west onto an unpaved county road, heading toward Oak. (Watch for historical markers along this route, which follows part of the old trail here.) Drive 1 mile west, then ½ mile north, and then ½ mile west. Site marker is on the north side of the road, 1/2 mile west of the site.

A-5. Emery Stagecoach Ambush Site (3.5 miles east of Oak). A roadside monument recounts the life-or-death race of a passenger-filled stagecoach chased through this area by a war party on Aug. 9, 1864. Please do not enter private property.

Site of 1864 Stagecoach ambush.

Directions: From Kiowa Station, continue west approximately 4 miles, following trail markers. A marker commemorating the Emery ambush site is on the south side of the road.

A-6. Bowie Ranch Site (2.5 miles east of Oak). A roadside sign marks the site of the William Bowie ranch, where a pioneer couple was slain in their home during the 1864 uprising. No remains of the ranch are visible. Please do not enter private property.

> **Directions:** From the Emery site, continue west for ½ mile, turn south toward the Little Blue for ½ mile, and then turn west again to parallel the river for another ½ mile. Watch for the sign on the north side of the road.

A-7. Oak Grove Station/ Comstock Ranch Site (1.5 miles east of Oak). On Aug. 7, 1864, a suspiciously friendly party of twenty Cheyenne dropped in for a visit at Oak Grove Station, a busy road ranch operated by the Comstock family. While chatting casually with nervous ranch workers who had gathered for dinner, the Cheyenne suddenly struck, killing two men and wounding two more. Eleven ranch workers fled into the ranch house and another escaped into a nearby oak grove. The Indian fighters abruptly rode off as an ox train approached. The next day, the survivors fled and the raiders returned and set fire to the ranch buildings. No original structures remain, but the site retains its ranching character. The Oak Grove Pony Express Station is also commemorated here. Only the monument area is open to the public; please do not cross the fence.

Comstock Ranch Site at Oak Grove.

> **Directions:** From the Bowie site, continue west for about a half-mile, then jog right to follow the curve of the river. Take the next left, which angles northwestward, and continue for about ¾ mile. The large granite marker is on the north side of the road.

A-8. Warpath on the Little Blue, Oak-to-Deweese Section. Along this stretch of trail, Indian fighters killed several homesteaders and took four captives on Aug. 7, 1864. Specific locations where the events occurred are on private lands distant from the county road. Even so, it is easy to picture the events of that day while driving through this rural area.

Directions: Begin by taking Railroad Street north through Oak and follow the road as it jogs west across the railroad tracks. Then proceed as directed in individual site entries below. Again, watch for Oregon Trail and Pony Express markers along the route.

A-9. Eubank Homestead (1.5 miles northwest of Oak). Indian fighters destroyed the Eubank homestead and killed two children who were home alone. A short distance north of the ranch, three Eubank men and a teenage boy were slain while cutting hay and a younger boy was taken captive. An interpretive sign at the fence line tells the story. Please do not enter private property.

View looking toward Eubank Ranch from roadway.

Directions: A half mile after turning west out of Oak, the road turns north again. Stop at the corner and look toward the northwest. About a mile distant stood the Eubanks homestead.

A-10. The Narrows (2 miles northwest of Oak). The Eubank parents, their two babies, and a visiting teenage girl were taking a Sunday stroll along The Narrows section of the trail when they heard screaming from the homestead behind them. The father was slain as he ran to the aid of his children. The women and babies hid in the brush, but were discovered when the toddler screamed. All four were captured, to be released months later.

Directions: From the Eubank homestead stop, drive north for 1 ½ miles to the next intersection. Drive west 1 mile and stop again. The Narrows is about 1 mile southwest of the road. Please do not enter private property.

Next, turn north, then follow the county roads as they stair-step north and west one mile at a time, following the curve of the Little Blue and the Oregon Trail toward Angus. You will make a series of five turns (including the north turn at The Narrows stop) before emerging onto state road 4 and continuing west (the sixth turn). The Oregon Trail runs in a straight line southwest of the stair-steps and intercepts the county road in several locations.

A-11. The 1864 Uprising: Interpretive Marker (*2.5* miles north of NE-*4* and NE-*14* intersection). A Nebraska State Historical Society interpretive marker provides more information about the 1864 uprising. There is also a granite marker 1/2 mile north across the Little Blue River. From the state marker, look east toward the hillside to see a series of parallel wagon ruts heading toward your location. Note, this is private property.

Nebraska SHS interpretive marker for 1864 uprising.

Directions: Drive west on state road 4 to state road 14; turn north and continue for about 2 ½ miles. Interpretive marker is on the west side of the road, just south of the Little Blue River.

From here, continue north on state road 14 to Spur 18C.

A-12. Warpath on the Little Blue, Deweese to Kenesaw Section. Several road ranches, stage stations, and former Pony Express stations (remember, the Pony went out of business several years before the 1864 uprising) were located along this stretch of trail as it followed the Little Blue River northwestward. Watch for markers and monuments along the roadside.

To follow this section of trail, turn west on Spur 18C toward Deweese. Where the blacktop road curves south, straight ahead is the approximate location of Liberty Farm Station, a combination homestead, Pony Express Station, and road ranch that was destroyed in the Indian raids. From here, the Oregon/Pony Express Trail angles northwestward. After crossing the Little Blue, turn west into Deweese, then north on Deweese Street. Follow the road as it heads out of town and jogs west, north, and then west again. Continue by following site directions below.

A-13. Pawnee Ranch (4 miles west and 3 miles north of Deweese). Some 60 settlers, freighters, and emigrants on the Oregon-California Trail took refuge here at sturdy Pawnee Ranch, holding off attackers for several days. A monument commemorates this event; no ranch remains are visible. Please do not enter private property.

Directions: Continue west for three miles on county road 3045, then turn north and cross the Little Blue. Continue a mile beyond the river and turn west. Take a right at the next intersection and watch for a monument near the corner on the east side of the road.

A-14. Spring Ranch (4.2 miles west and 3 miles north of Deweese). Spring Ranch, a prosperous road ranch, was left undefended by its owners when they rushed to safety in a nearby town. Indians burned the buildings and attacked two other homesteads in this vicinity, as well. Please do not enter private property.

Directions: Drive north a short distance from the Huff grave marker, then turn west at the next road, county road 3048, and cross Pawnee Creek at the old Oregon Trail crossing. From the bridge, look southeast of the confluence of the Pawnee Creek and the Little Blue to see the location of Spring Ranch.

From here, continue west through the Spring Ranch Historical Area, the site of a town that sprang up after the uprising. Follow Road C north for 2 miles to state road 74 and turn west.

A-15. Smith-Simonton Site (6 miles south of Hastings). In this vicinity on Aug. 7, 1864, a war party ambushed a small train of Denver-bound freight wagons on the Oregon Trail, killing five teamsters and mortally wounded a sixth. Look for an interpretive sign at the fence line; do not enter private property.

Interpretive marker at the Smith-Simonton site.

Directions: Drive west on state road 74 to U.S. 281; turn north and drive 3 miles to Saddle Horn Road. Turn east and continue for 0.4 mile to the marker on the south side of the road.

Also of Interest: **Hastings Museum of Natural and Cultural History** (1330 North Burlington Avenue, Hastings) offers exhibits on the Pawnee and Sioux people, a display of trail-related artifacts, and dioramas featuring wildlife of the Plains. A modest admission fee is charged.

Directions: From the Smith-Simonton wagon train site, drive north on U.S. 281 into Hastings. Turn east on U.S. 34/6, then north on U.S. 281/ Burlington Avenue. Continue northward through town. The museum is on the east side of Burlington as you approach 14th Street.

Pawnee exhibit in the Hastings Museum

To continue your auto tour from the Smith-Simonton site, turn north on U.S 281 toward Hastings. The Oregon, California, and Pony Express Trail corridor continues northwestward from the Smith-Simonton site and crosses U.S. 34/6 exactly 8 miles west of this turn. Upon approaching Hastings, turn west on U.S. 34/6. Watch for the Oregon and Pony Express Trails monument erected Nebraska State Historical Society 9 miles west of Hastings, on the north side of the highway.

A-16. Susan Hail Grave (2 miles north and 3.5 miles west of Kenesaw). Susan Hail (or Haile) was 35 years old and the mother of six children when she died en route to California in 1852. An interpretive sign tells her story. Gravesite is open to the public.

Susan Hail gravesite.

Directions: From U.S. 34/6, turn north on the Spur 1A spur road to Kenesaw. At the south edge of town, turn west on Pine Street and drive 1 ½ miles. Turn north in Winchester Avenue. Drive 3 miles and turn west on 70th Street. Continue about 1 ½ miles to pullout on north side of the road. Return to U.S. 34/6 to resume tour.

A-17. Harold Warp Pioneer Village (U.S. 34/6 and state road 10, Minden). This large museum exhibits more than 50,000 historical objects and buildings, as well as a sizeable collection of original William Henry Jackson paintings depicting trail days. Its "Pumpkinseed Station," an 1860s-era log cabin, is thought by some to be an original Pony Express station, but other researchers have determined that it actually served the

Black Hills Stage route, instead. Open daily (including holidays except Christmas); for seasonal hours and current admission rates, call 1-800-445-4447.

Directions: Take U.S. 34/6 west into Minden. The Pioneer Village is on the corner of U.S. 34/6 and state road 10. Parking is available on the east side of the museum between the Pioneer Motel, Pioneer Restaurant, and Pioneer Museum.

Outdoor exhibits area at the Harold Warp Musuem.

A-18. Fort Kearny State Historical Park (1020 V Road, south of Kearney). Fort Kearny was the first Western military post built to protect emigrants on the Oregon Trail, and it later served as the headquarters for a number of small outposts along the trail. Fort Kearny was also a Pony Express station and a place where travelers could re-supply. The park offers an interpretive center with trail-era artifacts, reconstructed buildings, and grounds. Open Memorial Day-Labor Day, daily, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. A Nebraska state parks pass for admission to the park can be purchased at the interpretive center.

Fort Kearny State Historic Park

Directions: From Minden, proceed north on state road 10 to spur road L50A. Turn west on L50A to Fort Kearny State Historical Park.

To continue your site-by-site auto tour toward Wyoming, skip ahead in this guide to Auto Tour Segment D: Kearney to Wyoming Border.

AUTO TOUR SEGMENT B: OMAHA-CENTRAL CITY-KEARNEY

(Mormon Pioneer, California, and alternate Oregon Trails)

Instead of driving across Kansas, many California, Oregon, and Utah bound emigrants set out from the Omaha and Council Bluffs area and followed the Mormon route into the Platte River Valley. An excellent place to begin your auto tour of the combined Mormon/California Trails is at the remarkable public outdoor sculpture exhibit in downtown Omaha.

B-1. Outdoor Sculptures: Pioneer Courage and Spirit of Nebraska Wilderness (Between Dodge St. and Capitol Ave., vicinity of 15th St., Omaha). These stunning installations of heroic-scale covered wagons, livestock, men, women, children, buffalo, and geese span several blocks in the heart of downtown Omaha. Bring change for a parking meter so you can get out and explore.

Pioneer Courage sculptures.

Directions: If following the Mormon Trail west from Council Bluffs, take I-29 to I-480 W and cross into Omaha. Take the U.S. 6/Dodge Street exit toward Eppley Airfield and go straight to enter Dodge Street. At 13th Street, turn north and park on Capitol Avenue between 15th and 17th Streets. If arriving from the west, take U.S 6 eastbound into downtown Omaha. Turn north on 13th Street and park on Capitol Avenue between 15th and 17th Streets.

B-2. The Mormon Trail Center (3215 State Street, Omaha) is located in historic Winter Quarters (now, Omaha's District of Florence), where many of the first Mormon emigrants spent the hungry winter of 1846-47. The visitor center, operated by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, offers guided tours of trail exhibits (including handcarts and a cabin) and films recounting the Mormon emigration. Free. Open to

all visitors daily, including Sundays, 9 a.m.-9 p.m.

Mormon Pioneer Interpretive Center.

Directions: From downtown Omaha, go west on Dodge Street and turn north on N 17th Street. At 0.2 mile, bear left onto I-480 west and continue for just over ½ mile. Take Exit 2C and merge onto U.S. 75 north. Drive 2.7 mile, bear right at North 30th Street and continue for about 2 miles. Turn west at State Street and drive three blocks to the center.

B-3. Mormon Pioneer Cemetery (opposite the Mormon Trail Center). Hundreds of Mormon emigrant men, women, and children who died here between 1846 and 1848 were laid to rest on this hillside. The exact locations of most of their graves are unmarked. They are commemorated by an Avard Fairbanks statue of grieving parents, located in the north end of the cemetery. Open to all visitors, dawn to dusk.

Grieving parents sculpture at cemetery.

Directions: From the Mormon Trail Center, walk across the street and enter the cemetery through the memorial stairway and gate.

B-4. Historic Winter Quarters occupied much of the same ground where the Omaha Waterworks is located today, east of North 30th Street. The settlement stretched south about a mile from the Florence?Winter Quarters Mill, the only remaining Mormon Pioneer building in the

district - see entry B-5. Although, the historic settlement is gone, but interpretive signs at two locations tell its story.

Directions: From the Mormon Trail Center, head east on State Street three blocks to U.S. 75/N-30th, the approximatee location of historic Main Street. A Nebraska State Historical Society informational sign is located here. Turn north on U.S. 75 and drive ½ mile to N. 30th Street & Dick Collins Road, and park in the little parking area beyond the firehouse. A wayside exhibit tells more of the story.

B-5. The Old Florence Mill (9102 N. 30th Street, Omaha) was built by Mormons in 1846-47 to grind meal for the people of Winter Quarters. A grain elevator was added to the mill in 1915, but the original framework still stands. An historical museum and art gallery now occupy the mill and elevator. Open May-September, Tues.-Sun, 1-5 p.m., or by appointment – call (402) 551-1233. A modest donation is requested.

Old Florence Mill at Winter Quarters.

Directions: From Site B-4, turn east onto Dick Collins Road/ Historic Davenport Street and drive down the hill a short distance.

B-6. Elkhorn Ferry Crossing (Elkhorn Crossing State Recreation Area, 252nd Street & Bennington Road). The 1847 Mormon pioneers led by Brigham Young faced their first major river crossing here and built a ferry to assist those who followed. Site is interpreted by a wayside exhibit. Closed Nov. 1- April 1.

Elkhorn River crossing.

Directions: From Florence Mill, turn west on Dick Collins Road/ Historic Davenport Street and proceed across the interesection with North 30th and North 31st Streets. The road becomes U.S. 75. In

less than ½ mile, at the second traffic light, continue straight onto state road 36 & McKinley Street westbound. McKinley becomes Bennington Road. Where Bennington and state road 36 split, stay right on 36 and drive about 11 miles. You will cross the Elkhorn River and turn south on the first road to the left (252nd Street). Drive 1 mile and turn east on Bennington (gravel), into Elkhorn Crossing State Recreation Area. Continue approximately 1 mile to the interpretive exhibit overlooking the Elkhorn River.

B-7. Liberty Pole Camp (Fremont Lakes State Recreation Area). After crossing the Elkhorn River, the 1847 Mormon pioneers gathered their wagons around a cottonwood pole to reorganize for the trip west. Nothing remains of the camp; a wayside exhibit located off-site tells the story.

Near The Liberty Pole Camp site at Fremont Lakes State Recreation Area.

Directions: From Elkhorn Crossing return to state road 36 and drive west 6 miles to U.S. 275. Turn north and drive approximately 4 miles, crossing Old Highway 8. The next road is Morningside; turn west there and drive 1 mile, then turn north on Luther Road. In approximately ½ mile turn west on Military Avenue. Drive through the town of Fremont to Ridge Road. Turn south and cross the railroad tracks, then immediately turn northwest onto State Lakes Road into Fremont Lake State Park. Park at the pay station. The wayside exhibit is ahead on a grassy slope.

At Columbus, Nebraska, forty miles ahead, the trails split. The route of the 1847 Mormons (and some California emigrants) followed the Loup River northwestward, while another route of the California Trail kept to the north side of the Platte River.

The sites listed below are on the Mormon loop. To follow the Platte River route, take NE 30 west from Columbus. The two routes converge in Central City, Nebraska.

Also of Interest: Genoa, Nebraska, was settled by Mormon settlers in 1857 as a way station for the Utah emigration. Two years later, it became agency headquarters for the newly established Pawnee Indian

Reservation. Pawnee and settler artifacts are exhibited at the **Genoa Historical Museum** (402 Willard Avenue/ NE 22), open Memorial Day-Labor Day, Fri-Sun., 1-5 p.m. Nebraska State Historical Society interpretive signs are located on the south end of Genoa City Park, west of NE 22.

Genoa Historical Museum.

Directions: From Fremont Lakes State Park, return to Military Avenue, turn west, and follow it as it curves northward to intersect with U.S. 30. Drive west on U.S. 30 for 40 miles to Columbus. Turn north on U.S. 81 and continue for about 4 1/2 miles and bear west on state road 22. Continue 16 miles to Genoa and follow the highway as it turns west through down town. The museum is on the north side in mid-town. Stay on 22 as it jogs south again. The park is on the west side, and the signs are near a parking area on the south end of the park.

B-8. Genoa Ruts (1.5 miles southeast of Genoa). Original Mormon trail ruts can be seen here. Please do not enter private property.

Wagon Ruts exhibit near Genoa.

Directions: Route is well signed. Continue south through Genoa on state road 22 to a split where 22 turns west and state road 39 heads south. Just beyond the split is an intersection with an unsigned dirt road. Turn east there and drive 1 mile, then turn south on the next dirt road and drive ½ mile to the wayside and site, located on the east side of the road.

B-9. Pawnee Mission and Village Wayside (6 miles west of Genoa). Repeated attacks by Lakota Sioux and their allies on the Pawnee village

near this pullout forced the Pawnees to abandon the site. A wayside exhibit tells the story. Please do not enter private property.

Looking toward site of former Presbyterian Pawnee Mission.

Directions: From Genoa, take state road 22 west toward Fullerton. The exhibit is at a pullout on the north side of the highway about 6 miles west of Genoa. Watch for more Nebraska Historical Society informational signs along the highway as you continue toward Fullerton.

B-10. Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (3133 West Highway 34, Grand Island) offers pioneer, Native American, and Old West exhibits, a settlement-style exhibit of original *1860s* log cabins, a living 1890s railroad town community, a reconstructed Pawnee earth lodge, a prairie restoration exhibit, and a Nebraska State Historical Society informational sign about the Mormon Trail. Open year-round, Mon.-Sat., 9 a.m.-5 p.m., Sundays noon-5 p.m. Railroad Town and outdoor exhibits open May-Sept. Admission varies by age and season; contact (308) 385-5316 or www.stuhrmuseum.org for rates.

Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer.

Directions: From Fullerton, turn south on state road 14, then west on U.S. 30 into Grand Island. Follow highway signs onto U.S. 281 S & state road 2 E (Tom Osborne Expressway.) In less than 2 miles, turn east onto U.S. 34 E &Husker Highway/Henry Fonda Memorial Highway and continue about ¼ mile to Stuhr Museum.

B-11. Murdock/Mormon Trail Ruts (1.5 miles south of Alda). A wayside exhibit interprets these Mormon Trail wagon ruts.

Directions: Enter Alda on U.S. 30 E. Turn south on Link 40C for about 1 ½ miles, then west (watch for sign to site) on Guenther Road. Wayside is on the right.

From here, take U.S. 30 toward Kearney. To continue your site-by-site auto tour toward Wyoming, skip ahead in this guide to Auto Tour Segment D: Kearney to Wyoming Border.

Mormon Trail wagon ruts along the Wood River.

AUTO TOUR SEGMENT C: NEBRASKA CITY-CENTRAL CITY-KEARNEY
(California Trail)

The "Oxbow Cutoff" of the California Trail was heavily used by freighters hauling supplies and equipment to the western military forts in the late 1850s and 1860s. Gold-seekers and emigrants, including some Mormons participating in the ongoing "Gathering of Zion," also used the route. The cutoff angled northwestward from Nebraska City and entered the Platte River Valley south of today's city of Columbus. From there, wagons followed the river's south bank to Fort Kearny. Begin your auto from the old company headquarters of Russell, Majors and Waddell in Nebraska City.

C-1. Russell, Majors, and Waddell Building: **The Old Freighters Museum** (407 N 14th Street, Nebraska City). This 1858 building was the corporate headquarters of Russell, Majors and Waddell, a freighting company that supplied the western forts with military equipment. This

Old Freightors Museum of Russell, Majors, & Waddell.

is also the company that operated the Pony Express out of St. Joseph, Missouri. The museum is open by appointment as well as on Arbor Day in April and on weekends during the Applejack Festival in September. Call the Nebraska City Tourism and Commerce office at (402) 873-3000 or check www.nebraskacity.com for information. Admission is $2 adults, $1 children.

Directions: Approaching Nebraska City eastbound on state road 2, take the U.S. 75N & state road2 business route into town. Turn left on 11th St/Business 75 and another left onto 3rd Avenue. Continue three blocks to the museum on 14th Street. Approaching Nebraska City westbound on state road 2, turn right (northwest) onto 11th Street/ U.S. 75 business route, then left onto 3rd Avenue. Drive 3 blocks to the museum on 14th Street.

From here, drive east on 3rd Avenue, then turn north on 11th Street/U.S 75 business route and follow it for about 3 ½ miles. Turn right onto U.S. 75 and continue for 15 miles. Turn west on state road 1, then north on state road 63 to Ashland.

C-2. Saline Ford/Oxbow Cutoff (Silver Street, Ashland). Freighters and emigrants took advantage of Salt Creek's rock ledges to ford the stream as they continued toward the Platte River. A wayside exhibit at the town park tells the story. Also planned for the park is a sculpture, "Towers of History," which will commemorate local Indian tribes, the Oxbow Cutoff, and other aspects of area history.

Salt Creek Crossing at Ashland.

Directions: State road 63 intersects with U.S. 6 south of Ashland. Turn right (east) on U.S. 6 and continue for about 3/4 mile. Turn left (northwest) again onto state road 66 and cross the bridge into town. At the four-way stop, turn east onto Silver Street and drive about 1 ½ blocks toward Salt Creek; park at the pullout on the south side of the street before you cross the silver bridge. Almost directly below the bridge are the stone ledges where the wagons crossed. To see them,

cross the berm near the edge of the parking area, walk east toward the bridge, and look along the stream bank below the bridge.

C-3 Saunders County Museum (240 N. Walnut, Wahoo) offers Oxbow Trail map and artifact exhibits (including a journal that describes travel on the Oxbow Trail), and trail research materials. Open summers April-Sept., Tues.-Sat., 10 a.m.-4 p.m., and Sun., 1:30-4:30 p.m.; and winters Oct-March, Tues.-Fri. 10 a.m.-4 p.m.

Directions: From Ashland, continue north on state road 63, which becomes state road 66 going west. Proceed west to intersection with a flashing light. Turn north on U.S. 77 (also called County Road 17) and continue north into Wahoo. After the first stop sign in town, go north 1 block and turn west onto 3rd St. The museum is on the southwest corner.

From Wahoo, follow state road 92 west to U.S. 30. Turn west on U.S. 30 to Grand Island. There you can visit the Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (see entry B-10 for description and directions) and the Murdock/Mormon Trail ruts (see entry B 11).

From Grand Island, take U.S.-30 west toward Kearney. To continue your auto tour, see ***Auto Tour Segment D: Kearney to Wyoming Border****, below.*

AUTO TOUR SEGMENT D: KEARNEY TO WYOMING BORDER

(Oregon, California, Mormon Pioneer, and Pony Express Trails)

For all four trails, your tour of this segment of the Great Platte River Road begins at the Archway Monument in Kearney, Nebraska. From there, your auto tour mostly follows U.S. 30, NE 92, and U.S. 26, with detours to sites on either side of the Platte River.

D-1. The Great Platte River Road Archway Monument (Archway spans I-80; entrance at 3060 E. 1st Street, Kearney). The Archway is a trail-themed visitor center with exhibits, family activities, and lots more to see and do. Open daily; hours vary seasonally. Check www.archway.org or call (877) 511-2724 for more information. Admission $10/adult, $3 to $6/youth, free five years and younger.

Archway Monument at Kearney.

Directions: From U.S. 30 and Grand Island, turn south at the intersection of U.S. 30 and 2nd Avenue in Kearney and continue to the south through town. At the traffic light one block before I-80, turn east onto Talmadge Road and watch for signs to the Archway. At the end of the block turn south onto Central Avenue, go one block, and turn east onto 1st Street/Archway Parkway. Continue 2 miles to the Archway Monument.

From Ft. Kearny State Park, take state road 44 north across the Platte River, cross I-80, and turn east onto Talmadge Road. Watch for signs to the Archway. At the end of the block turn south at Central Avenue, then east on 1st Street/Archway Parkway. Continue 2 miles to the Archway Monument.

Mormon Trail Interpretive exhibit about mail exchange.

D-2. Historical Wayside (I-80 rest area about five miles west of Kearney). Because this rest area is accessible only from the freeway's eastbound lanes, it requires backtracking. Here you will find historical information about Fort Kearny, forts of the Plains, and Mormon mail exchange on the trail.

Directions: From the Archway, return to state road 44 and turn north. Turn west on U.S. 30 and continue to Odessa. Turn south on state road 10b and enter I-80 eastbound to the "Kearney Eastbound Rest Area" east of mile marker 268. From here, return to I-80 east toward Kearney and take Exit 272 to state road 44 north into Kearney. Turn west on U.S. 30 toward Overton.

D-3. Plum Creek Massacre Site and Cemetery (5 miles south of

Overton). Here, Indian fighters attacked a Denver-bound wagon train, killing 13 men and capturing a woman and a boy. A historical sign, located at the nearby Plum Creek Massacre Cemetery, tells the story. Although the cemetery commemorates the victims, they were buried elsewhere.

Directions: At Overton, turn south on state road 24B; cross I-80 and the Platte River. Where the highway ends about ½ mile south of the river, turn west on county road 748 and continue approximately 1 ½ miles. The site is on the north side of the road. Continue west for another 2 miles to the Plum Creek Cemetery, also on the north side of the road. From there, you can return to Overton and continue west on U.S. 30, or follow local roads as they jog west and north, following the Platte River, to county road 433. There, turn north to U.S. 283 and following the highway north to Lexington.

D-4. Dawson County Historical Museum (805 N. Taft Street, Lexington). This area was hard-hit in the 1864 Indian raids, and two captives were taken in an attack on a Denver-bound wagon train near Plum Creek. Museum archives about these events include the original manuscript written by Nancy Morton about her six months' captivity with the Sioux. The museum also offers a Great Platte River Road exhibit about the Oregon, Mormon, and Pony Express Trails, exhibits of trail-related artifacts, and a locally produced driving guide to local historical locales (including the Plum Creek vicinity). Open year-round (except holidays) Mon.-Sat., 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. A free-will donation is requested in lieu of an admission fee.

Dawson County Historical Museum.

Directions: From U.S. 30, turn north onto Jackson Street. Turn east onto 6th Street, then north on Taft. Museum is on west side of Taft. From here, return to U.S. 30 west.

D-5. Willow Creek Pony Express Station (8th Street, Cozad). The original Willow Island Station has been relocated to Cozad's Veterans Memorial Park, at 104 East 9th Street. Open Memorial Day through

Labor Day weekends, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Free. No guides available to assist visitors.

Directions: From U.S. 30, turn north on F Street, then east on 9th Street.

D-6. Gothenburg Pony Express (Ehman Park, NE-47 and 15th Street, Gothenburg). A trail-era cabin thought by some to be an original Pony Express Station is located in a Gothenburg city park. Other researchers believe this historic cabin—now used as a Pony museum— was part of a trailside road ranch on a route once used by the Pony Express, but was not an actual Pony Express station. Open daily beginning April 15; June-Aug., 8 a.m. - 8 p.m.; May and September, 9 a.m. - 6 p.m.; April and Oct., 10 a.m. - 3 p.m. Free. Guide on-site during open hours.

Gothenburg Pony Express Station.

Directions: Route is well signed. From U.S. 30, turn north into Gothenburg on state road 47. Continue on 47 north through town, following signs to Ehman Park. From here, continue to North Platte on U.S. 30.

Also of Interest: **Fort McPherson National Cemetery** (12004 S. Spur 56A, 4 ½ miles south of Maxwell). Fort McPherson was established in 1863 to protect the emigrant trails and the railroad; today nothing remains of the original fort. The national cemetery, where soldiers from many of the western posts are buried, was established in 1873 and is still in operation. Just south of the center of the cemetery in Section

Fort McPherson National Cemetery.

B is a monument commemorating Fort Laramie soldiers killed in the Grattan Fight, which triggered the Plains Wars that occurred after 1854. Pawnee Scout Spotted Horse also is buried here, at C285. Brochures and information are available in the public information building near the cemetery entrance. Visitors can use the intercom phone there to contact staff and request a printed guide to the cemetery. (Staff is unavailable when funerals are in progress.) For more information, go to www.cem.va.gov/nchp/ftmcpherson.htm.

Directions: From U.S. 30 in Maxwell, turn south on Spur 56A/Fort McPherson Road. Cross I-80 and continue for another 1 ½ miles.

D-7. Roadometer Starting Point (North Platte Regional Airport, east of North Platte). Several Mormon pioneers collaborated in creating a "roadometer" to measure the miles the Brigham Young party traveled each day. A wayside exhibit, in the vicinity of the camp where the device was first used, tells the story. The camp itself lies beneath the airport runway.

Mormon Trail Interpretive exhibit about Roadometer.

Directions: North Platte Regional Airport is a short distance east of the city of North Platte. From U.S. 30, turn south into the airport entrance. The wayside is in a parking lot median. From here, continue west on U.S. 30.

D-8. The Sand Hill Ruts (4 miles north of Sutherland). Deep ruts and swales are still visible where the Mormon Trail crests the sand hills and descends toward the valley. A wayside exhibit tells the story.

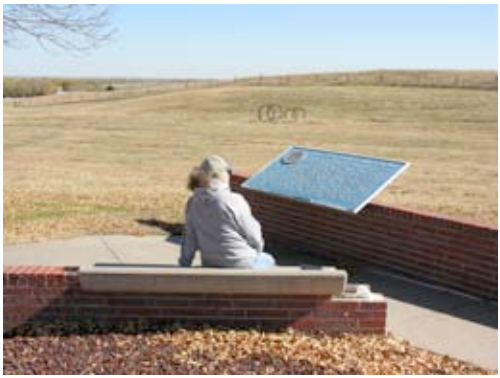
Mormon Trail Interpretive exhibit at Sand Hill ruts.

Directions: As you approach Sutherland, watch for Pioneer Trace/Prairie Trace

Road near the east edge of town. Drive north for 3.8 miles on Pioneer Trace/Prairie Trace Road. Watch for roadside pullout on the east side of the road.

From here, continue to Sutherland and turn south on state road 25 to I-80. Enter I-80 eastbound to access the O'Fallon's Bluff interpretive area.

D-9. O'Fallon's Bluff Trail Ruts & Interpretive Area (I-80 eastbound rest area near Sutherland). Because this site is accessible only via I-80's eastbound lanes, it requires backtracking. This freeway rest area is also an interpretive park for the emigrant trails. Wagon traces are still visible here— you can walk in them— and Nebraska State Historical Society signs tell the story of the Great Platte River Road.



O'Fallon's Bluff Rest Area on I-80.

Directions: From I-80 eastbound, take the rest area exit between mileposts 159 and 160. To continue auto tour, re-enter the freeway and continue east for about 5 miles. Exit at the Hershey interchange and take spur road 56C through town. Turn west on U.S. 30.

D-10. California Hill (4 ½ miles west of Brule). Deep ruts are carved into California Hill, where wagons pulled up out of the Lower California Crossing of the Platte River. The site, owned by the Nebraska State Historical Society, is open to public visitation. Free.

Directions: Drive west through Brule on U.S. 30 for about 4 miles. Watch for a granite 1912 Nebraska State Historical monument for the Oregon Trail on the north side of the road. About ½ mile beyond that, turn north on a gravel road, Road West MN. One-half mile from that turn, stop and park. There is a pedestrian pass-through in the fence line. Enter the pasture and walk to the ruts. Return to U.S. 30 and continue west.

D-11. Colorado Welcome Center (Julesburg, Col.). This visitor center has outdoor and inside exhibits on Pony Express, California, and Oregon

Trail history. Here you can also pick up a South Platte River Trail brochure, which will guide you on a loop tour of trail and other historical sites between Julesburg and Ovid – an area that was hard hit by the ongoing Plains Wars in 1865. See also www.rivertrailonline.org. Most roads on this tour are unpaved.

Colorado Welcome Center at Julesburg,

Directions: From U.S. 30, turn south on state road 27 (7 miles east of Chappell). Cross I-80. Almost 2 miles later, the road will split: follow it east 1 mile and south 2 mile to the Colorado border, where the road becomes CO-11. Follow CO-11 south into Julesburg. In Julesburg, turn east on U.S. 138; then turn south on U.S. 385. Cross the Platte River. Welcome Center is at the intersection of U.S. 385 and County Road 28, immediately north of I-76.

D-12. Trail Ruts (Julesburg). As you follow the Julesburg-Ovid loop tour, look past the fence lines for white posts that mark the locations of trail ruts and swales, and also watch for Pony Express monuments and interpretive signs about a variety of local historical events and locales. Devil's Dive, where the trail descends a steep slope, is one of the first stops on the tour.

Directions: Turn left from the Welcome Center Driveway onto county road 28 and drive 0.9 mile. Devil's Dive is on the right.

D-13. Julesburg No. 1 (Julesburg). The original town of Julesburg was burned by Indian fighters in 1865, following a 4-mile running battle with the U.S. Cavalry. No original buildings remain.

Historical monument at Old Julesburg site.

Directions: Continue west on county road 28 for about 5 more miles. Pullout, interpretive signs, and Pony Express monuments are the right.

D-14. Fort Sedgwick (south of Ovid, Col.) was featured as a forlorn Plains outpost in the movie "Dances with Wolves." Built in 1865 to protect the travelers and the transcontinental telegraph during the ongoing Plains Wars, the fort was abandoned in 1871. No original buildings remain, but the site is marked with a flagpole.

Across this field is site of Old Fort Sedgwick.

Directions: Continue west on county road 28 for about a mile. Pullout is on the right. The flagpole indicating the original fort site can be seen in the privately owned fields beyond the pullout.

D-15. Upper California Crossing (east of Ovid, Colorado.). Just east of here was the Upper California Crossing, where the Pony Express, California, and Oregon Trails crossed the South Platte River and started northwestward to Wyoming. White trail markers in the field indicate where wagons entered the river.

Directions: Turn north on county road 27.8 (paved) and cross the South Platte River into Ovid. Turn east on U.S. 138. Pullout is outside of town on the right side of the road. (Watch for interpretive sign on "Sugar Town.")

D-16. Fort Sedgwick Depot Museum (201 W. 1st Street, Julesburg).The old Union Pacific Depot exhibits Indian and pioneer relics. Open Memorial Day to Labor Day, Mon.-Sat. 1 a.m.-4 p.m., Sundays 1 -4 p.m. During the off-season, call (970) 474-3504 to arrange admission.

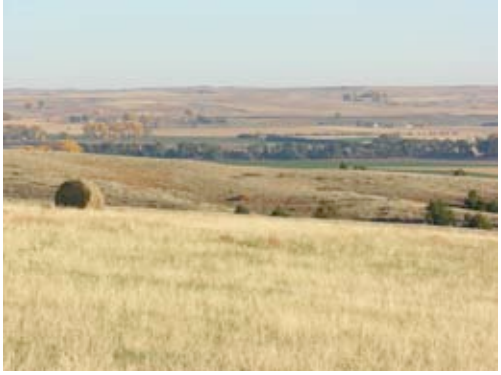
Fort Sedgwick Depot Museum.

Directions: As you enter Julesburg on U.S. 138, the Depot Museum is on the right near the railroad tracks.

To resume the auto tour for the Mormon Pioneer, Oregon, and California Trails, continue east on U.S. 138 to Big Springs. There, turn north on County Road 207, continue to U.S. 26, and turn west. Proceed to Ash Hollow (entry D-17, below).

To follow the Pony Express Trail, take U.S. 138 west out of Julesburg for about 2 miles. Turn north on U.S. 385 to Chappell, and there turn west on U.S.-30 to Sidney. Turn north on U.S. 384 to rejoin the auto tour on NE 92. Continue west on NE 92 toward Bridgeport. Skip ahead in this guide to entry D-23 below.

D-17. Ash Hollow Complex (about 2 miles southeast of Lewellen). The Ash Hollow Complex includes two separate areas administered as Ash Hollow State Historical Park. Altogether, the park protects over 1,000 acres of historic trail and surrounding landscape. Attractions include a park visitor center, a pioneer grave, and an impressive series of trail ruts and swales. A ferocious battle between the Pawnees and Lakota Sioux also took place in this valley.



Platte River Valley from above Ash Hollow.

Directions to park complex: From the junction of county road 207 and U.S. 26, drive west approximately 1 ½ miles. Watch for the entrance to Windlass Hill on the west side of the road.

D-17.a: Windlass Hill is scarred by deeply eroded ruts cut by thousands of wagons sliding downhill with their wheels locked. A paved (but steep) walking trail with outdoor exhibits leads visitors along the ruts to the top of the hill, where hikers are rewarded with a vista of Ash Hollow and the Platte River. Open daily year round, 8 a.m. to sunset.

Now continue on U.S. 26 west for two more miles to the main park entrance, which is on the east side of the road.

D-17.b: Ash Hollow State Historical Park, Headquarters Area. Purchase a $3/vehicle park entrance permit or a $17 annual Nebraska state parks pass at the visitor center here. This portion of the park offers an interpretive center with exhibits, a cave with archeological exhibits, and a public picnic area. Grounds are open daily year-round, 8 a.m. to sunset; interpretive facilities and cave are open Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day, Tues.-Sun., 10 a.m. - 4 p.m.

Windlass Hill ruts at Ash Hollow.

From here, continue on U.S. 26 west for less than 1 mile to Ash Hollow Cemetery. Cemetery entrance is on the west side of the road.

D-17.c: Pioneer Grave at Ash Hollow Cemetery. Rachel Pattison was an 18-year-old bride of two months and on her way to Oregon when cholera took her life here in 1849. Her trailside grave was the beginning of this pioneer cemetery. To find her burial place, turn right toward the north end of the cemetery. A monument, which preserves her original gravestone, is near the flagpole.

Historical monument at Ash Hollow Cemetery.

D-18. Blue Water Battlefield/Harney Massacre/Battle of Ash Hollow Historic Wayside (1.8 miles west of Lewellen). In retaliation for the 1854 killing of 29 U.S. soldiers in Wyoming (the "Grattan Fight"), troops under General William Harney from Fort Kearny destroyed a Lakota Sioux village near here at Blue Creek the following year. Indian strikes against travelers and settlers along the Great Platte River Road in the 1860s were, in part, retribution for the killings at Blue Creek. A Nebraska State Historical Society sign tells the story; the actual battlefield, not

visible from the pullout, is on private land several miles distant from the road. Please do not enter private property.

Directions: Continue through Lewellen on U.S. 26 & state road 92 for 1.8 miles. Wayside is on the north side of the highway.

D-19. John Hollman Grave (2.5 miles south of Oshkosh). Emigrant John Hollman died in 1852, possibly of cholera. His original gravestone still marks his resting place; a Nebraska State Historical Society sign tells of death on the trail.

Historical monument at the Battle of Blue Water site.

Directions: Continue into Oshkosh on U.S. 26 and turn south on state road 27. Grave is two miles south of Oshkosh.

D-20. Frog's Head Bluff (Indian Lookout Point) Interpretive Wayside (2 miles west of Lisco). More widely known as Indian Lookout Point, this stone projection looked like the profile of a frog's head to the 1847 Mormon pioneers. A wayside exhibit tells the story. The landmark is privately owned; please do not enter.

Indian Lookout Point along U.S. 26.

Directions: Take U.S. 26 &state road 92 west toward Lisco. Wayside pullout is about 2 miles west of Lisco, on the north side of the highway.

D-21. Ancient Bluff Ruins and Narcissa Whitman Interpretive Waysides (6 miles west of Lisco, 8 miles east of Broadwater). Narcissa

Whitman, a missionary and one of the first white female overland travelers, passed by here in 1836. Brigham Young and his advance group of Latter-day Saints camped near here 11 years later. Interpretive signs and waysides tell the stories.

Distant view of Ancient Bluff Ruins from the east.

Directions: Continue west on U.S. 26 & state road 92 from Lisco. Pullout is on the north side of the road east of Broadwater.

Continue on U.S. 26 toward Broadwater. At the east edge of town, turn south onto state road 92 west toward Bridgeport.

D-22. Amanda Lamme (or Lamin) Grave (5 miles southeast of Bridgeport). Twenty-eight-year-old Amanda Lamme died near here in 1850 while on her way to California. Her grave, located on private property, cannot be viewed from the road, but a Nebraska State Historical sign interprets the site and discusses death on the trail. Please do not enter private property.

Nebraska Historical marker for Amanda Lamme grave.

Directions: Pullout is on state road 92 north of the intersection of that highway and U.S. 385.

D-23. Mud Springs State Historical Site & Pony Express Station (5.5 miles north of Dalton) Caution! This site is accessed by a dirt road that may be unsuitable for low-clearance vehicles. Site is in rural area open to livestock. Mud Springs was a Pony Express home station—a place where riders ate and slept—and an Overland Stage and transcontinental telegraph station. It also is the site of an 1865 skirmish between stage

station employees, the U.S. cavalry, and Kakota Sioux and Cheyenne fighters. Free public access to monument area; do not enter nearby private land.

Mud Springs Pony Express station.

Directions: From the junction of state road 92 and U.S. 385, drive south for 8.1 miles on U.S. 385. Turn west onto a dirt road (intersection is near a feature mapped as "Lookout Mound") and watch for signs to Mud Springs. Turn left on Mud Springs Road. Pass the Pony Express Trail marker and watch for a small, white sign reading "Monument." From here, return to U.S. 385 and drive north.

D-24. Courthouse & Jail Rocks (5 miles south of Bridgeport). Travelers on the south side of the river had a close-up view of these celebrated landmarks.

View Of Courthouse and Jail Rocks.

Directions: From U.S. 385 where you exit Mud Springs, turn north for about 2 ½ miles. Turn west on county road 78 (paved). The road jogs north and becomes county road 105, then jogs west and becomes county road 82. Turn right (north) on state road 88 toward Bridgeport and cross Pumpkin Creek. A Nebraska Historical Society sign and pullout are on the west side of the road, and a gravel road will take you closer to the features.

D-25. Courthouse & Jail Rocks: View from the Mormon Trail (2 miles northeast of Bridgeport). Although they were on the opposite side of the river, Mormon emigrants could see Courthouse and Jail Rocks, and often noted them in their journals.

Directions: From state road 88, continue north through Bridgeport and cross the Platte River. Turn west on U.S. 26. A pullout with a

view of the landmarks and an interpretive wayside is located on the north side of the highway about two miles east of Bridgeport. Return to Bridgeport and continue west on U.S. 26 & state road 92.

D-26. Chimney Rock National Historic Site (1 mile south of Bayard). Again, travelers on the Mormon Pioneer Trail viewed this famous landmark from a distance, while those on the Oregon, California, and Pony Express Trails passed much closer. Watch for a roadside pullout with a wayside exhibit (west of U.S. 26 where it turns north from state road 92, near milepost 47) telling of the first Mormons to view the feature. Chimney Rock grounds and visitor center are open daily year-round, and closed on state and federal holidays. Admission is $3 for adults; children with adults are free.

Chimney Rock from U.S. 26.

Directions: Continue west from Bridgeport on U.S. 26 & state road 92 for about 12 ½ miles. Turn south on county road 75 and follow signs to the visitor center. Return to 92 west.

D-27. Rebecca Winters Grave (1 mile east of Scottsbluff). Fifty-year-old Rebecca Winters, a Mormon emigrant, died of cholera near here while on her way to Utah in 1852. Her resting place is marked with an iron wagon wheel rim that was inscribed with her name when she died. A monument, Nebraska Historical Society Sign, and a wayside exhibit commemorate the site and interpret the Mormon emigration.

Rebecca Winters grave site.

Directions: Return to state road 92 and drive west toward Gering. Approaching town, turn north on state road 23 & Scottsbluff-Gering Bypass to the South Beltline Highway. Turn east; the road turns northward and crosses the railroad tracks. Immediately after crossing the tracks, turn right on Rebecca Winters Drive. The grave is in the small triangle between the railroad tracks, South Beltline Highway, and U.S. 26.

D-28. North Platte Valley Museum (11th and J Streets, Gering).This museum offers exhibits about Native Americans, Robidoux Trading Post, emigrant trails and cabins, and Rebecca Winters. It also houses the archival collection of renowned emigrant trail scholars Paul and Helen Henderson. The museum gallery is open Mon.-Fri. 9 a.m.-4 p.m.; Sat.-Sun. noon to 4 p.m.; closed weekends Labor Day through Memorial Day. The Western History Archive is open to researchers Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, noon to 4 p.m., or by appointment (call (308) 436-5411). $3 adults, $1 ages 6-12, free for ages five and under.

Entrance way to North Platte Valley Museum.

Directions: From the Winters monument, take the South Beltline Highway west into Scottsbluff. Turn south on Broadway/10th Street/ state road 71 Business Route and cross the North Platte River into Gering. Continue south through town; turn west onto J Street one block to end at the museum.

D-29. Robidoux's First Trading Post (8 miles west of Gering). Before the overland trails cut through Scotts Bluff, they swung south around it. Joseph Robidoux built the first of two trading posts in this vicinity in 1849 to serve the Oregon and California traffic. It later burned; no buildings

Site of Robidoux's First Trading Post.

remain. Some researchers question whether the marked location is the actual site of the fort.

Directions: Return to state road 92 (Old Oregon Trail Road), then turn south on state road 71. South of Gering, turn west on Robidoux Road (watch for sign to Robidoux Pass and blacksmith shop), a maintained gravel road suitable for cars. In 4 miles, the road jogs north and then west. Continue another 4 miles. As the road curves northwestward, watch for the Robidoux Post site on a low rise on the south side of the road. Park along the road and walk up to the site. (If you see a sign for pioneer graves, you have passed the trading post site by about .2 miles.)

D-30. Pioneer Graves (8 miles west of Gering). Wagon swales and four anonymous pioneer graves are located near Robidoux's Post. Watch for white trail markers and ruts along the road.

Pioneer Graves east of the summit from Robidoux Pass.

Directions: From the trading post, continue northwestward on the gravel road a short distance, about 0.2 mile. Turn north onto a rough two-track or park along the road and walk in. The graves are 0.1 mile from the road.

D-31. Robidoux Pass (9 miles west of Gering). This pass was used by Oregon and California-bound traffic until Mitchell Pass was opened through Scott's Bluff in 1851. Watch for ruts on the south side of the road.

Robidoux Pass beyond the interpretive marker.

Directions: From the gravesite, return to the main gravel road and continue northwestward to the crest of

the hill. At the hilltop, turn right down a two-track a short distance to an interpretive panel about the pass. Return to the gravel road and continue west over the hill; watch for a road sign for Robidoux Pass.

D-32. Robidoux's Second Post (about 9 miles southeast of Gering). The log buildings at this site are a reconstruction of Robidoux's second post, built in 1851. Interpretive signs tell the story.

Robidoux's Second Trading post.

Directions: At Robidoux Pass, the road makes a hairpin turn and then splits. Continue straight (south) onto Summit Ranch Road. Follow it for about 3 miles and turn east onto to Carter Canyon Road, watching for directional signs to the post. Continue about 1 ½ miles to the reconstructed post on the south side of the road.

D-33. Scotts Bluff National Monument (2 miles west of Gering). The first wagon trails skirted around this majestic geological formation, but a later route cut through at Mitchell Pass. Attractions include a visitor center with a trail museum and artwork by pioneer photographer and artist William Henry Jackson; a short hiking trail; and a paved driving route (with free shuttle in the summer). Wagon swales are still visible. Grounds are open year-round, dawn to dusk. Visitor center is open daily, 8 a.m. - 7 p.m. in the summer and 8 a.m. - 5 p.m. in other seasons. Admission is $5/car, $3/motorcycle.

Mitchell Pass at Scotts Bluff National Monument.

Directions: From Robidoux's Second Post, continue on Carter Canyon Road as it swings north once more to Robidoux Road. Turn east and onto Robidoux and continue to state road 71. Turn north on

71 toward Gering. Turn west again on state road 92 (Old Oregon Trail Road) and continue into Scotts Bluff National Monument.

D-34. Horse Creek Treaty Grounds and Battle Site (2 miles southwest of Morrill). This spot in September 1851 was the campground of some 12,000 tribal representatives—the largest gathering of Indians ever recorded. They came to work out the terms of a treaty to protect the emigrant trails and compensate the tribes for that use of their lands and resources. At the same site in 1864 a band of Lakota Sioux resisted efforts of the U.S. Army to move them to Ft. Kearny, resulting in a fight known as the Battle of Horse Creek. Nebraska State Historical Society interpretive panels tell about the treaty; privately owned treaty grounds can be viewed from the pullout.

Roadside pullout and interpretive markers for Horse Creek Treaty site.

Directions: From Scotts Bluff National Monument, continue west on state road 92 (Old Oregon Trail Road) to state road 29. Turn north on 29 and drive to U.S. 26. Turn west on U.S. 26. Interpretive pullout is 4 miles west of Morrill.

This ends the auto tour route of the Oregon, California, Mormon Pioneer, and Pony Express National Historic Trails through Nebraska. To continue west along the auto tour route, follow U.S. 26 toward the Wyoming border and Fort Laramie National Historic Site.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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Salt Lake City, UT 84111

www.nps.gov/cali (California)
www.nps.gov/mopi (Mormon Pioneer)
www.nps.gov/oreg (Oregon)
www.nps.gov/poex (Pony Express)

Email: ntsl_interpretation@nps.gov

Nebraska Tourism:
www.visitnebraska.org

Colorado Tourism:
www.Colorado.com

Oregon & California Trails Association - OCTA:
www.octa-trails.org/index.htm

Mormon Trails Association:
www.mormontrails.org

National Pony Express Association:
www.xhomestation.com

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Regional Auto Tour Route Map

Click on the hot link above to open the
Acrobat Reader PDF map document.

National Trails System
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior