



The Meek Cutoff: Tracing the Oregon Trail's Lost Wagon Train of 1845

Brooks Geer Ragen

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In 1845, an estimated 2,500 emigrants left Independence and St. Joseph, Missouri, for the Willamette Valley in what was soon to become the Oregon Territory. It was general knowledge that the route of the Oregon Trail through the Blue Mountains and down the Columbia River to The Dalles was grueling and dangerous. About 1,200 men, women, and children in over two hundred wagons accepted fur trapper and guide Stephen Meek's offer to lead them on a shortcut across the trackless high desert of eastern Oregon.

Those who followed Meek experienced a terrible ordeal when his memory of the terrain apparently failed. Lost for weeks with little or no water and a shortage of food, the Overlanders encountered deep dust, alkali lakes, and steep, rocky terrain. Many became ill and some died in the forty days it took to travel from the Snake River in present-day Idaho to the Deschutes River near Bend, Oregon. Stories persist that children in the group found gold nuggets in a small, dry creek bed along the way.

From 2006 to 2011, Brooks Ragen and a team of specialists in history, geology, global positioning, metal detecting, and aerial photography spent weeks every spring and summer tracing the Meek Cutoff. They located wagon ruts, gravesites, and other physical evidence from the most difficult part of the trail, from Vale, Oregon, to the upper reaches of the Crooked River and to a location near Redmond where a section of the train reached the Deschutes.

The Meek Cutoff moves readers back and forth in time, using surviving journals from members of the 1845 party, detailed day-to-day maps, aerial photographs, and descriptions of the modern-day exploration to document an extraordinary story of the Oregon Trail.

The Meek Cutoff: Tracing the Oregon Trail's Lost Wagon Train of 1845 Details

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From Reader Review The Meek Cutoff: Tracing the Oregon Trail's Lost Wagon Train of 1845 for online ebook

Judy says

A friend of mine asked me to find a good book about the Lost Wagon Train of 1845 (Stephen Meek's Cut-off). A group of experts in all kinds of fields followed the trail as they could find it for two years. The maps, photos and diary entries from those pioneers are extraordinary. What a wonderful way to learn the details of a well-known history. Well Done.

Carole says

This book was incredibly interesting to me as the author recreated the experience of the Meek Cut-off. Full of beautiful photographs I felt like I was there with them. My ancestors were among these pioneers who wandered Eastern Oregon suffering great hardships, and I now have a greater appreciation for their experience. It's so amazing to me that after all these years have passed that there are still signs of the 1845 trail. What a great, very beautiful book.

Ashlynn Johnson says

I thought this was a fantastically informative book. I would strongly recommend for those interested in the history of the wagon train; or the settling of the north west, a colorful, factual book. And for those of us such as myself who have previously studied the subject matter I was still pleased to find myself learning more with each page read. I would have given five out of five stars but as it is more of a work of scientific nature even with a story, I could not fully be entranced.

Lara says

The story of the Lost Wagon Train is a pretty interesting one, and I liked the idea of a group of researchers attempting to follow the same path 150+ years later. And I think it's pretty amazing that there are still wagon ruts visible all this time later, and that they were able to locate grave sites and camps and various wagon parts. But the presentation feels a bit lacking to me.

I like that the journey is presented day-by-day, with sort of a general outline of what happened that day (sometimes focused on the original wagon train and sometimes on the modern researchers), followed by actual diary entries made by members of the 1845 party. But I would have liked a little more information, I suppose, on who these people, both past and present, really were. There are some brief bios of everyone involved at the very beginning of the book, but there's no life brought to them. And the photographs are very bland, have awkward shadows, and almost always show only the researchers' backs, if they're in the pictures at all. It's very much more the story of the trail itself than it is of the people involved in either time period, which seemed strange to me.

I would definitely recommend this to folks with a die-hard interest in the Lost Wagon Train of 1845, but to folks like me with little previous knowledge...I'm not so sure.

Definitely an interesting idea, though.

Received this book through First Reads.

Jean says

Fascinating historical journey as a group of historians, geologists, archeologists, engineers, and others--with the writer, traced the Oregon Trail's lost wagon train of 1845. The Research Expedition set out in 2006 to follow the tracks of the followers of Stephen Meek, who had promised a safer, shorter route to Oregon, but then became lost in the vast reaches of unexplored Oregon between the Malheur region and the Deschutes and John Day Rivers. The project took place in September, following closely the same dates recorded by diarists of the original expedition. The book presents diary excerpts from the 1845 emigrants as compared to the modern-day travelers' experiences. Maps present the trails followed by groups in the original wagon train. Some of the photographs show artifacts, landscape sites, and trail ruts from the 1845 journey found by the 2006 expedition.

1845 diary entries showed how off course the Meek emigration was: They confused Steens Mountain with the Cascade Range, and branches of the Sylvies river for the Deschutes and John Day Rivers. Later writings, also included in the book, detailed how close the emigrants came to hanging Stephen Meek in desperation for their lost condition: some dying of thirst and starvation. Interesting that a possible gold lode was discovered while the emigrants searched for water, but little notice was taken at the time because of the desperate condition of the travelers whose "gold" would have been water and grazing grounds for their animals.

My only objection to this book was that landscape sites were not clearly shown in some of the maps. Also, I would like to have known what the original travelers did or thought when they discovered that Steens Mountain was not the Cascades.

Tuck says

superb example of primary source history writing, ground truthing, and putting Oregon trail/ westward expansion in understandable context. super photos, maps, narrative. bib and index are o k.

Juli says

Very interesting and very well done. This book is a fascinating look at the part of the Oregon Trail when some of the emigrants agreed to follow Stephen Meek. This book combines a modern day expedition to find the 1845 route, pictures, and diary entries from some of those who lived through the hardships on this journey. A must read for any Oregon Trail enthusiast!

