



West from Salt Lake: Diaries from the Central Overland Trail (The American Trails Series)

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Prior to 1859, overland travelers leaving Salt Lake City for California had but two alternatives. They could go north into Idaho, then turn southwest and follow the Humboldt River into northern California, or they could head south, following segments of the Old Spanish Trail, and enter southern California. Both routes were long and tortuous. In the summer of 1859, Captain James Simpson blazed a more direct trail by leading an expedition across the desert. Simpson's is the route the Pony Express and the Overland Stage adopted. But emigrants in covered wagons also traveled the Central Overland Trail, and this is the first book to collect their day-by-day accounts.

Based on ten years of research, *West from Salt Lake* includes excerpts from twenty-three emigrant diaries, many previously unpublished. Using Simpson's diary to trace his route, editor Jesse G. Petersen has located each campsite and shows which of Simpson's two alternative wagon roads the parties traveled. In addition to the annotated emigrant accounts, Petersen excerpts four documents by non-emigrants: two by soldiers and two by employees of the Pony Express and its predecessor.

The diaries are rich in anecdotes on the challenges of the overland crossing, especially through desert. One traveler provisioned her party with fresh food meant to last a month, only to find that the produce wilted in the arid heat and the "tub of fresh butter . . . was soon turned by the hot sun of the desert into liquid oil." A major theme of the diaries is the continuing quest for water and forage grass for the travelers and their animals, but readers will also catch glimpses of Indians, soldiers, and miners. "Our men are all off prospecting," writes one diarist, "hoping to discover a rich silver mine." But having "never [seen] a silver mine until a few days ago[,] they would not know a valuable piece of ore if they should find one."

Trail enthusiasts and students of westering migration history will welcome this detailed view of the previously neglected Central Overland Trail.

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