

The Oregon Trail

Morrow County's highway to the past

The year is 1852. Westbound emigrant John Kern in his 150th day out of Independence, Mo., has traveled nearly 1,750 miles on the Oregon Trail. He has just passed over the desolate sage flats of present-day Morrow County, stopping only to camp and stock up on water at Well Spring, then later doing the same at Willow Creek near Cecil.

An estimated 250,000 pioneers crossed through Morrow County on their way to the fertile Willamette Valley between 1841 and the end of the 19th century. Although going was relatively easy during the two-day trek through the northern Morrow County flatlands, many pioneers—like Kern—were not impressed with the local landscape.

"If this is Oregon, it is not the place I started for," wrote Kern in his diary after passing through Morrow County. ". . . Have endured too many hardships and privations. . . to ever be put off into such an ocean of gloom, eternal horrors and desolations such as this. The creator must have intended an abundance of wickedness in the world. . . and this country as a refuge to those who could not bear the countenance of honest men."

Not exactly material for a Chamber of Commerce brochure were Kern's comments. But early-day emigrants to Oregon Territory had no way of visualizing the advent of pivot irrigation systems that would convert the wastelands of Morrow County he passed through into lush potato and alfalfa fields.

The fact that few pioneers

stopped to settle in northern Morrow County accounts for one of the major reasons why the county contains what is believed to be one of the best preserved sections of the entire Oregon Trail.

Wagon ruts remain visible in many places across the county—across the southern end of the Navy Bombing Range, parallel to the county's Emigrant Road, and along the canyons leading west of Cecil into Gilliam County.

Now, nearly 100 years after railroads made the Oregon Trail a part of history, the U.S. Congress is seriously interested in preserving what is left of the trail.

The Oregon Trail Act, passed by the House in April and approved by the Senate in late July, was established to include the trail remnants in the National Register of Historic Places, authenticate the trail route, and include the pioneer route in the National Trails System.

It remains hazy as to precisely what will be done with the trail remnants in Morrow County. Money apparently has been allocated to purchase trail segments and easements to them, to build educational historic displays, and to mark the trail route. Under the enabling legislation passed earlier this year, the Department of the Interior has three years to prepare a plan for development and management of the trail.

Most likely to receive some sort of development are 987 miles of "high potential route segments"—areas containing trail remnants worthy of preservation. In Morrow Cou-

nty, a 12-mile "high potential route segment" has been designed by the Department of the Interior. It is located on the Boardman bombing range.

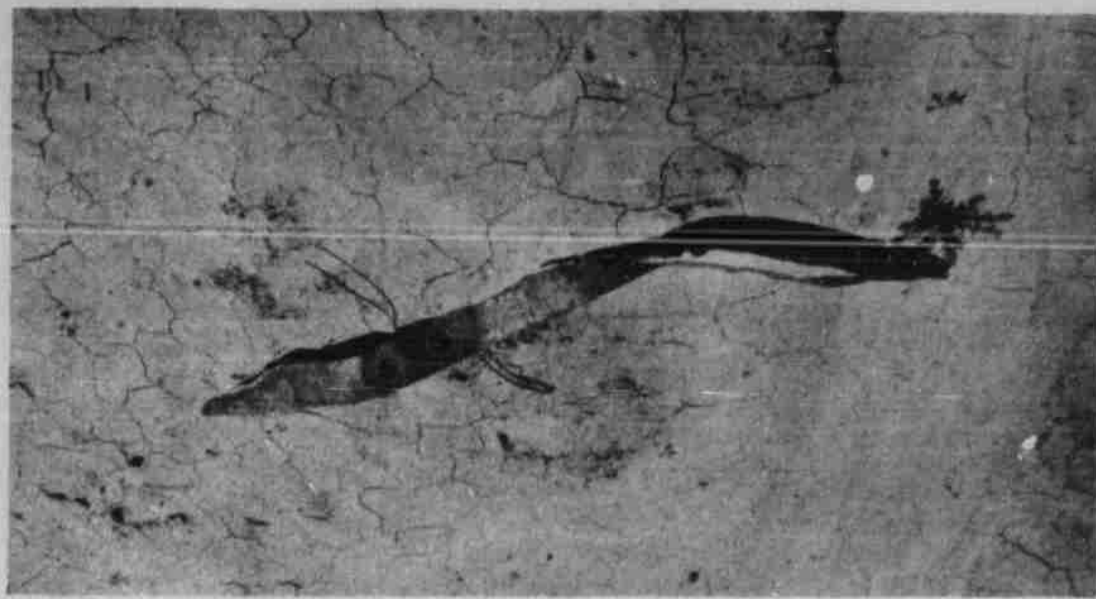
According to the Department of the Interior proposal, the 12-mile stretch is among the largest unbroken segments remaining in the 1,924-mile long trail. "The land is pockmarked in places by bomb craters," the proposal noted, "but otherwise retains a natural appearance."

The route here, as on the adjoining Boeing land, has high public use potential and is worthy of nomination to the National Register of Historic Places."

The proposal noted that "emigrants disliked this part of the trail for its dust, heat and scarcity of water. A modern follower of the route would find an interpretive foot trail along the segment a very educational experience. The trail remnants and historic sites have high potential for interpretation, but development plans should consider protection from vandalism at the isolated sites."

Sen. Mark Hatfield was co-sponsor of the Oregon Trail enabling legislation in the senate.

It is not yet known whether the Navy will be forced to delete the Oregon Trail segment from its bomb sights. But one thing is certain, modern day tourists would need as much courage as their pioneer ancestors to walk along the bombing range segment if the emigrant route remains open to target practice by Navy jets.



Twisted scrap of metal banding, possibly from a barrel from a covered wagon, lies along a sun-baked stretch of the Oregon Trail near the Boardman Bombing Range.

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Story and photos
by Rick Steelhammer



Wells Spring, watering hole for thousands of emigrants who traveled along the Oregon Trail, is easily reached on an unpaved Emigrant Road. Sign marking the spot, above left, has been used for target practice by vandals. Springs are now dry, due to a lowering of the water table by nearby irrigation pumps. A short distance from Wells Spring is a pioneer graveyard and monument (above) commemorating Col. Cornelius Gilliam, who was killed near the site in 1848 during an Indian attack.



Heading west from Cecil, into Fourmile Canyon near the Gilliam County line, this section of the Oregon Trail is one of several still visible in the area. Although going was relatively easy for the pioneers passing through Morrow County, the desolation dampened the spirits of some. "If this is Oregon, it is not the place I started for," wrote one such emigrant, describing the area as "an ocean of gloom." Pioneers could have foreseen that one day the Morrow County desert would bloom with irrigated croplands.

