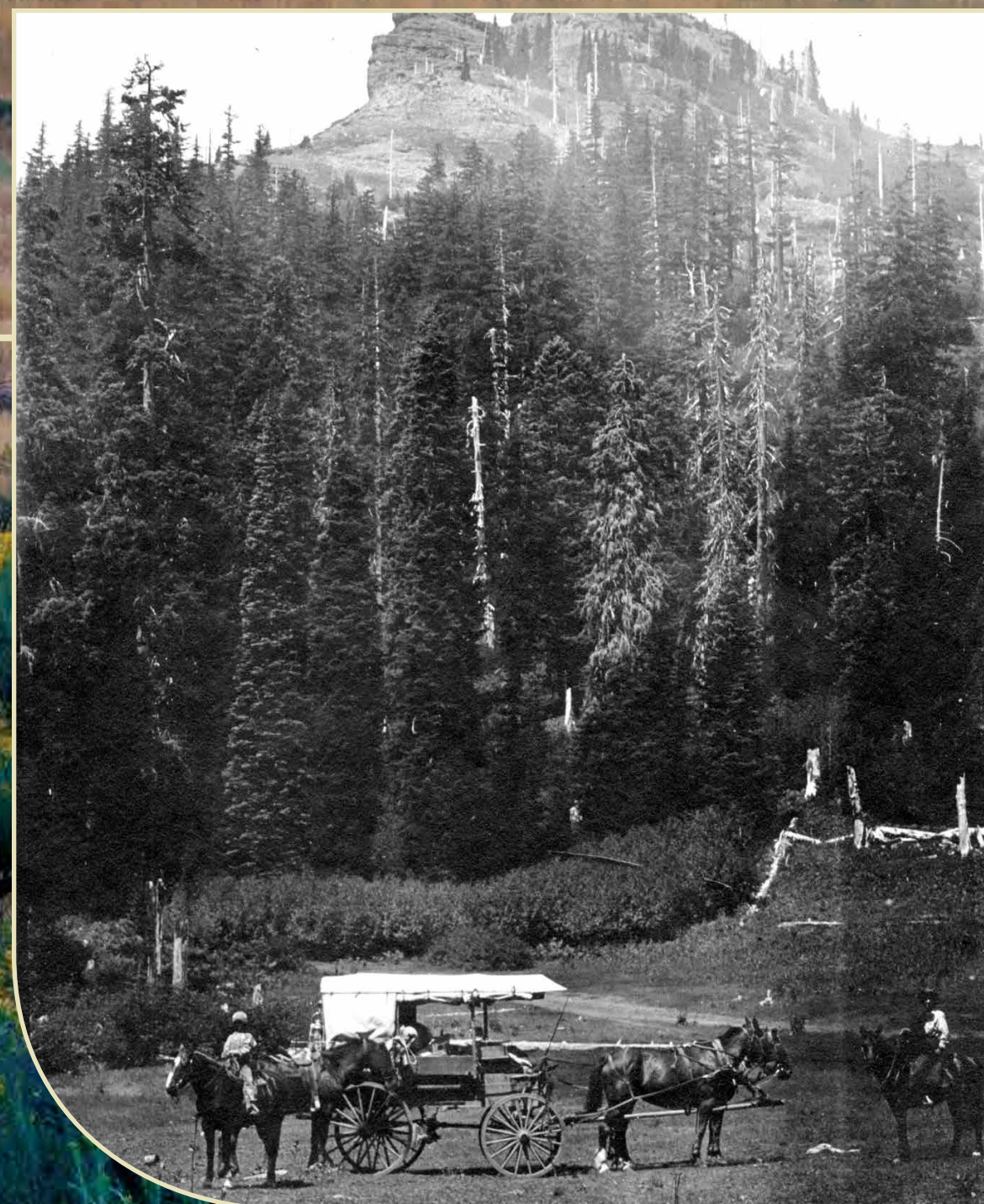


THE SANTIAM WAGON ROAD

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.



Team and wagon on Santiam Wagon Road, circa 1890.
Photo: Bowman Museum.



Wagon road toll station, circa 1866. Photo: Bowman Museum.



Central Oregon stage coach, circa 1910. Photo: Bowman Museum.

Where did the road lead in the high desert? What was it like to travel back then?
Walk the Santiam Wagon Road of today to find the answers.



Learn more about the Santiam Wagon Road, leer en español, listen with an audio reader, or download for reading later. Many thanks to the Bureau of Land Management for their support of this project.

CONNECTING VALLEY AND RANGE

Look into the grove of pines ahead.

The faint path between the trees is one clue that helped to reconstruct the location of the Santiam Wagon Road.

The Santiam Wagon Road was built in the 1860s to connect the Willamette Valley to the open rangelands of eastern Oregon and the gold camps of eastern Oregon and Idaho. 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.



Lebanon, Oregon was a supply and restocking point for travelers. The first few miles of the Wagon Road were established here in 1861.

Photo: Lebanon, Oregon. *Oregon Historical Society*, #BA011654.



Sketch: Mount Jefferson and Black Butte from Camp S. *Abbot and Williamson Journal 1857, Bowman Museum.*

The Central Oregon Wagon Road took travelers around Black Butte, followed Indian Ford Creek, went past Camp Polk Meadow, and headed east through the desert to cross the Deschutes River at Lower Bridge.



DEB QUINLAN

Canyon City and John Day, Oregon were destination points for Wagon Road merchants looking to sell their wares to gold miners.

Photo: Central Oregon miners and family, circa 1905. *Bowman Museum.*



Burns, Oregon was the end point for the "official" Wagon Road. Beyond this point the route to Idaho was only marked by stakes in the sand.

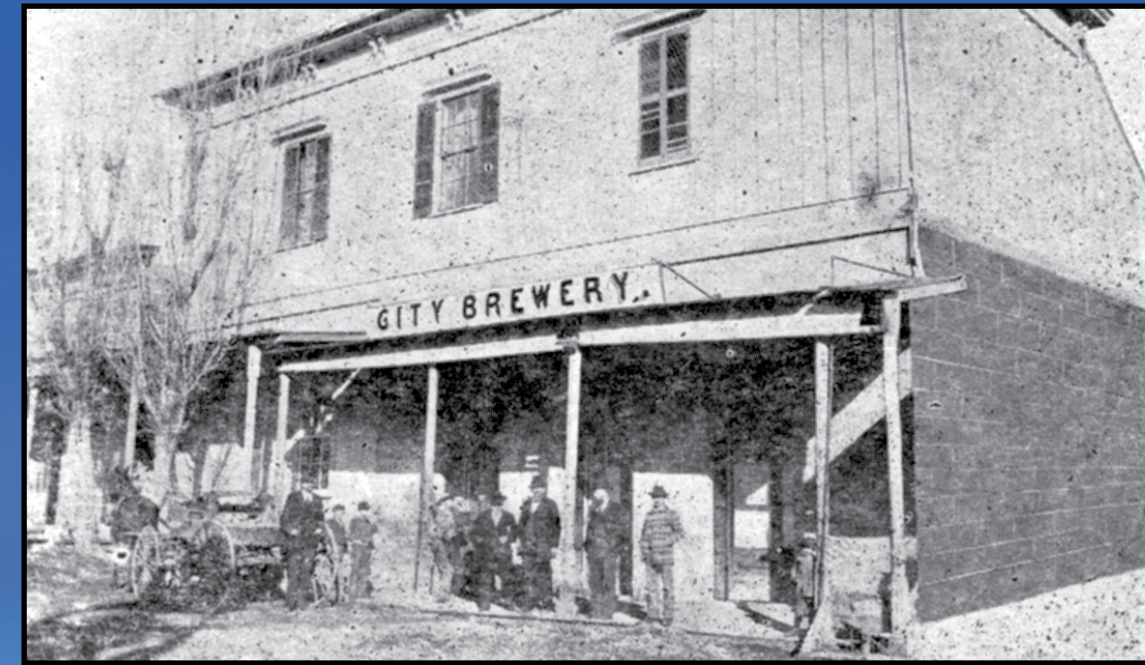
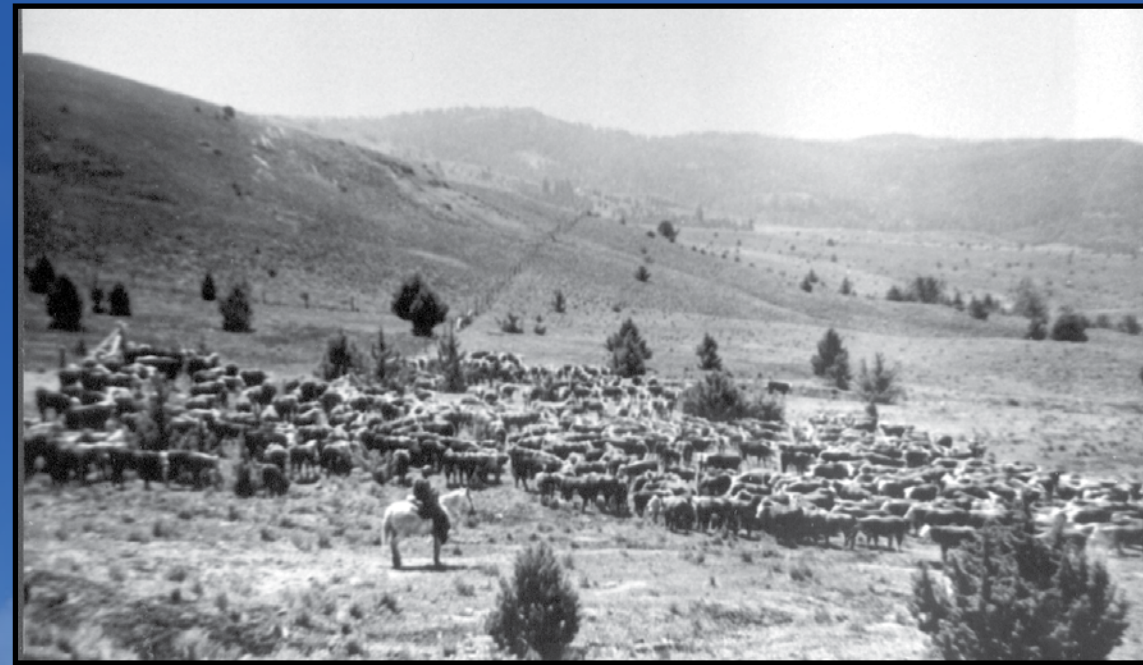
Photo: Freight to Prineville, circa 1900. *Bowman Museum.*



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

EASTWARD TRAVEL

Why were settlers from the Willamette Valley heading to the high desert to graze their cattle? By the 1860s, the Willamette Valley was getting crowded. Population growth combined with private land ownership limited open range for grazing. The Santiam Wagon Road allowed ranchers to access open range in Central Oregon, and it helped merchants and freighters reach the growing gold mining populations in eastern Oregon and Idaho.



Livestock Grazing

Ranchers traveled the Santiam Wagon Road to graze their livestock on the less crowded range of Central Oregon. The photos above show how different the landscape looked at the time of the Santiam Wagon Road. Compared to today, there were fewer juniper trees, more scattered sagebrush, and taller native bunchgrasses. Photos: Bowman Museum.

Cattlemen and Gold Miners

Willamette Valley merchants were also lured east by the gold rush in John Day and Canyon City where gold country populations topped 10,000. The photo above shows City Brewery in thriving Canyon City, where gold was first discovered in 1862. Canyon City's population in 2020 was 660. Photo: Bowman Museum.

The Land Grab

The people who built the Wagon Road received official government designation allowing them to build and claim large tracts of public land. In the end, the road company took possession of 861,512 acres of public land. The photo above shows one road builder, Andrew Wiley (bottom left) with his wife Elizabeth and family. Photo: Bowman Museum.

What does the meadow in front of you look like?

When Euro-American settlers first came to Central Oregon, the landscape looked different. There were few trees, scattered sagebrush, and tall native bunchgrasses. Unfortunately, the native bunchgrasses weren't adapted to intense grazing by livestock, but rather the occasional browsing by deer and elk. The hope for endless food for livestock quickly disappeared.



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

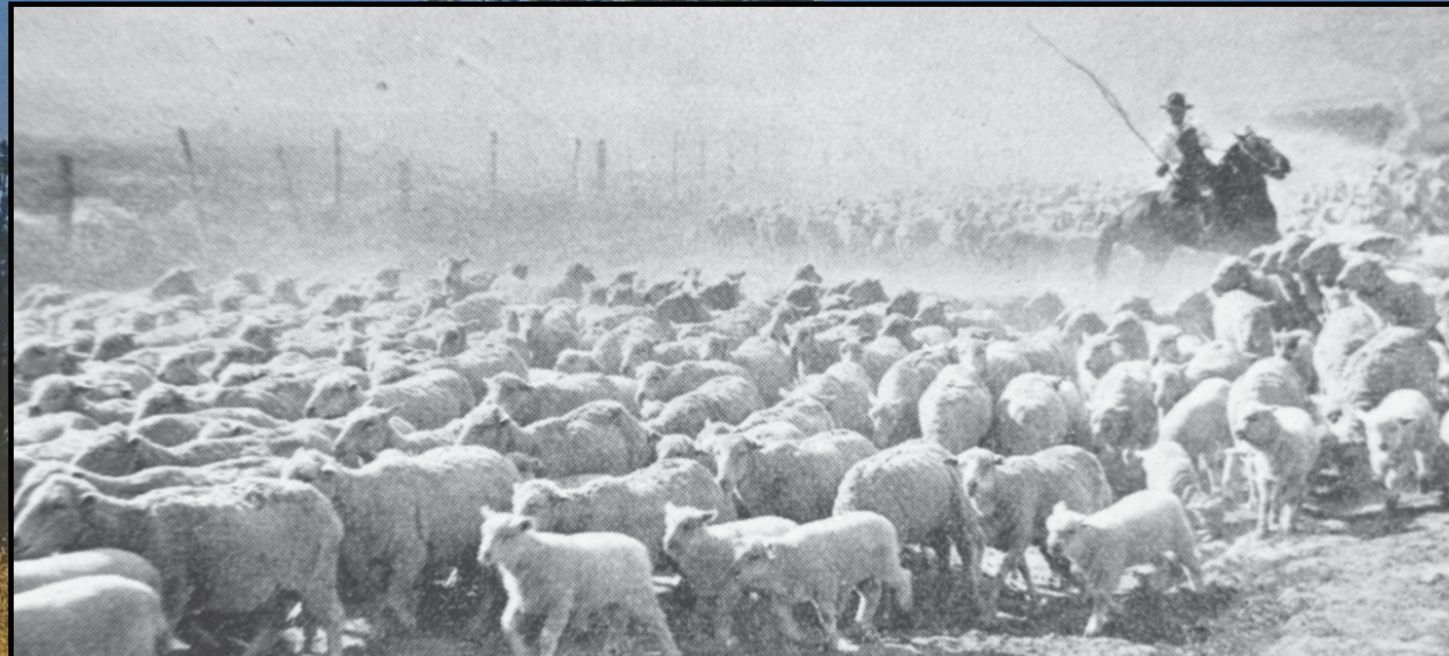
WESTWARD TRAVEL

Westward traffic on the Santiam Wagon Road consisted of wool wagons in long “trains” often half a mile long, traveling from Shaniko (near Madras) with wool for mills in the Willamette Valley towns of Waterloo, Brownsville, and Jefferson. Ranchers in the eastern part of Oregon also traveled westward for as long as a week to get a load of fruit and vegetables to take home for the winter.



Raising Sheep

The late 19th century saw an expansion in sheep raising, as the federal government forcibly resettled Native Americans and offered western lands to Euro-Americans. Central Oregon was prime sheep raising territory, with herders grazing sheep in the Cascades in summer and in lower elevations during winter. Sheep also willingly ate the “weeds” left behind from cattle grazing. Photo: Oregon Historical Society, #BA018206.



Big Business

Sheep were big business in Central Oregon at the time of the Santiam Wagon Road. By 1900, 20,000 square miles of Central Oregon were devoted to wool, wheat, cattle, and sheep production. Wool growers had to travel the Wagon Road to get their wool to the Willamette Valley mill towns. The photo above shows sheep on their summer pasture in 1914. Photo: Bowman Museum.



Wool Capital of the World

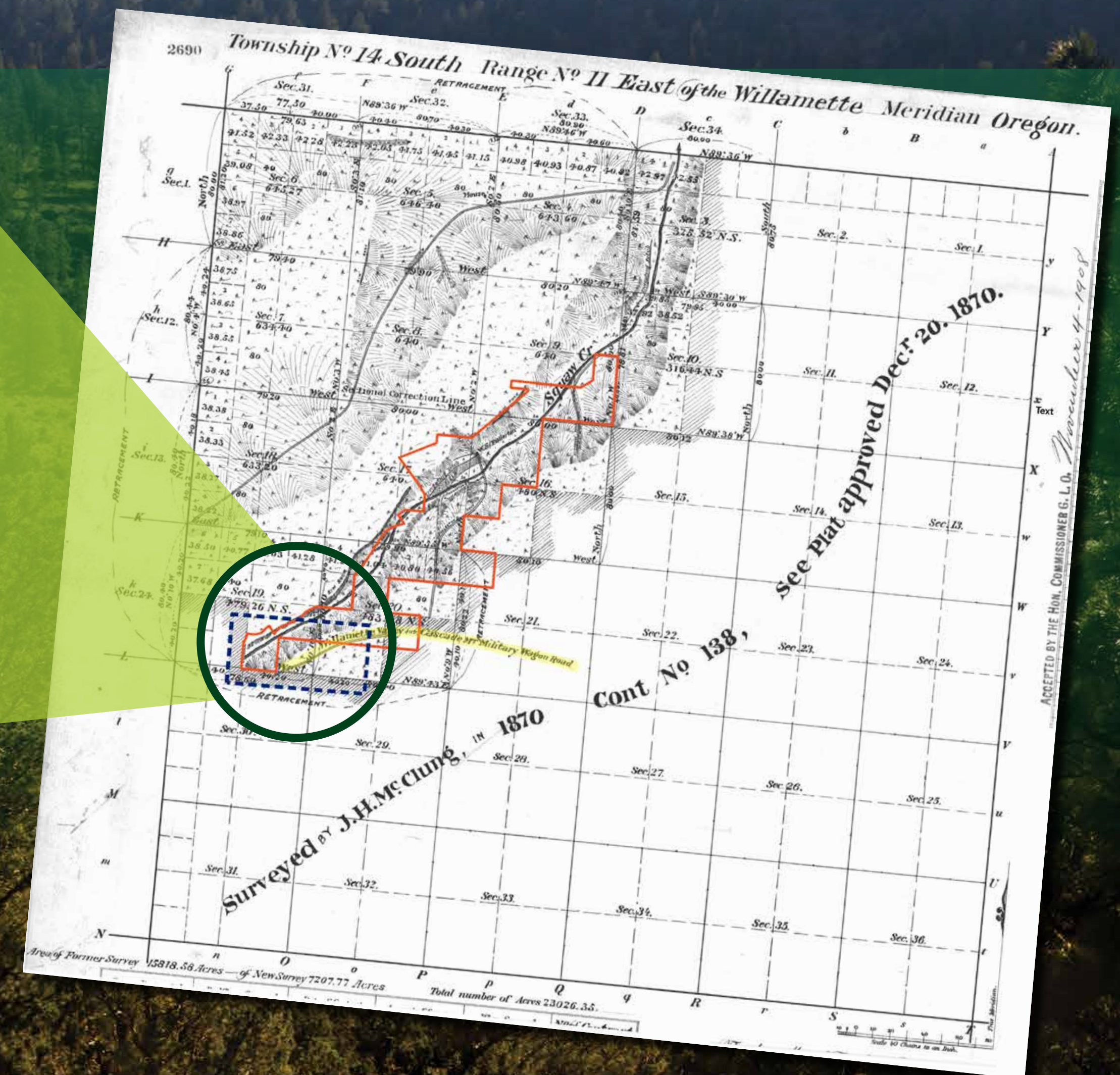
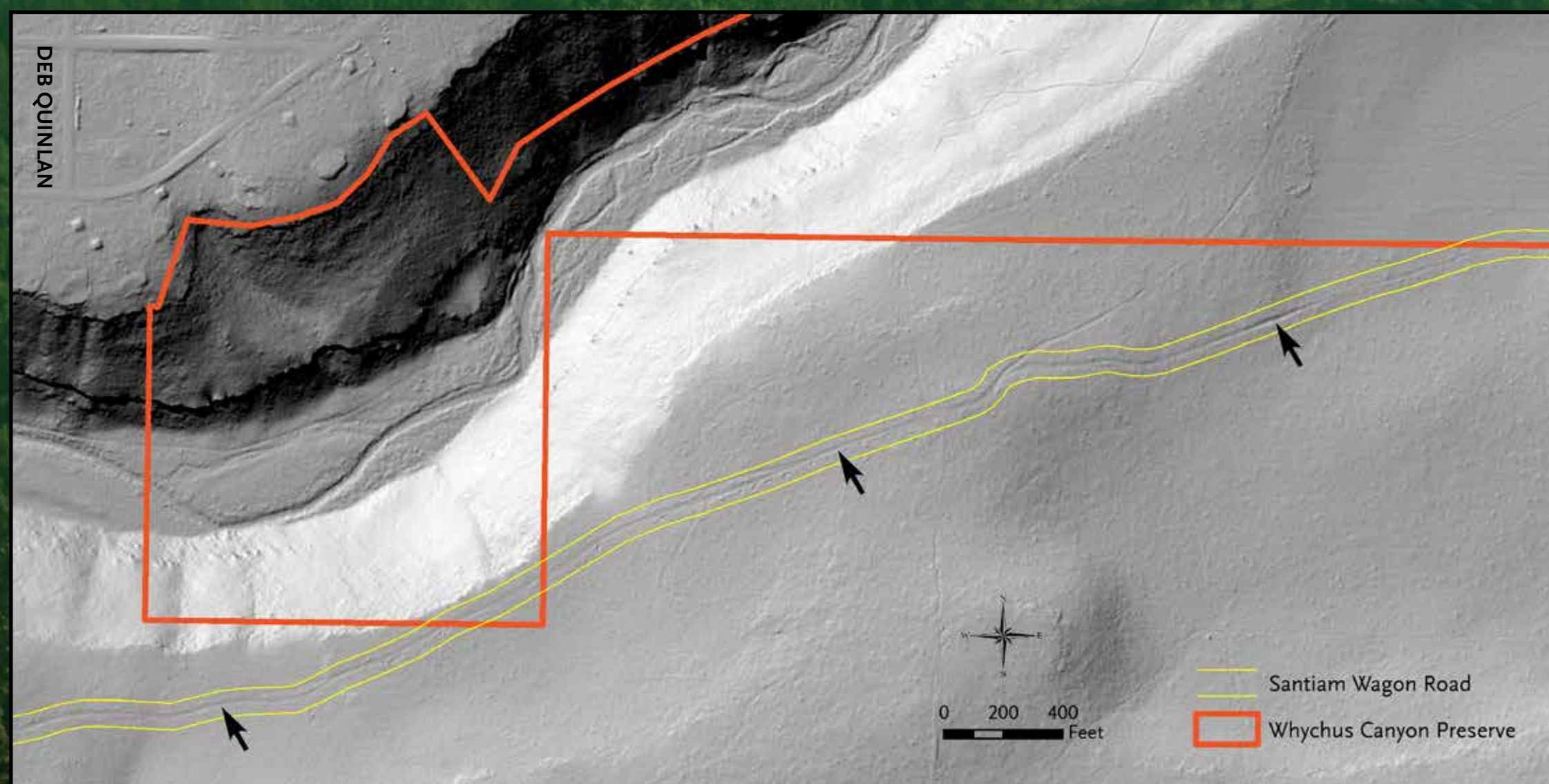
Over time, wool business moved away from the Wagon Road to Shaniko, where the Columbia Southern Railway ended. In 1900, Shaniko was the “Wool Capital of the World,” serving as the gateway to wool markets beyond Central Oregon. Here a wagon full of wool heads to market. Photo: Bowman Museum.



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

RECONSTRUCTING ROUTES

Historic surveys are helpful in reconstructing routes of historic wagon roads. Public land surveyors recorded local landmarks such as roads, streams, and buildings. J.H. McClung was responsible for the first known surveys of Central Oregon in 1870. His maps show the route of the Santiam Wagon Road and include landmarks such as streams, canyons, and trails.



Modern Technology

Today, modern LIDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) technology can be combined with historic maps and documents to reconstruct the path of the Wagon Road. LIDAR uses lasers to accurately map landform contours beneath surface vegetation. The LIDAR photo above shows the path of the Santiam Wagon Road (between the yellow lines) carved into the ground by years of wagon use.



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

END OF AN ERA

The Santiam Wagon Road served as a livestock trail and the only freight route over the central Cascades for most of the 74 years (1865-1939) it was in use. It spanned a distance of almost 400 miles on today's roads and provided passage for around 5,000 wagons during the first 15 years of its existence.



From Wood and Wagons

Over time, the era of wagons and wagon roads made way for the new modern world of cars. The photo on the left features Half Moon wooden bridge at the base of Seven Mile Hill (near modern day Santiam Pass) on the Santiam Wagon Road. The photo on the right features Daniel Swift, who was a freight operator between Shaniko and Prineville, circa 1905. Photos: Bowman Museum.

To Steel and Rubber

The Oregon Trunk Railway line, completed in 1911, ran from the Columbia River up the canyon of the Deschutes River to Bend. The railway and the arrival of automobiles spelled the end of the Wagon Road. The first car, "Old Scout," came to Central Oregon in 1905 and "Old Steady" (pictured on right) arrived in Prineville shortly thereafter. "Old Steady" suffered some damage during the early years, as one untrained user smoked a cigarette while fueling up (look closely!). Photos: Bowman Museum.

Wagons Make Way for Cars

By 1900, the Columbia Southern Railroad connected to Shaniko, diverting freight traffic, especially the wool wagons, away from the Wagon Road. By 1911, the Oregon Trunk Railroad reached Bend, further rerouting traffic. The road over McKenzie Pass opened in the 1920s and the Santiam Pass road opened in 1939, bringing automobiles, modern highways, and the end of an era.



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