

MT. WHITNEY, WHITNEY CREEK, AND THE POISON MEADOW TRAIL

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One of the old-time trails crossing the southern Sierra Nevada goes under the plebeian name of the **Hockett Trail**. It connected the towns Visalia and Independence. A line stretched taut between these two places would span the highest peaks and ridges in the whole chain, yet the trail itself is an easy trail and attains no great altitude, for it circumvents the impassable ridges at just that point where the High Sierra Nevada begins to break down abruptly to the south. As a piece of successful evasion, the Hockett Trail has my unreserved admiration; for the man who built it (doubtless it was one Hockett himself) had a practical and thoroughgoing idea of the topography of the southern Sierra.



National Park Service generalized map of Hockett Trail location.

Summarizing the Hockett Trail's Path across the Sierra Nevada

The Hockett Trail (~96 miles in length) is an historical trek across the southern Sierra Nevada mountains. It was used by pack trains, the army, and recreationalists for several decades following its completion. The trail was named after the founder, John B. Hockett, in 1863. It was being constructed at the same time as the Jordan Trail by its founder John Jordan. Mining in Owen's Valley initially created the drive find a way across the Sierra. In 1865, a couple years following the completion of the Hockett Trail, traders created a wagon route over Walker Pass further south. Although it would take longer to complete the journey across the mountains, it was much safer and easier than the Hockett Trail. The Hockett trail still remained and allowed a variety of people to access this area of the Sierra Nevada mountains.

As with the passage of time the use along the Hockett Trail has varied. Some sections are overgrown or have disappeared causing new routes to be created. Most of the trail still exists today and can be retraced. The beginning and ending portions of the trail are now paved roads. The trail passes through both the National Park Service and USDA Forest Service jurisdictions, but primarily resides within the Forest Service's Golden Trout Wilderness.

The Hockett Trail started in Three Rivers, California. It followed up the South Fork of the Kaweah River and climbed up the ridge just above Garfield Creek to the confluence of Hockett Lakes outlet flow, South Kaweah River, and Tuohy Creek. From there the trail went northeast for about a mile and then went southeast through Sand meadows to Windy Gap. The travel dove down into the head waters of Soda

[Spring] Creek, but quickly went north over a small saddle to Wet Meadows. The trail went east downstream to the confluence with Little Kern River. The trail followed the river for about a mile, crossed Shotgun Creek, and proceeded down the eastern side of the Little Kern River. The trail never saw the Little Kern River again as it went south through Lion Meadows, then east at Burnt Corral Meadows, and eventually dropped down into Trout Meadows.

Once at Trout Meadows the trail went north and into the Kern River canyon. The trail stayed on the west side of the canyon, just like it does today, and stays that way until the Kern River Ranger Station within the National Park Service jurisdiction. It proceeded about 0.75 miles of the Ranger Station to Lower Funston Meadow. The trail went east across the Kern River and up along the

northern side of Golden Trout Creek. The trail continues following Golden Trout Creek to its headwaters in [Big] Whitney Meadows then goes east over Cottonwood Pass. The trail descends into Horseshoe Meadows, but quickly leaves the meadow and moves north towards Cottonwood Creek. The trail goes east down Cottonwood Creek to the modern day paved road and follows the road down the mountain.

Hockett Trail & map excerpt courtesy of Joshua Courter (20xx)

In olden days supplies for the mines went over the mountains by this route, and as ore was sent out, the mule-trains were heavily loaded on the return trip as well. In later days this same trail has been, for the greater part of the distance, a convenient and serviceable trail to Mt. Whitney (indeed, the only practicable route for animals) from either the desert or the San Joaquin Valley side of the mountains. Furthermore, the easiest way to Mt. Whitney is still the longest way, that is, to follow the Hockett Trail as far as the higher meadows on Volcano (Old Whitney) Creek. As is well known, there is no abbreviated route to Mt. Whitney with animals.

One must go a long way around to compass a short distance. It was with the thought of finding a "Northwest Passage" to or from Mt. Whitney that two of us left Three Rivers on August 1, 1900. I had just come in from the desert about Owen's Lake, having crossed the Sierra twice in that season, and my companion was Mr. Ralph Hopping, a naturalist and mountaineer, resident in the region, whom I chanced to find at leisure the day before. Each of us had a seasoned riding-mule and pack-mule, with a full complement of supplies.

Our route into Mt. Whitney may be briefly described. It passed over Farewell Gap, followed the Hockett Trail to the Kern, and kept to the bed of the Kern Canon as far as Junction Meadow. About two and one half miles above Junction Meadow the east canon wall becomes less abrupt, and it is here quite feasible to gain the top of the eastern plateau and find a way of doubling back towards Whitney.

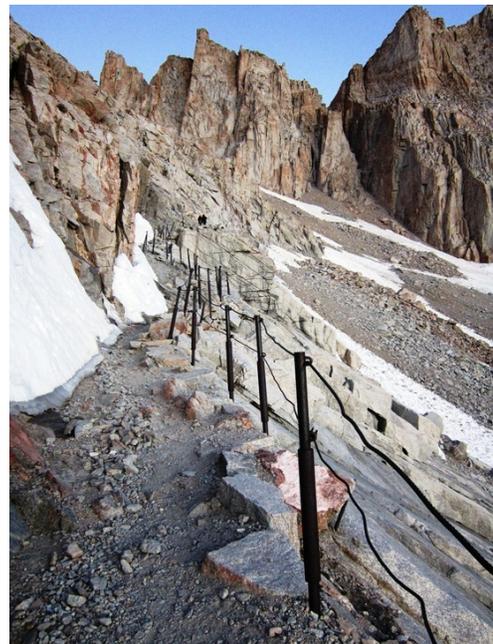
This whole plateau from the edge of the Kern Cañon cliffs eastward is covered by a forest of foxtail pine (*Pinus Balfouriana*), very considerable portions of it being what is termed a pure forest, - that is, without admixture of other species. This pine ranges northward as far as the Mt. Shasta region, but right here about Mt. Whitney is the most extensive forest of this species, - that is, at the southern limit of its range. On Mt. Whitney it divides honors at the timberline with the tamarack-pine. The tamarack-pine is very characteristic of swampy meadows at 6,000 to 7,500 feet altitude, and, indeed, the books speak of it as peculiar to such situations. Nevertheless it is not bound to one habitat, for the tree is a feature of the granite slopes hereabouts, and one finds good-sized trees as well as the dwarfs at the timberline. The two forms, the alpine and that of the meadows, differ in general appearance, and one cannot but contrast them, the former having a much stockier trunk and a less sym-metrical crown.

Not many hundred yards south of the east fork of the Kern one meets a rock floe stretching east and west. It is not very wide, but is troublesome to cross. There were any number of inviting openings which permitted one to become involved in it, but we discovered but one way through. Needless to say, this was enough for us, the clew being given by a thin line of foxtail pines which pioneered into the floe from either side. Then we took up our way again, and without further incident arrived at the meadows below Camp Langley, went into camp, and the next day, being the seventh day from Three Rivers, we climbed to the summit of Whitney - a tedious, though by no means difficult, undertaking.

The summit has been frequently described. As for me, my eyes were lured eastward – desertward - to the reds, browns, buffs, grays, and slates, lying like colored cloud-shadows on the nearer ranges, and beyond them the far-stretching, brooding desert, all hazy and mysterious in the hot sunshine. Fortunately enough, we were here joined by a man who knew all that country, and who pointed out an arm of Death Valley, the Panamint Range, dominated by Telescope Peak, the Grapevine Range, and other interesting landmarks. It was pleasant on the summit; the sun warmed the place, there was no wind, and this man from the desert, whose thought was colored by the sagebrush, gave us high entertainment of experience in the sun-baked wilderness without knowing that he did it, his long forefinger, perched as we were at fifteen thousand feet, localizing his stories.

It was our purpose on the return journey to proceed directly from Mt. Whitney to the Kern through the gorge of Whitney Creek, or, as it is designated on all of the older maps, Crabtree Creek. It is not very far from Whitney to the Kern straight down Whitney Creek as you measure it on the map. If we could in some way insinuate the mules and ourselves into and through the Whitney gorge, then we should have discovered a short route from Mt. Whitney. In anticipation, I may say here that we found the route quite short enough.

On the morning of August 8th, having saddled and packed with especial care, we plunged boldly down into the cañon. For about two miles we had good going, following the right-hand slope, or wall. Then we were tangled up in the inevitable brush that kept company with a very varied assortment of granite blocks. Furthermore, the cañon narrowed down, and it was partially closed by a transverse wall through which the stream had eaten out a narrow cleft, tumbling over in a series of small falls. The mules sensed trouble. Guided by instincts which did them credit, they made desperate efforts to take the hack-trail up hill, and it was only after much persuasion, hard work, and trail-building that



Mt. Whitney Trail at “Weeping Rock”

we at last found ourselves across stream on the opposite hillside. Thence we worked along the high hillside, evaded the impassable cleft, and so down to the stream once more, crossing it again with some difficulty.

Here we paused to contemplate the view. On two sides were the walls of Whitney Creek, to the east the transverse wall, to the west the cliffs of Kern Cañon, over which Whitney Creek made its tumultuous way. With a strong aversion to conceding the possibility of painfully retracing our steps, we made a noon camp. Out of high esteem for my little brown mule the camp was named "Hot Haste Camp." We nailed the legend to a red fir tree as a sign. That sign will outlive the mule. "Hot Haste" was the most philosophic mule that it has ever been my privilege to know. It is true that in most particulars he was not to be trusted, but he differed from other mules in that he did not subscribe to the doctrine of useless resistance. He did not kick for the sake of kicking,

nor swell for the sake of swelling. Headed off on the back trail, "Hot Haste" yielded at once; his strong philosophic bent immediately dominated his actions and demeanor.

It needed but little exploration to show the hopelessness of tracking directly down either side of the stream, and without doubt our mode of egress is the only one. Work your way up to the foot of the cliffs of the northern wall, follow our built trail over the talus (if there be any of the blocks still in place) out to a small timbered shoulder projecting somewhat into the canon. Having gained this, it is a matter of time to zigzag down the less-inclined slopes of the Kern Cañon to the bed of the Kern River. It was thus that we came through. I am told that others have since tried it and failed, but with mules (not horses) and an outfit contrived and strengthened by the experience of many seasons it ought not to be considered a venturesome trip.

The day's excitement was such that we were glad to make an early camp. After about three miles of travel we forded the Kern to the west shore and disported our camp equipment on the surface of a little meadow, beautifully green, diversified with many sorts of flowering herbs and with as many as three kinds of gentians-so that the name Gentian Meadow seemed appropriate. One edge of the green open held three little pools, so crystal clear, so filled with iridescent tints, that I was at once carried back to glacial valleys opening to the shores of Bering Sea, where like pools are found on the mossy tundra. But the smell of cooking rose on the still air and one's thoughts thus hurry back precipitately to the present.

The next morning we were up betimes and headed down the Kern. Between Junction Meadow and Funston's Meadows are many young tamarack pine trees, fifteen to forty feet in height. The trunks at four or five feet from the ground - and mainly on one side - bore conspicuous scars caused by the removal of the thin bark. These scars were of oblong outline, or triangular, or wedge-shaped, with the point of the triangle, or wedge, pointing upwards. They were quite cleanly made, and yet palpably no human tool had done the work. Old-time mountaineers say that porcupines feed on the inner bark, when the snow is on the ground, and, in any event, it is scarcely dubious but that some gnawing animal has cut out these false "blazes."

Just to the left of Funston Creek in the Kern bed a trail may be found which climbs the west wall of the cañon. It is a good trail and leads directly to Funston's Mountain Meadow, a large round meadow on a broad, level plateau which permits a fine inspection of the near-at-hand red-hued Kaweahs and the ragged peaks of the Sawtooth Range. Just to the south of Funston Meadow is a forest of tamarack-pines, a finer forest than any of that species that I know elsewhere. It is an almost pure forest of considerable extent, and many of the trees have trunks five or six feet in diameter. The juniper-trees on this plateau were also exceptional as to the size of the individual trees and their intact tops.

East and west across the Funston Meadow plateau is the huge gash of the Big Arroyo. Such names as Dry Creek, Big Creek, and Stony Creek weary by their endless repetition along the paths of the earlier West American trailers, and evidence the imagination's poverty, but I am fain to admit that the Big Arroyo is worthy of his name. We were nearly an hour getting to the bottom of him, and there camped for the night.

From this point to Farewell Gap the trail is often indefinite or none at all; so it may not be amiss to particularize. We followed upstream the bed of the Big Arroyo for two miles, turned abruptly up the hill, and entered the so-called Soda Canon. Along Soda

Creek are a series of meadows, enticing to both beast and man. These are the "Poison Meadows," but they do not look so attractive when one observes the whitening skeletons of riding and pack animals that have died in this paradise up under the sky. Although all of the plants here were carefully collected, I regret to say that the source of the poison has not yet been located. The poisonous plants which grow here also grow in other meadows which are regarded as perfectly safe. It is said - and with obvious good reason - that staked animals are more likely to die than animals which are allowed to range freely. The poison works quickly, as poisoned animals usually die the same day. As to accusations against the water, I not only tasted but drank freely at all of the streams in passing through this country. The subject needs much more detailed study than I was enabled to give it. We had no loss, because we prevented the mules from eating, although, of course, they, being hungry, protested nearly every step of the way.

In this manner we journeyed up the canon through In this manner we journeyed up the canon through woods of tamarack-pine, red fir, Jeffrey pine, succeeded by a very sharply defined zone of mountain pine, and this in turn by a zone of foxtail pine. After about three miles we turned south abruptly up a difficult hill to a little mountain lake, one of the exquisite sort so frequently met with, which rested in a hollow of the country rock just below an unnamed granite peak, which, merely on account of its symmetry and position, had for some time been holding our attention. Here we made a mid-day camp, naming the bit of water "Little Claire Lake," tacking the sign to a tamarack-pine tree on the northern shore. Then we set off again, pausing on the southern side to get our fill of a foxtail-pine forest, of which I had never seen the like before. Here, indeed, between the granite and the sky, was the solidarity of the foxtails. I set much store by the memory of this spot. The place was all cleanly strewn with coarse granite sand and thickly peopled with the foxtail pines. Their red-brown trunks were rich in color and called the eye back to them again and again - and still again. The short needles of the thickly foliated trees were in fives, densely set at the ends of the branchlets and so formed the "fox's tail." Usually the axis of the tree projects through the crown as a splinter point whitened by sun and rain.

Both men and mules reluctantly, albeit for different reasons, surmounted a rough escarpment, perhaps one hundred and fifty feet high, that bars an easy way into the Estcourt Basin. There was no sign that we had been preceded; all was clean, inviolate. Another beautiful stretch of water recalled Stevenson's pool, for it seemed as if it too might be "forever quiet, clear, and cool." It now seems well that we did not even leave a name for the lake, so unmarred, so remote from human steps seemed this basin.

The course, now, is southwesterly up a long series of rocky slopes to the lowest notch in the divide towards the Little Kern. This notch - it isn't much of a notch - is called by the shepherders Quinn's Pass. From the little meadow below the pass one must hug the mountains to the right and with great persistence until the old trail is found leading directly to Farewell Gap. Thence to Visalia the way is long but a traveled one.