In the 1860s, a new road was built over the central Cascades connecting the valley to desert.

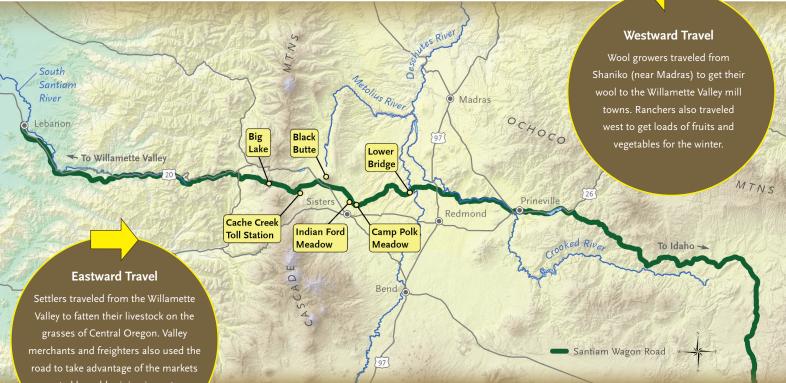
This newly built road, the Santiam Wagon Road, helped people travel more easily from the Willamette Valley across the rugged Cascades, to the forests, meadows, and deserts of Central Oregon. Where did the road lead in the high desert? What was it like to travel back then? Learn more about the Santiam Wagon Road to find the answers.



The Santiam Wagon Road

And distances

The Santiam Wagon Road was built in the 1860s to connect the Willamette Valley to the Idaho border. Like many wagon roads, it followed well-known trails and travel corridors used by Native Americans. It was nearly 400 miles long and served as a livestock trail and freight route over the middle section of the Cascades. The Wagon Road was in use from 1865-1939. It passed many sites familiar to Central Oregonians today: Big Lake, Cache Creek, Black Butte, Indian Ford Meadow, Camp Polk Meadow, and on across the high desert to Lower Bridge.



created by gold mining in eastern Oregon and Idaho.

The End of an Era

By 1900, the Columbia Southern Railroad connected to Shaniko, taking much of the freight traffic away from the Wagon Road. By 1911, the Oregon Trunk Railroad reached Bend, further rerouting traffic. Finally, modern highways over the Cascades opened in the 1920s and '30s bringing automobiles and the end of an era.

WAGON ROAD TOLL STATION. PHOTO: BOWMAN MUSEUM.



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Native American Communities

For Native American communities, the construction of the Santiam Wagon Road was part of the continued Euro-American invasion of their ancestral lands. The Wagon Road and other Euro-American developments disrupted traditional territories and lifeways, introduced diseases, and led to forced displacement and cultural suppression. The impacts of this displacement are still felt today, but Native American communities are building a strong future through their connection to the land. FREIGHT WAGONS NEAR SHANIKO. PHOTO: BOWMAN MUSEUM.

Reconstructing the Route

The Santiam Wagon Road was built in the mid 1860s, so how do we know today the route it followed?

- Historic surveys: Public land surveyors were required to record local landmarks. J.H. McClung was responsible for the first known surveys of the area in 1870. His maps indicate the route of the road and include natural landmarks and established trails.
- Physical evidence: Old tree blazes, wheel ruts, and piles of rocks (cleared to make a path for the wagons), can also help with reconstruction.
- LIDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) technology: LIDAR uses lasers to accurately map landform contours beneath any surface vegetation. This technology clearly shows the path of the wagon road.

Visiting the Santiam Wagon Road

See remnants of the Santiam Wagon Road at the Deschutes Land Trust's Whychus Canyon Preserve. Historic Wagon Road stopping points can also be seen at the Land Trust's Indian Ford Meadow Preserve and Camp Polk Meadow Preserve. Visit today!



Learn more about the Santiam Wagon Road, leer en español, listen with an audio reader, or download for reading later.



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