

From [Las Vegas Sun](#), Nov. 18, 1996, page A-1

# Group retraces trail of lost gold seekers

## Backpackers OK'd to pass through Area 51

By Christopher Smith  
Salt Lake Tribune

ENTERPRISE, Utah - Impatient to join California's gold rush in 1849, a group of fortune seekers veered its wagons from the Old Spanish Trail near here, taking a rumored 20-day shortcut into the mountains of southwestern Utah.

It turned out to be the "Road to Hell" - four months of starvation, thirst and suffering that gave Death Valley its name and remains one of the most poignant tragedies in the history of Western migration.

This week, a small group of Californians will begin retracing the path of the so called "Lost '49ers," hiking 376 miles from Enterprise, Utah, to Death Valley National Park. The history buffs and backpackers claim they will be the first people to walk the tortuous route since the original passage of 1849-50.

"I guess we're a bunch of nuts," says Allan Smith of Palmdale, Calif., a Sierra Nevada backcountry guide and former paramedic who is part of the five-member "Footsteps of the Lost '49ers" expedition leaving Saturday from Enterprise. "The Forest Service and BLM (Bureau of Land Management) have asked us to photograph and document any artifacts we come across, because so few people have walked over this country."

A portion of the Lost '49ers Trail crosses through Area 51, the secretive military base east of the Nevada Test Site that has become grist for hordes of UFO and captured-alien conspiracy theories and science fiction plots. Earlier this month, expedition leaders announced that the Air Force and the Department of Energy gave permission for the party to follow the '49ers Trail across territory normally off-limits.

"We passed their security clearance and the only condition was that we will have two government escorts accompany us while we are in Area 51," says Smith.

Death Valley National Park officials were surprised that the expedition received authorization to enter the classified Groom Lake testing area, the existence of which routinely is denied by the Pentagon.

"That's amazing," says park spokeswoman Ann Holeso. "They never let anyone in there."

Winding southwest from Enterprise, the Lost '49ers Trail twists over the Utah-Nevada border, around the head of Beaver Dam Wash, through Meadow Valley Wash near the current Nevada hamlet of Elgin, skirts the Sheep Mountain Range, across the southeastern corner of the Nevada Test Site to Amargosa Valley, then over the Nevada-California border into Death Valley.

### Little outside contact

The five members of the expedition - Smith, fellow hiking guide Clay Campbell, archaeologist Jerry Freeman and Freeman's adult daughters, Holly and Jennifer - plan to carry their camping gear and have arranged food-and-water supply drops every five days. The group will not have radios, and members will have little outside contact.

"We suspect we'll have just about every type of weather imaginable this time of year, which is the same season that the original expedition was done," Smith says. "We all know what we're getting into and we're a little nervous but quite excited. We want to do this as realistically as possible."

Perhaps, but true realism would mean a slow, agonizing death on the trail.

The saga of the Lost '49ers began Jan. 24, 1848, when gold was discovered in California, triggering the rush of 80,000 emigrants to the coast in 1849.

Many of these westbound prospectors arrived in the Salt Lake Valley too late in the fall to chance going directly across the desert and through the Sierras before snowfall. News of the Donner Party, trapped by snow in the craggy Sierra Nevada in the winter of 1847, still was fresh in the minds of the emigrants. Donner survivors had been forced to resort to cannibalism.

But gold fever got the better of about 500 fortune seekers, who were eager to keep moving and did not relish the idea of wintering among the Utah Mormons because of mutual theocratic disdain and fear of violence toward non-Mormon "Gentiles."

Capt. Jefferson Hunt of the Mormon Battalion had been over the southerly Salt Lake to Los Angeles section of the Old Spanish Trail twice and offered to guide the estimated 500 emigrants for \$10 per wagon. The convoy, which left Springville on Oct. 2, 1849, made good time down a route that today roughly follows Interstate 15. In Beaver, the wagon train was joined by a group of 20 supply packers led by Capt. O.K. Smith.

Smith began circulating a map he claimed had been drawn by mountain man Bill Williams, who supposedly knew every pass through every mountain range in Utah. The map showed a shortcut through the barren peaks that make up the rim of the Great Basin, a path that would cut 500 miles from the trip to Los Angeles and take a mere 20 days, Capt. Smith promised.

On Nov. 4, 1849, near present-day Newcastle in Utah's Iron County, most of the wagon train split from Hunt. About 100 wagons joined Smith for the westward shortcut, while a mere seven wagons heeded Hunt's warning to stay the course.

"If you want to follow Captain Smith, I can't help it," Hunt said, according to the journal of emigrant Jacob Stover. "But ... you will get into the jaws of hell."

His prediction quickly proved true as the wagon train trundled up Shoal Creek west of what is now Enterprise and encountered a canyon that seemed impassable for the oxen teams and wagons. The place was dubbed Mount Misery.

Disgust over the dead end splintered the group seeking the shortcut. Some settlers retraced their tracks to catch up with Capt. Hunt, who had stayed on the main route. Others swore allegiance to the map, while still others - including Smith struck out on their own.

Those who turned back toward the Old Spanish Trail eventually reached California without unnecessary hardship.

Smith tried to scramble down Beaver Dam Wash with others in tow, but soon they fractured again, with some turning south to intersect the Spanish Trail and Capt. Smith turning north to Salt Lake City, which he reached successfully. Nine others pressed west overland on foot with fatal consequences.

"The boys said we would have to draw cuts in the morning to see who should be killed to eat," two survivors later recounted. "As we did not want to be killed to be eaten or to eat anybody, when we thought they were asleep, we got up and traveled 'til day." The seven others died in the desert. The estimated 50 emigrants in 27 wagons - who would become the Lost '49ers decided to continue on westward from Mount Misery, through the imagined shortcut.

Moving west into Nevada, they dropped into a barren basin, seemingly walled in by black rocky mountains. Optimism evaporated in the dry desert air.

"When the sun was fairly up, I took a good survey of the situation and it seemed as if pretty near all creation was in sight," wrote William Lewis Manly, whose first-person account of the tragedy, "Death Valley in '49," remains the most popular version.

"North and west was a level plain, fully 100 miles wide it seemed, and from anything I could see it would not afford a traveler a single drink in the whole distance or give a poor ox many mouthfuls of grass."

## Bachelors leave

As days drew on with diminishing supplies, weakened livestock, scant water and seemingly endless rows of mountains to cross, the wagon train splintered again. A group of bachelors - who called themselves "the Jayhawkers" decided to abandon the men who had brought wives and children, arguing that speed across the desert would mean survival. Although three of the bachelors died, the Jayhawkers managed to reach safety Feb. 5.

Although Manly was single, he decided he could not abandon the remaining emigrants - the Bennett, Arcane, Earhart and Wade families - left behind by the Jayhawkers. They struggled on across the Nevada badlands that a century later would become an atomicbomb proving ground. They burned wagons for fuel, thirsted constantly, slaughtered skeletal oxen where they fell, and ate everything but the animals' hldes.

"The mothers were nearly crazy, for they expected the children would choke with thirst and die in their arms, and would rather perish themselves than suffer the agony of seeing their little ones gasp and slowly die," Manly wrote. "For the love of gold they had left homes where hunger had never come and often in sleep dreamed of the bounteous tables of their old homes only to be woefully disappointed in the morning."

Sensing impending doom, the slowly starving group members asked Manly and John Rogers to press on and return with help while they remained in the barren basin. The two men scavenged ice from cracks in rock cliffs and ate the only game they saw for days - a black crow. "A vestpocketful of powder and shot would last a good hunter till he starved to death for there was not a living thing to shoot, great or small," Manly wrote.:

After two weeks, the men reached a Spanish mission 30 miles from Los Angeles, and, by communicating in sign language, managed to buy three horses and a burro loaded with jerky, cornmeal and flour. The horses and some supplies were lost on the return rescue trip. When Manly and Rogers finally came to the four families nearly a month after leaving, many already were dead.

As Manly escorted the starving eight survivors - four adults and four children - out of the basin toward Los Angeles, he wrote that they turned and "overlooking the scene of 80 much trial, suffering and death, spoke the thought uppermost, saying: 'Goodbye, Death Valley.'"

### Comments

Major errors here! The joke, of course, is that no one crosses Area 51, and the reporter never checked with the Air Force to confirm the story. It is surprising that the Sun got suckered by this.

You won't find this article on the [Sun's own web site](#). We suspect that it was pulled as soon as the editors discovered their error. Both the Sun and Review-Journal had follow-up articles on their front pages the following day, stating this time that the modern day group would have to go far out of their way to avoid Area 51, which is what we would expect.

-- Glenn Campbell

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