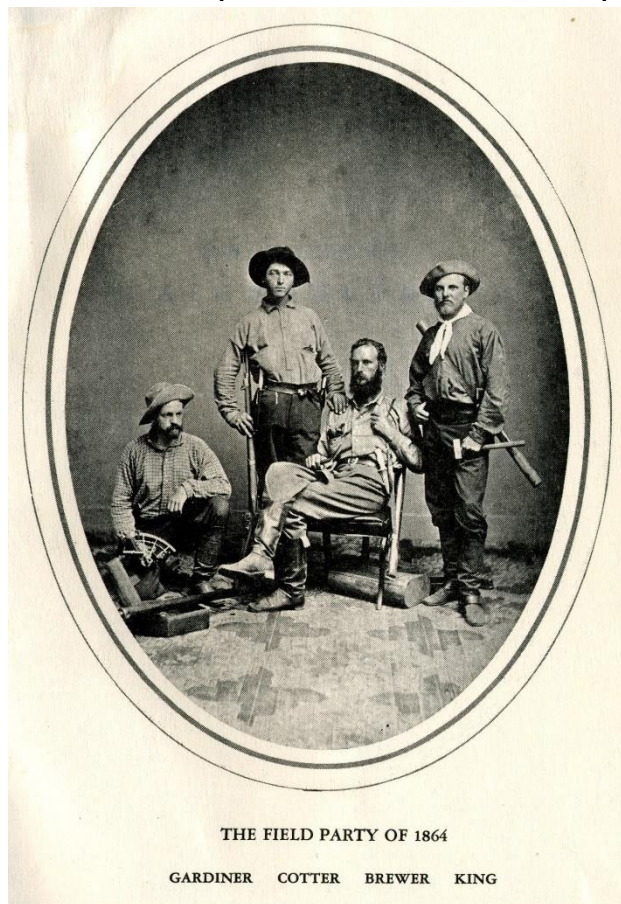


The Upper Sac Canyon Trail in 1862: From the Pit/McCloud Confluence to Mt. Shasta City

By Eric Palmer

Those of us who frequent the Upper Sac at Dunsmuir hold a strong affinity for that special, if not sacred land and its crystal clear Mt. Shasta spring fed water that supports the trout we seek. But what, we have to wonder, did that area look like in the 1860s? While at that time it certainly had felt the crush of heavy placer mining and settler activity, compared to today it was still relatively as virgin as a thousand years ago.

How cool would it be to see that area through the eyes of an early adventurer with the passion *and* talent for documenting everything he saw in his journal and letters to a brother in the east. William H. Brewer did just that as the lead member ("Principal Assistant...") of the first California Geological Survey team, which, from 1860 to 1864 traveled fourteen-thousand miles by mule and boot leather from below Los Angeles to the Oregon border with many zigs and zags in between. The full trip is thoroughly documented in *Up and Down California: The Journal of William H. Brewer*¹. I highly recommend the book for anyone interested in the history of



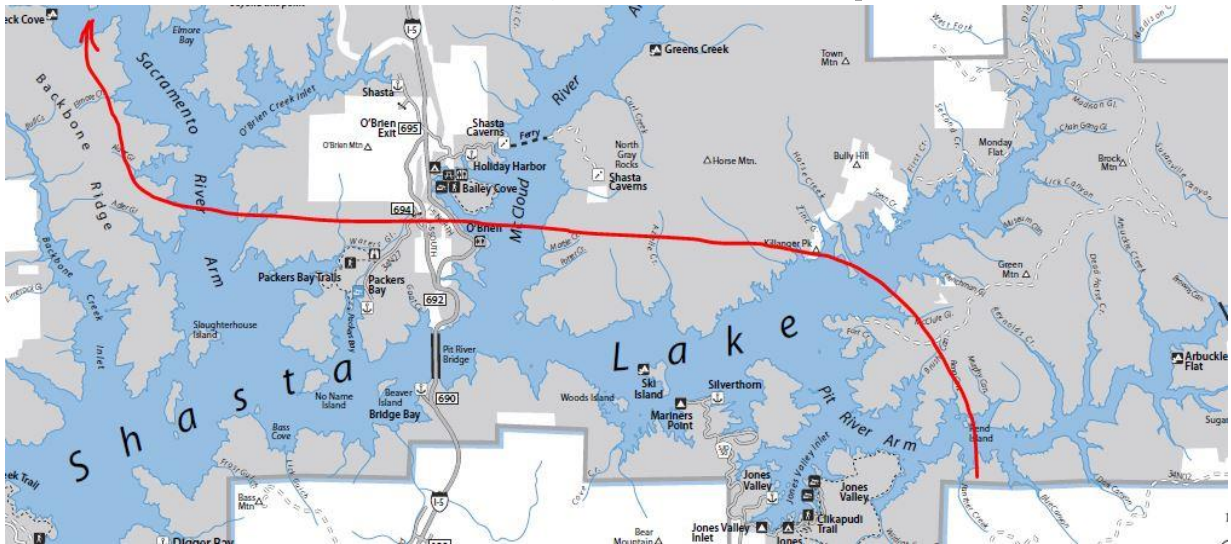
¹ *Up and Down California...*, was first published in 1930 and again in 1949 with a third and final printing in 1974 by the U.C. California Regents. It is readily available used on Amazon and eBay.

the period. For background on the origins of this geological survey and other members involved, click [here](#).

What follows is an excerpt describing the small party's arduous trek across the Pit River, the McCloud, and then the Sacramento, and up the west side of the Upper Sacramento River canyon and past our favorite fishing holes, through today's Dunsmuir, and finally to Strawberry Valley, or as we know it today: Mt. Shasta City. Their starting point would be about five miles below the Pit River arm of Lake Shasta from their overnight encampment at Bass's Ranch, to be described later. The areas where they crossed the three rivers to reach the west side of the canyon are today all under water as you can see in the map below.

In the words of William H. Brewer to his brother in the east:

“Sunday, September 7 [1862], we were all up at dawn and started before seven. We had hoped to be at Mount Shasta at full moon, but the detentions had so delayed us that we must travel Sunday and were yet three days behind time. Five miles over a hilly road brought us to Pit River. Here let me say that the upper Sacramento, above where it turns from the east to south, is here known altogether as Pit River, while the name Sacramento is retained for the branch that runs nearly straight south from the west base of Mount Shasta. We Crossed the ferry, crossed some hills to McCloud's Fork, a swift stream of pure, cold water, green as the Niagara and cold from the snows of the mountains beyond. We followed up that a few miles



Approximate path of Brewer's company from below the Pit R. to the Upper Sacramento canyon. In 1862 the McCloud was a tributary to the Pit which then fed the Sacramento River.

then crossed the ridges to the Sacramento Fork [today's Upper Sac, see red line above] where we camped for the night. Such a hilly road—all up and down—now winding along a mere shelf hundreds-of-feet above the river, then descending into ravines. The country between these forks is dry, while the hills mostly covered with bushes and scattered trees, but after this day we had very different scenery, for we were in a wilderness of mountains and continually rising. We were glad enough to get into camp, for all were tired. We had had a hard day's drive, although we had come but twenty-one miles.

We had seen a number of Indians, and at the ferry where we camped that night there were a number more [*likely the Winnemem band of Wintu who still live in the area, and with much of their ancestral lands under Lake Shasta*]. We heard that many had recently died. There were some graves on a knoll near camp, and a number of squaws kept up an incessant howling, moaning, screeching and thumping on something until dark. Their noise was positively hideous, but then this is their way of showing respect for the dead. They ceased when it got dark, but commenced again soon after dawn.

Monday, September 8, we were up again at dawn. We crossed the Sacramento Fork by ferry [see red line to the left.], and all day followed up that stream, making twenty-one miles. It was certainly, together with the next day's ride, the most picturesque road I have traveled in this state—in fact, I think that I ever traveled [*Note that Brewer was well traveled in Europe including the Swiss Alps*]. Sometimes down to the level of the river—then crossing ridges, sinking into ravines—sometimes a narrow way where two wagons cannot pass for half a mile at a stretch, the steep mountain on one side and the swift stream hundreds of feet below on the other. None of your magnificent roads, such as one sees in Switzerland, where at such places a parapet guards from all danger; but rough, sidling, the outer wheel uncomfortably near the soft shelving edge—bridges, without rail, made by laying poles or split timber on the beams, spanning deep ravines, where the mules went over trembling with fear. The road is pretty well engineered. The fifty miles that we passed over, rough as it is, cost, we were told, \$40,000 [*\$970,800 in today's dollars*], and our tolls up and back were \$25.50 [*\$607 today*].

The valley ran nearly straight toward Mount Shasta, and at times we got most glorious views of that peak. Its snow-covered head rose magnificently far above everything else—with what wonder and awe we regarded it, the goal of our trip! The many stories we heard of the terrors of ascending it—many declaring that no man ever had succeeded in reaching the highest summit, although many had *nearly* succeeded—were fiction, as we shall see farther on [*Skipping a paragraph where Brewer, a botanist by education, collects samples of a rare plant, the darlingtonia. He lagged behind while the others continued.*].

We had a beautiful camp that night among the pines and firs at **Sim Southern's**². He entertained us with some most marvelous stories of his attempted ascent of Mount

² A large ranch, and later an 1880s hotel at the site of today's Sims Flat USFS Camp Ground.

Shasta—marvelous indeed to hear, but received with some allowance, and more so after we had been on the ground. In fact, popular testimony was that with him "truth is stranger than fiction."

Tuesday, September 9, we continued on our way. In a few miles we passed the Castle Rocks (Devil's Castle of the map) [referencing a map he provided to his brother], most picturesque objects to behold [*This of course is today's Castle Crags State Park*]. A granite ridge rises very abruptly from the valley, its crest worn into the most fantastic forms—pinnacles, minarets, battlements, domes, and peaks. Some of these rise perhaps three thousand feet above the valley, and the chain of Castle Mountains is much higher beyond. We were in sight of them a long time and each turn of the road disclosed a new view of them. In crossing a spur from this chain that runs down to the river we had the most magnificent view of Mount Shasta that we have yet had [*this could be our Soda Creek fishing access area*]. It appeared up the valley, the foreground of mountains opening to show it, the great cone rising high, its upper six thousand feet streaked with glistening snow, its outlines sharply cut against the intensely blue sky, its sides steep beyond belief.

Next we came to the Soda Springs³. These are close by the river, here merely a large mill stream in size, its waters green and cold, and traces everywhere of what a torrent it must be during the winter rains. The waters of the spring are highly charged with carbonic acid—so are called "soda" springs, for they sparkle like soda water—and hold iron in solution [*Brewer was educated in chemistry so was likely correct in his assessment*]. They have a considerable reputation for curative powers. Here we left the immediate side of the stream and struck up an inclined table-land [*this would be the long steep 1-5 grade north as you leave Dunsmuir*], rising a thousand feet more in the next nine miles to Strawberry Valley Ranch, where we camped. This is the base of the mountain [*Strawberry Valley was today's Mt. Shasta City*].



THE BEER KEG
By Charles F. Hoffmann

**An essential necessity of camp life.
Hoffmann was the team's artist who's sketches
documented all they saw since they had no camera.**

³ This could have been today's Tauhindauli Park in Dunsmuir, aka Upper Soda Springs, or one of several other soda springs farther up-stream and still within Dunsmuir. If the former, odd he did not mention Ross and Mary McCloud's inn which was operating there at the time.

On the last two days' ride we had met much lava. It seemed to have run over the country after it had its present general features but not the present details. The streams have, in many places, cut through the bed of lava into the softer slates beneath. These slates were for the most part very hard, for they had all been baked and altered by heat. The last nine miles from the Soda Springs was entirely over lava. Much of the last two days had been through fine forests—pine, fir, cedar, and spruce, with various other trees. Many of the cone-bearing trees were large and grand beyond anything the eastern states know of. Trees six or eight feet in diameter and 200 to 250 feet high were not rare.”

At noon on Friday September 12, 1862, Brewer and his team would summit Mount Shasta, in spite of considerable local scuttlebutt that it was impossible. On reaching the top, miscellaneous household items were found proving that they were not the first. Led by an experienced guide, the path they choose is the one most commonly used today.

Brewer continues describing their return trip south back down the river canyon on the very narrow single lane wagon toll road high above the river:

“Wednesday September 17, we were up early, ate a hearty breakfast of venison and delicious trout, raised our camp, and were off, returning by the same road that we came, instead of going by way of Yreka as we had intended. We got but 17¹/₂ miles that day, and camped at the Sweet Briar Ranch that night [*anyone who fishes the Upper Sac knows the Sweet Briar access off I-5*].

Thursday, September 18, we were off early, as we intended to get to the Sacramento ferry that night [*This would be the ferry back across to the east side of the lower Sacramento River*].

We arrived at Dogtown⁴ (one house) a little too early to camp, and we thought that with diligence we might reach a house about six miles farther, where hay might be obtained for our animals, so we pushed on.

I have already described the roads, often mere narrow dug-ways, where two teams cannot pass⁵. On such places we generally ride some distance ahead of the wagons to look out for meeting teams. But in one place the wagon had nearly caught up with us, when we were suddenly face to face with a wagon. Both stopped, and we parleyed and palavered [to talk unnecessarily at length]. It was nearly sunset. He was loaded with four thousand pounds of freight. After a careful examination we found that we could not pass; it was impractical to draw either wagon back. The track was perhaps four hundred feet above the river, and, in passing, the outer wagon could not fail starting and finally bringing up in the water below

⁴ Dogtown was the name of the original mining camp at today's Delta, off the Vollmers/Delta I-5 exit, and one of most productive mining claims in the region in the 1850s. It later became a logging hub which the railroad renamed to Delta once the railroad was extended past that location in 1884.

⁵ This crude toll road was likely the origin of State Route 3 and later Hwy. 99. Until 1933 it was merely an "improved road" (graded gravel) running from Redding to Mt. Shasta City and then to Oregon. It was not paved until 1933 as automobile use became more common.

At last we unloaded our wagon and set it carefully so far over the edge that his could pass, which it did, clearing ours only three inches. We loaded up, but as we could not reach the desired haven, we tied up in a cheerless place for the night. We had a little barley for the mules, but no hay, so we tied them to the bushes, brought water half a mile, got supper long after dark, provoked, ill humored, and uncomfortable.

Friday, September 19, we made a long heavy drive of twenty-three or twenty-four miles, and camped that night at Bass's Ranch, near Pit River."

And, so ends William Brewer's narrative of their trip up then back down the Upper Sacramento Canyon wagon toll road. Omitted were sections on their encounters with the local Wintu with observations that might be considered offensive by modern sensibilities, but were the norm of the time, even for the "enlightened and educated", such as Brewer.

Bass's Ranch, their last *and* first encampment on this leg of their travels, was near Bass Hill at the approximate site of today's [Mountain Gate](#). This is located midway

between Lake Shasta (the actual lake) and the small town of Shasta Lake just minutes south of the lake on I-5. If you stop at the Chevron Station just off I-5 on Old Oregon Trail Road, your last pit-stop heading north before the lake, you are very close to Mountain Gate and the former Bass's Ranch across the freeway. John S.P. Bass was a local luminary of considerable stature at the time, who had also established the Bass Stage Station near his ranch, along with numerous other enterprises.

[William Henry Brewer](#), at the end of this four-year herculean effort, immediately accepted an offer of the position of *Chair of Agriculture* at the *Scheffield Scientific School at Yale University*, a position he held until retirement in 1903. Brewer went on to author several other books and spent time on lecture tours speaking of his California adventure. Born on September 14th, 1828, William Brewer died November 2nd, 1910 at the age of 82.



THE SURVEY PARTY IN CAMP NEAR MOUNT DIABLO, 1862

GABB WHITNEY AVERILL HOFFMANN BREWER SCHMIDT