

# The American Falls on the Snake River

**T**he Snake River was about 800 feet wide at the falls. Over a distance of about 200 feet the river dropped about 50 feet. Robert Stuart called the falls "Portage Falls" in 1812. By 1826, Peter Skene Ogden wrote that the falls were commonly known as American Falls. American Falls provided a spectacular display for thousands of travelers on the Oregon Trail.

Several Oregon Trail diarists commented on the naming of American Falls, although the incident described occurred many years prior to the opening of the Oregon Trail. Abigail Jane Scott Duniway summarized the story in a July 25, 1852, entry in her diary. "A melancholy occurrence accounts for this name," she wrote. "A party of three men were on this river in a canoe and not being aware of their proximity to the falls went on until they were hurried along by the current and precipitated over the falls; all but one found a watery grave." Because the men were American trappers, the falls henceforth were called American Falls.

Many Oregon Trail travelers were struck by the beauty of the falls. They were described as "grand," "a most wonderful & beautiful sight," "romantic," as presenting "an appearance of extraordinary beauty

or sublimity." Henry M. Judson wrote in August, 1862, that one of his traveling companions proclaimed the American Falls "equal in beauty & grandeur to the falls of St. Anthony in Minnesota." Interestingly, those same St. Anthony Falls in Minnesota will, in 1890, be compared to another falls on the north fork of the Snake River and the name St. Anthony will be adopted for a new Idaho settlement.

Bryon N. McKinstry wrote in July, 1850, that the water, as it descends over the falls, "works itself into a perfect fury, throws the spray into the air like rain which strikes you in the face, and when the sun shines forms a beautiful rainbow." Charlotte Stearns Pengra wrote in July, 1853, that the water "comes 'tumbling, and rumbling, and whirling and boiling, and bubbling and foaming, clashing and dashing to the depths below.'"

If the Oregon Trail travelers could visit American Falls today, they would probably be disappointed. It took a mighty dam to still the water of the great falls. However, when the spillways of the dam are opened and a great amount of water is released, American Falls regains some of its majesty and beauty of long ago.