

Karen Bassett

## Saving the Old Creates Something New The Oregon Trail

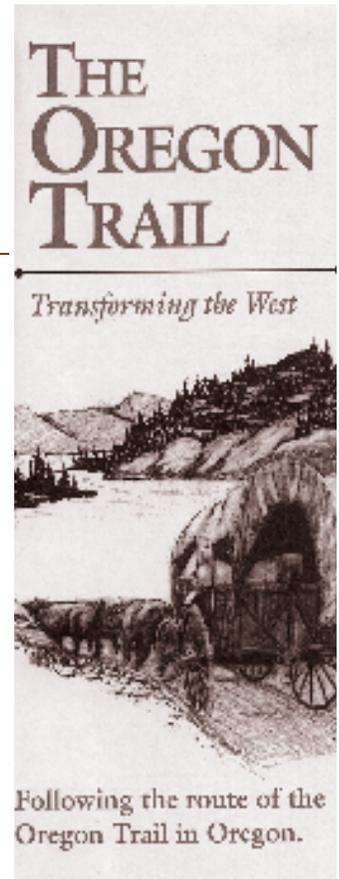
**I**n 1993, the Oregon Trail Sesquicentennial gave the State of Oregon an opportunity to integrate celebration and interpretation to foster preservation. Here's the story:

In the 1840s, the Oregon Territory was “way over there,” across the Missouri River and far out West beyond the edge of the settled United States. An idealized vision of Oregon, with the promise of free land and good soil, filled Midwestern farmers’ imaginations, and what they imagined was a place of boundless opportunity where those with the gumption to make the journey could plant their crops and live well, safe and happy. The enticing idea of this place pulled people westward away from everything they had known before, and between the 1840s and 1860s, an estimated 350,000 men, women, and children packed up and moved west from Missouri through what later became the states of Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, and Idaho. Some went to California for gold; others, about 50,000 or so, went on to Oregon.

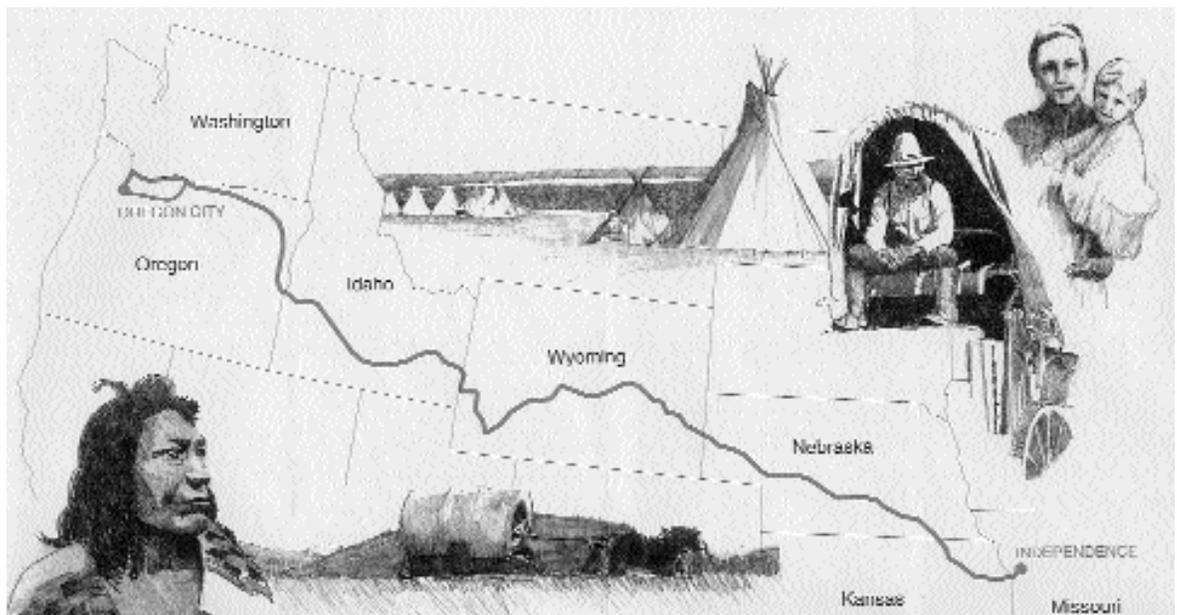
One-hundred and fifty years later Oregonians (many of whom are descendants of the Oregon pioneers) celebrated the Sesquicentennial of the “Great Migration” of 1843, the first organized effort by Euroamericans to settle the Oregon Country. Celebrating the past inspired Oregonians

to preserve what still existed—segments of the Oregon Trail and a few interpretive sites. To this were added miles and miles of marked trail remnants, four interpretive centers, and enough interpretive sites to nearly triple the number existing before the celebration began.

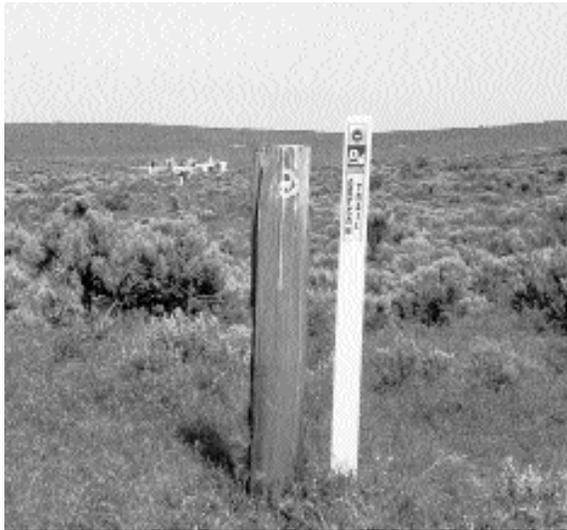
More often than not, 20th-century farmers and many others mistook the 19th-century emigrant road for just any old road—a freight road or maybe a farm-to-market road. In too many cases, unwitting workers (including one local utility company who thought the emigrant route was an ATV trail) plowed the ruts under. Miles and miles of the Oregon Trail are now gone. Yet, miles of the Oregon Trail still exist, and in 1978, Congress designated the Oregon Trail’s route and remnants as a national historic trail. The Oregon



*The Oregon Trail: Transforming the West. Map to Oregon Trail sites and hiking segments, and interpretive brochure produced by the Oregon Trails Coordinating Council.*



Marking the Oregon Trail. Oregon-California Trails Association members (in the distance) marking the ruts near Well Spring on the Columbia Plateau, a favorite resting place along the Oregon Trail. The old Oregon Trail marker stands beside OCTA's Carsonite marker which is used across the entire length of the Oregon Trail.



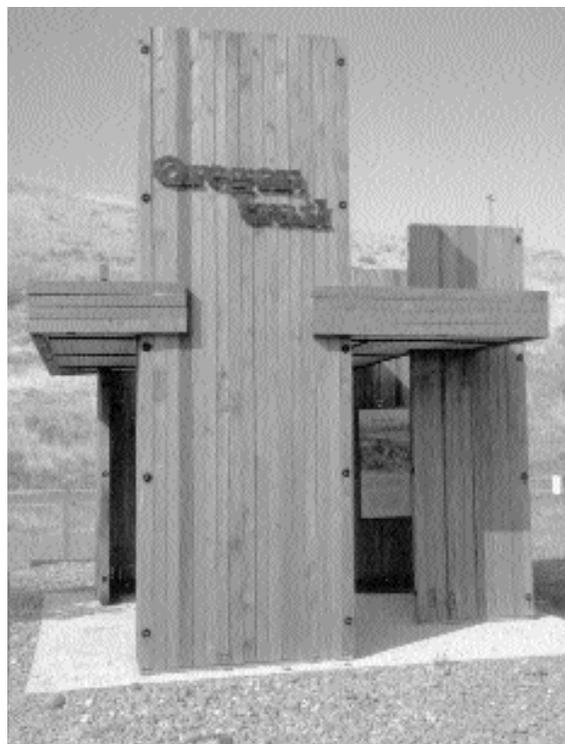
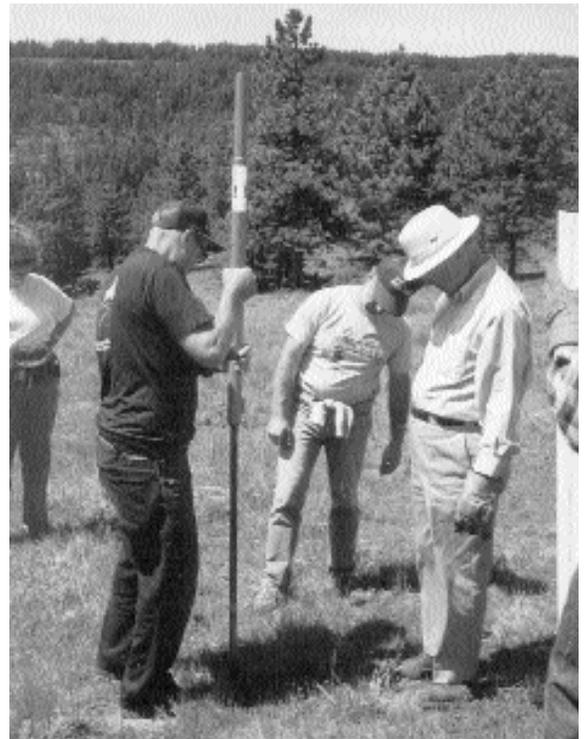
National Historic Trail ribbons through 547 miles of Oregon's landscape, through sagebrush steppe and over mountain ranges and rivers.

In 1982, an Oregon farmer plowed under a rut segment on the Columbia Plateau. In so doing, the farmer helped inspire several Oregon Trail enthusiasts to begin efforts to actively preserve the Oregon Trail. The group organized as the Oregon-California Trails Association (OCTA). By 1984, when the group met in Oregon City, Oregon, for their second annual convention, OCTA's membership had grown to 600 persons. OCTA's activities, coupled with the opening of Oregon City's Oregon Trail Interpretive Center, drew the attention of Oregon's Governor Victor Atiyeh, who saw the Oregon Trail as a resource deserving attention and

OCTA Volunteers in action.

protection. By executive order, Governor Atiyeh appointed the Oregon Trail Advisory Council to monitor the condition of the trail and submit a proposal identifying existing and potential interpretive sites along the trail.

The Council members assessed potential interpretive locations, identifying additional sites, and recommending that the state work with both federal agencies and local communities to develop a Trail-wide coordinated interpretive presentation. The Oregon Trail Advisory Council also suggested that four communities (Baker City, Pendleton, The Dalles, and Oregon City) work with private and public partners to develop major interpretive facilities describing the Oregon Trail's story from a vari-



Oregon Trail Interpretive Kiosk. The Oregon Trail interpretive kiosks were installed at sites along the length of Interstate 84 in Oregon in preparation for the 1993 statewide commemoration of the Oregon Trail's Sesquicentennial.

ety of perspectives, working toward a more authentic interpretation of the story itself. (The Advisory Council also recommended that the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla people tell their own story in their own words.)

The Oregon Trail Advisory Council was (and is) comprised of several of Oregon's preservation champions, each of whom had existing commitments within the public and private sector. To ensure that the Advisory Council's vision was implemented, the group recommended that the Oregon legislature appropriate funding for the Oregon Trail Coordinating Council, a group specifically mandated to oversee and coordinate the interpretive sites and segments program along the Trail (building an infrastructure around which to celebrate and to leave a solid interpretive presentation as a legacy of the commemoration) and to



OCTA volunteers and Oregon Trail ruts crossing the Columbia Plateau. The Columbia River flows in the distance.

work cooperatively across the state (and with the other Oregon Trail states too) to pull together the state's biggest celebration ever, the Oregon Trail Sesquicentennial.

Pre-commemoration interpretive development took nearly two years, from 1990 well into 1993, and resulted in myriad opportunities and partnerships. In places whose names still ring of the Oregon Trail story—Emigrant Springs, West Tollgate, and Farewell Bend—the Oregon Trail Coordinating Council (OTCC) worked with chambers of commerce, local historical societies, cities, port authorities, the Bureau of Land Management, the Forest Service, Oregon State Parks, and the Oregon Department of Transportation to secure funds for the interpretive sites and segments program. The OTCC worked with local communities and state agencies, coordinating site and interpretive development.

OCTA volunteers and Oregon Trail ruts crossing the Columbia Plateau. The John Day River flows in the distance.



Adding together direct state funding, federal funding (especially from the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991), and corporate and community matching dollars, communities raised more than \$300,000 to fund the sites and segments program. The money was invested in renovating 11 Oregon Trail interpretive sites and in developing 13 new interpretive sites (including kiosks at state parks, waysides, and rest areas). Through the combined efforts of the OTCC, USFS, and BLM, a coordinated series of interpretive signs in 47 different locations along the Oregon Trail combine to tell the Oregon Trail story.

Amid all the Sesquicentennial development, OCTA's stalwarts continued working with land owners, governmental agencies, archeologists, and historians to identify and mark more than 24 miles of Oregon Trail remnants on public and private land. OCTA worked with the National Park Service, the USDA Forest Service, and the U.S. Navy to develop more than 25 miles of hiking segments on three distinct Oregon Trail remnants (in the Umatilla National Forest, along the Navy's Boardman Bombing Range, and on the Mount Hood National Forest).

Work continues on the major interpretive facility components (the four centers represent more than \$50 million in state, federal, and private investment) and the last of the four facilities is scheduled to open in late 1997.

So far, Oregon's effort has been a rousing success in terms of preservation and promotion of the Oregon Trail in Oregon. The commemoration provided an opportunity to interpret Trail resources, to give meaning to the old ruts winding across farmers' fields, through forests, up mountain slopes, and across rivers. It also provided an opportunity for hearty discussion among descendants of both the emigrants and the Native Americans to discuss the Trail's impacts—then and now. Finally, the interpretive effort implemented in preparation for the Oregon Trail's Sesquicentennial provided a model for activities on Oregon's other national historic trails (the Applegate Branch of the California National Historic Trail commemorating 150 years in 1996, the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail commemorating 200 years in 2005-6, and the Nez Perce National Historic Trail) and state-designated historic trails. In projects initiated through OTCC funding, interpretive developments along all of Oregon's historic trails are now key components of the state's commemorative planning and heritage tourism programs.

*Karen Bassett serves on the staff of the Oregon Trails Coordinating Council in Salem, Oregon.*