Chapter Ten
Scott-Applegate Cut-off

Botanist Joseph Burke traveling with Jesse Applegate's advance road party told of arriving August 26 at the turnoff from the California Trail onto the Scott-Applegate Cut-off. This was the middle stretch of the new Southern Route as yet untraveled by wagons. The lead company of South Road emigrants guided by Levi Scott was not far behind, probably arriving there around the first of September. Following behind them, chronicler Virgil Pringle arrived on September 5, and Thornton, traveling with parties in the rear, placed his arrival in mid-September, probably a week or more behind Pringle.

As Thornton and ex-Gov. Boggs approached the turnoff, they became apprehensive about the distance they had already traveled on the first leg of the new route. Thornton claimed Jesse Applegate had told them the turnoff was no more than 200 miles from Ft. Hall. Because they had already traveled twice that far -- nearly 400 miles -- they were growing increasingly restive. Burke confirmed that Jesse Applegate left Ft. Hall on August 11, went 200 miles to the Humboldt River, and after traveling for seven days arrived there on August 17. He then proceeded another 200 miles down the river with the road party and in nine more days arrived at the Scott-Applegate turn-off on August 26 – sixteen days and 400 miles in all, averaging 25 miles per day on horseback.[1]

When the Boggs party did reach the turn-off, explorer David Goff was waiting there to pilot them over the South Road, Scott having gone on ahead with the lead company. The ex-Governor, "perceiving that we had been misinformed as to the distance, thought it unadvisable to proceed." Boggs told Thornton that he "had lost all confidence in Applegate's judgment of distances; and concluded if he [Jesse Applegate, the professional land surveyor] had made as great an error of judgment in the residue of the route, that we should not be able to reach the settlements before winter set in, and that we should in all probability perish…."[2]

Boggs was the same man about whom Jesse Applegate, in promoting the virtues of his new route, had written in an August 9 Ft. Hall letter to his brother Lisbon in Missouri: "Gov. Boggs and almost all the respectable portion of the California emigrants are going on the new road to Oregon…." Now here was ex-Gov. Boggs – who had initially intended to go to California but had been persuaded to take the South Road by his acquaintance with Jesse Applegate as a Missouri legislator – had changed his mind yet again -- and had decided instead to continue on down the trail to California as he had originally intended. Thornton, having no desire to live in a "foreign" country that he believed would require him to renounce his U. S. citizenship, reluctantly separated himself from Boggs' company and turned onto the new Southern Route to Oregon.[3]

THE SOUTHERN ROUTE

Upon turning off the established California Trail onto the untried Scott-Applegate Cut-off, the first obstacle emigrants had to overcome was crossing the Black Rock Desert, an arid stretch that was nearly desolate of water and grass for the oxen. Many of the emigrants had crossed a similar desert in the earlier Greenwood Cut-off – and Jesse Applegate had told them this one was only thirty miles across – almost one-third shorter than the previous dry crossing.

Chronicler Pringle reported on September 6 traveling fifteen miles to the first weak spring, having supper at 4:00 p.m., giving their cattle what water they could get, and moving on. His party then traveled all night another nineteen miles to a second spring, where they arrived at 4:00 a.m., and found this spring weaker than the first. By then, Pringle had traveled thirty-four miles in nearly twenty-four straight hours of traveling, and Jesse Applegate's "thirty-mile-long" Black Rock Desert continued on before them as far as they could see. After getting what sleep and rest they could, at 9:00 a.m. on September 7, Pringle started on the last stage of the desert -- "our stock weak and working badly, getting very little water and nothing to eat."[4]

Another twenty-one miles brought them to Black Rock at 8:15 p.m. -- a total of fifty-five miles in which the emigrants -- and especially their oxen -- had toiled under the hot summer sun. The dry stretch which was supposed to be almost one-third shorter than the earlier one, actually turned out to be nearly one-third longer -- nearly twice as long as Jesse Applegate had represented it!

Pringle continued: “Left 2 steers belonging to [Smith] Collins on the road, they being too week to come in, several others barely getting through.” Traveling just behind Scott and the lead wagons, A. H. Garrison had said on the way to Black Rock, “… we began to find dead cattle, and some that had given out and was left to die. Oh what suffering we now experience, both man and beast was famishing for water … the horrible thirst continued by the time the water we started from the Humboldt with was all exhausted.” Scott reported going the final twenty miles from Rabbit-Hole Spring to Black Rock at night, to avoid the hot sunbeams streaming down on “our suffering teams.”[5]

Traveling some days behind Pringle, Thornton’s party filled their kegs with water and set off upon the new cut-off. Soon after they started, they saw in the distance what Thornton learned later was the emigrant company of Elam Brown & David Allen, headed in the opposite direction, back toward the California Trail. Thornton learned later that upon entering onto the new cut-off, Brown & Allen had prudently “sent forward one of their company forty-five miles on horseback to reconnoiter, and that they were met by him [returning] after the wagons had traveled thirty miles.” Their messenger had told them “… that he had been fifteen miles farther forward, without finding water. It was finally deemed hazardous to rely any longer upon the word of this untrustworthy

guide'' – land surveyor Jesse Applegate.

Thus the Brown & Allen company became the second group to reject the South Road, and proceed on to California instead, even after having traveled thirty miles of the new portion of the route. The reason for their rejection was essentially the same reason given by Boggs – the distances on the ground were considerably longer than the estimates of distances given them by Jesse Applegate when they began.

Continuing on into the desert, Thornton told how their oxen had been without water or grass for two days and into morning of a third -- forty-eight straight hours. "Some cattle had already perished," ... "Mr. [James] Crump's team was so reduced that it became necessary to send aid back to him." David Butterfield's "team had been without water and grass three days and two nights.... Some of our cattle perished in the desert, and all that survived were greatly injured, and now when we got to water, it was greatly impregnated with mixed alkaline salts, that made it unfit for use...."

On leaving Black Rock after resting the cattle only one day, their "poor famishing cattle appeared to be almost frenzied...;" and "had suffered great injury from this drive...." When the party left from the next oasis at Great Boiling Springs after resting the cattle two or three days, they "... proceeded forward as fast as the enfeebled condition of the teams would permit.''[6]

This same "permanent injury" theme was echoed by Pringle as his party continued on, traveling westerly through the barren Nevada country. On September 11 at Mud Meadows, Pringle spoke of "... our teams being badly jaded...." Then on September 14 at High Rock Canyon, he mentioned being where a "... grassy flat opens, offering us a good camp to recruit our jaded teams." Historian Dale Morgan added a telling comment at this point, apparently sufficiently moved to observe that, "[m]ost teams traveling this route were worn down by the deserts just crossed."[7]

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After such an inauspicious start, the emigrants' situation seemed to improve somewhat as they gradually emerged from the Nevada desert country, and began winding past the shallow lakes of northeastern California. But by then a new hazard had become apparent, in the form of increasing harassment from the local Indians. Beginning when they traveled down the Humboldt River, the Indians were proving to be increasingly troublesome to the South Road emigrants as they moved slowly along, and especially when they were camped for the night. This new hazard required the emigrants to stick closely together and keep a continuous guard over their stock. The need for vigilance was constant, as one's future livelihood could be stolen in a moment of inattention.

The Indians were described as wild and shy "masters of stealth" and cunning, so the emigrants rarely ever saw them. Yet as some knew well, "where

there was the least sign of Indians, there was the most danger. But seeing no Indians made some of the men careless and negligent about guarding, or taking care of their stock," according to Scott. This may have been one of the reasons Scott sought such a high level of compliance from the travelers -- his own awareness of this constant danger.

Of course, for most of the way the travelers were passing through these native-Americans inhabitants' country. The Indians they encountered were not so much warlike or tradelike, as they were surreptitious opportunists, anxious to take advantage of a free meal. They were seeing the white man for the first time -- along with the "meals on hoof" these intruders brought with them. Thornton described the Indians along the whole length of the Humboldt River as being very troublesome. He reported some encounters with Indian cattle rustling, their lying in ambush along the willows, and one man named Sallee having died from being shot by a poisoned arrow.[8]

To make matters worse, in addition to being alert to direct encounters with the Indians during the day, the emigrants had to protect against any indirect activity that occurred at night. This necessitated posting sufficient lookouts around the perimeter of the encampment all evening, to guard against these "stealth masters" of the wilderness making off with stock while most of the emigrants were asleep. This placed an additional burden on travel-weary wagon drivers who needed the benefit of sleep to recover from the regimen of working hard all day. This guard duty took its toll on the overall physical condition of the wagon train for the hard travel that lay ahead.

A further problem that the native inhabitants presented were the delays sometimes caused by the time off taken by Scott and others in searching for missing livestock. In one instance about thirty miles previous to leaving the California Trail, Scott was out helping John Owens from the road party recover a stolen horse, when they came under attack. Just as Scott vaulted into his saddle he was struck by an arrow in the right groin, and another struck his horse in the right thigh. Scott's horse recovered from his lameness in a week or so, and after a few days Scott said he suffered no further inconvenience from his own wound. But this encounter did increase the fearfulness of the emigrants.

Another incident had occurred around September 19 after crossing into what would become modern-day California, just before reaching Goose Lake (see map). One of Pringle's oxen had been shot with arrows, as well as two other cattle in their party. "The Indians made a break on us, killing several head of our cattle and driving off quite a number, leaving many wagons almost without a team." Here Robert "Lancefield lost several of his oxen...," and had to replace them under yoke with cows, which had to do the work of oxen the remainder of the journey.[9]

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The parties traveling with Pringle finally overtook Scott and the lead

company on Monday, September 28, upon their entering into Oregon from the south. The Indians had grown more emboldened, stealing more cattle the next day. Scott recalled their having stolen four head of oxen and wounding several others with arrows, and when several men went in pursuit of the stolen oxen, they found them slaughtered near the Klamath Lake tules. Pringle remembered the Indians having driven off quite a number of cattle during the night, "owing to the inefficiency of our guard." The entire next day was spent trying to recover the cattle, and by next morning they had found all but ten head.

The next week – the period extending from Sunday, September 27, to Saturday, October 3 -- proved to be the most eventful of any so far. During this period several pivotal events would occur that would transform entirely this collection of undisciplined farmers into a tight-knit company of obedient soldiers ready to meet any challenge the South Road could bring. The emigrants were now on the final stretch of the Scott-Applegate Cut-off: having finally left California and crossed into today's *state* of Oregon, they were now fast approaching the Cascade Mountains, and the Old Trappers' Trail which lay just beyond.

On September 28 the emigrants traveling with Scott and with Pringle merged into a single lead company of around fifty wagons. Because of the need to present a united front against Indian harassment, Scott was elevated from his role of mere "guide" to that of being full "leader" by election of the emigrants, who agreed to follow strictly his instructions at all times. All saw this gesture as necessary for basic survival. The emigrants now fully recognized the desperate nature of the situation they were in, and pledged their allegiance toward doing whatever was necessary to survive it.

Scott acknowledged that whatever unruliness these emigrants may have brought with them onto the Southern Route, once they became aware of the daily life-threatening situation *they had gotten themselves into,* they were quick to place themselves in the hands of the one man who could possibly see them through alive. "After a while they began to obey my directions without talking back, or questioning the wisdom, or propriety of them. Had it not been that they improved in this respect, as we advanced, and perils gathered more threateningly about us, I feel confident that the suffering would have been much greater than it was." In other words, once the emigrants realized the true nature of their predicament, they quickly discarded the unmanageability that was typical of all trail emigrants – by the necessity of survival. On the Oregon Trail necessity and expediency ruled supreme.[10]

On September 30 this newly-formed lead company reached Lower Klamath Lake. During the next two days the emigrants encountered a very steep precipice that would have cost several days in lost travel time to "backtrack" around. The emigrants told Scott they thought by double-teaming the wagons they could "cross the ridge in less time than it would take to avoid it." Scott was skeptical, but the emigrants then proceeded to hitch multiple teams to the

wagons. They put “eighteen to twenty-three yoke to each wagon” -- and soon the hillside was covered with wagons, oxen, and people, in a scene that resembled “the fighting of a great battle.” Afterwards, Scott praised the emigrants for having demonstrated great "industriousness" and "heroism" in overcoming an obstacle that he did not believe possible they could overcome. Scott’s attitude toward the South Road emigrants had improved considerably.[11]

It was around this time that Thornton pointed out that October 1 was the date Jesse Applegate had told the emigrants they would reach the settlements, if they averaged just “twelve or thirteen miles each day” on his new Southern Route. According to Pringle’s distance estimates, the emigrants had taken fifty-six days to cover 745 miles from Ft. Hall to the point near today’s Keno, Oregon, which they had reached on October 3. This was an average rate of travel of nearly thirteen-miles-per-day. Yet the emigrants were only just now crossing over the forty-second parallel and entering into the Oregon Territory from the south, and had not even *reached* the Cascade Mountains, much less actually crossed them.

The South Road emigrants had already traveled further than the 730 mile overall length of the northern route from Ft. Hall to the Willamette Valley, and yet they still had another 240 miles or so to go before they would reach the settlements! Clearly, something was badly amiss. The 730-mile distance from Ft. Hall for the old route down the Columbia River compared very favorably to 985 miles for the South Road. Thus the new route that was supposed to have been much shorter, was actually over 255 miles longer, well over a third-again longer than the regular route!

And this was not the worst of the bad news. Lindsay Applegate wrote later that on October 3 he and his brother Jesse along with the others in the road working party had already reached the settlements! The road workers had abandoned their road clearing duties many days earlier, and headed for home. According to Applegate the reason they had left was quite simple. The road party perceived that they had successfully removed all the “greatest difficulties” from the roadway ahead.[12]

Botanist Burke put a slightly different take on the reason for their having left early. Burke claimed that the road party had cleared the road ahead only “where it was absolutely required.” Burke also differed slightly with Applegate’s date of their arrival at the Applegate Polk County farms, putting it one week earlier on Sept. 26. If this earlier date was accurate -- and the road party had started from the turnoff on August 27 as also reported by Burke – the elapsed time would have given the road workers only thirty travel days to cover the 575 mile overall length of last two sections of the Southern Route, after their having turned off from the California Trail. The resulting average speed of roughly 19-miles-per-day on horseback indicated that traveling at so fast a pace the road builders would not have had sufficient time to actually work on clearing many

obstacles from the roadway.

Scott in retrospect offered two different possible explanations for why the road builders had "abandoned" both their road-working duties and the emigrants. In Scott's first version, Capt. Applegate had decided it would be best for him to hasten forward to blaze out the road and leave its actual construction to the remaining road party. In Scott's later version, Jesse Applegate had hastened forward to recruit settlers to return and help with the road building effort. In both versions, Applegate was supposed to have appointed some unnamed person who was left in charge of the remaining road workers. The problem with Scott's two hypotheses was that the road did not get adequately blazed nor cleared, and no one from the settlements ever arrived to help clear it. This left the road clearing work to be done by the emigrants themselves – literally building the route ahead of them as they trudged slowly along.[13]

Whatever the reason for the road party's early withdrawal, Scott summed up the emigrants' now gloomy predicament at the end of this pivotal early-October week:

SCOTT: Before us lay a stretch of densely timbered country for about thirty miles, part of which was level, but the most of it in the mountains. Through this timber we found the way blazed, but very imperfectly opened. As we had no spare hands to send forward to do the work [all extra hands having joined Applegate's road party at the beginning of the route] we were frequently compelled to stop the train till the teamsters could go ahead, open and prepare the road for the passage of wagons and then return and bring them up. We had relied upon Captain Applegate and his party of hands to open the road through this timber, and they had done but little besides blazing it out. … The men, after toiling hard all day, had to guard the stock during the night to keep them from wandering away in the forest and being lost.

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At the beginning of their final week on this middle stretch of the Southern Route – extending from Sunday, Oct 4 through Saturday, Oct 10 -- the emigrants finally started over the Cascade Mountains, following the general course of today's Highway 66. Pringle wrote about this mountain crossing only that at first the road was "bad and rough," and later "tolerable except a steep hill to go down."

The difficulties the emigrants experienced in making this difficult mountain crossing were best exemplified by the toll it had taken on their work oxen. When they finally reached the summit of the first range, the effort "... was labor enough to break down fresh and strong teams, much more such as ours were, worn down and exhausted, in consequence of long privation ... most of the teams were pretty well worn down by it." One of Thornton's own oxen "... now faint and exhausted with want of water and grass, sank down upon the road. ..."

THORNTON: To me it was truly a misfortune to lose the services of an ox, but aside from the regret occasioned by the pecuniary loss, Tom's long and continued faithful services through so many dangers and hardships, had excited within me a very strong attachment, and even gratitude. ... I left him in the wilderness to famish and die.... As I turned away, I imagined that the poor fellow looked at me with a reproachful expression, which seemed to say, 'Is it possible you are about to leave me here to die?'

As the emigrants continued along the mountain ridge, Thornton himself lost several more oxen, until it became "evident that the wreck of my team could no longer take forward my wagon." So he arranged to put some supplies in another emigrant's wagon, and leave the rest behind. From this point on it appeared as though Thornton and his wife, not in the best of health at the beginning of the journey, were destined to walk the rest of the way into the valley on foot!

On October 8, the emigrants rested their teams while the company worked on improving the road. The next day they passed into a new watershed, in reaching Emigrant Creek and the headwaters of the Rogue River. Thornton, now traveling with Dunbar's company a few days behind the leaders, arrived there on Sunday, October 11.

THORNTON: It was with a grave face, and a burdened and anxious heart, that I on that night received my little morsel of food from the hand of my wife, who bade me be courageous, assuring me that ... so long as there was a God of Providence, upon whose faithfulness she leaned for the fulfillment of the promise, `His bread shall be given him, and his water shall be sure.' I confess, however, with shame and humility, that I had my doubts and fears upon the subject.[14]

It was on this same day at a point north of present-day Ashland, Oregon, that the lead company finally reached the Old Trappers' Trail, marking the end of their perilous journey over the middle section of the Southern Route. It was now both the start of a new week, and the beginning of a new leg of the journey.

SCOTT: The toil and suffering of the people since we crossed the Klamath River had been very great. Many of them were sick and could not get out of the wagons, and in many places, the jolting of the vehicles over the rough and unbeaten road made the traveling very hard on the sick. In many places it took two, three, and sometimes more persons, with ropes attached to the wagons to keep them from upsetting. These problems, combined with a multitude of other difficulties, rendered our progress slow, and extremely laborious.

On this third and final section of the South Road, the emigrants were now approaching what would prove to be the most formidable obstacle on a route which had already presented these emigrants with many more challenges than could have been imagined when they chose to embark on this supposedly

"superior" route. They would need all of their newfound ingenuity, resourcefulness and heroism to overcome this new obstacle, and come out of it with everything intact – including their own lives!

As Thornton had remarked after descending the Cascade Mountains, he sensed that "the Angel of Death was close behind us."