INTRODUCTION

On May 12, 1841, the first group of overland emigrants seeking a new home in California, known to history as the Bidwell party, left the Missouri settlements and headed west. By the middle of September they had abandoned their cumbersome wagons in what is now northeastern Nevada and struggled on across the Great Basin and the Sierra Nevada using the mules and oxen as pack animals. Ascending the eastern slope of the Sierra along the valley of the West Walker River, they reached the crest somewhere in the vicinity of Sonora Pass on October 18, 1841. According to Bidwell's own account this climb was not terribly difficult, but then it took them twelve long days to find their way down through the canyons of the Stanislaus River to the Central Valley.[1]

Nothing about the experiences of the Bidwell party's 2,000-mile journey brightened the prospects for taking wagon trains to California on a regular basis.[2] There would have been no reason for a contemporary observer to see in them the advance guard of an overland migration from the United States that was to bring more than 165,000 people across the Sierra by 1857, swamp the Mexican and remaining Indian societies, and irrevocably alter the social and political geography of North America.[3] Yet that is what they were.

The adventures and misadventures of the Bidwell party show how meager geographic knowledge of the Sierra Nevada barrier was in the early 1840s. Then, in a remarkably short time, the Sierra Nevada was reduced in public perception from a mysterious and impenetrable moun-

tain wall blocking off California to a challenging yet manageable stage of the overland journey. By the middle of the 1860s the mountains had been transformed into scenery, to be enjoyed from a good coach road. When Samuel Bowles, the nationally known editor of the Springfield, Massachusetts, *Republican,* made a tour "out west" in 1865, he described his stagecoach trip over the Sierra in glowing terms:

> Thus munificently prepared, and amid the finest mountain scenery in the world, we swept up the hills at a round trot, and rolled down again at the sharpest gallop, turning abrupt corners without a pull-up, twisting among and past the loaded teams of freight toiling over into Nevada, and running along the edge of high precipices, all as deftly as the skater flies or the steam car runs; though for many a moment we held our fainting breath at what seemed great risks or dare-devil performances. A full day's ride was made at a rate exceeding ten miles an hour; and a continuous seven miles over the rolling hills along the crest of the range was driven within twenty-six minutes. The loss of such exhilarating experience is enough to put the traveler out of conceit with superseding railroads.[4]

Between the Bidwell party's stumbles through the wilderness and the Massachusetts editor's breezy jaunt lay a period of vigorous exploration and road building, which is the subject of this book.

Though the Sierra Nevada today retains many officially recognized wilderness areas and has been less obviously altered by human activity than the adjacent Central Valley, the human imprint is nevertheless pervasive. In recent years investigations by geographers have tended to remove the notion of a pristine pre-Columbian America, unaltered by human hands or feet, into the realm of myth.[5] Aboriginal populations were substantial, and their actions, particularly the setting of fires, must have been a major determinant in the distribution of plant communities. Even so, the Indian impact was relatively slight compared with what began with the gold rush.

The increase in activity was almost explosive after 1849. With mining, logging, ranching, and water development, the population of the Sierra rose to much higher densities than prevailed before, in many places higher than today. Great flows of people and goods throughout the mountains created a volume of traffic vastly larger and more environment altering than the Indian trade in back-packed food items and decorative objects.

Yet it should not be assumed that all these movements simply appropriated existing routes. Despite folklore about the tendency of animal paths, Indians trails, wagon roads, railroads, and interstate highways to

succeed each other in historical sequence along the same alignment, the demands of each form of overland transport were different, and the study of trans-Sierra routes shows many discontinuities. A good example is the Truckee route. It is a commonplace that this has always been the primary overland route connecting California with the rest of the country.[6] In actual fact the Truckee route lapsed into disuse well before the end of the gold rush. Most overland transportation in the 1850s and early 1860s used other, easier passes across the mountains. Only with the construction of the Central Pacific Railroad in the late 1860s did the Truckee route regain its importance.

The principle of least effort suggests that a lower mountain pass will be preferred to a higher one, other things being equal. Other things are usually not equal, however, and that is what makes the story interesting. The changing importance of the Truckee route shows how transportation channels may be determined by technology as much as by the physical configuration of the earth's surface. The Truckee route quickly got a bad reputation because it was so difficult for wagon trains to climb up from the east. Yet it became the favored route fifteen years later because it offered the easiest way for the railroad to climb up from the west, and difficulties on the east side could now be overcome with improved technology and a large labor force. There had been a radical reevaluation of topography.

Other important determining factors in creating the pattern of roads in the Sierra Nevada were the real or imagined appeal of certain destinations and promotional activities carried out by local businessmen and governments. Most emigrants did not wait until they had crossed the mountains before deciding where in California to go. On the contrary, they began to angle toward a particular California destination before they reached Humboldt Sink, well out in the Nevada desert. Boosters of nascent towns were aware of this and took steps to attract emigrants their way by improving mountain roads and making them easier to use (or at least claiming that they had done so). At first such promotional activities were carried out by ad hoc coalitions of businessmen, real estate speculators, and trail guides, with some individuals playing all three roles. But it was not long before government got into the act. Throughout the period between the gold rush and the completion of the Pacific railroad, road projects were a subject of intense political activity at local, state, and federal levels.

The combination of topographic, technological, political, and economic factors had the effect of encouraging the use of some of the many

possible routes and leaving others undeveloped, or favoring a particular route for a time only to abandon it later. As a result, today there are passes in the Sierra where roads might cross but do not, and passes where once-busy roads have lapsed into near-invisibility.

Significant growth of geographic knowledge accompanied these road-building efforts. Surveys that sought no more than the best alignment for roads provided much additional information in the process, from the rough-and-ready knowledge summarized in the handwritten "waybills" that wagon drivers exchanged to the printed surveyors' reports sent out by state and local governments and by toll road entrepreneurs trying to raise funds. Formal exploration of the Sierra Nevada, by the Whitney survey, for example, came later, in the 1860s.

Beyond the local economic rivalries of competing California towns lay much larger geopolitical concerns. The historical geography of roads for wagons and stagecoaches over the Sierra must to some degree be only a part of a wider view of all overland transport between the Pacific Coast and a frontier of settlement that remained at the eastern edge of the Great Plains from the early 1840s to the late 1860s. Federal policies decided in Washington, D.C., were an important part of the story.

The still broader landscape of the affairs of nations is important as well. Road building and the accumulation of geographic knowledge in the Sierra Nevada were part of a larger geopolitical movement in which the United States acquired and absorbed vast western territories formerly held by others. To understand many of the actions and speeches reported here, the mental map of the actors and speakers must be familiar. On this map, the block of territory formed by the present lower forty-eight states did not have the ancient solidity it seems to have today. Britain and France were still seen as contenders for the Pacific coast of North America in the 1840s. California's permanent adherence to the Union was not taken for granted by everyone in the 1850s. In the 1860s California gold and Comstock silver were prizes that had to be kept out of the hands of the seceding South.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the physiography of the Sierra and its approaches and pays some attention to the chief climatic problem for transportation, heavy winter snow. Chapter 2 relates traverses of the range by parties on foot or on horseback that established an important body of knowledge for the subjects of chapter 3, the emigrants who crossed the mountains, beginning in 1844, in trains of ox- or mule-drawn covered wagons. The several transmountain tracks of the wagon train emigration formed the transportation inheritance of California's first

road builders, mostly small-town entrepreneurs and politicians, whose efforts are the subject of chapter 4.

Chapter 5 looks at the new state government of California and its first halting efforts to survey and build a road over the Sierra. Chapter 6 shifts the focus to Washington, D.C., to cover a national transportation question that colored all Californians' thinking about trans-Sierra roads: the long-awaited Pacific railroad and the sectional rivalry that delayed its completion. Chapter 7 reviews a series of federal initiatives in the late 1850s that sought to encourage overland stagecoach and fast mail service by building roads from the Missouri frontier to California. Chapter 8 is concerned with the mail contractors and stagecoach operators who used trans-Sierra routes. Renewed road-building efforts within California, stimulated by this federal activity, forms the material of chapter 9. Chapter 10 examines the way the Central Pacific Railroad was projected as a commercial challenge to already existing roads and road traffic. The final chapter traces the fate of the trans-Sierra roads after they had been supplanted in many of their functions by the railroad and before the automobile brought about their dramatic revival.