November 20, 2019

“From the lower crossing of the Snake River, at Old Fort Boise to The Dalles, is approximately 350 miles. It became a serious question with many whether there would be enough provisions left to keep starvation from the door, or whether the teams could muster strength to take the wagons in. Many wagons were left by the wayside. Everything possible shared the same fate; provisions only were religiously cared for — in fact starvation stared many in the face. Added to the weakened condition of both man and beast small wonder if some thoughtless persons would take to the river in their wagon-beds, many to their death, and the remaining to greater hardships. I can not give an adequate description of the dust, which seemed to get deeper and more impalpable every day. I might liken the wading in the dust, to wading in water as to resistance. Often times the dust would lie in the road full six inches deep, and so fine that one wading through it would scarcely leave a track. And such clouds, when disturbed — no words can describe it.” - Ezra Meeker’s account of his 1852 trek to Oregon Territory

Dear OCTA Friend:

Ezra Meeker made that trip nearly 170 years ago and it can be difficult to imagine the struggle that remained ahead of emigrants like Meeker and others in this new land, especially given the struggles and losses they had already endured. Meeker wrote of all he saw on the trail west to the Oregon Territory, and today many of the places he saw remain virtually unchanged. This is in part because of the diligence of people like you, people who fight to preserve the story of the trails we love.

Last year, when now Past President Pat Traffas wrote to you at this time of year, she wrote to you about our ongoing preservation fights in places that Mark Twain saw and wrote about in Roughing It. This year, I am writing to you to report that those same preservation fights continue and appear to be picking up pace. Our intrepid volunteers like Gail Carbiener continue to fight it out in the trenches, ensuring OCTA’s voice is heard as the process for the proposed B2H transmission line in Oregon and Idaho proceeds. Volunteers such as Linda and Gene Tacey in Nebraska are doing the same thing near Sutherland, where the proposed R-project transmission line threatens trail resources there.

Under the guidance of National Preservation Officer (and Past President) John Winner, OCTA remains deeply involved in both of these issues. Just last week I received a report that the B2H Coalition has filed suit in federal court challenging the Bureau of Land Management’s and U.S. Forest Service’s finding. The Oregon Trail is one of the major issues in the suit. And though OCTA is not a party to the suit, our member Gail Carbiener is listed as a party as an individual. From their press release:

Concerned citizens across Oregon have joined forces to oppose construction of the massive, nearly 300-mile-long, Boardman to Hemingway (B2H) high-voltage transmission line. Stop B2H Coalition and Greater Hells Canyon Council charged the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Forest Service with failure to adequately review the impact of the route Idaho Power has proposed for the B2H transmission line across five eastern Oregon counties. The suit was filed in federal court in Pendleton.

OCTA did contribute $20,000 from our Pat Loomis Preservation Fund to the B2H Coalition to assist with legal expenses. We are monitoring the situation closely and are prepared to continue taking measured actions to ensure that the Oregon Trail remains intact.
In Nebraska, OCTA is the lead plaintiff on a suit against a 225-mile transmission line by Nebraska Public Power District (NPPD), which crosses the Oregon-California and Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trails near Sutherland. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife service issued a permit authorizing this project to move forward. Once issued, a petition was filed in U.S. District Court by OCTA and three other entities. By the end of July, attorneys were moving towards working out an agreement whereby the Department of Justice, NPPD, and Plaintiffs would stipulate to an expedited merits briefing schedule in lieu of us having to file a preliminary injunction motion. In exchange, NPPD would be willing to agree to hold off any major construction activities that could otherwise be conducted under the ITP.

In other words, the Nebraska project is in a temporary holding pattern.

Mention of these two projects does not even get into discussions of other projects where OCTA has interests, such as the Avangrid Aurora Solar project near Battle Mountain, Nevada; the Long Canyon Mine project near Elko, Nevada; the ongoing issue with the Fernley Swales in Nevada; the I-229 project in St. Joseph, Missouri; or issues in the El Dorado National Forest in California, among others.

In late October, I met with members of our marketing/PR committee and OCTA staff to discuss ways in which OCTA can move forward on better promoting and funding our fights to preserve our trails in the face of all of these threats. In August, OCTA won an annual “credit” grant of $120,000 from Google to spend solely on ads on their search engine. We can use those ads to educate others on these issues, but Google cannot be our only tool for fighting back. OCTA also launched a new YouTube Channel this month as a result of that PR/marketing meeting and we are busy preparing to fill it with entertaining and historical pieces as well as pieces that advocate for our cause. Right now, our committee is soon to create a video about B2H at Flagstaff Hill near Baker City, Oregon before winter sets in, and we are discussing other videos to create and include as we strive to continue bringing OCTA into the 21st century with a wide array of digital tools to help us fulfill our mission of preservation and education.

Hopefully, Ezra Meekers’s words that open this letter cause you to visit or revisit these sites. Whether it’s the monumental Scotts Bluff in Nebraska or the deep, grand ruts at Guernsey, Wyoming, there is certainly much to see. But many sites are under threat. **This is why your membership in and support of OCTA and its mission is so critical.**

**OCTA cannot completely fulfill its mission without extra funding.** We depend upon the generosity of our members to keep going. We need funds on-hand to meet the needs of any preservation issue, to ensure that we can take advantage of every media opportunity, to fully fund our educational program, or take care of any other general need. Would you please take a moment and return the enclosed envelope with your contribution to support all the good work of OCTA? We are a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization and your contributions are tax deductible (OCTA Tax Identification Number: 84-0962140). Also, if you have an IRA, did you know that the penalty for not taking your IRA Required Minimum Distribution (RMD) is 50% of the amount not taken or of the shortfall? **Yes, you read that right, 50%.** Please consider gifting a portion of the Required Minimum Distribution to OCTA rather than forfeiting an amount to the IRS because you forgot to take the RMD. **Thank you so much for all you do to support OCTA and our mission!**

Sincerely,

Lee Black, President