

The Emigrant Trail at Big Bend

Tahoe National Forest

Nevada City Ranger District



First Wagons to Cross the Sierra Nevada

The Big Bend Visitor Center, 18 miles west of Truckee on Interstate 80, is located at the site of the winter camp of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party, the first emigrant group to cross the Sierra Nevada Mountains with covered wagons. Members of the party, led by Elisha Stephens, wintered in 1844-45 at Big Bend in a cabin near the South Yuba River, while others struggled through the deep Sierra snows toward Sutter's Fort for help. In November 1844, a child, Elizabeth Yuba Murphy, was born at Big Bend. One member of the party, Moses Schallenberger, spent the winter in a cabin later used by the Donner Party near Donner Lake. Unlike the Donner party two years later, every member of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party made it safely to California, including two children born en route.

Caleb Greenwood, a well-known "mountain man" and explorer, who guided the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party in 1844, returned east the next year to guide more emigrants to California. He improved the route by opening the Dog Valley Portion of the trail, used as the main wagon route until 1925.

The Emigrant Trail to California

In 1846, the ill-fated Donner party attempted to emigrate to California on this trail, but never made it beyond Donner Lake until the survivors were rescued in 1847. However, an estimated 500 wagons made it across this route that year. In 1849, emigrant John Markle wrote in his diary that the Big Bend section was "the damndest, rockiest, and roughest road I ever saw." In 1852, over 50,000 emigrants travelled through Big Bend on their way to a better life in the Golden State, but emigration waned as the Gold Rush ended.

The Transcontinental Railroad

In 1864, this portion of the Emigrant route was improved and renamed the Dutch Flat & Donner Lake Wagon Road. This toll road was owned and operated by the Central Pacific Railroad (CPRR) in conjunction with construction of the railroad itself. This began the CPRR's control over much of the freight traffic in California, and helped create the vast Southern Pacific railroad empire.

In 1869, the railroad itself was completed, connecting with the Union Pacific Railroad at Promontory Point Utah, and carried both freight and passengers over the Sierra Nevada Mountains year round.

Highway Routes

By 1913, much of the wagon road had become a portion of the Lincoln Highway, the first transcontinental paved route for automobiles. It was replaced by 1930 with U.S. 40, (now known as old 40), until it was replaced, in turn, with today's Interstate 80 in the mid-1960s.



Early Explorers

In 1845, Captain John Frémont, leading an Army detachment mapping the west, passed through Big Bend. His mission was to explore the west for valuable resources, though this was Mexican territory at the time.



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While all of these routes follow essentially the same route across the Sierra, each road varied a bit in its actual on the ground location. Fortunately for us, portions of the Emigrant trail are visible and easy to find in the Big Bend area.

Rust Marks from Covered Wagons

Emigrant Wagons travelling through Big Bend left rust marks from the scrape of iron wheels across hard granite, and the hubs of their wagon wheels scarred trees adjacent to the trail. Many of these marks remain visible some 140 years after the fact.

Most of the rust marks are small, and can be difficult to see. One of the largest and most obvious sets of rust marks can be found by parking at the Loch Leven Lakes trailhead, 0.25 mi east of Big Bend Visitor Center, and walking down toward the river about 20 yards. Look for an iron 'T' monument, placed by Trails West. This marker is on the Emigrant Route.

Approximately 12 yards east, or upstream of this marker, are some boulders about two feet high, on the right as you walk eastward on the route. Look carefully; you'll see rust patches on the side of the rocks, caused by side scraping of thousands of wagon wheel hubs.

Feel the rusty areas. You'll probably notice that they are smoother than the unrusty rock. In fact, these spots have been "polished" smooth by the thousands of wagons who passed this way.

From here, the trail keeps to the same elevation and heads west, or downstream, towards midslope on the large rock that dominates the landscape. Midslope on this rock are a group of pine trees that died in 1996. The bases of these trees show deformation caused by being used as winch or snub trees. At this point, wagons were lowered down to the river with ropes wrapped around the trunks. The abrasion from the ropes caused damage to the trunks that affected their growth.

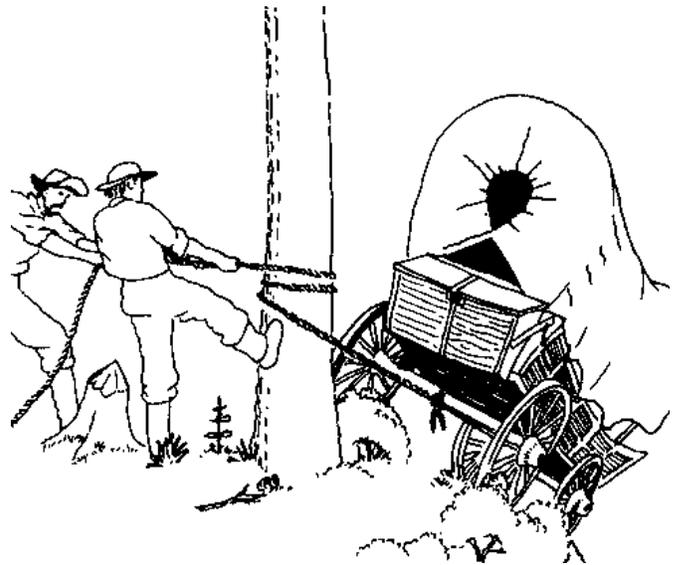
Along the river, a paved trail follows the emigrant route into Big Bend station. At the Visitor Center, the route trends up through the museum building, and goes diagonally across the old highway, and is marked on the other side on private property.

Please Preserve the Past...

Along the Emigrant Trail, and in many other places on your National Forest, artifacts are occasionally still found. These pieces of our history are important pieces of the puzzle that is the past, and they are protected by Federal and State law.

By leaving artifacts in place, you help preserve the memory of the pioneers who came to California in search of a better life, and leave this evidence available for others to discover. You also give scientists the chance to document and preserve the evidence of these brave men and women.

If you have questions or comments about evidence of the Emigrant Trail, please contact the Cultural Resources section of the Tahoe National Forest.



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