

SCOTT'S BLUFF NATIONAL MONUMENT

Landmark on the Overland Trails

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Clemson University



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A HISTORY AND GUIDE



FEDERAL
PUBLICATION

National Park Service
Department of the Interior

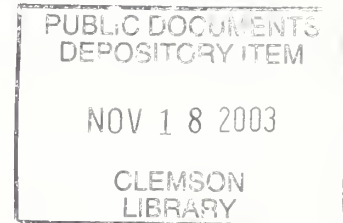
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SCOTTS BLUFF

Scotts Bluff National Monument
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A HISTORY AND GUIDE

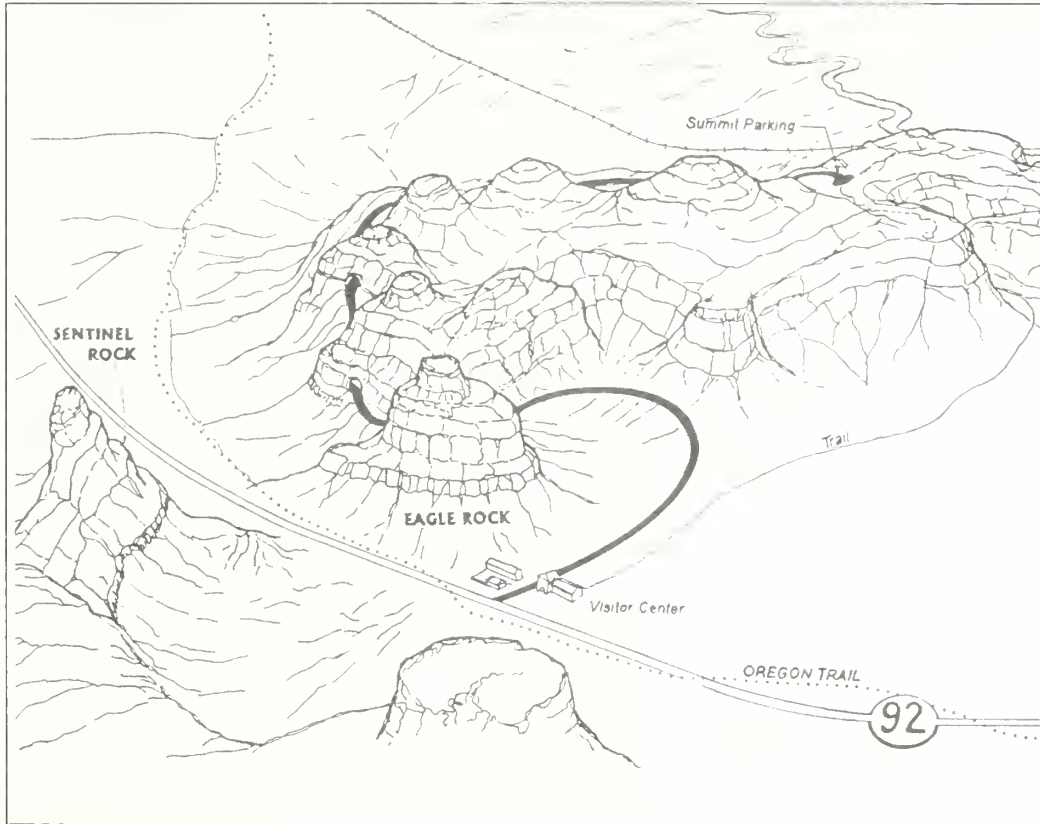
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2004-00 27-P

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A three-dimensional drawing of the primary features of Scotts Bluff National Monument.

INTRODUCTION: LANDMARK ON THE OVERLAND TRAILS

The geological feature known as Scotts Bluff served as a landmark for travelers on the High Plains long before covered wagons lumbered across the West. The first human hunters to venture out onto the treeless prairie ten thousand years ago had already learned to make their way along animal trails that paralleled the few waterways, using prominent features to guide them on their way.

Nineteenth Century American explorers, fur trappers, emigrants and freighters on the overland trails continued this tradition of relying on natural prominences to guide them on their long journey through the seemingly trackless wilderness. Like the Native Americans before them, these travelers observed that the forces of nature provided the most direct routes for spanning the vast distances involved in crossing the Plains.

In 1919 Scotts Bluff National Monument was established by a Presidential Proclamation to preserve the natural beauty of the region, as well as to tell the story of the thousands of travelers who had filed past the bluff in their pursuit of a better life. As the monument approaches its centennial year, we are reminded that although the facilities may change and new policies are adopted, Scotts Bluff National Monument continues to serve as a landmark in an important chapter of our nation's history.

This handbook is intended to provide present-day visitors to Scotts Bluff with a thumbnail history of the events that resulted in Scotts Bluff becoming a national monument. The book also provides a description of the facilities, programs and activities that have been designed to protect our cultural and natural resources as well as educate the general public.

2 THE SANDS OF TIME

While observing the rugged rock formations along the North Platte River Valley, it is tempting to assume that the bluffs have always been there. The height and imposing bulk of the bluffs give them a sense of timelessness. However, the bluffs we see today in western Nebraska are comparatively recent products of natural processes that are still at work.

Scotts Bluff was formed as a result of a major geological uplift that took place toward the end of the Mesozoic Era. This simply means that about 70 million years ago the West Coast of North America began to rise. This phenomenon eventually resulted in the displacement of the inland seas, which had once covered much of the central portion of North America, as well as the formation of the Black Hills and Rocky Mountains.

As the new mountain ranges were pushed ever higher, tremendous natural forces were applied to the High Plains. The entire drainage system was altered, and rivers which had previously emptied into the Pacific Ocean, now began to flow eastward into the Mississippi River Basin. As a result, vast amounts of silt and sediment were carried by wind and water from

the Rocky Mountain region and deposited in what is now Wyoming, Colorado, Nebraska and South Dakota.

These materials were put down in layers, which over hundreds of centuries were compressed into sandstone and siltstone. Intermixed within these strata are layers of ash, contributed by periodic volcanic activity thought to have begun about 50 million years ago. Geologists tell us that after 5 million years this period of creativity slowed and a period of relative stability ensued. Then, 35 million years ago, the uplift and volcanic activity resumed and continued for the next 15 million years.

Ten million years ago the pace of regional uplift increased. During the previous 60 million years, the forces of nature had been building thick layers of sedimentary rock on the High Plains, but from this time to the present the steeper drainage caused streams to cut into the landscape and remove much of the sediment that had previously been deposited.

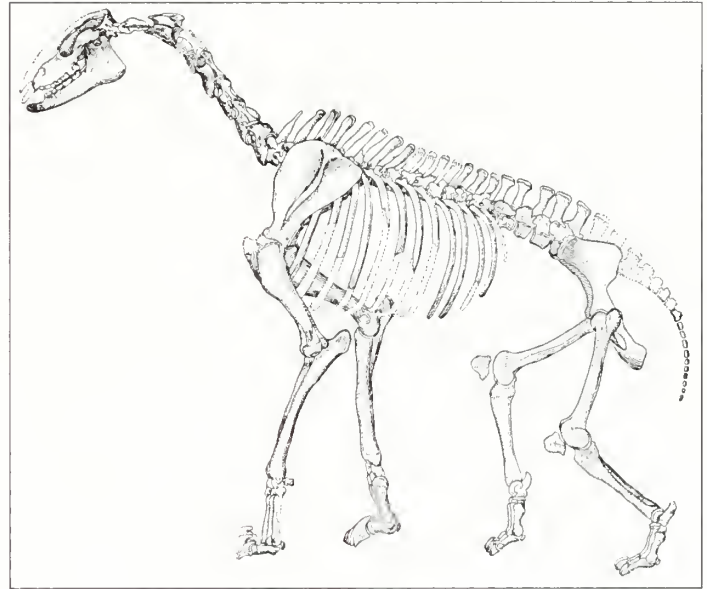
As the uplift continued, streams carved ever deeper into the layered stone and huge amounts of debris were excavated. In a few places, layers of denser stone slowed erosion, and thus prevented the surviving

bluffs from being reduced to the level of the surrounding countryside. This harder capstone, composed of limestone concretions, is responsible for the exposure of sedimentary layers at Scotts Bluff dating back 20 to 34 million years ago.

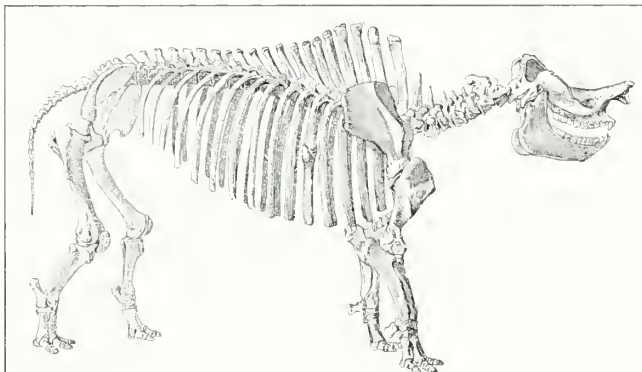
In addition to the spectacular bluffs, another less-visible geological feature known simply as “the badlands” can be found between Scotts Bluff and the North Platte River. In geological terms, a “badland” is any area that cannot support vegetation. A much larger western “badland” can be seen at Badlands National Park in South Dakota.

The badlands at Scotts Bluff were formed when water, either draining from the bluffs or from the periodic flooding of the river, seeped into a layer of sediment known as the Brule formation. The Brule layer is quite soft and offers little resistance to the eroding power of water, but it retains enough lime so that once the water enters the formation, the surrounding sediment compacts and hardens – leaving behind a stark, barren landscape.

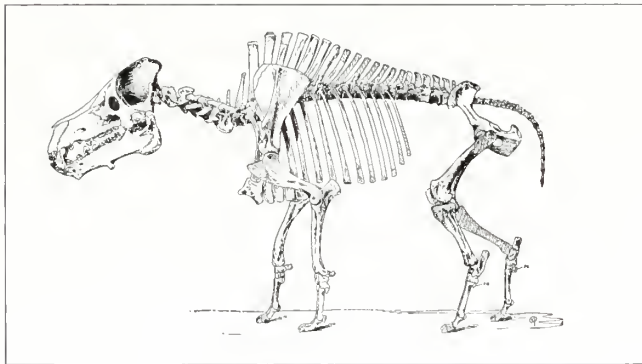
The layers of sand and silt at Scotts Bluff National Monument have preserved a variety of fossils from a time very different from present-day Nebraska. Thirty million years ago, western Nebraska was



Chalcotherium



Titanothere



Dinohyus

populated by mammals one might normally expect to see in Africa – rhinos, camels, and giant hogs were once common here. In addition, the sheep-like Oreodont, long-necked Chalcotheres and huge turtles lived on the High Plains, but now only their fossilized bones remain.

The forces of nature are still at work on the bluffs of the North Platte River Valley. Occasional rockfalls, heavy downpours and powerful winds continue to alter the appearance of Scotts Bluff and the surrounding landscape. While the bluff may appear to be solid and invulnerable, it is actually quite delicate. The soft nature of the sandstone makes climbing the bluff very dangerous, but the paved hiking trails allow visitors to explore the monument, while protecting the bluff from unnecessary erosion.

EARLIEST TRAVELERS

Physical evidence indicates that the first humans to live in the region around Scotts Bluff arrived 10,000 years ago. These people are thought to have been nomadic hunters who manufactured stone tools and lived in small groups. Traveling by foot, these early visitors to the North Platte River Valley would have been limited in both how far they could travel and what they could take with them.

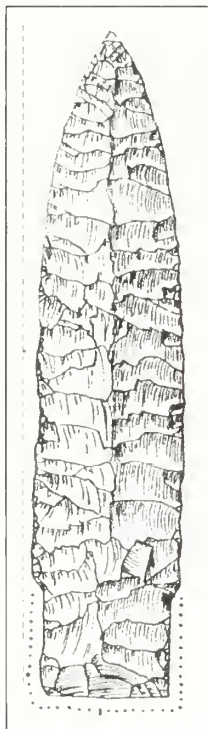
A number of archeological sites have been identified within the boundaries of Scotts Bluff National Monument, and these appear to have been temporary campsites. While consisting of little more than a fire pit and a few stone flakes, these sites are proof that humans have inhabited the High Plains for a long time. However, the vast distances and periodic droughts posed daunting obstacles to mobility and prospects for survival.

A unique type of flaked, stone tool, known as a "Scottsbluff point" was first found near Scottsbluff, Nebraska in 1932. These long, thin points were skillfully fashioned between 8,000 and 9,000 years ago. Scottsbluff points have been found in central

Canada, throughout the Rocky Mountains, Wisconsin and south to Louisiana, indicating extensive travel or trade.

In time, a different lifestyle evolved among Native Americans living in the West. Farming seems to have offered a more dependable source of food, and for the next 5,000 years, small groups of farmers lived along the major rivers of the High Plains. Then, around the year 1400 AD, perhaps due to an extended drought, the plains were abandoned. Two hundred years later, eastern tribes, such as the Pawnee, Arikara, Kansa and Mandan moved out onto the prairie and began to develop semi-permanent villages along major waterways.

These tribes tended to live in large, well-organized towns and built communal earth lodges. They also made pottery, which was used to store the crops they harvested. Most of these "River Indians" would occasionally venture out onto the plains on foot to supplement their food supply by hunting buffalo. The Pawnee are thought to have originated in present-day Arkansas and migrated northward along the



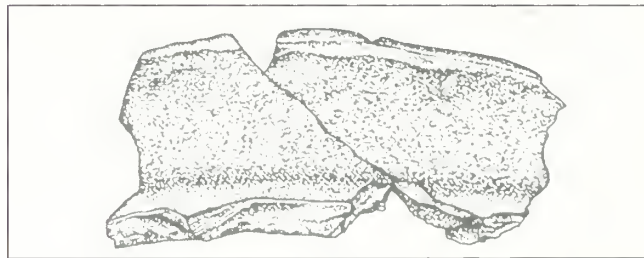
Scottsbluff
Point

western bank of the Missouri River to the plains of eastern Nebraska. Here they established permanent villages of earth lodges, and farmed in the more fertile river valleys. They are known to have also hunted buffalo and may have ventured west as far as the North Platte River Valley, but are not believed to have lived year-round in this region.

Life on the Great Plains changed dramatically in the 16th Century when the Spanish re-introduced the horse to the North American continent. Within a few years, horses escaped from their Spanish masters and herds of wild horses quickly adapted to their new environment. It was only a matter of time until Native Americans gained access to these animals, and their lives were forever altered.

No longer limited to travel by foot, a man on horseback was free to travel much farther and faster. As a weapon of war, the horse enabled a warrior to strike an enemy and escape, while as a mount for pursuing game, a hunter could range farther afield and bring back more fresh meat. Also, as a beast of burden, a family could now haul more household goods over a wider distance than had ever before been possible.

As late as the 18th Century these tribes had made their homes in the forests of Canada and Minnesota. Sometime around the year 1780, larger eastern tribes, displaced by the expansion of the United States, in turn, forced the Lakota, Cheyenne and Arapaho out onto the treeless prairies of North and South Dakota.



Pottery fragments found at Scotts Bluff

The Arapaho eventually established themselves in eastern Colorado and southeastern Wyoming, where they became renowned for their skills as horsemen. The Cheyenne settled in Wyoming, and with their allies, the Teton Lakota, who centered their territory in the Black Hills area, adapted to an unfamiliar environment by developing a culture that allowed them to move over a wide area in pursuit of buffalo.

In addition to the Teton, the Lakota were divided into three other groups. The Santee remained in Minnesota where they both hunted small game and farmed, while living in bark lodges. The Yankton and the Yanktonai moved into what is now southeastern South Dakota where they farmed and hunted.

By the time the Lewis and Clark Expedition reached the Upper Missouri River in 1804 the Lakota, Cheyenne and Arapaho had established themselves on the High Plains. Half a century later, these were the same tribes that travelers on the overland trails passing near Scotts Bluff would have encountered.

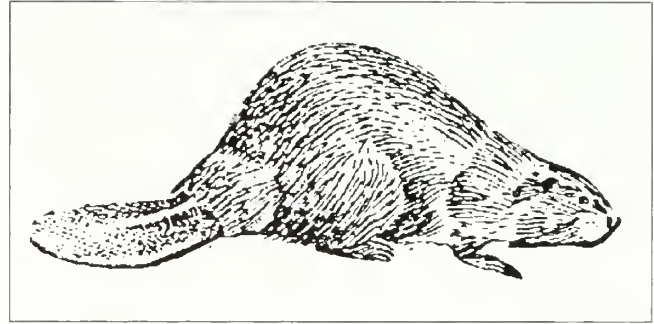


EXPLORERS AND TRAPPERS

The quest for wealth had been a motive for America's westward expansion since Colonial times. As the 19th Century dawned, the successful return of the Lewis and Clark Expedition in 1806 brought with it fantastic reports of vast untapped natural resources in the Upper Missouri River Basin, and before long efforts were launched to exploit this potential.

Among the first businesses to take advantage of these resources was the fur trade. A great deal of money could be made from beaver pelts, which were used to make hats and coats. The demand for beaver pelts grew so high that several companies were formed to send hunters and trappers out into the uncharted wilderness in an effort to supply this valuable commodity.

The development of the fur trade in the Far West had several unforeseen circumstances. The frontiersmen fanned out across the frontier and in the course of searching out new sources of beaver pelts, they became intimately familiar with the Native American tribes living there, as well as the vast western landscape.



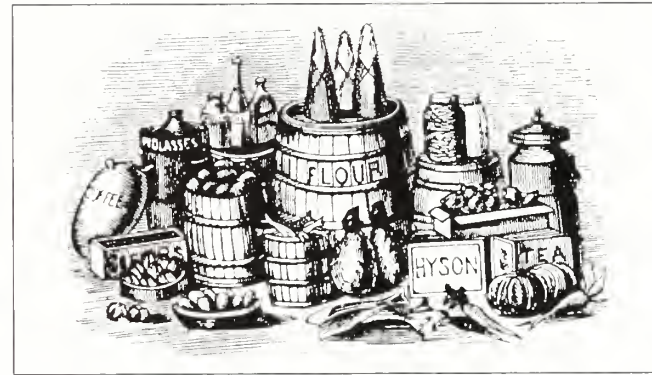
It should come as no surprise that the first Euro-Americans to see Scotts Bluff were fur traders returning to St. Louis after spending a year at the mouth of the Columbia River on the Pacific coast. The small group of seven men were led by Robert Stuart, and on Christmas Day, 1812, he made the following entry in his journal:

21 miles same course brought us to camp in the bare Prairie, but were fortunate in finding enough driftwood for our

culinary purpose. The Hills on the south have lately approached the river, are remarkably rugged and Bluffy and possess a few Cedars. Buffaloe very few numbers and mostly Bulls.

Although the Stuart party had a difficult time as they made their way eastward, the trail they blazed through present-day Wyoming and Nebraska would eventually prove to be of profound historic importance for the next 60 years.

In the 1820s a new generation of fur traders began to make names for themselves. Jim Bridger discovered the Great Salt Lake in Utah and Jedediah Smith explored the headwaters of the Snake River, becoming the first American to reach California by an overland route. William Sublette established Fort William on the Laramie River in what is now Wyoming. In 1825 Thomas Fitzpatrick, a noted guide and trapper, rediscovered the central overland route first used by Robert Stuart, and as a result the North Platte River Valley became a popular route into the prime beaver country of Wyoming.



William Ashley is credited with devising a more efficient method of obtaining furs, which came to be known as the rendezvous system. Before the first rendezvous in 1827, each spring trappers would have to haul the pelts gathered the previous winter, all the way to St. Louis to sell them. Ashley's idea was to have the trappers stay out on the frontier where they could spend more time gathering pelts, and he would bring pack trains loaded down with trade items and supplies to pre-arranged places. The trappers would then be able to trade their furs for items they needed and Ashley would return to St. Louis with horses loaded down with furs.

The rendezvous of 1828 led to tragic events that are now shrouded in mystery, but which would have a lasting effect on Scotts Bluff. The story involves a man named Hiram Scott, an employee of the American Fur Company. The known facts are these: Scott had worked for the American Fur Company since 1823, and had been present at the 1827 rendezvous. In 1828 he was again was serving as a clerk for the company at the rendezvous in Wyoming, but somehow during the return trip he met his death near the bluffs that now bear his name.

William A. Ferris, who traveled up the Platte River in 1830, made the earliest recorded description of Scott's death. He wrote:

We encamped opposite to "Scott's Bluffs" so called in respect to the memory of a young man who was left here alone to die a few years previous. He was a clerk in a company returning from the mountains, the leader of which found it necessary to leave him behind at a place some distance

above this point, in consequence of a severe illness which rendered him unable to ride. He was consequently placed in a bullhide boat, in charge of two men, who had orders to convey him by water down to these bluffs, where the leader of the party promised to await their coming. After a weary and hazardous voyage, they reach the appointed rendezvous, and found to their surprise and bitter disappointment, that the company had continued on down the river without stopping for them to overtake and join it.

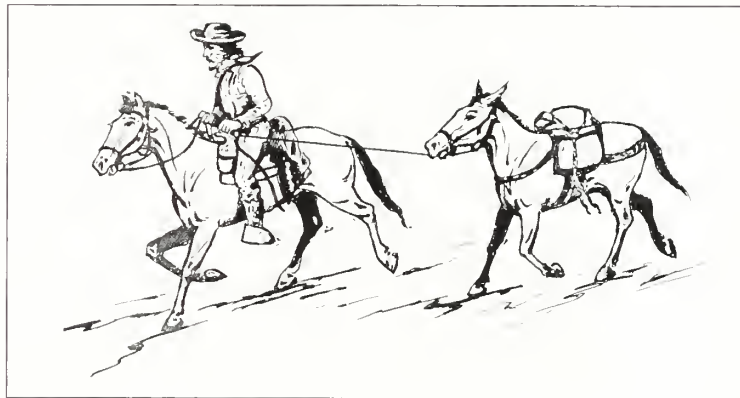
Left thus in the heart of a wide wilderness, hundreds of miles from any point where assistance or succor could be obtained, and surrounded by predatory bands of savages thirsting for blood and plunder, could any conditions be deemed more hopeless or

deplorable? They had, moreover, in descending the river, met with some accident, either the loss of the means of procuring subsistence or defending their lives in case of discovery and attack. This unhappy circumstance, added to the fact that the river was filled with innumerable shoals and sand-bars, by which its navigation was rendered almost impracticable, determined them to forsake their charge and boat together, and push on night and day until they should overtake the company, which they did on the second or third day afterward...

Poor Scott! We will not attempt to picture what his thoughts must have been after his cruel abandonment, nor harrow up the feelings of the reader, by a recital of what agonies he must

have suffered before death put an end to his misery.

The bones of a human being were found the spring following, on the opposite side of the river, which were supposed to be the remains of Scott. It was conjectured that in the energy of despair, he had found strength to carry him across the stream, and then staggered about the prairie, till God in pity took him to himself.



Two years later, Captain Benjamin Bonneville made his way along the North Platte River and recorded his version of the events surrounding the death of Hiram Scott.

A number of years since a party were descending the upper part of the river in canoes, when their frail barks were overturned and all their powder spoiled. Their rifles being thus rendered useless, they were unable to procure food by hunting and had to depend on roots and wild fruits for subsistence. After suffering extremely from hunger, they arrived at Laramie's Fork, a small tributary of the north branch of the Nebraska, about sixty miles above the cliffs just mentioned. Here one of the party, by name of Scott, was taken ill; and his companions came to a halt, until he

should recover health and strength sufficient to proceed. While they were searching round in quest of edible roots they discovered a fresh trail of white men, who had evidently but recently preceded them. What was to be done? By a forced march they might overtake this party, and thus be able to reach the settlements in safety. Should they linger they might all perish of famine and exhaustion. Scott, however, was incapable of moving; they were too feeble to aid him forward, and dreaded that such a clog would prevent their coming up with the advance party. They determined, therefore, to abandon him to his fate. Accordingly, under pretense of seeking food, and such simples as might be efficacious in his malady, they deserted him and hastened forward on the trail...

On the ensuing summer, these very individuals visiting these parts in company with others, came suddenly upon the bleached bones and grinning skull of a human skeleton, which by certain signs they recognized for the remains of Scott. This was sixty long miles from the place where they had abandoned him; and it appeared that the wretched man had crawled that immense distance before death put an end to his miseries. The wild and picturesque bluffs in the neighborhood of his lonely grave have ever since borne his name.

Over the years the story of the death of Hiram Scott was told thousands of times around the campfires of emigrants passing near the bluff that bears his name. With each telling, the story grew until it assumed the status of a legend.



14 FIRST WAGONS TO OREGON

In addition to establishing a trade route along the Platte River and across Wyoming, the fur trade also provided the first use of wheeled vehicles on the High Plains. In 1827 a trade good caravan bound for a rendezvous at the Great Salt Lake hauled along a small cannon on a two-wheeled carriage. The first train of wagons to venture out onto the prairie belonged to fur traders bound for the Wind River Mountains in 1830.

For the next ten years, fur traders continued to use small numbers of wagons to haul goods and furs up and down the Platte River Road. Several prominent figures in frontier history accompanied these caravans. Among them were missionaries Marcus and Narcissa Whitman, who made their initial journey to Oregon in 1836, and the Jesuit Priest Father Pierre-Jean De Smet made his first journey west in 1840.

The last fur trade rendezvous was held in 1840. After a period of 30 years, changes in fashion and the depletion of the beaver population began to eat into the profits of the fur trade. While a demand for buffalo hides and trade goods continued for the next 40 years, the days of the fur traders were numbered.



Coincidentally, as the fur trade began to fade, an interest in journeying to Oregon began to grow. This could not have come at a better time for those mountain men who were losing their livelihood, as they were suddenly in demand as guides for wagon trains bound for the Willamette Valley.

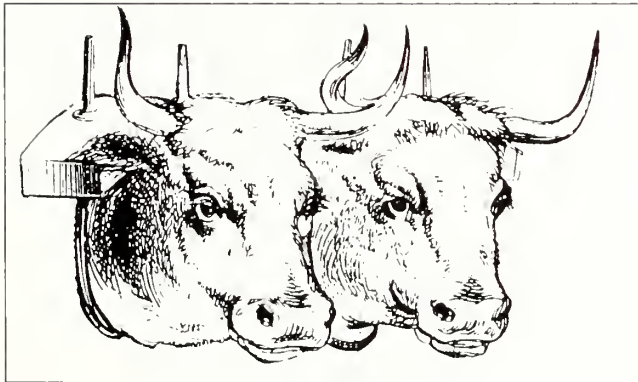
The first organized train of Oregon-bound emigrants was the Bidwell Party of 1841. This group consisted of 80 people and was led by mountain man Thomas Fitzpatrick. Also accompanying this wagon train were Father De Smet, making his second journey west, and Methodist minister Joseph Williams, who along with John Bidwell, recorded their observations during this historic event.

In 1842, a military mapping expedition, led by Lieutenant John C. Fremont made its way up the Platte River. This expedition's report proved to be a standard reference guide for emigrants who would later follow

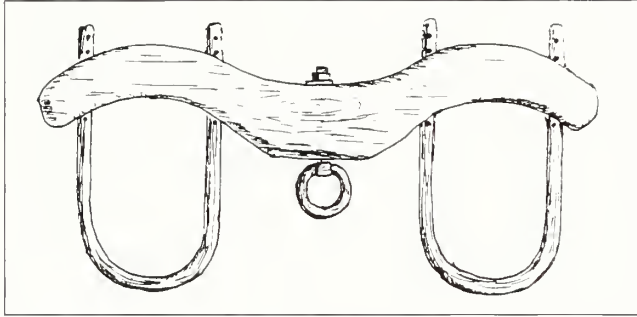
in their footsteps. The U.S. Army's presence in the West was reinforced in 1843 when 500 men of the 1st Dragoons, led by Colonel Stephen W. Kearny marched all the way to South Pass – proving that a large column of men and wagons could move along the Oregon Trail.

The year 1843 saw an ever-increasing number of emigrants on the trail to Oregon. In May of 1843, more than one thousand people departed Independence, Missouri, under the leadership of Peter Burnett. Most of these home-seekers had been recruited through the efforts of Marcus Whitman, and their wagon train elected their leaders and agreed to abide by mutually accepted rules of behavior. Their successful journey set the pattern for the thousands of wagons that would follow.

In 1845, an estimated five thousand people in 500 wagons were counted as they passed newly-established fur trading post that would later become Fort Laramie, but events far from the overland trails would have repercussions on western emigrants. First, in 1846, the long-standing dispute between the United States and Great Britain over control of the Oregon Territory was resolved in favor of American interests.



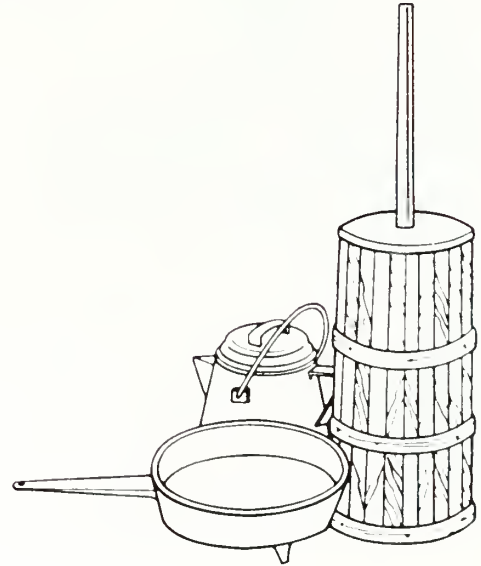
This resulted in increased wagon traffic bound for Oregon.



Then, in May of 1846, the United States went to war with Mexico. Following Mexico's defeat, western territories such as California and New Mexico came under American control. As a result, American influence in these territories increased dramatically and citizens felt encouraged to pursue new and greater opportunities in the Far West. However, to reach these "Promised Lands" the long and dangerous overland journey still had to be made.

While the well-organized Burnett wagon train of 1843 served as an example of how to successfully cross the High Plains, in 1846 the leaders of the

George Donner Party chose to ignore many of the hard-learned lessons of the trails – and paid a tragic price. In late October of 1846, delays, internal squabbles and over-loaded wagons caused the 87 members of the Donner Party to become snowbound near Truckee Lake in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California.



Already running short of food, over the next four months the unfortunate pioneers endured incredible hardships. Sub-zero temperatures, huge snowdrifts and malnutrition forced members of the party to eat their oxen, and even their pet dogs. Before they were finally rescued in February of 1847, some members of the Donner Party had even resorted to cannibalism.

Stories of the horrors endured by the Donner Party served to remind all travelers on the overland trails that delays could prove fatal. In the Far West, the forces of nature had to be considered at all times. Disease, torrential rains, lightning, hail, prairie fires, flashfloods, quicksand, buffalo stampedes and early blizzards were simply too dangerous to take lightly, and the sooner the High Plains could be crossed the better.

1846 also proved to be a year of trials for members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints – or as they are more commonly known, the Mormons. Founded in 1830 by Joseph Smith, the Mormon faithful had first been forced to leave their homes in Ohio in 1832. Moving to Independence,

Missouri, they established a new community, but again encountered violence and were forced to relocate again. Establishing a new community at Nauvoo, Illinois, in 1839, the Mormons prospered.

Unfortunately, local citizens again felt threatened by Mormon teachings, and violence was again the result. On June 27, 1844, Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum were killed by a mob in Carthage, Illinois. Church leaders had been considering plans to move out into the Far West as early as 1842, but a final decision had not yet been reached in 1845 when threats of more violence brought matters to a climax.

On February 4, 1846, the ten thousand Mormons at Nauvoo, under the leadership of Brigham Young, crossed the frozen Mississippi River and moved into Iowa. The plan was to move west in stages, first marching the 300 miles across southern Iowa to the Missouri River. Then, after wintering near present-day Council Bluffs, they would proceed further west.

After enduring many difficulties and hardships, on April 5, 1847, a handpicked group known as the Mormon Pioneers, consisting of 143 men, 3 women and two young boys left their Missouri

River campground near Omaha and ventured out onto the Great Plains. On July 24, 1847, when Brigham Young first saw the Valley of the Great Salt Lake he declared, "This is the place."

That same year, other Mormons following in the footsteps of these pioneers, arrived in Utah and

began the tasks of planting crops, digging irrigation canals and laying out the community that would come to be known as Salt Lake City. Over the next 20 years, an estimated 70,000 Mormons migrated to Utah over the Mormon Trail.



Mormon Party Near Fort Bridger by William Henry Jackson

GOLD IN CALIFORNIA

On February 24, 1848, an event occurred which would have profound effects on America's westward migration. A carpenter named James Marshall was working on a sawmill on the American River in California, and as he paused during his labors, he noticed something glinting in the water. It was a gold nugget. News of the discovery reached the East Coast two months later and by the end of the year "Gold Fever" was spreading like wildfire. By December 5, 1848, when President James K. Polk

made the following report to Congress, the "Rush to California" was on:

The accounts of abundance of gold are of such an extraordinary character, as would scarcely command belief were they not corroborated by the authentic reports of officers in the public service.



Marshall Finds Gold by William Henry Jackson

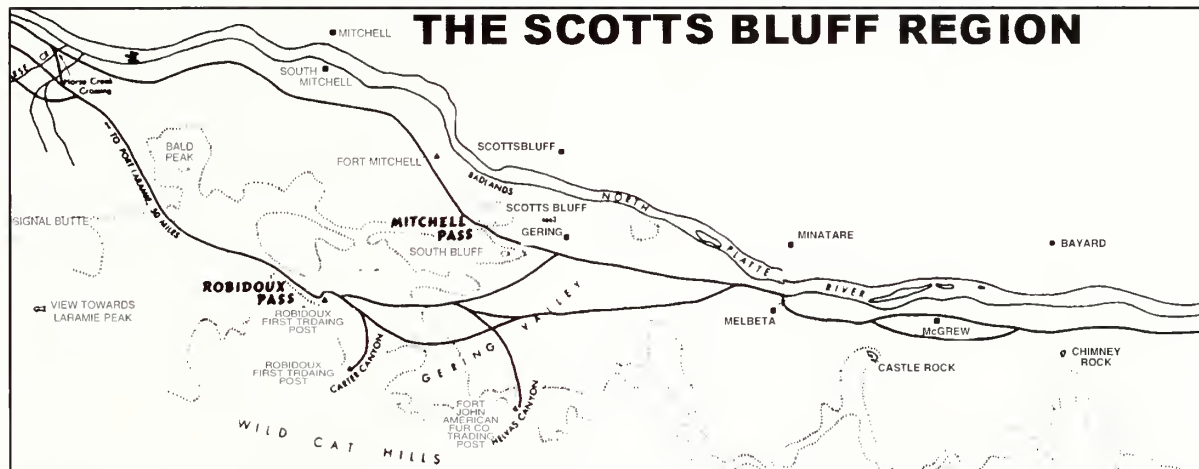
Within a year of Marshall's discovery, an estimated 90,000 miners arrived in California, all hoping to strike it rich. As might be expected, the motivation of those heading west in the California Gold Rush was very different from that of the emigrants on the Oregon and Mormon Trails who had dreams of starting new lives or escaping religious constraints. Driven by the hope of a quick profit, the California Trail was used almost exclusively by men.

Unlike settlers bound for Oregon and Utah, gold seekers were primarily interested in reaching the gold fields, making their fortune and getting out as quickly as possible. Therefore they only brought enough food and equipment to accomplish these short-term goals. Also, these "49ers" were not restricted to the overland routes. If they could afford it, many miners made the trip to California by sea – either the long way around Cape Horn at the southern tip of South America, or using a shortcut across the Isthmus of Panama.

Those 49ers who elected to travel via the California Trail essentially used the same route as settlers on the Oregon and Mormon Trails until they

reached the region of what is now Salt Lake City. Then the trail veered to the southwest, crossed Nevada and approached California through the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Activity on the California Trail peaked in 1852 with 50,000 travelers, but continued until 1860 by which time an estimated total of 200,000 people had made the journey.





Overland gold seekers passing near Scotts Bluff in the early years would not have used the pass nearest the bluff. Instead, they used what is now called Robidoux Pass, located just to the south of the present-day monument. There were a number of reasons for this detour. The presence of impassable badlands to the north of the bluffs forced emigrants away from the North Platte River, and the many coulees and washouts near the base of Scotts Bluff made wagon travel difficult and dangerous.

Beginning in 1849, Robidoux Pass – or as it was called by many emigrants “the Pass at Scotts Bluffs” - was the site of a trading post, where supplies could be purchased. The post’s owner was a prominent trader and businessman in the early days of the frontier named Joseph Robidoux. He and his many sons established a series of trading posts scattered along the trails. While the site at Robidoux Pass traded with Indians for beaver skins and buffalo hides, it also held a temporary monopoly in providing provisions and services to overland travelers.

In addition to offering goods and repairs, the trading post in Robidoux Pass was also attractive to wagon trains concerned about their wagons and draft animals. A blacksmith shop offered an opportunity to make repairs to trail-damaged wagons and tend footsore oxen and mules. A diary entry made by Simon Doyle on June 15, 1849, reads:

...the road lay for 8 miles along a valley south of the bluffs when it commenced a gradual ascent to the Ridge... near the summit is a small spring of cold water south of road. one mile further on is a splendid spring North of Road down a deep ravine 300 yards from Road overhung with Cedar. Here is found a man... working at Blacksmithing.

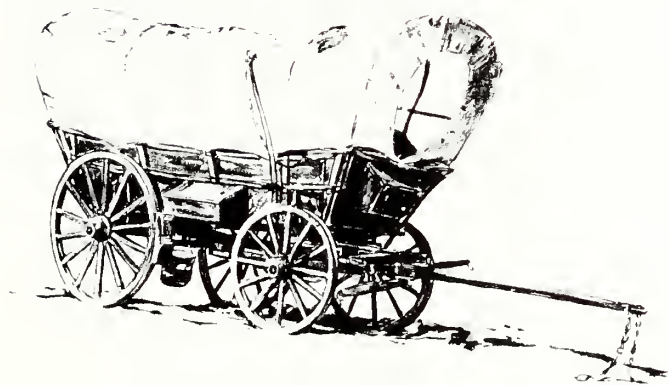
From this description it would seem that the grade through the Robidoux Pass was both gentle and safe, and there was the added bonus of reliable freshwater springs located near the trading post. It

must have seemed that the Robidoux enterprises would continue to be profitable for a long time.

However, all this changed in 1850 when unknown laborers took the time to physically alter what is now known as Mitchell Pass. Many of the deep gullies were filled in and approach ramps were cut into the sides of ravines, allowing wagons to safely navigate the pass. No record survives documenting who made these improvements. One popular theory holds that a detail of soldiers from Fort Laramie was sent over to Scotts Bluff with the mission of reducing the transit time for supply wagons bound for the post. A second theory holds that a competitor came up with a scheme to re-route traffic away from the Robidoux trading post.

Whatever the motivation may have been, after 1851 Mitchell Pass, or as it was commonly known then - "the Gap" - became the primary route through the bluffs and Robidoux Pass and its trading post faded into history. Some traffic continued to use the Robidoux route - perhaps as an alternative when Mitchell Pass became congested - but by 1860 overland traffic almost exclusively used the newer Mitchell Pass route.

Today, Robidoux Pass lies on private property but is still accessible by the general public who are encouraged to respect the wishes and rights of the owners. A gravel road one mile south of the intersection of State Highways 71 and 92 leads to the site of the blacksmith shop, which is described by an historical marker.



Although the freshwater springs described by overland travelers rarely flow, the site is remarkable for the presence of emigrant graves. A concrete cross now marks the final resting-place of a 49er whose death was recorded in the journal of Charles G. Hinman:

Have turned our wagon over once and broke three bows, 2 stakes and my rifle. It was close by an Indian traders and Black smith shop, and it happened one of our company was taken with the cholera ...which caused us to camp, and during the afternoon we had everything in repair. The man died about 10 o'clock the same night [June 13, 1849] We buried him at 8 o'clock the next morning with as much decency as if he had been in the States, put a sand stone up with his name, age etc. cut on it, and left him. He was a young man and left a wife and one child in Indiantown, Illinois. His name was Dunn.

Nearby, the occupants of four grouped graves are unknown and are simply marked by recently installed metal crosses. Next to these graves is a large stone of red granite, on which a bronze plaque donated by the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1942 has been mounted. It reads:

**Honoring these, and
all the thousands
who lie in nameless graves
along the trail.
Faith and courage
such as theirs
made America.
May ours preserve it.**



THE PONY EXPRESS

No other private enterprise in the history of the American West has captured the imagination of the American public quite like the Pony Express. The high drama of dedicated young men, risking life and limb while crossing the uncharted wilderness on a daring mission has become an integral part of our frontier mythology. In the 140 years since the Pony Express ceased to exist, countless novels, television programs and movies have been produced, usually perpetuating romanticized stories about the courageous sacrifices of those riders.

In reality, the Pony Express was conceived as a short-lived expedient – a temporary way to improve communication between Americans on the East and West Coasts at a time when war clouds were forming on the horizon. Officially known as the Central Overland and Pike's Peak Express Company, the Pony Express was the brainchild of the freighting partnership operated by William Russell, Russell Majors and William Waddell.

The demand for a regular overland mail service began in the 1840s with the arrival of the first American emigrants in Oregon and California. Then,



as the numbers of Mormon settlers and gold seekers swelled into the hundreds of thousands, the first federal attempts to provide a transcontinental mail service were initiated.

Beginning in 1849, a number of experiments were undertaken in the hope of providing faster and cheaper overland mail delivery, but all encountered the same difficulties: high expenses and severe weather. In 1851, an attempt to use pack mules to deliver mail from California to Salt Lake City failed when one employee was killed by Shoshone Indians and heavy snows caused delays of up to 54 days.

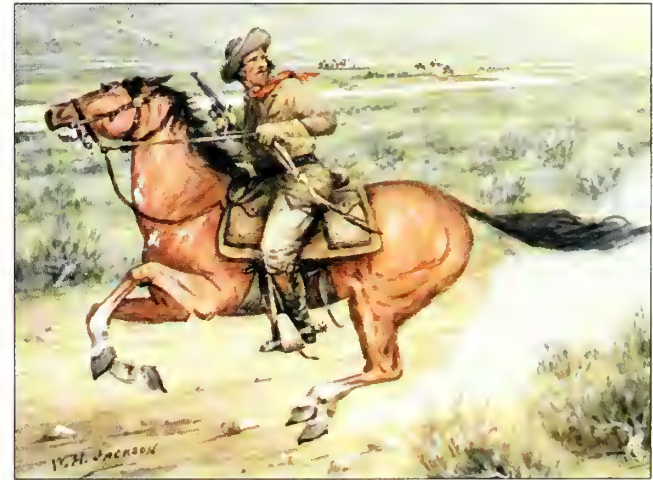
In 1855, a different solution to the problem of delivering mail involved the use of ships. Special sailing vessels under government contract, known as mail packets, and occasionally ships of the US Navy made the long circuit from New York City, around South America and arriving in San Francisco in a month. In 1858, with the completion of a railroad across the Isthmus of Panama, mail could be delivered in 21 days.

However, maritime mail delivery was still thought to be too slow, and above all, too expensive. In 1857 the Mormons came up with an idea for a "Swift Pony Service" between Utah and the East, but political difficulties between the Mormons and the federal government derailed the plan before it could be implemented. From 1857 until 1860, tensions between the North and South further complicated efforts to adopt an overland delivery system due to competing regional plans for overland routes.

The most successful of these latter schemes was known as the Butterfield Overland Mail Service, named for its owner John Butterfield. This venture utilized 500 coaches and 800 employees, based at stations placed every 8 to 25 miles along a route that

went from Tipton, Missouri, to Los Angeles, California. Initiated in 1857, this southern route was well organized, but was vulnerable to the political uncertainties involved in the threat of Civil War.

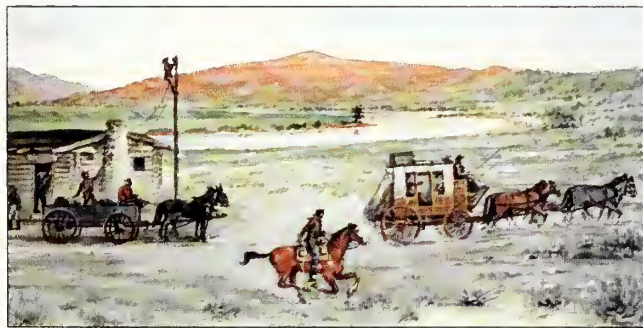
In 1859, Russell, Majors and Waddell were awarded a government contract to deliver mail from Leavenworth, Kansas, to the gold camps around Pike's Peak, Colorado. The next year, the company was asked to expand the scope of the project to include 10-day



Pony Express Rider, by William Henry Jackson

mail delivery from Missouri to California – if they could commence operations within 60 days!

Work quickly began in selecting a route, building stations, purchasing horses and equipment and hiring enough men to make the complex system work. The plan called for “relay” stations that would provide the riders with fresh mounts, to be placed every ten to twelve miles along a central route that stretched along the Platte River, across Wyoming, through Salt Lake City and southwesterly into Nevada before ending in Sacramento, California. Every fourth station was designated a “home” station as that was where the riders would change.



Red Buttes, Wyoming, by William Henry Jackson

This meant that each of the 80 riders was responsible for delivering a special saddlebag, known as a “mochila”, filled with mail over a distance of between 75 and 100 miles. He would then hand the saddlebag off to the next rider, who would continue the journey to the next home station. Two hundred station keepers were responsible for providing healthy, well-fed horses so the relentless cycle could continue. Riders were expected to simultaneously repeat their routes, both eastward and westward, seven days a week.

The mail carried by the first Pony Express rider left St. Joseph, Missouri, on April 3, 1860, arrived in Sacramento, California, on April 13, 1860 – after 232 hours on the road. During the next 18 months of operation, the Pony Express had three riders killed when they were thrown from their horses, one rider was frozen to death when he became lost in a blizzard, and two others are thought to have been killed by Payute Indians. In addition, at least three station keepers are known to have been killed by Indians.

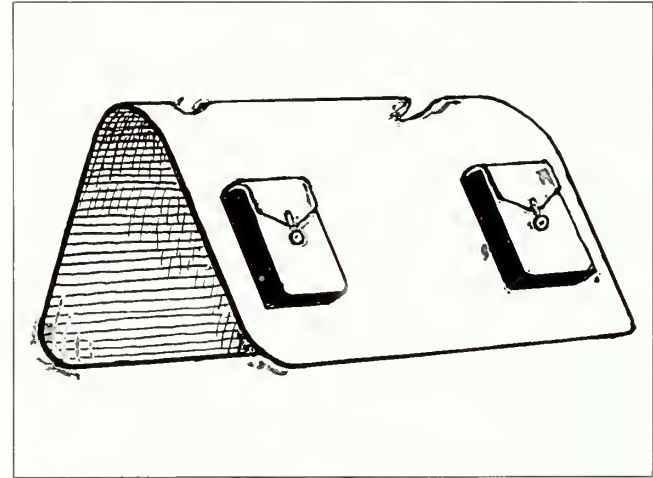
No records exist which detail material losses that Russell, Majors and Waddell suffered in the form

of stolen horses and destroyed stations, but the huge expenses involved in erecting, maintaining and supplying so many remote stations quickly became a drain on the company. The financial reputation of the partnership was further damaged in 1861 when it became public knowledge that William Russell had illegally used government bonds to prop up the faltering Pony Express.

In 1861, construction of the transcontinental telegraph line began at both ends of the central overland route. In some ways this development helped the Pony Express as it shortened the distances the riders would have to cover before mailed messages could be more efficiently forwarded by wire. The expansion of the telegraph system coupled with financial difficulties and Indian depredations finally brought the Pony Express to its last run on October 26, 1861.

The Pony Express stations were quickly adapted as stagecoach or telegraph stations, or were simply dismantled for their lumber. Scotts Bluff Station is thought to have been located northwest of Mitchell Pass, probably near the site of later Fort

Mitchell. Unfortunately, no drawings of Scotts Bluff Station exist. A bronze plaque, however, located near the North Platte River Bridge, west of Scottsbluff perpetuates the historic significance of the site.



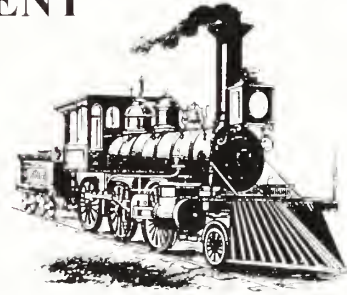
Mochila

SCOTTS BLUFF NATIONAL MONUMENT

For a period spanning at least 40 years, a network of historic trails brought hundreds of thousands of fur traders, explorers, missionaries, settlers, gold seekers, soldiers and businessmen past Scotts Bluff. What has been described as the greatest voluntary mass migration in human history took place in the shadow of this prominent landmark. However, the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 changed the landscape of the American West forever.

This transformation seemed to take place overnight. Risky journeys that had once required months, now could be made in a matter of days. Commercial goods and mail that might once have been delayed by heavy snow or floods could now be efficiently transported by the railroad regardless of weather conditions.

With the construction of the railroads, a strange thing happened in the West. The vast prairies that had once been considered isolated were now accessible. The “Great American Desert” which emigrants saw only as an obstacle on their journey to more fertile lands, was now highly valued as farm and ranch land.



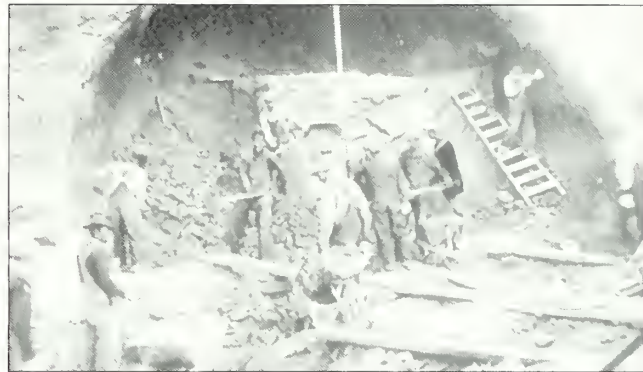
Settlement in the North Platte River Valley began with the arrival of cattlemen in 1870. Homesteaders followed close behind the ranchers in the 1880s, and farming became more profitable with the construction on irrigation canals. Coinciding with the arrival of railroad lines in the valley, the town of Gering was established in 1888, and Scottsbluff was founded in 1900.

Remnants of the well-worn overland trails continued in use by freighters, cattle drives, and as a means for local travel, but the days of the prairie schooner were gone by the dawn of the 20th Century. Most signs of the old trails may have been obliterated by plows or paved over by highways, but they weren't forgotten.

On March 28, 1914, an inquiry was made to the Department of the Interior about the possibility of establishing a National Monument at Scotts Bluff. Two years later a second attempt was made, which coincided with the establishment of the National Park Service on August 5, 1916.

Not having received a positive response from the federal government, concerned citizens submitted a petition to the National Park Service on October 5, 1916, in which they urged that a national monument commemorating the Oregon Trail be set aside. In March of 1918, a second petition was submitted, and their persistence paid off. On December 12, 1919, Woodrow Wilson signed a Presidential Proclamation, which officially established Scotts Bluff National Monument.

The monument's first Superintendent, or as they were called in those days "Custodian", was Will Maupin, editor of the Gering Midwest newspaper. He served from 1920 until 1924 at a salary of \$1 per month. With the aid of donations, Maupin was able to construct a picnic area at the base of the eastern face of the bluff. He was also able to make improvements on a



Tunnel Construction, 1935

hiking path to the summit, and was the first to suggest that a paved road to the summit be built, along with what he termed an "amusement resort".

The monument's second Custodian was Albert Mathers, President of the Gering National Bank, and he served from 1925 until 1934. Thanks to his energetic leadership, in 1926 new tables were added to the picnic area. Using the labor of local Boy Scouts, a new hiking path from the picnic area to the summit, which came to be known as the Zig-Zag Trail, was completed in June of 1927.

In 1928, the picnic area received further improvements when it was provided with electric power and streetlights, and in 1930 a Memorial Arch was constructed. A high point in Custodian Mathers' efforts to develop the monument came on June 16, 1931, when Horace Albright, Director of the National Park Service visited the site. Impressed by what he had seen, on a second visit in 1932, Albright promised to support the construction of the summit road.

Within a few months the first federal money was allocated to begin work on the Summit Road. Excavation of the lower tunnel and parking area, and



Oregon Trail Museum, 1936

construction of a connecting hiking trail was assigned to a private contractor. Unfortunately, at this same time, a surveyor discovered that the previously developed picnic area had been mistakenly built outside the monument's boundary!

For a short time, construction efforts came under the guidance of an agency known as the Civil Works Administration, which continued until April 28, 1934, when all construction came to a stop. At this time a complete survey of the monument was conducted to identify the bluff's historic and natural resources and to determine its future needs.

During this survey, Dr. Harold J. Cook was named the monument's first ranger and on December 20, 1934, he became its third Custodian. For the next few months, another federal agency, the Public Works Administration funded some work on the road to the summit, as well as planning for the new museum.

Development at Scotts Bluff National Monument began in earnest with the arrival of Company 762 of the Civilian Conservation Corps. In April of 1935, these civilian laborers, under the leadership of Army officers, assumed responsibility for completing the Summit Road and work on new picnic

grounds. Work on the first wing of the Oregon Trail Museum was assigned to the Fullen Construction Company in the fall of 1935.

Charles Randels succeeded Cook on July 15, 1935, as Scotts Bluff's fourth Custodian. Before leaving on June 25, 1938, Randels oversaw the completion of the tunnels and the paving of the Summit Road in 1937. The Oregon Trail Museum was dedicated on July 16, 1936, and the Summit Road was opened to the public on September 19, 1937.

The skilled workers of the Civilian Conservation Corps also added a new paleontology wing and tower to the museum as well as built public bathrooms, a ranger residence and maintenance shop. On completion of the landscaping, the work of the Civilian Conservation Corps was completed on May 31, 1938.

The 1940s proved to be a time of challenges and innovation. Merrill Mattes became the fifth Superintendent on June 25, 1938, and it fell to him to establish policies for the use of the new facilities. In addition to offering visitors a spectacular view of the surrounding countryside, the Summit Road was used as a raceway for the local Soap Box Derby. The



Headquarters Area, 1937

museum and hiking paths attracted a large number of visitors, but the new picnic facilities, located at the western base of South Bluff suffered from overuse and vandalism and were eventually closed.

America's involvement in the Second World War also affected the operations at Scotts Bluff National Monument. Gas rationing drastically reduced the number of tourists and several of the monument's personnel left to serve in the military. To fill these vacancies, Scotts Bluff was among the first Park Service units to hire a female ranger when Ethel Meinzer came to work here on August 3, 1942.



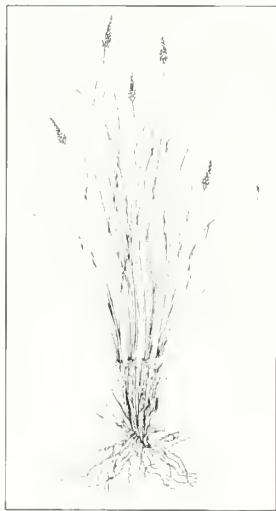
Merrill Mattes
and
Ethel Meinzer

With the end of the war in 1945 efforts toward further development at the monument were initiated. A collection of paintings, photographs and drawings by William Henry Jackson had been offered to the Oregon Trail Museum after the artist's death in 1942. However, wartime scarcities prevented any new construction and it wasn't until August 8, 1949, that the William Henry Jackson Memorial Wing was added to the museum.

The most recent development of facilities at the monument took place during a ten-year program known as "Mission 66". To commemorate the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the National Park Service, special efforts were made to improve the visitors' experience in the national parks.

As a result of this initiative, an outdoor amphitheater and updated interpretive signs were installed and extensive revisions of the museum exhibits were made. The construction of a second ranger residence, and additional maintenance facilities in 1962 brought the period of major development at Scotts Bluff National Monument to an end.

THE MIXED GRASS PRAIRIE



Blackroot Sedge

When Scotts Bluff National Monument was established by Presidential Proclamation to preserve its significance as a landmark for emigrants on the overland trails, its scientific value was also set recognized. As such, the monument was also set aside for its unique geology, fossils and its significance as an example of high plains flora and fauna.

The prairie of the North American continent is divided into three main types – tall grass, mixed grass and short grass. Variations in climate and soil determine the grasses, shrubs, and wildflowers found in each prairie type. The names are generally descriptive of the prairie types: tall grass prairie grasses can be six feet tall; the mixed grass can be three feet; and the short grass, ten inches in height.

The tall grass prairie is found to the east of

Scotts Bluff, in such mid-western states as Iowa and Illinois. Tall grass prairies usually receive 20 to 30 inches of precipitation each year and its soils can be several feet deep. The short grass prairie is located still further west at higher elevations and in the “rain shadow” of the mountains of Wyoming and Montana, receiving less than 10 inches of precipitation each year and having rocky or sandy soils less than six inches deep.

The mixed grass prairie is the predominant vegetation type within the national monument, and is found in eastern Colorado, the Nebraska Panhandle and western South Dakota. Mixed grass prairie generally receives 10 to 15 inches of precipitation each year, its topsoils may be only six to nine inches deep, and it consists of a combination of grasses, shrubs, and wildflowers. The most common grasses include needle-and-thread grass, little bluestem, prairie sandreed, western wheatgrass, sideoats grama, purple three-awn, and Junegrass.

Other plants commonly found in a mixed grass prairie environment include blackroot sedge, prairie coneflower, prairie rose, winterfat, fringed sage, plains

prickly pear cactus, and rabbitbrush. Together, needle-and-thread and blackroot sedge comprise nearly 83% of the national monument's primary native prairie.

The ponderosa pine and juniper woodlands of the bluff summits are among its most striking features. Historically, it is known that emigrants occasionally used these trees for firewood. This plant community survived since it was able to escape most of the frequent prairie fires that once burned the prairie below the summits.

The soils of the summits are very thin and moisture quickly evaporates in areas exposed to the wind. Considering these harsh conditions, it is surprising trees are able to grow in these areas at all. Eastern red cedar, a close relative to the Rocky Mountain juniper but not native to this area, has also invaded the summit areas.

The lush vegetation along the North Platte River has changed the most since the emigrants traveled through Mitchell Pass. Until the development of irrigation projects and the construction of dams upriver, the river was much wider than it is today. The seasonal flooding and frequent prairie fires served to keep trees from establishing on the river's banks.

With the advent of modern agriculture, prairie fires along the river have become a thing of the past. As a result of the reduced number of fires and floods, many woody species of trees and exotic weeds are now able to grow within the floodplain of the North Platte River, where they provide a dramatic increase in wildlife habitat.



At one time, hundreds of acres of the national monument were privately owned, and the prairie in these areas is in varying stages of restoration to its original state. Differing ratios of plant species in these areas account for the variety of prairie colors. The National Park Service's ultimate goal is to remove all non-native flora and revegetate the entire national monument with only native plant species so that the flora will more accurately reflect its appearance during the period of westward migration.

Prescribed fire is one of the tools used by management to restore and maintain native prairie and reduce accumulated fuel on the east boundary. When used correctly fire can be applied to the land to reduce non-native vegetation and stimulate native species. Many non-native plants are annuals reproducing by seeds only. They are most susceptible to fire in the spring, and this allows native plant species to replace them.



Skunkbush Sumac

Fires in late summer or early fall simulate the work of nature. At this time of the year, thunderstorms with lightning historically ignited prairie fires, which recycled nutrients, reduced the buildup of undergrowth and prepared the soil for the next year's new growth. The national monument initiated its current prescribed fire program in 1998.

For prescribed fire management purposes Scotts Bluff is divided into seven burn units, and when weather conditions allow, one unit is burned each year. Occasionally wildfires occur due to lightning strikes or human carelessness, and owing to the possibility of property damage these fires are considered dangerous and are suppressed as quickly as possible.

Scotts Bluff National Monument is one of the few places in the Nebraska Panhandle where all wildlife is protected in a natural environment. Here there are resident populations of invertebrates, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals, and all animals are free to roam in and out of the national monument.

The largest animals currently inhabiting the national monument are the mule deer and the whitetail deer, both of which are native species. The whitetail deer is generally found along the river, while the mule deer spends most of its time on the mixed grass prairie.

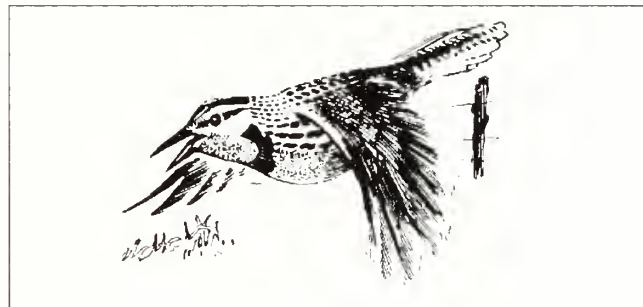
Other mammals commonly seen at Scotts Bluff are the coyote, porcupine, badger, and red fox. The black-tailed prairie dog also lives here, and the "prairie dog town" is located in the northwest section of the national monument, an area only accessible on foot.

Several species of reptiles can be found within the national monument, the most notorious of which is the western prairie rattlesnake. The species is considered common, but not abundant. Visitors need to be aware that they may encounter a rattlesnake during the warmer months of the year. Rattlesnakes are timid and can usually be found in shady, cooler spots during the hottest part of the day. They may occasionally be found warming themselves in the morning sun, or on the warm pavement during the evening hours.

The largest of the native prairie animals, which the emigrants would have seen, are now gone from the national monument. The elk, grizzly bear, and bison were displaced as settlers encroached on their habitat, and will likely not be reintroduced at the monument. Bobcats and mountain lions have been observed in the Wildcat Hills to the south, but they are not believed to inhabit Scotts Bluff.

More than one hundred species of birds can be observed at the national monument throughout the year. The most common breeding bird species of the prairie include the western meadowlark, black-billed magpie, common grackle, spotted towhee, and brown-headed cowbird. Bald eagles are commonly seen

during the winter as they migrate into the area to spend the winter along the North Platte River.



Meadowlark

The National Park Service is working to preserve not only the bluffs but its associated plant and animal communities. Together the total picture of the land's topography, and the vegetation and wildlife, which the emigrants would have encountered, are equally important in understanding the emigrants' experience.

ACCESS TO THESE FACILITIES AND EVENTS MAY VARY DUE TO WEATHER, CONSTRUCTION OR OTHER FACTORS.

PERMANENT FACILITIES

Oregon Trail – The roadbed of the actual overland trail is still visible in Mitchell Pass. These trail remnants are accessible on a hiking path (1-mile roundtrip) which begins at the museum. Interpretive wayside exhibits along the way describe the trail.

Oregon Trail Museum – The museum contains displays relating the story of America's westward movement and local natural history. Also included are a 12-minute slide program, the William Henry Jackson Room, and occasional temporary displays.

Book store – A sales area is operated by the non-profit Oregon Trail Museum Association (OTMA). A wide variety of books, maps, videos, and postcards are available. Sale of these items helps to support interpretive programs at the monument.

Summit Road – A 1.6 mile paved motor vehicle road leads to a parking area on the summit, which offers a view of Chimney Rock 23 miles to the east, and Laramie Peak 90 miles to the west. Three tunnels on the Summit Road will not accommodate vehicles more than 12 feet in height or more than 25 feet in length. No towed vehicles are allowed on the Summit Road.

Saddle Rock Hiking Trail – A 1.6 mile asphalt path (3.2 miles roundtrip) leads from the museum to the summit of the bluff. For safety and to preserve the delicate ecosystem of the bluffs, visitors are required to stay on the paved hiking trails at all times. Pets are allowed on the trails, but must be kept on a leash.

Summit Overlook Trails – Two paved hiking trails are accessible from the Summit Parking Lot. The North Overlook Trail offers a view of the Scotts Bluff badlands and the North Platte River. The South Overlook Trail provides a view of Saddle Rock and Mitchell Pass.

Parking – Designated “Handicap Parking” spaces are available at the Oregon Trail Museum and in the Summit Parking Lot. Special parking areas for buses and Recreational Vehicles have been set aside east of the Oregon Trail Museum.

SPECIAL PROGRAMS

Tuesday Evening Programs – During the summer programs are presented by guest speakers on a variety of topics relating to western American history. These programs are free to the public. Schedules can be obtained from the monument on request.

Living History – Rangers in period clothing demonstrate 19th Century skills and tasks. These programs are offered on weekends from mid-June through mid-August.

Ranger Talks – Daily prepared presentations by rangers are offered from mid-June through mid-August.

Shuttle Van – A van fueled by alternative fuels provides visitors with rides to the summit. From mid-June through mid-August scheduled runs are made every 30 to 45 minutes. During the remainder of the year the van is operated as needed. The cost of a ride is covered by a visitor’s entrance fee.

Open Houses – Each summer we offer one fee-free day and several fee-free nights. Contact the monument for specific dates.

Spring Up the Bluff – Each year a relay race up the Summit Road is held for teams of local runners. The event is held on the last Saturday in April in commemoration of National Park Week.

Local Art Show – The Oregon Trail Museum hosts an exhibition of works by local artists. This event is also held each April in commemoration of National Park Week.

Pony Express Re-Ride – The monument is a stopover for riders each June, as they re-enact the route taken by the Pony Express. Contact the monument for specific dates.

Picnic Tables – Three tables are located in the median of the bus/RV parking area east of the museum.

Handicap Accessibility – An accessible public restroom is available. A wheelchair is available for visitor use on request.

Website – A description of the location and facilities at Scotts Bluff National Monument, can be found at www.nps.gov/scbl

PUBLIC POLICY

Entrance Fees – Visitors to Scotts Bluff National Monument are required to pay an entry fee. This fee is waived if the visitor presents a valid National Park Pass, local Annual Park Pass, a Golden Age Passport or a Golden Access Passport. Commercial rates are available. Contact the monument for specific fees.

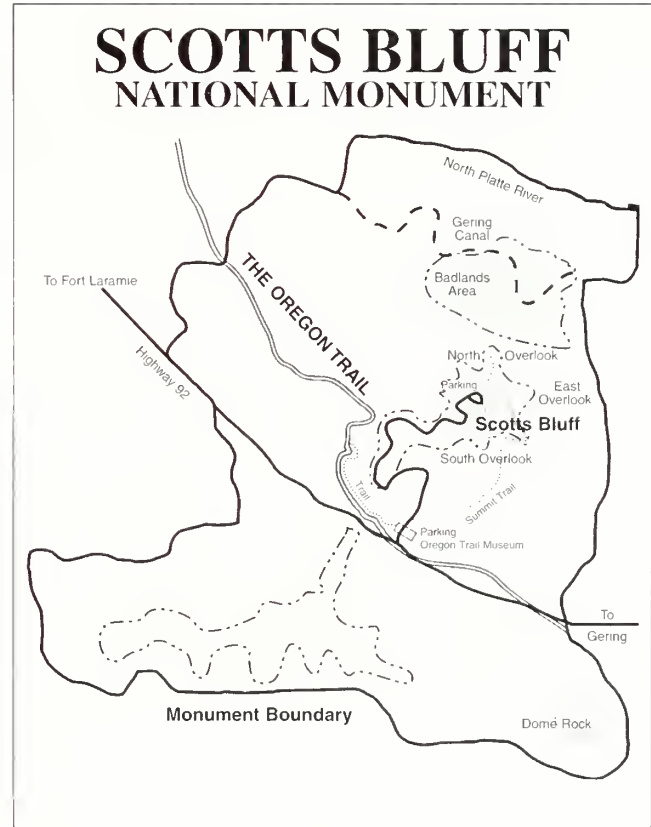
The following activities are prohibited within the boundaries of Scotts Bluff National Monument:

- **Possession, destruction, injury, defacement, removal or disturbance of artifacts, wildlife or geological specimens.**
- **Possession or use of electronic detection gear.**
- **Hiking off-trails on the summit, or on Dome Rock, Eagle Rock, Sentinel Rock and Saddle Rock.**
- **Camping.**
- **Horseback riding.**
- **Skateboarding, roller skating and roller blading.**

Operating Hours – Winter hours: 8 to 5
 Summer hours: 8 to 7
 (Memorial Day through
 Labor Day)

Hiking paths are open during daylight hours. The Summit Road may be closed to the public in the event of inclement weather. The monument's facilities are open year round, with the exception of being closed on Christmas Day and New Year's Day.

Contact us: Superintendent
 Scotts Bluff National Monument
 PO Box 27
 Gering, Nebraska 69341
 308-436-4340





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