The Applegate Trail

By Stephen Most

In 1843 three brothers, Jesse, Lindsay, and Charles Applegate and their families, joined the emigrants who traveled the Oregon Trail. Times had been hard back home in Missouri. Prices of pork and other stock had fallen so low, there was no point taking them to market. Yet that suffering did not prepare the Applegates for the hardships of their journey, especially the calamity on the Columbia River, whose currents swept three of their children away and killed two of them.

In 1846 Jesse and Lindsay Applegate, together with Leon Scott, headed a party to locate a less dangerous route to the Willamette Valley. Rather than bring families, oxen, and wagons over the Blue Mountains and along the daunting Columbia, the new route would lead emigrants through the southern mountains of the Cascade Range. The road that Scott and the Applegates built went through Nevada desert, passed Goose Lake, Tule Lake, and Lower Klamath Lake at the California-Oregon border, crossed the Cascades into the Rogue River Valley, then headed north toward the pioneers' destination.

The new road proved to be no easy detour. The first winter that the Applegate Trail was open for emigration came early and caused great suffering. This was the fatal winter of 1846-1847 when the Donner Party came to grief crossing California's Sierra Nevada. It was also unfortunate that the Applegate Trail passed through the homeland of the Modocs. One band of Modocs ambushed emigrants at a place on the edge of Tule Lake that became known as Bloody Point.

Although the Applegates built their trail to bring settlers north into Oregon, as soon as word of gold in California reached the newly established settlements, that road became jammed with men rushing south. Lindsay Applegate reached California in 1848, ahead of the rush, and returned home with $6,000 worth of gold dust.

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