

POST-CONVENTION TOUR

OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ASSOCIATION

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NATIONAL CONVENTION—SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH

FLOATING ISLAND TO DONNER SPRING

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ROY D. TEA, GUIDE

THE GREAT SALT LAKE DESERT

PREHISTORIC PERSPECTIVE

Over 15,000 years ago a large, deep, freshwater lake now called Lake Bonneville covered the area known as the Great Salt Lake Desert. The lake at its highest level was over 1000 feet deep. It was supplied with water from the ice age and had an outlet to the Snake River in the north, which flowed into the Columbia River and then to the Pacific Ocean. Eventually Lake Bonneville's water cut through the resisting rock at Red Rock Pass north of Preston, Idaho, in an outpouring of water of catastrophic proportions. The lake level fell some 350 feet in about six months. Drier years and retreating glaciers lowered the water below its natural outlet and evaporation reduced the inland sea to our present Great Salt Lake.

The Great Salt Lake Desert or basin was created by sediment of fine clay and silt being washed into Lake Bonneville over eons of time. Some of these sediments are over 8000 feet thick. When the remnants of Lake Bonneville evaporated, salts were washed to the lowest portions of the basin, creating salt pans such as the Bonneville Salt Flats. The slightly higher-level mud flats left by the prehistoric lake are the thirty-six miles of flats that the explorers and pioneers crossed to reach Donner Springs between 1845 to 1850.

The first humans to inhabit this region were Indians. Caves used by Indians in this area have yielded carbon-dated material 12,000 years old. A cave or overhang was discovered by this writer in 1960 while prospecting for road building material on Floating Island which is just off the emigrant trail and is mentioned by journal writers as an isolated butte. This cave was excavated by archaeologists in 1986 and has been classified as a major find. It was an Indian "motel," just an overnight stopping place, without any water, used for protection while they were traversing this region. There is a cave near Wendover called Danger Cave and another one on the south flank of Pilot Peak called Raven Cave. Both are dated at 12,000 years old.

HISTORIC PERSPECTIVE

The first record of white men and explorers in this region were John C. Fremont and his large pack party of October 1845 on a expedition to California. Fremont sent a scouting party consisting of (according to the

various source accounts) Kit Carson, Auguste Archambeault, Lucien Maxwell, Richard Owens, and Basil Lajeunesse to cross the desert to find water by the prominent mountain peak that could be seen from the eastern edge of the desert. They were the first recorded men to cross this area, and found a spring near the edge of the flats at the foot of the slope of this mountain. Fremont named this friendly 10,700 foot mountain Pilot Peak, a name it still bears today.

Later in California Fremont and his party's exploits were heard by such men as mountain man James Clyman, Lansford W. Hastings, and others. Hastings had previously written a book called *The Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California*, and was interested in promoting emigration to California for personal gain. In the spring of 1846 James Clyman headed east with Hastings, James M. Hudspeth, and others to follow Fremont's trail in reverse to the Salt Lake Valley, crossing the mud flats at the insistence of Hastings. East of Fort Bridger Hastings recruited emigrants to take his newly traversed "short cut" and promised to guide them to California.

The Bryant Russell pack party, and the Harlan-Young, Hoppe or Lienhard, and Donner-Reed wagon parties decided to follow Hastings Cutoff across the Great Salt Lake Desert in the summer of 1846. Later, others seeking gold in California and a quick, shorter way travelled Hastings road, which was not shorter and proved to be much more difficult because of the long, hard drive without water or feed for the animals. The cutoff was abandoned after 1850 because of the hardships suffered during the crossing by the Forty-Niners, and the safer Hensley Salt Lake Cutoff established in 1848 to the City of Rocks on the California Trail was used extensively until the railroad came in 1869.

MODERN PERSPECTIVE

In 1983 the Great Salt Lake began to rise dramatically, faster than at any time in recorded history. Highways, industries, railroads, and wetlands were flooded, and the International Airport was threatened. The State of Utah decided to pump water from the lake into the Newfoundland Basin where it could evaporate. Dikes were built and pumps were placed at a cost of over 60 million dollars. In 1987 pumping began and water covered the Hastings trail on the flats. The salt water evaporated leaving some six inches or more of salt across some 20 miles of once-pristine pioneer trail. The lake was kept from

rising some two more feet because of the pumping project. Since then the lake has receded due to dry years here in the basin. Rain and snow water are slowly dissolving the salt deposited on the trail and the salt is being carried to lower areas, exposing the trail once again.

DIARIES AND JOURNALS

The following quotes comes from published manuscripts, journals, diaries, and historical periodicals such as the *Utah Historical Quarterly*.

Fremont Pack Party 1845

As mentioned, the Fremont Party made the first recorded crossing of the Great Salt Desert. The following extract is from the manuscript journal of **EDWARD M. KERN** of the **FREMONT** pack party in the fall of 1845. Plain text is placed to highlight comments and present day place names.

Traveling today (25th) over a broken country at the foot of the ridge we camped at a small spring stream. [Redlum Spring] [October 26, 1845] Bill Williams leaves us at this camp to return to the settlements on the Arkansas. [October 27, 1845] Kit Carson, Archambeau and Dick Owens, were sent to see what prospect of water ahead, this being as far as the eye could reach Nothing but a large barren plain.

On the 28th [October 1845] after a couple of hours travel through the mountain [Cedar mountains] we entered on one of the most disolate [sic] looking places I have seen—with but a small prospect of water ahead and less of grass, we commenced our journey over what has since been called by the emigrants the "Long Drive". We were the first white men without doubt who had ever attempted it. At five o'clock we camped, tired and worn out, among some low sand hills—without water and but little wood—25 miles—Striking Camp at 5 o'clock next morning [October 29, 1845], we passed at 10 [o'clock] a small isolated range [Floating Island], previous to reaching this point the road had become muddy—at 11 o'clock we nooned among some bunch grass at the foot of a low range of [hills]; [Silver Island Range] no water. We kept among these hills until 4 [o'clock] when we again entered the plain—the mud on this afternoon's road is very heavy—water salty. At 6-20 [o'clock] we reached some springs of good water, [Donner Springs] grass, and timber plenty—

Extremely fatigued with their two days travel many of our animals rested."

[October 30 1845]—3 miles to a spring creek in the mountain. [Pilot Peak Creek] Pinon abundant. The day cold and disagreeable.

Friday Oct 31 [1845]—Along the ridge over broken and sterile country for 12 miles when we struck a level plain and an old wagon trail [of the Bidwell/Bartleson Party of 1841]. This was the sign of an old party who had attempted to cross the Desert. To save themselves [two words illegible] many men were obliged to throw away their effects and return.

Kern is incorrect; the Bidwell-Bartleson party did not return but continued on and reached California at Marsh's Ranch near present day San Jose.

James Clyman & Lansford W. Hastings, Spring 1846

The second party known to cross this desert was JAMES CLYMAN and HASTINGS going eastward on May 27 & 28th 1846. The following is taken from Winfred Blevins 1984 book, *Journal of a Mountain Man: James Clyman* pp. 248-249 :

27 Left our camp near the top of the mountain an took a N.E. cours to a high rugged looking butte [Pilot Peak] standing prominent and alone with the tops whitened in snow [Went] along the East side of this butte which stands in the salt plains to near the Eastern point 22 miles and encamped on a fine spring Brook [Pilot Peak Creek] that comes tumbling from the mountain in all its purity This butte affords numerous springs and brooks that loose themselves immediately in the salt plain below but the grass is plenty generally and the main bulk of the county produces nothing but a small curly thorn bush winding on the earth. To the S.s.E. and East you have a boundless salt plain without vegetation except here and there a cliff of bare rocks standing like monumental pillars to commemorate the distinction of this portion of the Earth

28 Left our camp at the Snowy or more properly the spring Butte [Pilot Peak] for this Butte affords several fine Brooks and took the Trail East and soon entered on the greates salt plain the first plain is 6 or 7 miles wide and covered in many places three inchs deep in pure white salt passed an island of rocks [Silver Island] in this great plain and entered the great plain over which we went in a bold trot untill dusk

when we Bowoiked [bivouacked] for the night without grass or water and not much was said in fact all felt encouraged as we had been informed that if we could follow Mr Fremont's trail we would not have more than 20 miles without fresh water. In fact this is the [most] desolate country perhaps on the whole globe there not being one spear of vegetation and of course no kind of animal can subsist and it is not yet ascertained to what extent this immense salt and sand plain can be south of where we [are now] our travel to day was 40 miles"

Bryant/Russell Party 1846

The BRYANT/RUSSELL pack party, the next emigrants to cross the desert, and the first party to be enticed by Hastings to take this route to California. The following excerpts are from Edwin Bryant's book *What I Saw in California*, p. 174, University of Nebraska Press.

Beyond this we crossed what appeared to have been the beds of several small lakes separated from each other by small mound shaped elevations of a white, sandy, or ashy earth—This is a perfect description of the dunes separating the Playas. Bryant talked about mountains in their front some 30 to 40 miles and some on the left He said: "Those on our left were as white as the snow like face of the desert—" The mountains on the left he was referring to are the low hills south of the Knolls siding which are covered with blowing white gypsum sand. This sand is 92% gypsum not quite pure. Bryant again: About eleven o'clock we struck A great white plain uniformly level, and utterly destitute of vegetation or any sign that shrub or plant had ever existed above the snow-like surface" He said it was frightfully forbidding and unearthly, it gave them a shudder of apprehension—the mules even wanted to counter-march.

Bryant again: For fifteen miles the surface of this plain is so compact, that the feet of our animals, as we hurried them along over it, left but little if any impression for the guidance of the future traveller. but he says: As we proceeded the plain gradually became softer and our mules sometimes sunk to their knees in the stiff composition of salt, sand and clay. Then they decided to walk leading their mules.

Bryant wrote that clouds came over with a distant thunder, "A furious wind rushing across the plain and filling the whole atmosphere

around us with the fine particles of salt, and drifting it in heaps like the newly fallen snow. Our eyes became nearly blinded and our throats choked with the saline matter, and the very air we breathed tasted of salt." A perfect description of a Salt Desert storm. After the storm he talked about extraordinary mirages and then said: "Our course being west."

Bryant continues : "About five o'clock, P.M. we reached and passed, leaving it to our left, a small butte rising solitary from the plains. Around this ground is uneven, and a few scattering shrubs, leafless and without verdure, raised themselves above the white sand and saline matter which seemed recently to have drifted so as nearly to conceal them." [He is describing Floating Island.] "Eight miles brought us to the northern end of a short range of mountains" [this is the Silver Island Mountains] "turning the point of which and bending our course to the left we gradually came upon higher ground, composed of compacted volcanic gravel." He was once again, as he describes it, "upon terra firma." Bryant describes how he had made a detour to the base of floating Island looking for a spring of water but none was found. When he reached the point and rounded it he was considerably in the rear. "passing down the range of mountains on my left some four or five miles, and then rising some rocky hills connecting this with a long and high range of mountains on my right." [This is Crater Island]. "When I had reached the most elevated point of this ridge [Donner/Reed Pass] the sun was setting, and I saw my fellow-travellers still far in advance of me, entering again upon a plain or valley of salt, some ten or twelve miles in breadth. On the opposite side of this valley rose abruptly and to a high elevation another mountain [Pilot Peak], at the foot of which we expected to find the spring of fresh water that was to quench our thirst, and revive and sustain the drooping energies of our fateful beasts." Bryant noticed smoke in a canyon on Pilot Peak which he felt showed that Indians had noticed their coming. He overtook an old pack-mule with her pack hanging underneath her with their food supply. He took time to unpack and pack and then proceeded onward with the mules racing to the water that they now scented. Bryant came upon John C. Buchanan on his exhausted mule in the dark. He was thunderstruck by the passing of the pack mule and Bryant coming upon him in the dark

since he felt he was the last one. They both had a good laugh and rode on toward the spring.

Bryant continued: "We left to us, in our tired condition, the seemingly interminable plain of salt, and entered upon the sagey slope of the mountain about 10 o'clock. Hallooing as loudly as we could raise our voices, we obtained, by a response, the direction of our party who had preceded us, and after some difficulty in making our way through the sage, grass, and willows, (the last a certain indication of water in the desert,) we came to where they had discovered a faint stream of water, and made their camp. Men and mules on their first arrival, as we learned, had madly rushed into the stream and drank together of its muddy waters, -made muddy by their own disturbance of its shallow channel and sluggish current."

"Delay of gratification frequently gives a temporary relief to the cravings of hunger. The same remark is applicable to thirst. Some hours previously I had felt the pangs of thirst with an acuteness almost amounting to an agony. Now, when I had reached the spot where I could gratify my desires in this respect, they were greatly diminished. My first care was to unsaddle my mule and lead it to the stream, and my next to take a survey of the position of our encampment. I then procured a cup of muddy water, and drank it off with a good relish. The fires before noticed were still blazing brightly above us on the side of the mountain, but those who had lighted them, had given no other signal of their proximity. The moon shone brilliantly, and [Richard T.] Jacob, Buchanan, [James] McClary, and myself, concluded we would trace the small stream of water until we could find the fountain spring. After considerable search among the reeds, willow, and luxuriant grass, we discovered a spring. Buchanan was so eager to obtain a draught of cold, pure water, that in dipping his cup for this purpose, the yielding weeds under him gave way, and he sank into the basin, from which he was drawn out after a good "ducking," by one of those present. The next morning this basin was sounded to the depth of thirty-five feet, and no bottom found, We named this spring "Buchanan's well." We lighted no fires to-night, and prepared no evening meal. Worn down by the hard day's travel, after relieving our thirst we spread our blankets upon the ground, and laying our bodies upon them, slept soundly in the bright

moonshine. Several of our party had been on the road upwards of seventeen hours, without water or refreshment of any kind, except a small draught of cold coffee from our powder-keg, made of the salt sulphur -water at our last encampment, and had travelled the distance of seventy five miles. The Salt Plain has never at this place, so far as I could understand, been crossed but twice previously by civilized men, and in these instances two days were occupied in performing the journey. Distance 75 miles."

They remained in camp and rested on August 4 and took care of their animals and then: "We cleared away with our hands and willow sticks the thickly matted grass and weeds around "Buchanan's well," making a handsome basin, some five or six feet in diameter. The water is very cold and pure, and tasted to us more delicious than any of the invented beverages of the epicure to him. While engaged in this work, Brown brought forward a remarkable blade of grass which he had pulled up a short distance from us, to which he called my attention, and desired its measurement. It was measured, and found to be thirty-five feet in length. The diameter of the stalk was about half of an inch, and the distance between the joints about eighteen inches. It was heavily seeded at the top. With this prodigiously tall vegetable production, we endeavored to sound the depth of the spring; but after thrusting it down to its full length we could discover no bottom. "

The party was inactive the whole day except for Col. Russell and Miller who rode up to the mountain hunting and saw three Indian huts but the inhabitants had fled. They hated inactivity and wanted to proceed. "August 5—A most delightful, clear morning, with a light, soft breeze from the south fanning the parched and arid desert, playing over the waving grass, and sporting with the silvery leaves of the willows of the oasis."

"Our mules, notwithstanding the day's rest we had allowed them after the long and laborious ride over the Salt Plain, evinced much stiffness and exhaustion. We took a southwest course along the slope of the range of mountains under which we had encamped. This slope is covered with a debris of gravel and sharp fragments of dark volcanic rock, and is furrowed from the base of the mountain down to the verge of the plain with deep and almost impassable ravines. The hoary and

utterly desolate plain of salt on our left expand in breath, and stretches, interminably to the eye, away to the southeast and the southwest. The brisk breeze having cleared the atmosphere of the smoke, our view is much more extensive than it was yesterday."

"After travelling about ten miles we struck a wagon-trail, which evidently had been made several years. From the indentations of the wheels, where the earth was soft, five or six wagons had passed here. The appearance of this trail in this desolate region was at first inexplicable; but I soon recollected that some five or six years ago an emigrating expedition to California was fitted out by Colonel Bartlettson, [Bartleson] Mr. J. Chiles, [Joseph Chiles] and others, of Missouri—"Bryant then goes on to say that they followed; "this old trail some two or three miles, we left it on the right." This is in the area that we now call Bidwell Pass.

Harlan-Young Party 1846

The next group of emigrants and the first with wagons to cross this desert was the HARLAN/YOUNG PARTY with HASTINGS as the guide. The source document comes from Charles Kelly's book, *Salt Desert Trails*, pp. 52-54. It is said that the party consist of about four companies with about ten families in each company and a total of eighty wagons.

The obituary of SAMUEL C. YOUNG describes the crossing of the Salt Desert: "The sun rose in full splendor, reflecting his rays on this vast salt plain, as white as snow and as far as the eye could reach not a thing to be seen, not a spear of grass or drop of water, and the end could not be detected by the eye. The stock was showing great signs of fatigue; a little hay and some water revived them, and a cup of coffee and a cold snack had as good effect on the emigrants. It was a blessing that they were ignorant of what was before them. They were led to believe that they would reach water and grass by noon; full of hope they again started their jaded and trusty teams. They traveled until noon, the stock showing great distress; they stopped to feed them some grass and give them a little water, which comprised nearly all they had laid in."

"The emigrants by this time had become very much discouraged. The eye could not detect the end of the plain. But no time was to be lost, so they started again, in the midst of the glare of the sun at noon-day, upon this still, vast, white salt plain. Every mile traveled that eventful

evening [afternoon] produced its effect; oxen gave out and lay down, some to rise no more; others from extreme thirst, became crazy and nothing could be done with them, and finally they would become exhausted and drop down dead. From the middle of the evening one disaster after another happened nearly every step of the way, Wagons were abandoned; such of the oxen as could travel were taken out and driven along; others would give up and lie down, even after the yoke was taken off, and neither persuasion nor the whip could make them budge. These misfortunes continued and increased during that evening, until it seemed as if all were lost."

"But night came at last--that at least shut off the reflection of the sun. In the midst of all but despair they stopped to give the last pound of grass to the surviving stock, and a few favorites got a little water, and such as had wagons left, went to them and got out and ate and divided with others their frugal meal. At last they started on their long night tramp. Hoping to get to water and grass before morning. On they traveled, every mile so full of disaster that the recital would fill pages; but they struggled on through that long, dark and lonely night, still praying for water and grass; but the morning was again ushered in with the sun's reflection upon the white salt plains, with no signs of the end. The loss of stock through the night could now be realized. A halt was ordered, a little rest was taken, with a morsel to break the fast, and the order was given to make the last effort to get through. From this until noon more stock was lost than during the last twenty-four hours."

"At noon they reached water and grass in a most worn out and despondent condition. Some of the teams were left, some as far back as thirty miles. Water and grass were hauled back and some of the stock saved and some of the wagons brought in. Others were abandoned and it took many days to collect everything together and get ready to start again. Here was eighty-two miles of desert these emigrants had passed over, instead of forty. Volumes could be written on the sufferings of man and beast that occurred during this eighty-two mile march across the desolate wastes."

LIENHARD OR HOPPE PARTY 1846

The next group to cross the Salt Desert was the LIENHARD OR HOPPE party. They were still following the Harlan-Young party. In the LIENHARD JOURNAL using Charles Kelly's *Salt Desert Trails*, pp. 70-73 & p. 76, we read:

"On reaching this plain, we halted and again gave each head of cattle a little water and grass. Taking a little refreshment ourselves, we then recommenced our onward journey, hoping that by the next morning we would have arrived at the expectantly watched-for fresh-water springs and their attendant good grass."

"Zins and I remained with the wagon, while Ripstein, Diel, and Thomen went on ahead intending to go on until they should arrive at the freshwater springs. Step by step we continued over this gray waste in the increasing darkness of the night. Here and there the ground was a little soft, additional evidence that not long since water must have been standing here. We went on without ceasing until about 1 o'clock in the morning, when suddenly our three comrades spoke to us; a short distance from here they had come upon a man who had remained behind to take care of several wagons; from this man they had learned that the distance to the nearest freshwater springs and grass was at least 24 miles. We soon came up to the wagon in which this man was staying, and from him we learned that those ahead of us had left many wagons behind and driven the cattle ahead to the springs, there to recover strength, after which they would come back for the wagons. Up to this time our cattle appeared to be in passable condition; the night was cool, and the level plain excellent to travel on, with exception of a few somewhat wet places. In the far-off east it was gradually growing lighter; some distance to our right we could perceive in the dawning light a chain of very steep-sloped mountains [Newfoundland Mountains]; a little to our left, almost in front of us, we could make out a few other mountain-tops [Silver Island] which rose almost perpendicularly from the gray, dead plain, and there we hoped to find the longed-for water. When the sun came up, slowly rising like a great, round, red disk from the apparently limitless plain that stretched before us, we had come to within a few miles of this last high mountain. Up to this time we passed 24 wagons which had been left behind; now we made a halt. Our oxen all

appeared to be suffering; the whole of their bowels appeared to cry out, and incessant rumbling which broke out from all; they were hollow-eyed, and it was most distressing to see the poor animals suffer thus."

"We could give them no more water, having only a little for ourselves, and the grass we gave them they would hardly touch. However, we could not remain here, we had to go on, and the poor cattle had to drag the wagons along behind them. Presently we came upon abandoned cattle, a few already dead, while others yet moved their ears; they could be saved only by others coming back bringing water for them."

"The lofty, precipitous mountains [Silver Island] rising from the plain now loomed up on our left as we approached their northern end. On them, however, grew no vegetation; they appeared reddish-brown, as if burned; at the foot of these mountains it was perfectly dry, without a sign of moisture. In front of us, near these mountains, rose a pebbly knoll; surely we must now be near the water, so we hoped, but alas, when we reached the summit [Donner/Reed Pass] we saw, over a 10 mile-wide valley, through the bluish haze, another high mountain beyond [Pilot Peak] and we realized that we would have to reach this before we should have complete the crossing of the endless plain."

"The valley between us and the haze-shrouded mountains in the distance [Pilot Peak Mountains] looked like a wide, large lake, the apparent surface of which here and there mirrored a deceptive semblance of the mountains and hills; we knew, however, that this was only a mirage, having already experienced several illusions of the kind. Straight through the seeming expanse of water from the opposite shore, a black monster moved toward us like a frightful, giant snake, in a long, sinuous line. We all stared a long time at this puzzling apparition; it separated into detached parts, and we then supposed it must be a band of Indians. However, as we traveled slowly down the hill to meet them, we realized that what we saw was neither a monstrous snake nor friendly Indians, but a considerable number of men with oxen, a few mules, and horses, who were going back into the barren desert to recover their abandoned wagons."

"We had taken but one short rest since sunrise, at which time we drank the last of our warm water. Not only our cattle but all the

members of the company were now suffering from thirst. We found the returning teamsters supplied with water, carried in small kegs on the backs of some of the oxen or mules. At our request they willingly gave each of us a drink, but they could spare none for our cattle and we asked none for them. The sun shone burningly hot, as it did each day when not obscured by clouds, and we were seriously afraid that our cattle would not be able to get across this wide valley, for they appeared to be suffering terribly."

"Our wagon was the second in line, but our leading yoke of oxen every instant were in danger of breaking their horns off in the wheels of the wagons ahead of us, for they continually tried to pull up to it so that they might remain a while in its shade, in this way continually getting between the wheels. In an effort to avert this, Zins drove while I walked ahead of them; soon, however, I received quite a thrust from the horns, since each of the two foremost oxen sought to profit by my small shadow, and to push the other away. Eager as I was to alleviate as much as possible the sufferings of the poor devils, in this way they very soon cured me of my enthusiasm for going ahead of them."

"In this valley there was a great quantity of the finest salt, often in a 2-inch-thick crust. Here and there flowed, a few inches deep, crystal-clear water which, however, was as salty as salt itself, and the poor cattle, tormented by their dreadful thirst, tried constantly to drink of it, only to shudder in consequence. Slowly we were nearing the huge, common camping place where a small village of wagons stood. To this point not a single head of our cattle had given out, and we were coming over closer to the green grass when suddenly first one and then the other ox of our leading yoke fell, scarcely a quarter of mile from the grassy ground. Zins and I had considerable difficulty getting them to their feet again, but after this was accomplished, we went slowly on until we arrived at the grass-covered ground, and scarcely had the oxen reached there than they began to run as rapidly as though they were not at all tired. On arriving at the lower end of this wagon-village we stopped and freed the poor animals from their yokes. Fortunately the spring [Donner Springs] was so hedged about by the wagons that the cattle could not gain free access to it, and it was therefore necessary for them to satisfy their thirst slowly from the water that flowed over the ground and gathered in their own footprints.

A full two hours passed before they seemed to get quite enough, after which their first need appeared to be rest."

"The spring [Donner Spring] was fine one about 4 or 6 feet across, and from 4 to 5 feet deep, the water fresh and good, and entirely free from any saline or mineral taint. The Kollog [Kellogg] brothers had a fine, large, black hound which they had brought along with them to this point, and which probably was extremely thirsty by the time it arrived here; it had jumped into the spring, immersing itself and drinking, but when it came out upon the grass again, it had suddenly fallen down, and shortly afterward it died."

"Although Mr. Hoppe was not always our captain, our party was known as Hoppe's Company. We were told that the companies which had gone in advance of us had been generally of the opinion that our party would suffer most in crossing this long desert, to the point, perhaps, of perishing altogether. Here we were, however, the only company which had had to leave behind neither a wagon nor an animal, at which they were not a little amazed."

"The journey from the last good water to this point had taken from 9 o'clock in the morning of the 17th to about 4 o'clock in the afternoon of the 19th of August, and during this time only on the first night had the cattle actually enjoyed rest, without, even then, being freed from their yokes. Otherwise, all the stops we made put together could hardly have amounted to more than 4 hours, and apart from this it was continuous driving until our arrival at these springs. During that time, all the water we could give to each head of cattle could scarcely have exceeded 1 1/2 gallons. To be sure, we had spared our cattle as much as we could under the circumstances, but we had reason to congratulate ourselves that we had made this crossing without suffering the slightest loss."

"In spite of long-sustained fatigue everyone was animated and happy the young girls gathered together and sang, while the young Americans danced to the squeaky sounds which a man named Roadies coaxed from his old fiddle, so that the dust eddied up in clouds; in short, one might have supposed the whole journey completed."

They stayed at the springs washing and mending and letting the cattle rest. Most of the wagons from the other party which had been left on the desert were brought in and everyone were in good spirits, singing and

dancing. Lienhard tells about a girl named Lucinda "a healthy specimen of a two-legged animal" and the problems they had with her. She was apparently man crazy.

Lienhard relates that "On the afternoon of August 21, toward evening, we forsook this camping place, the grass having become scant, and went on 2 miles south, where water equally good, and grass undoubtedly better were to be found, although many others were there." This camping spot is the meadows by the old 1880 Munsee homestead which is exactly 2 miles south of Donner springs.

They stayed at this camp site on August 22nd and 23rd, and on the 24th they broke camp and traveled to what is now known as Silver Zone Pass where on the morning of the 25th they found a spring hole 12 feet deep and alleviated their thirst.

James Mathers 1846

Another very brief account of crossing the salt desert is by JAMES MATHERS in 1846. See *Overland in 1846* by Dale L. Morgan.

August 16th: "Started on the long drive and after traveling until near the middle of the next day without resting but a little we were obliged to leave two waggons and go on with the third so as to get the cattle to water the sooner, the distance still being more than 20 m. I remained with the waggons on the salt plain until the evening of the 20th when Carolan came back with the oxen and the next day about 11 o'clock we reached the camp at the foot of the mountains, the whole distance without water about 65 m. On the 18th there was a violent wind and salt drifted over the plain like snow."

"Like a good many emigrants after him, including Reed, Mathers was so disorganized by the crossing of the Salt Desert to Pilot Peak that he preserved only a fragmentary record of the experience."—Dale Morgan.

Donner-Reed Party 1846

James Frazier Reed

The following is from Reed's narrative of 1871 describing the crossing of the Salt Desert in 1846. It is from *West from Fort Bridger*, published as *Utah Historical Quarterly* [U.H.Q], volume 19, pp. 210-214:

"We started to cross the desert traveling day and night only stopping to feed and water our teams as long as water and grass lasted. We must have made at least two-thirds of the way across when a great portion of the cattle showed signs of giving out. Here the company requested me to ride on and find the water and report. Before leaving I requested my principal teamster [Milt Elliott], that when my cattle became so exhausted that they could not proceed further with the wagons, to turn them out and drive them on the road after me until they reached the water, but the teamster misunderstanding unyoked them when they first showed symptoms of giving out, starting on with them for the water."

"I found the water about twenty miles from where I left the company and started on my return. About eleven o'clock at night [September 2] I met my teamsters with all my cattle and horses. I cautioned them particularly to keep the cattle on the road, for that as soon as they would scent the water they would break for it." Apparently Reed met his drovers ten miles from the springs, which would place them just west of present Donner-Reed pass. "I proceeded on and reached my family and wagons. Some time after leaving the men one of the horses gave out and while they were striving to get it along, the cattle scented the water and started for it. And when they started with the horses, the cattle were out of sight, they could not find them or their trail, as they told me afterward. They supposing the cattle would find water, went on to camp. The next morning they could not be found, and they never were, the Indians getting them, except one ox and one cow. Losing nine yoke of cattle here was the first of my sad misfortunes. I stayed with my family and wagons the next day, expecting every hour the return of some of my young men with water, and the information of the arrival of the cattle at the water. Owing to the mistake of the teamsters in turning the cattle out so soon, the other wagons had drove miles past mine and dropped their wagons along the road, as their cattle gave out, and some few of them reaching water with their wagons. Receiving no information and the water being nearly exhausted, in the evening [September 3] I started on foot with my family to reach the water. In the course of the night the children became exhausted. I stopped, spread a blanket and laid them down covering them with shawls. In a short time a cold hurricane commenced blowing; the children soon complained of the cold. Having

four [five] dogs with us, I had them lie down with the children outside the covers. They were then kept warm. Mrs. Reed and myself sitting to the windward helped shelter them from the storm. Very soon one of the dogs jumped up and started out barking, the others following, making an attack on something approaching us. Very soon I got sight of an animal making directly for us; the dogs seizing it changed its course, and when passing I discovered it to be one of my young steers. Incautiously stating that it was mad, in a moment my wife and children started to their feet, scattering like quail, and it was some minutes before I could quiet camp; there was no more complaining of being tired or sleepy the balance of the night. We arrived about daylight [September 4] at the wagons of Jacob Donner, and the next in advance of me, whose cattle having given out, had been driven to water. Here I first learned of the loss of my cattle, it being the second day after they had started for the water. Leaving my family with Mrs. Donner, I reached the encampment. Many of the people were out hunting cattle, some of them had got their teams together and were going back into the desert for their wagons. Among them Mr. Jacob Donner, who kindly brought my family along with his own to the encampment."

Reed's narrative of 1871 says further: "We remained here [at Pilot Peak] for days hunting cattle, some of the party finding all, others a portion, all having enough to haul their wagons except myself. On the next day, or day following, while I was out hunting my cattle, two Indians came to the camp, and by signs gave the company to understand that there were so many head of cattle out, corroborating the number still missing; many of the people became tender footed at the Indians coming into camp, thinking that they were spies. Wanted to get clear of them as soon as possible. My wife requested that the Indians should be detained until my return, but unfortunately before returning, they had left. The next morning, in company with young Mr. Graves—he kindly volunteering—I started in the direction the Indians had taken: after hunting this day and the following, remaining out during the night, we returned unsuccessful, not finding a trace of the cattle. I now gave up all hope of finding them and turned my attention to making arrangements for proceeding on my journey. In the desert were my eight [three] wagons; all the team remaining was an ox and a cow. There was no

alternative but to leave everything but provisions, bedding and clothing. These were placed in the wagon that had been used for my family. I made a cache of everything else. Members of the company kindly furnishing team to haul the wagon to camp. I divided my provisions with those who were nearly out, and indeed some of them were in need. I had now to make arrangement for sufficient team to haul that one wagon: one of the company kindly loaned me a yoke of cattle & with the ox and cow I had made two yoke. We remained at this camp from first to last, if my memory is right, seven days."

Virginia Reed 1846

The following is taken from a letter by VIRGINIA E. B. REED to Mary C. Keyes dated May 16th, 1847 concerning the desert crossing and after the wait for the return of the men with their oxen:

"We wa[i]ted thare [deleted: "throug"] [thinking thay would] come we wa[i]ted till night and we thought we [would] start to walk to Mr doners [Donners] wagons that night [distant 10 miles] we took what little water we had and some bread and started pa [papa] caried Thomos and all the rest of us walk we got to Donner and thay were all a sleep so we laid down on the ground we spread one shawl down we laid down on it and spred another over us and then put the dogs on top [Tyler, Barney, Traylor Tracker & little Cash] it was the couldes night you [deleted: "most"] ever saw [for the season] the wind blew [very hard] and if it haden [not] bin for the dogs we would have Frosen as soon as it was day we went to miz [Mrs] Donners she said we could not walk to the Water and if we staid we could ride in thare wagons to the spring so pa [papa] went on to the water to see why thay did not bring the cattel when he got thare thare was but one ox and cow thare [deleted: &] none of the rest had got to water Mr Donner come out the night with his cattel and braught his wagons and all of us in we staid thare a week and Hunted for our cattel and could not find them."

The following narrative comes from *Across the Plains in the Donner Party*, a personal narrative of the overland trip to California 1846-47 by Virginia Reed Murphy, pp. 23-25. We start Virginia's remembrances after the men failed to return with the oxen:

"Can I ever forget that night in the desert, when we walked mile after mile in the darkness, every step seeming to be the very last we could

take! Suddenly all fatigue was banished by fear; through the night came a swift rushing sound of one of the young steers crazed by thirst and apparently bent upon our destruction. My father, holding his youngest child in his arms and keeping us all close behind him, drew his pistol, but finally the maddened beast turned and dashed off into the darkness. Dragging ourselves along about ten miles, we reached the wagon of Jacob Donner."

Virginia tells about the cold night and the crossing to the springs where they were told about the loss of 18 head of cattle and being 800 miles from California. They realized that their wagons must be abandoned. We continue her narrative:

"The company kindly let us have two yoke of oxen, so with our ox and cow yoked together we could bring one wagon, but alas! not the one which seemed so much like a home to us, and in which grandma had died. Some of the company went back with papa and assisted him in caching everything that could not be packed in one wagon. A cache was made by digging a hole in the ground, in which a box or the bed of a wagon was placed. Articles to be buried were packed into this box, covered with boards, and the earth thrown in upon them, and thus they were hidden from sight. Our provisions were divided among the company."

Caching anything in the manner described by Virginia on the mud flats is improbable. By digging down just eight inches or one foot on the flats in the sticky, gumbo mud where the wagons were abandoned, one encounters salt water. To make matters worse, one can dig a hole in the morning and find the water lower than in the afternoon. The heating of the ground causes the ground water to rise. If indeed they did cache their belongings, they could have done so by carrying them to a higher, dryer area by Floating Island.

The Donner party made the last reported crossing of the Salt Desert in 1846.

Miles Goodyear with Horse Herd 1847

The following excerpt is from the *Utah Historical Quarterly*, vol. 20, pp. 4-11:

MILES GOODYEAR, a trapper and trader who had a post and farm on the site of Ogden, Utah, took a pack train of dressed buckskins to California in

1846, and returned east in 1847 with a herd of California horses. One of his men (possibly John Craig) wrote a letter describing the trip and mentions seven others in the party. The writer says: "And with a few exceptions a more drery Sandy and barren country dose not (in my opinion) exist on gods footstool. Excepting the great African desert. The entire county having a streaking and volcanic aprearence and abonding with hot and even boiling Springs. And if the different parts of our continents is cursed in proportion to the Sins of the inhabitnts that formerly dwelt on them Then indeed must those ancient inhabitants have been awfully wicked for this is truly a land the Lord has cursed."

"On one occasion we traveled over a vast Sandy and Salt plane a distenc of at least Seventy five miles with out either grass or water and lost four head of horses that perished for want of water. We was 22 hours constantly traveling before we got to water And when we did come at a Spring the great Salt Lake lay off in full view having a number of high rocky barren Islands all through it." Nothing was said of the wagons abandoned on the flats the year previous .

SAMUEL J. HENSLEY 1848

In the summer of 1848 SAMUEL J. HENSLEY and his pack party of ten attempted to cross the Great Salt Lake Desert on the Hastings Cutoff but the "Miry" mud from heavy rains thwarted their attempt so his party retraced their route to Salt Lake City. Hensley then headed north and west and pioneered a new route to the California Trail at the City of Rocks in Idaho, near the Utah and Nevada border. He then proceeded on to the Humboldt River where on August 27,1848 he met the Thompson company, a wagon train of discharged Mormon Battalion members. Mr. Hensley gave the "Boys" a "way bill" and told them how to find his trail near the Twin Sisters at the City of the Rocks. Thus began Hensley's Salt Lake Cutoff.

CAPT. JAMES BROWN 1848

The next party was that of CAPT. JAMES BROWN who was returning from California with the back pay due the Mormon Battalion Sick Detachment. ABNER BLACKBURN, a member of the party, states [U.H.Q., p. 7-8 vol. 20,]:

"--started on the smooth bed of the ancient lake nothing but baked mud no shells or sign of marine life---not a bird bug hare or coyote to be seen on this wide desolate waist nothing but man and he was out of his latitude or his natural sence there was a mountain in the middle of this vast plain [Newfoundland Island] and appeared as though it had been surrounded by the lake at some past time" Abner then tells about the abandoned wagons: "Stopt at some abandoned waggons we weare cold pulled the waggons together set them an fire and had a good warm tied the horses threw them the wood to eat rolled up in our blankets and the first night on the desert was gone."

Mormon Battalion Soldiers 1848

JAMES S. BROWN, nephew of Capt. James Brown and a member of the 1848 Thompson company, mentioned another party of horsemen who travelled the cutoff that year in Oct. They were a small group of **Mormon Battalion soldiers** returning from California. No details were given. [U.H.Q., vol. 20, p. 9.]

OCTA member Robert K. Hoshide's article, "Salt Desert Trails Revisited," in *Crossroads*, the Utah Chapter Quarterly Newsletter, Volume 5, Number 2. Spring 1994, quotes from several accounts of 1849 crossings of the Salt Desert. They are listed below.

John Rankin Pyeat 1849

JOHN RANKIN PYEAT was part of the Evans Company during the gold rush of 1849 and in a letter from California he wrote [Hoshide, Salt Desert Trails p. 6]:

"We left the Mormon town on the 17th day of August and got to the desert on the 23rd—64 miles hear—having cut grass in the time above mentioned and supplied ourselves with water. We started through the desert, 67 miles through the desert on the 2e [23rd], and got a part of our wagons through on the 25th, leaving the rest of them on the desert, 21 miles from water and grass, our teams giving out from the hard pulling in the mud. We were obliged to double team and go out with half our wagons. After gitting our teams to the grass and resting a day, we again cut grass and took one wagon back to haul the grass and water. This was the Carnahan's boys wagon. We having made arrangements with them to

join with them and leave our big wagon in the desert. This we done putting the load in thear wagon and come out in two days more. We got all of our oxen out (but some of them has bin of very little use to us since, though we have got them, all but one to this place). Thear were many of the company that did not get thear oxen out of the desert."

George W. Buffington 1849

"GEORGE W. BUFFINGTON described his experiences crossing the Salt Desert after his Cherokee Trail party had been decimated by cholera." John Lowery Brown, a Cherokee going to California in 1850, also mentions deaths from cholera. Mr. Hoshide states that it took two days and a night to cross the desert. Buffington expected a Dr. Thompson to die on the desert when [Hoshide, p. 6]:

"the train moved on leaving the Doctor to die in the middle of desert sand and waste. Four days later, after they had crossed the desert and were waiting in camp, they saw the Doctor's lone wagon in the distance. As it approached they surrounded it to hear from the occupants and account of the doctor's last hours and burial, but instead were transported with joy to see the Doctor himself much improved in health. They remained here in camp several days to enable the patient to regain some of his strength and prepare for continuing his journey."

Archibald D. Phillips 1849

ARCHIBALD D. PHILLIPS wrote from Calif. to a friend in New York [Hoshide, p. 6]:

"We crossed the Great Desert with no difficulty, performing it, 70 miles from water to water in 24 hours, without the loss on an animal, or even any suffering. The day was cold, or very different might have been the case; we commenced the dreaded march about 5 o'clock P.M., our pack mules bearing the usual load, the riding mule packed with grass and water—the men on foot."

Jacob Gruwell 1849

The emigrants would lose even more time because of the great losses of livestock JACOB GRUWELL remembered [Hoshide, p. 6]:

"Suffered much from water—crossing a desert of 90 miles, from Tuesday till Thursday, nothing to drink except from the blood of a cow that had been dead for some time—Mr. Gruel lost his hearing & speech before they got through, Found no game of consequence till the Valley of the Sacramento."

J. Goldsborough Bruff 1849

The number of emigrants on the trail in 1849 was not large. We do have information of others who travelled the California Trail and whose friends took the cutoff. J. GOLDSBOROUGH BRUFF made this entry about his friends on September 17, 1849 [U.H.Q., vol. 20, pp. 10-11]:

"While riding along this level bottom I had observed a pack company travelling down the opposite side of the stream [the Humboldt River], about 1/4 mile off, where the mountains were crowding them off, and soon saw the advance fording the stream. These. . . turned out to be my New York friends [Captain John] McNulty, Fowler, Glynn and comrades; three others, some 12 or 15, were strangers, but intelligent gentlemen from Milwaukee. Mc'Nulty informed me that he had gone to Salt lake where the[y] had left many of his old company, the "Colony Guards," sick; and had come from there by the central route, and experienced great suffering on the long desert of 'Utaria.' He had heard of us in the morning and seeing the blue wagons of my train, thought it was. We had a very cordial greeting. The remainder of the Colony Guards were to remain and take a southern route from Salt Lake into California under the guidance of some Mormons."

Another version: "My old friends, the "Colony Guards" of N. York, rode rapidly up, and greeted me. We had a very cordial meeting . . . He [McNulty] had taken the central route from thence [Salt Lake City], through the great desert of Utaria—82 miles perfect arid waste. They suffered much—reduced to the necessity of drinking their mules' urine, &c. The remainder of the Guards, with a considerable number of other emigrants, under the guidance of some Mormons, would pursue a southern route from the lake into California, a route in my humble opinion, which will consign many emigrants and their animals to the wolves, and the rest to much suffering..."

James Hutchings 1849

JAMES HUTCHINGS noted the misfortunes of a Salt Desert group [Hoshide, p. 6]:

"Sept. 25th. . . Today we were overtaken by some Dutchmen who had taken the Hastings Cut-off at the south end of the Salt Lake and had been there three days without water, surrounded by salt and alkali lakes. Their excessive thirst at first produced giddiness, then faintness succeeded by trembling so they were obliged to lie down to prevent falling. This agony of thirst possessed them day and night. All of their oxen, twenty-five in number, had died or been killed, they using the blood to quench their thirst temporarily. They had three horses (to eight men) and the horses were so worn as to be of little use, consequently the men were packing sixty to eighty pounds, and most of this was clothing."

O. J. Hall 1849

U.H.Q., vol. 20, p. 11 states that there was another 1849 reference in the manuscript journal of O. J. HALL in the California State Library about a section of his company that had taken the Salt Desert trail. On the Humboldt, September 23, 1849, he writes:

"We overtook some teams of our old company. They said the company that took Hastings' Cutoff, they went 60 miles without grass or water, many died —some that reached water were past speaking, with black tongue, blood ran from mouth. When they revived they carried water back to others. It must have been a horrible scene. Wagons lay in piles, and property, along the trail. Indians very thievish—11 head of cattle stolen in one place. Some lost their whole train by death or theft and have to take pack on back and seem like crazy men." This account was hearsay and somewhat exaggerated.

HOWARD STANSBURY 1849 TOPOGRAPHICAL ENGINEERS U.S. ARMY

Howard Stansbury, Captain for the Corps of Topographical Engineers in the United States Army was sent to Utah on a scientific expedition to survey the Great Salt Lake and the surrounding area. During this survey in 1849 he travelled around the north end of the lake and west across the

Newfoundland Island, past the northern tip of crater island, and on to some springs. Thence three miles south to Donner Springs where they then began their journey eastward along the Hastings cutoff to Salt Lake City. From Stansbury's *An Expedition to the Valley of Great Salt Lake of Utah*, pp. 112-114:

"Friday, November 2.—Ther. at sunrise, 19°. As we were aware that immediately before us lay another desert plain, without wood, water, or grass, for seventy miles, some little preparation was necessary before undertaking to cross it. This consisted simply in baking bread and cooking meat enough to last us through, and in packing upon our mules as much grass as they could carry, which we had cut, a handful at a time, with our hunting-knives. We had only vessels sufficient to carry twenty gallons of water—a small supply for so many men and animals. The mules, however, were now much recruited by their rest, and we started in good spirits. Following the western edge of the mud-plain at the foot of the range for three miles, we came to the southern point of the mountain, where there had been an encampment of emigrants, who had taken this route from salt Lake City in 1848. There were here several large springs of excellent water, and the encampment had apparently been quite a large one. The usual destruction of property had taken place. Clothes, books, cases of medicine, wagon wheels, tools, &c., lay strewn about, abandoned by their owners, who had laboriously brought them two thousand miles only to throw them away." Stansbury then mentions Fremont and Hastings and the Donner party.

Continuing: "Leaving the springs, we crossed, once more, through in an opposite direction, the same mud-plain over which we had been obliged to pass in order to reach the mountain [Pilot Peak]. It was twelve miles in width; and now, in consequence of the recent rains, was soft and slippery—all the salt having disappeared, except a few crystals left in some old wagon- tracks. The travelling was in consequence heavy and laborious. After, crossing, we passed, by a gentle ascent [present-day Donner-Reed Pass], over a neck of land which connected the high ridge on our left, at the north end of which we had bivouacked on the 29th [Crater Island], with another and broader one to the south, and which later turned off considerably to the south-west [Silver Island Mountains]. Here we halted for a short time, to give our mules their last chance to

pick a little bunch grass which grew in thin scattered tufts on the mountain-side." He then mentions some geologic features of the Silver Island Mountains.

Continuing: "After halting an hour, we pursued our journey along the eastern base of this isolated mountain or butte, where the dark limestone was again seen, with gypsum, conformable and at right angles with the strata. Some six miles farther on, we passed another isolated butte [Floating Island], upheaved through the level mud-plain, containing what appeared to be another crater, analogous to that seen on the northern end of the ridge, open to the eastward, with the strata dipping in every direction. The main butte appeared to be, at this end, about ten miles wide from east to west, and had manifestly been very much disturbed."

"From this point we travelled on until past midnight, over a level mud-plain, lighted by the rays of the moon, which struggled through a mass of dark and threatening clouds. The wind was fresh and cold, and mud soft and tenacious, making the travelling very slow and fatiguing. During the night, we passed five wagons and one cart, which had stuck fast in the mud, and been necessarily left by their owners, who, from appearances, had abandoned every thing, fearful of perishing themselves in this inhospitable desert. Great quantities of excellent clothing, tool-chests, trunks, scientific books, and, in fact, almost every thing, both useless and necessary on a journey of this kind, had been here left strewn over the plain. Many articles had not even been removed from the wagons. The carcasses of several oxen lying about on the ground satisfactorily explained the whole matter. In attempting to cross the plain, the animals had died from exhaustion and want of water, and wagons and their contents had of course to be abandoned."

"About one o'clock in the morning, we halted in the midst of the plain, enticed by sight of a broken ox-yoke, the remains of a barrel, and part of an old wagon-bed, which served for fuel sufficient to boil a little coffee, of which all hands stood very much in need. The mud was ankle-deep; and the only place upon which we could spread down a blanket to sleep was around some scattering bushes of artemisia, where the wind had collected a little sand, presenting a spot rather higher and not so wet as the mud-flat around. The whole scene was as barren, dreary, and

desolate as could be well imagined. We gave the mules a portion of the grass that had been packed upon them in the morning, and two pint-cups of water each —the only liquid they had tasted during the day. We then fastened them up as well as we could to the artemisia-bushes, and, wrapping ourselves in our blankets, lay down to wait for the morning. The night was windy and quite cold, and the poor mules kept up such a pitiful and mournful cry, that we were but little recruited by our night's rest."

Silas Newcomb 1850

Again we refer to the *Utah Historical Quarterly*, Vol.. 20, for the next 11 excerpts. The earliest dated reference to any crossing of the Salt Desert in 1850 is found in the journal of **SILAS NEWCOMB** whose friends decided to try the desert route. They were **Vedder, Allyn, Marsh** and three others. On August 3, Newcomb passed the junction of the Hastings Cutoff with the old trail along the Humboldt River, and the next day made the following entry in his journal [U.H.Q., vol. 20, p. 14]:

"About 4 P.M. Messrs. Allyn, Vedder and Marsh and company of packers came along and gave us some information concerning the route via South end Salt Lake. They make it out to be unsafe, tedious route and advise all to keep the old road as being safest and best. They are nearly out of eatibles and provisions being generally scarce they look with foreboding to the future. Capt. Clark gave them a supper free and they seemed to relish it well. They report the Indians troublesome. Only two nights before eight head of cattle and one horse stolen."

Carlisle S. Abbott 1850

Another record of the same group was made by **CARLISLE S. ABBOTT**, who recorded a humorous incident. Abbott tells of two friends, Marsh and Allen [Allyn] with four others who took the desert route. When their teams gave out they started on foot for the springs, nearly dead from thirst [U.H.Q., vol. 20, p. 15]:

Finally Allen and one of the other men dropped to the ground exhausted, when, to the amusement of the others, Allen began to pray.

"O Lord Almighty, send us just one drop of rain!" Immediately from a few fleecy clouds scattering rain drops began to fall, and as Allen and his

companions had a rubber blanket, they quickly spread it out. But not a sufficient quantity of water fell to admit of its running together.

"The damnphool," said Marsh, **"might just as well have prayed for a barrel of water as for a drop, for he got ten times as much as he asked for."** After resting at the springs the men went back for their outfits, only to find that someone had stolen all their food. This is the only record of thievery on the Desert Route.

John Udell 1850

JOHN UDELL left the next earliest record of the 1850 crossing. His party of four men, crossed the Salt Desert on the 23rd of July being mounted on horses and unencumbered with wagons. He found that another party had preceded them, and the only name mentioned is that of Rev. Hill. [U.H.Q., vol. 20, p. 15].

ROBERT CHALMERS 1850

The next record we have is the journal of **ROBERT CHALMERS** who made the crossing on JULY 26-27. Chalmers refers to Auguste Archambault, a former guide for Fremont and at the time chief guide for Stansbury. He apparently took time off to guide about 300 gold-seekers across the Salt Desert for which he received \$300. Part of the large group were packers but a majority had wagons and oxen. Chalmers writes [U.H.Q., vol. 20, pp. 48-49]:

"July 26.—Went 45 miles. Started across the desert this morning. The first ten miles was very hilly and rocky, [Cedar Mt.] but after that, sandy with sage bushes. Then we went on to a salt bottom where nothing ever grew. We followed a trail across this bottom until next morning. It blew and rained hard in the night but we were obliged to travel on because what little grass and water we had with us was gone."

"July 27.—Went 30, or 75 miles altogether, going 12 in the morning. The roads were gravelly round the end of some high rocks. Barren mountains [Silver Island]. Went across another salt bottom to a spring under a high hill where we arrived at noon. We were pretty fagged out. We passed several horses and oxen that had given out. A number of people had to leave their packs and drive their animals and feed them a day and then go back for their packs. We camped here to recruit."

"July 28.—Laid up all day. Went to a meeting in a large tent that was erected with blankets. The man who officiated said that he belonged to no persuasion but he gave us a good discourse. The guide [Auguste Archambault] arrived this afternoon with his company of two or three hundred, which gave him \$300, to pilot them this far. They had lost some of their animals and had found one man dead on the plains. He had died of fatigue during last night."

William P. Bennett 1850

One member of Archambault's guided party was WILLIAM P. BENNETT. In his autobiography Bennett says [U.H.Q., vol. 20, p. 16]:

"We believed in this cutoff, therefore sold oxen and wagons and bought horses and pack animals...We left Salt Lake [July 22] to take the much-lauded cutoff, under the guidance of a Frenchman who said he had traveled that way two or three time with Fremont and others. We took with us provisions for only 15 days, as our guide said that within that time he would land us in California, instead of which we came out at the end of the period of time named, upon the main wagon road at the head of the Humboldt river. We had constantly traveled through a succession of waterless deserts, one of which was ninety miles across. In all of these deserts we were obliged to carry water and grass, and to travel much of nights. We were more dead than alive when we reached the Humbolt...in our one party there were no fewer than three hundred men."

John B. McGee 1850

Another man who was probably a member of this group was JOHN B. MCGEE who wrote a letter from Pilot peak, dated July 29, and addressed to Capt. W. H. Hooper in Great Salt Lake City. The letter reads [U.H.Q., vol. 20, pp. 16-17]:

CUT OFF

Pilot Peak, July 29, 1850

Capt. Hooper—

Sir. I am across the Great Desert after a hard drive, this Desert is over 80 miles without any doubt. Should any emigrants call on you for information you can say to them with confidence that they cannot get

through with their animals without at least 2 gallons of water to each animal and one gallon for each person; without they can carry this quantity of water with a supply of grass, no man should ever attempt to cross. There was a great deal of suffering among those who came over at the same time I did, but no lives lost, but no doubt a great many would not have got through, had it not been for the active part of those who got across early and hauled water back for those behind.

The road is very fine, especially across the desert, and plenty of grass and water on this route with the exception of the desert. I hope no one will endeavor to come this road without they are well prepared.

Yours in haste,
JNO. B. McGEE

Madison Berryman Moorman 1850

The *Utah Historical Quarterly*, volume 20, pps. 17-19 states: During the last week of July and the first two weeks of August there was an almost continuous procession of packers and wagons on the Salt Desert, moving day and night. MADISON BERRYMAN MOORMAN gives a vivid a description of his difficulties [U.H.Q.,vol. 20, pp. 17-19]:

"About 11 o'clock the moon rose and showed us that our road was much better which . . . cheered us no little on our way. The night was pleasantly cool and about the dawn we stopped to feed our animals and give them a short rest. I was nearly dead for sleep and fell down upon the ground, with the laryette in my hand, . . . About 8 o'clock we stopped again, in sight of the point of a mountain, at which we had expected to find water and grass. We gave our mules the residue of the water and grass & ate a little ourselves. Several wagons were here being guarded by several men, while the rest of their parties were gone on with their stock in search of grass & water, which, they told us, were twenty five miles off. This unfavorable intelligence gave us a good deal of uneasiness. There we were without grass and not more than a quart of water. The sun was already oppressively hot and one or two of our mules began to show signs of "caving in." We tarried but a short time and when we had traveled five or six miles—which brought us to the point of the mountain above mentioned [Silver Island], one of the mules refused to go any further. We gave it the last drop of water we had, which was but a

few swallows and the train moved on leaving Dr. [illegible] with his mule. After travelling a short distance we met a wagon loaded with water which had been sent out by subscription to relieve the distressed. The teamster gave us as much as we could drink but would not let us have any for our mules. We told him of Dr. T.[homas]'s situation and pushed on —seeing numbers of poor animals dead & dying and about 3 o'clock P.M. we reached the long looked for fountain, gushing out of the earth in a large bold stream while all around were emigrants and their stock grazing up on the immense meadow. In the lapse of an hour or two Dr. T.[omas] came in leading his mule, almost exhausted. We soon had a good supper prepared, which seemed to be more appreciated than any we had partaken of in our lives. We felt grateful that we had been so fortunate in crossing what was called a "Seventy-five mile Desert," but is, in reality, according to several Viameters, Ninety miles!"

"Aug. 1st.—They still continued to pour in from the Desert, many of whom were almost exhausted. Great suffering of man & beast reported... We had all the tanks filled with water and a considerable quantity of grass cut and packed upon mules and sent back to relieve them and bring in the wagon. The company contributed to the relief of the suffering still out, some of whom were reached just in time to save life. I felt much better today than it would supposed having slept but one night in three..."

Henry S. Bloom 1850

Following the Moorman party was HENRY S. BLOOM. From his diary we read [U.H.Q., vol. 20, p. 19]:

"Aug. 2.—Started again a little after daylight . . . Got to the Rock of Misery [Crater Island] 65 miles, our water all gone and our horses nearly famished for water. Teams giving out, men lying by the side of the road in the hot sun speechless for the want of water. Some lying in the shade of the rocks nearly dying from thirst. Men offering one, ten, twenty and five hundred dollars for a single drink of water. It was a sad sight to see strong, healthy, robust men reduced to such an extremity in a few hours time... We took the packs from the horses and concluded to rest a little and then try to reach the spring with the horses if possible. While sitting there a man came along and inquired how far it was to the spring. I

replied '16 miles'. He then exclaimed 'Oh, my God, I can never reach there without water!'...Just as we were prepared to start for the spring the water wagon came and Oh, what a relief to ourselves and others. It seemed like an act of an angel of mercy at the eleventh hour...Got to the spring at 10 o'clock p.m."

"Aug. 3.—Got an opportunity to send a canteen of water to Kinney and to have our packs brought in."

Ogle And Robinson Party—John Wood 1850

The following information from JOHN WOOD'S diary, describes his crossing of the Salt Desert with the gold seekers. This is from the *Utah Historical Quarterly*, volume 20, pp. 22-24:

[Aug. 5, 1850] "We passed a wagon which had a sick man in it, who was about to perish for water, so Captain Robinson put him in his wagon and we traveled until daylight, when we found that some of our cattle were nearly gone, and some of us not much better."

"August 6th.—This morning we stopped and rested about an hour, taking a little breakfast, giving our cattle about a quart of water apiece and some hay. It has the appearance of being cloudy today and of rain: it does it will be almost an interposition of divine providence, in our favor."

"The road has now become good, being very level, smooth and solid, and now while I am sitting here by the wagon wheel I discover that one of our steers is so near gone that he will not eat any hay; poor fellow, we will have to make a mile stone of you shortly, and probably all the rest."

"We suppose that we are about 35 miles from water; and can it be possible that the cattle can ever take these wagons through. The desert is a barren waste, generally level, and mostly covered with a thin saline crust; some places the ground being very soft. We had not gone far until the steer spoke of above gave way, but on we went pushing for life and death, not knowing how far we have to go but rather expect to reach the water by dark; we traveled on hard until night and reached a high bluff of rocks [Silver Island], where we were told we could find plenty of water, but lo and behold, it was 25 miles farther on." [Actually, about 15.]

"Ah, who can imagine our feelings; disappointment sinks the heart of man. Here, around these rocks, our hopes had lingered the live-long

day, but now they are transplanted 25 miles ahead, around a beautiful groupe of springs."

"Before reaching these bluffs, we met an old lady, with some water in a coffee-pot, going back to meet he husband who had lost his wagon tire and had gone back to hunt for it, but she found him ready to perish; he had laid down to die. We also passed Mrs. [E. S.] Hall, a lady from Cincinnati, on the road, who had stayed with the wagon, while her husband drove the cattle to the water, which he expected to find in a short distance, but found it to be 40 miles, and was unable to return; his wife was left to perish or be supplied by others; our company gave her some water to do her until morning."

"At the bluffs we fed the last of our hay and gave the cattle the last drop of water, and started on; now we begin to pass a great many dead and dying cattle, and we see men suffering extremely for water, but here some men have hauled out water to relieve the emigrants, which they sell at \$1 a gallon."

"Several of our cattle about dark are giving way and cannot go much farther; they look awful bad, and I know they feel worse than they look. I judge them by myself. Soon after dark another steer in our team gave way, and he was left, and some others in the company have also gone the way of all flesh, but we are going to see how many can go through, roll on is the cry now with everyone; we are going through or die. We have not an ox in the company now but what will take hard cracking with the whip and never flinch, but they certainly can endure more fatigue than I ever expected."

"About 10 o'clock two more steers gave out, which left us but two yoke to take our wagons through; some other teams gave way entirely and stopped for the night. When we got within 10 miles of the water our cattle seemed to know, by some instinct, that water was not far ahead, and became animated with new life, and the two small yoke we had attached to our big wagon, walked as fast as I could, and sometimes would trot, and when we got within a mile of the water I had to walk before them to keep them from running. Who could not sympathize with flesh and blood, suffering in this way?"

"It was one o'clock at night when we got through. This was the severest trial I have had by far, the desert proving to be 93 miles instead

of 75, as we had understood, and having to walk all the way almost without stopping, with but little to eat and drink, and no sleep, was soul-trying in the extreme. We dropped our bodies under the wagons and in less than five minutes were in a state of unconsciousness..."

"August 7th.—This morning we found ourselves near a burning mountain [Pilot Peak], surrounded by a number of good springs and good grass. This morning our case is deplorable notwithstanding it is heart-cheering to see water and grass; our team is broken and we must leave McLean's last wagon; the only resort we now have is to make pack saddles and pack our provisions on our remaining cattle, as many others have had to do."

"Emigrants are arriving here all the time from the desert, almost famished for water; they say men, women and children are dying with thirst and fatigue. All start in ignorance of the distance across, and many take but little water and they must perish. Mr. Hall, who left his wife on the desert yesterday, is preparing to go back after his wife and wagon."

"Our company rigged out a team loaded with water and have gone back on the desert to relieve the suffering, without money and without price. They found many at the point of death, and saved them, many suffering extremely, Mr. Ogle, who carried water back in the desert, on his back, 20 or 30 miles, tells of one man that could not speak, who he relieved, and many others almost in similar condition."

Joseph Cain 1850

JOSEPH CAIN wrote a letter to the *Deseret News* on October 2, 1850, in which he states [U.H.Q., vol. 20, p. 26,]:

"We met a number of persons who had come 'Hastings' Cutoff,' who have all declared it is a much longer road, and a much more dangerous one, on account of the Desert of 91 miles, and also the Indians; many of the emigrants having to travel on foot, packing their provisions on their backs, the Indians having driven off all their animals."

John Lowery Brown 1850

Another who apparently used wagons this season was JOHN LOWERY BROWN, a Cherokee who had reached Utah over the Cherokee Trail. Two other companies from the Indian Nation also took the cutoff in 1850, probably

about the same time Brown crossed. Brown crossed from August 9th, to 11th, He stated [U.H.Q., vol. 20, p. 25]:

"Twenty-five miles from the springs, we came to where some emigrants had waggons loaded with water which they had brought from the spring to sell to folks as they came up they sold it for one dollar per gallon."

He also said that four men died of the "diarear" [cholera] at Pilot Peak, two being buried in one grave. Note that all these deaths were caused by disease rather than by thirst or fatigue.

John R. Shinn 1850

JOHN R. SHINN whose wagon train was ten days behind that of John Lowery Brown recorded the following [U.H.Q., vol. 20, p. 26]:

"August 20.—Left the above camp at a quarter before 3 o'clock P.M. Traveled all night & the day following & the next night, & until half past 6 A.M. on the 22nd making the distance of 80 miles in 89 hours which time is about 27 hours traveling time, on the desert. After crossing the Mountains [Cedar Mountains] which took 5 1/4 hours, to travel 8 miles, it being very Steep & Rough. Camped at Pilot Peak creek until noon then traveled 2 miles to better grass & water [Munsee's homestead]. Weather good."



"August 23.—Laid by to recruit the cattle weather pleasant."

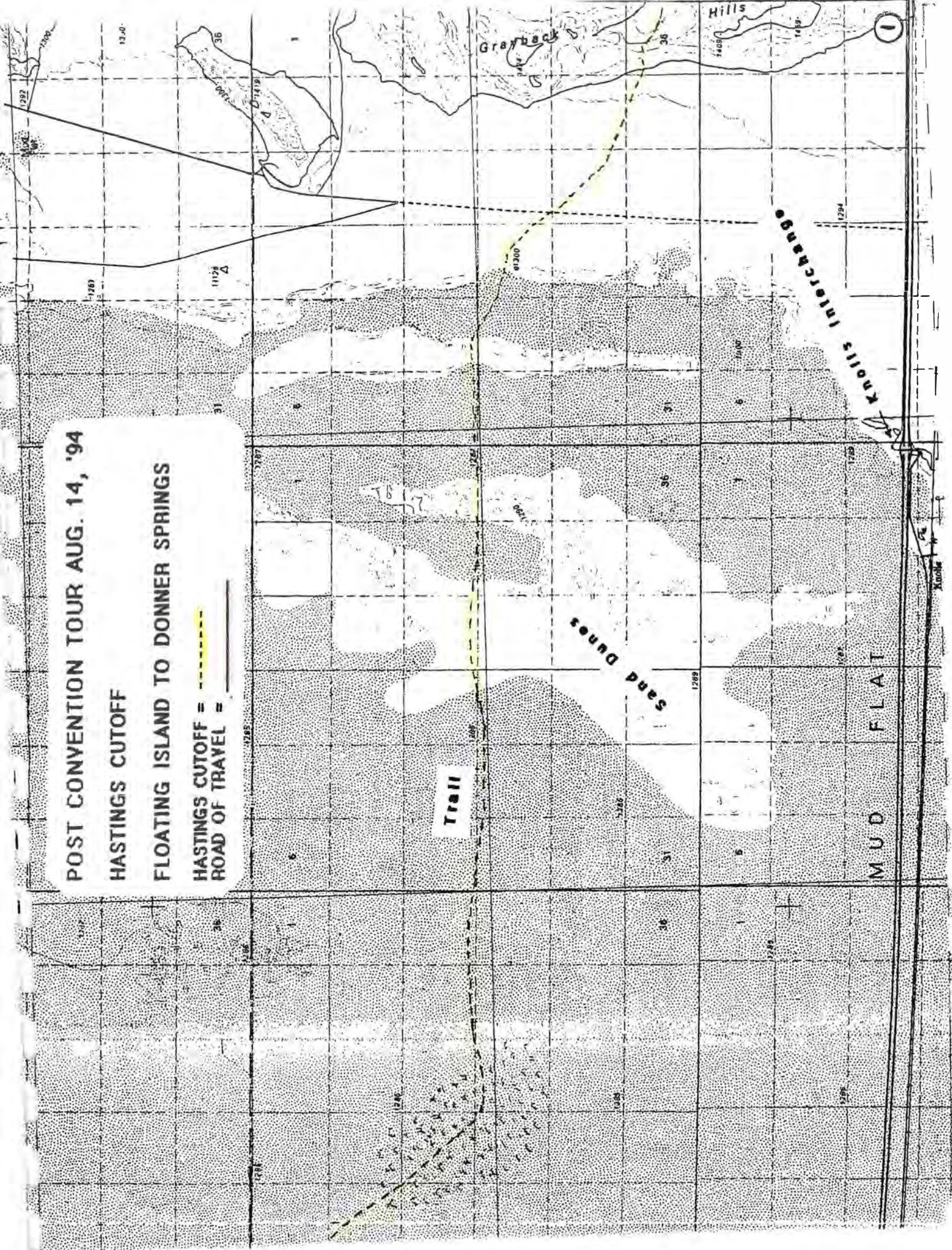
This was the last known crossing of the Salt Desert in 1850, and perhaps the last use of the Hastings Cutoff in its entirety between the Salt Lake Valley and the Humboldt River.

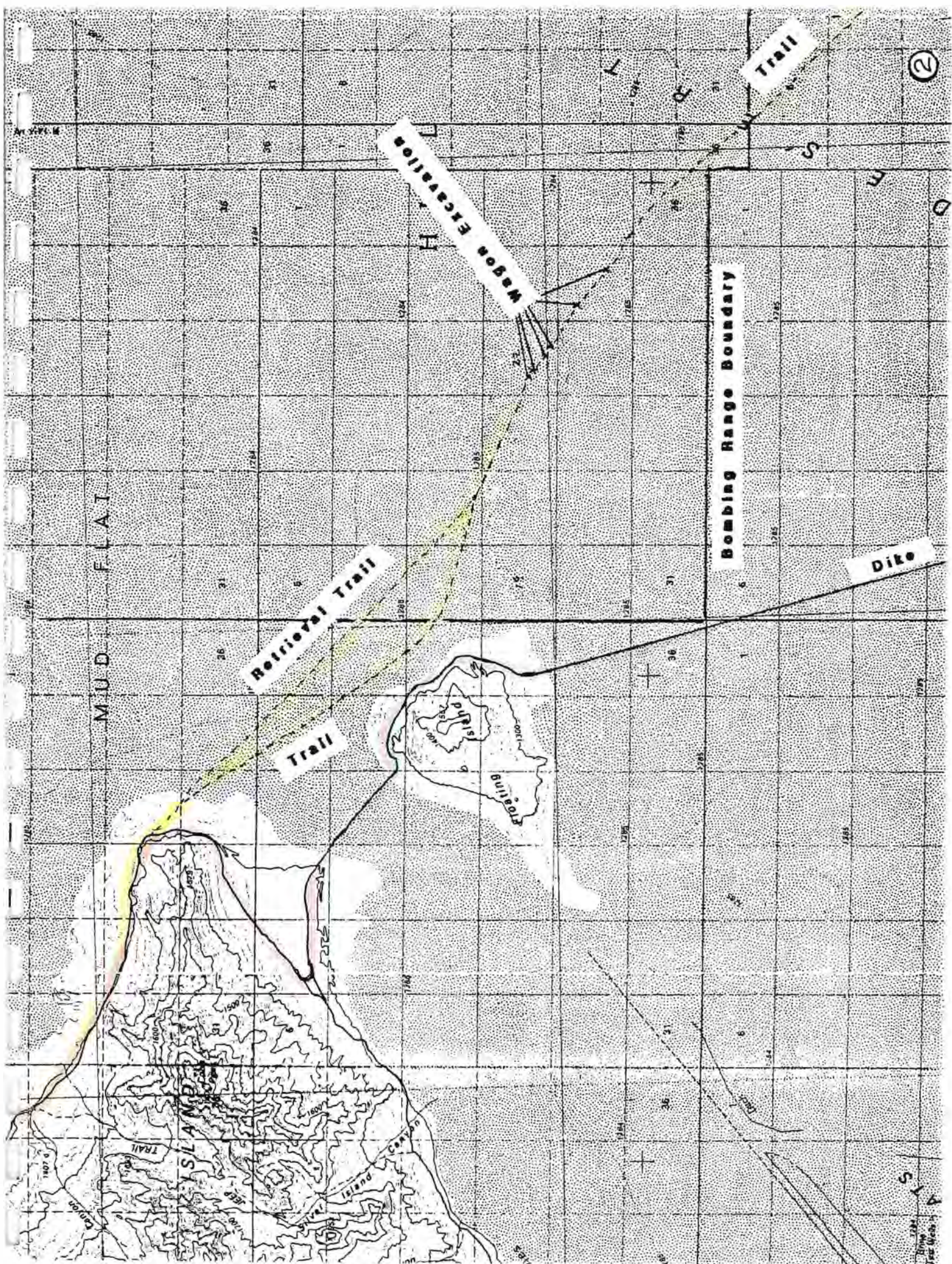
POST CONVENTION TOUR AUG. 14, '94

HASTINGS CUTOFF

FLOATING ISLAND TO DONNER SPRINGS

HASTINGS CUTOFF = 
ROAD OF TRAVEL = 





2

Trail

Wagon Escalator

Bombing Range Boundary

Dike

Retrieval Trail

Trail

MUD FLAT

TRAIL

TRAIL

ISLAND

ISLAND

S

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Miles
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