The Path of Dreams and Ruin

You have to hunt to find it, but here and there along the way you'll find stone markers, set down a century ago to memorialize a highway that for a couple of rowdy decades swept through the land not so far away, on its way to nothing less than the promise of the good life. It's the Oregon Trail.

The first white folks to "do" the trail were the Whitmans, a couple of newlywed missionaries bound for eastern Washington. It was 1836. Mrs. Whitman's letters home were a marvel when they were published out east, sparking a romance for the west in hearts and minds all over this nation.

With any luck at all, overland travelers in their big-wheel buggies could make 15 to 20 miles a day, lugged along by beasts of burden who had to be fed and watered and rested, sometimes a significant herd. Crossing creeks took far worse a toll than anything inflicted by Native raiders. If you rubbed pitch in the cracks of the box--and if you were lucky—a covered wagon could sometimes pass as a raft. But more often it wasn't the water that was the problem--it was the rugged gorges that had somehow to be navigated.

Despite the dangers and trials, as many as 400,000 people moved west on the Oregon Trail, which eventually, became "the Oregon Trail(s)" because pioneers were always on the lookout for a better way, a faster way from A to B.

You can still see that trail in a gallery of places because it's still there in the grass or, farther west, even in stone. Think of it--all traffic west had to move through the same path for maybe twenty years--all traffic, freighters and traders and gamblers and all kinds of fortune seekers. If you were going west, most often you took a single trail.

The old trail gets babied in places like Nebraska's Rock Creek Station, an out-of-the-way state park where David and James McCanles once jerry-rigged a bridge and
charged a toll for every last wagon that made its shaky way across. The McCanles did well, as you can imagine.

Even though today Rock Creek Station is ship-shape, it's unimaginable to see a hundred thousand prairie schooners fumbling down the path, then cross a flimsy bridge, then head up the hill on their way west. People use the word *interstate* in jest when they talk about the Oregon Trail, but it's not an exaggeration or even a metaphor. Today you have to hunt to find the Trail, but once upon a time it was an interstate.

West of the bridge, the trail slopes up a long hill, where the ground is neither as sandy nor rocky as it is on the east. The Trail is there, but it's almost impossible to shoot with a camera because what's left is nothing more than a swale, a v created in the lay of the land. In summer, that swale is awash with wildflowers and prairie grasses, and barely visible. But it's there. Trust me. It's there, a path in the landscape that isn't going away.

And that's good. The park wants to keep it visible as a memorial, wants to hallow the ground, hold it in reserve for your and my great-grandchildren to see and imagine for themselves that freeway of lanky spokes in wooden wheels turning noisily through the endless grass. The park wants to preserve what remains of the interstate.

With good reason. It's left its tracks through all of our lives. To some, it's the path of the American Dream; to others, those Native people it displaced, it's an avenue of ruin. If you stand there someday—or anywhere along the Trail—it's helpful to remember it was only rarely the road to riches.

The best way to keep it, or so the park has discovered--now get this--is to let the ground, on its own, return to prairie. The blanket of grasses and wild flowers thrown over the Oregon Trail at Rock Creek Station changes with the seasons, but that ever-changing wardrobe will best keep the trail.

There's something about that truth that's perfectly fitting. Nature itself will keep it best.