

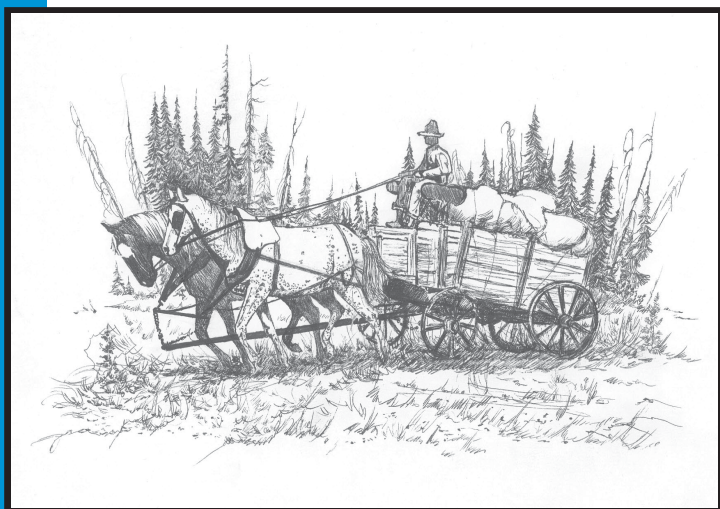
United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

Forest  
Service

NEZ PERCE NATIONAL FOREST



# TRAVEL THE ELK CITY WAGON ROAD



*This painting of Corral Hill Station, by local artist Robert Thomas, depicts life along the Elk City Wagon Road 100 years ago.*

# Welcome to the Elk City Wagon Road!



## *Let the Adventure Begin!*

**P**icture yourself on a wagon 100 years ago. The rough road makes your ride bumpy, and you hang on as the wagon moves forward.

In the winter you're atop a sleigh drawn by horses wearing snowshoes. They plod their way through drifts as high as ten feet. The air is cold. It's rough going.

Travel along the Elk City Wagon Road, and follow the same road miners and freighters took to the gold fields of Elk City.

## **Traveling the Road Today**

### *How to get there:*

The Elk City Wagon Road begins at Harpster, a small town on the South Fork of the Clearwater River. Harpster is between Grangeville and Kooskia at milepost 13 (about 13 miles from each town). It's located along State Highway 13, part of the Northwest Passage Scenic Byway.

If you're traveling from Grangeville, go past the Harpster store into the small community. Turn right at the sign describing the wagon road. If you're traveling from Kooskia, turn left at the wagon road description sign once you're in Harpster.

### ***Tour length:***

Starting at Harpster, you'll wind your way 53 miles to Elk City. The tour will take you 4-6 hours with travel of 10-15 mph.

The route is marked at each mile and road junction with brown and white "Elk City WR" markers. Reset the mileage counter in your vehicle at zero when you begin your tour.

### ***Road conditions:***

Most of this single-lane road is unpaved. (Drive slowly when conditions are dry and dusty.) There are few turnouts. Some stretches of road are narrow, and there are some tight switchbacks.

Vehicles with high clearance travel the route well although passenger cars can make the trip if driven with caution.

Large recreational vehicles and vehicles towing trailers are not recommended for travel along the Elk City Wagon Road.

Overhanging branches and rocks protruding from the roadway can cause serious damage.

Snow at higher elevations restricts travel to summer (late June through September). Check with the Clearwater or Red River Ranger Districts for current road conditions.

### ***Facilities:***

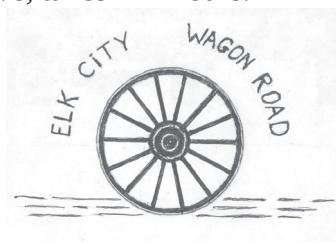
There are no gas stations along the Elk City Wagon Road. Gas is available at Kooskia, Harpster, Grangeville or Elk City.

There are no campgrounds along the route, but there are places to pull off and set up a tent.

There are picnic and toilet facilities near the Newsome Creek Cabin.

When you reach Elk City, you'll find a small, full-service community with hotels, restaurants and gas stations.

Your return trip to Harpster via State Highway 14, a 50-mile drive, takes 1 ½ hours.



## Traveling the Road 100 Years Ago

**O**n a spring day in 1900, a wagon made its way along the Elk City Wagon Road. Loaded with mining supplies and mail, a team of several horses pulled the wagon.

The driver knew he'd have to switch from wagon to sleigh when he encountered snow, but the road was well used and the snow packed. If he could make it to Mountain House Way Station before nightfall, he could get a good meal and a place to sleep. With a little luck and no breakdowns, the freight would reach Elk City in another three days.

So it was along the Elk City Wagon Road from 1895 to 1932. The freight and stage route was prominent in the mining and homesteading history of central Idaho.

Starting at Harpster on the South Fork of the Clearwater River 80 miles upstream from Lewiston, the road stretched about 50 miles to the mining town of Elk City. A branch of the road ran from Stites and joined the main route at the town of Clearwater. Beginning in the South Fork River valley at an elevation of about 1600 feet, the



*A mail team with snowshoes delivers the mail. Circa 1908.*

road climbed as high as 6200 feet in the Baldy Mountain vicinity and then dropped into the Elk City basin at around 4000 feet.

The first route in this area was the Southern Nez Perce Trail. Indian tribes used the trail to travel from the Camas Prairie in Idaho to the Bitterroot Valley in Montana. The Southern Nez Perce Trail remains significant to the Nimiipuu, the Nez Perce people.

The first gold miners from Pierce used the trail on their way to explore the Elk City area in 1861. The trail became a thoroughfare and was modified for pack strings and wagons in the mining boom that followed.

By 1890, several way stations had been built along the trail: Harpster, Newsome House and a rest station for mail carriers called Ten Mile.

In 1894 construction started on the Elk City Wagon Road. The road was finished in 1895. It closely followed the original trail, overlaying it in a few places.

By 1896, there were way stations at Switchback, Mountain House, Corral Hill and Mud Springs, providing room and food for travelers. These stations were some of the first homesteads in the area.

A stage trip from Stites to Elk City took two days in the summer. Leaving Stites at 6 a.m., the stage arrived at Mountain House by noon and at Newsome by nightfall. There, travelers spent the night.



*The Mountain House way station nestled in an alpine meadow. Today a sign marks the site.*

In the winter, the trip to Elk City took five days, with overnight stops at Switchback, Mountain House, Newsome and Mud Springs. The stage fare from Stites to Elk City was \$6 in 1910.

## **The Journey Begins**

**(Mile locator in parentheses.)**

### **① Harpster (0.0)**

Prospectors came through here from the Camas Prairie on their way to the gold fields of central Idaho in the 1860s. (It's reported that Abraham Harpster camped here in 1861.)

Pioneers began settling in the valley by 1864. The settlement was called Jackson Bridge, Clearwater Station, Brownsville, Riverside and Bridgeport. Finally, in 1893 it was named Harpster.

Harpster's claim to "dill pickle fame" was the sale of homemade pickles to places as far away as Spokane, Washington. Pickles were delivered to the Davenport Hotel there in the 1920s.

From mile 1.0-1.6, remnants of the original Wagon Road are visible on the left side of the road.

## ② Wall Creek Bridge (3.2)

The original Wagon Road continued up Wall Creek, but today the road is impassable beyond two miles. Follow the Elk City WR markers to the left.

Jacob and Fronia Riebold operated Riebold Station, a 14-room overnight and livery station one mile up Wall Creek. The house was constructed of boards milled on the property. Jacob died in 1911.

In 1916, Fronia married Reverend Knox, who preached the gospel to miners on a peak near Florence above the Salmon River, known today as Gospel Peak.

Follow the Elk City Wagon Road markers to the left.

## ③ Clearwater (6.6)

This town is located on the original Nez Perce Trail and a branch of the Wagon Road.

The railroad reached Stites in 1902, and Clearwater became a town with a sawmill, livery stable, blacksmith shop and general store. Caulder's sawmill was at the foot of the hill ½ mile north.

At mile 7.5 the road forks. Follow the Elk City

WR markers to the left. (Take the other fork only in good weather.)

At mile 8.7 on a flat covered with small trees you'll come to the site of the Folden Sawmill, which operated in the 1940s.

## ④ Four Ways Went Junction (9.5)

The original Wagon Road crosses here. The unmaintained fork to the left is the original route – not passable by highway vehicles. Downhill, to the west, is Nolen Way Station, the only remaining original building along the Wagon Road.

To see the site, turn right. Proceed 0.3 mile. The old wooden house sits below the road to the left. Nolen Station provided comfort and shelter to travelers and teams.



*Staging between Stites and Elk City: A branch of the Wagon Road ran from Stites and joined the main route at the town of Clearwater.*

*– collection, Friends of the Elk City Wagon Road*

## ⑤ Limestone Rock Outcrop (10.5)

The Ulmer family operated a kiln and sold lime to freighters. They quarried this vein of limestone, and their kiln was on the original road 600 feet uphill. You can walk to the site (it's a steep climb).

Lime was available self-service. Customers left payment in an unlocked box. (Lime was used to bond rock for concrete foundations.)

Junction with Sears Creek Road #1106 (mile 12.4). Turn left.

## ⑥ The Initial Tree (12.8)

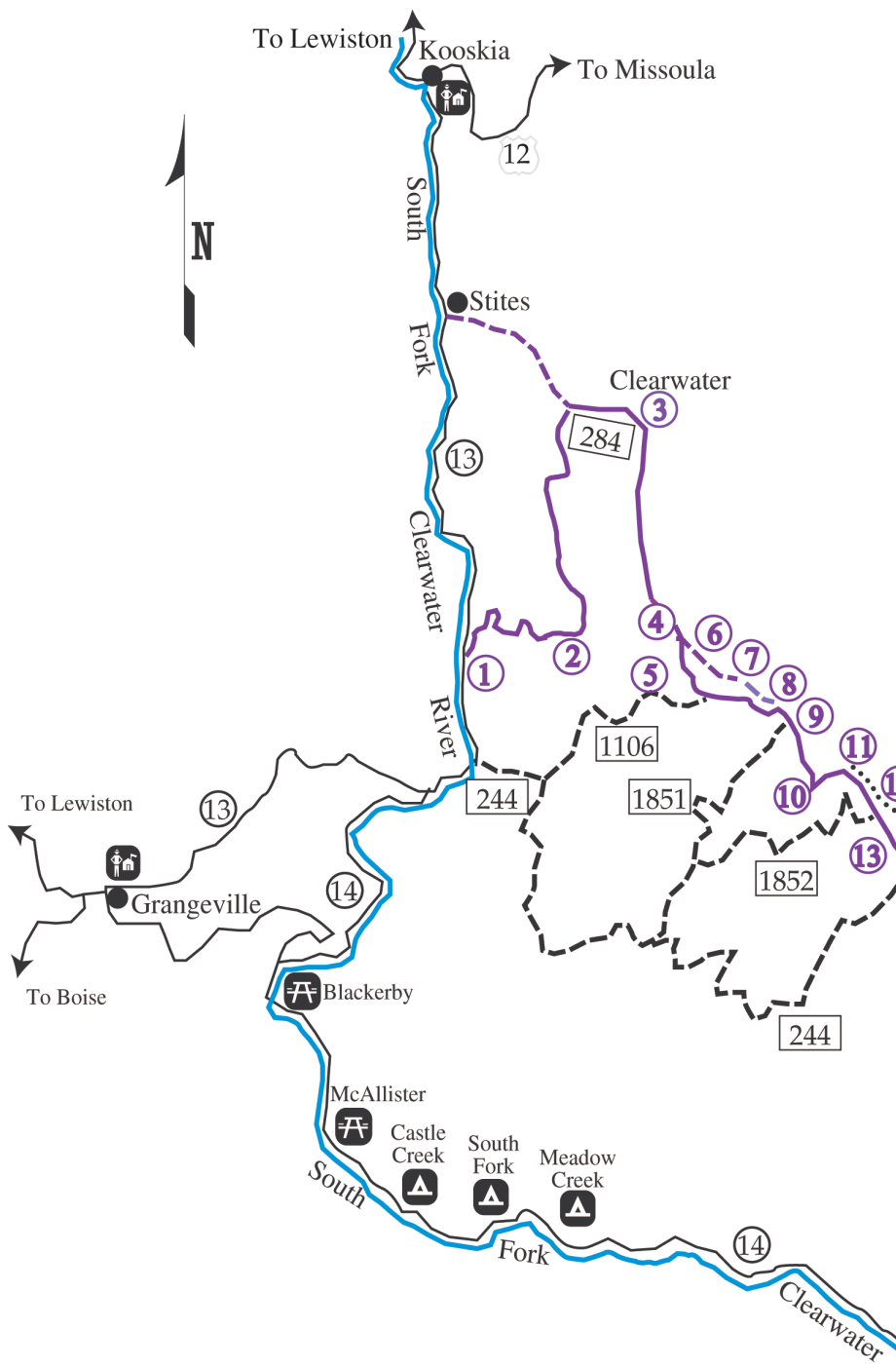
The road joins the route of the original Wagon Road. One-half mile west is a living monument of the Elk City Wagon Road. Follow the trail to the left to reach a ponderosa pine several hundred years old.

*"CO" and "M" are among 55 visible dates, brands and initials carved in the bark of the giant ponderosa pine tree by packers and freighters, prospectors and cattlemen.*

Travelers carved their initials, dates and brands in the tree. Some marks, barely visible, may have been made by Indian tribes en route to Montana. The tree is 5 ½ feet in diameter and has survived many lightning strikes. Remnants of the original road are also visible to the right one-tenth of a mile above.

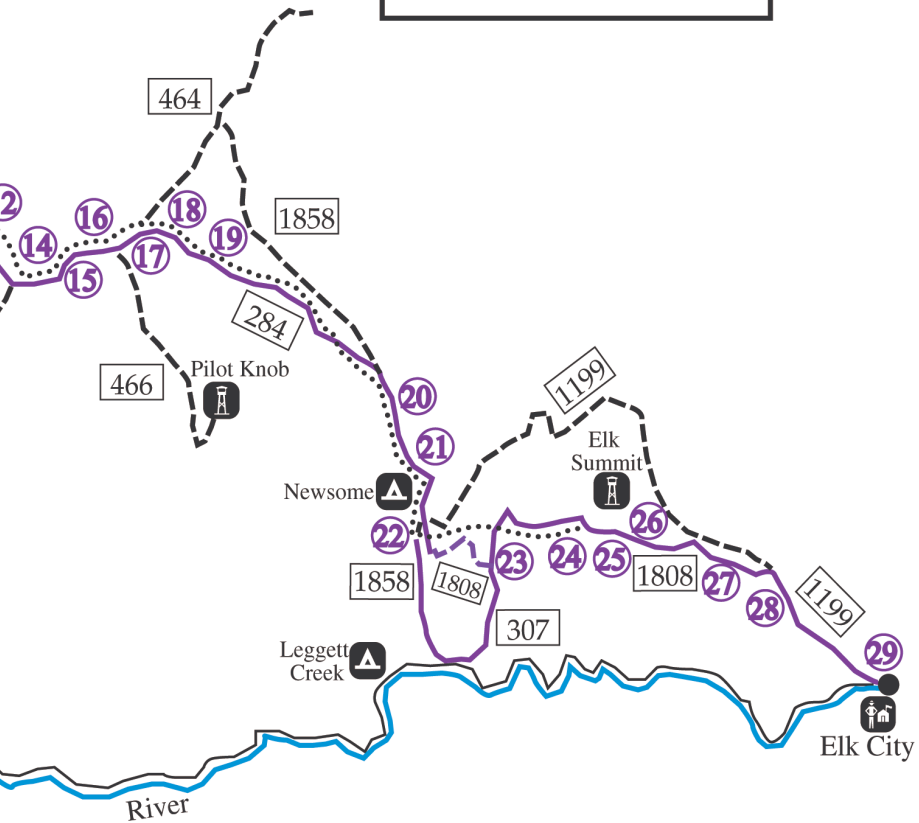
Junction with Road #284 (mile 13.2). Turn right.





### *Legend*

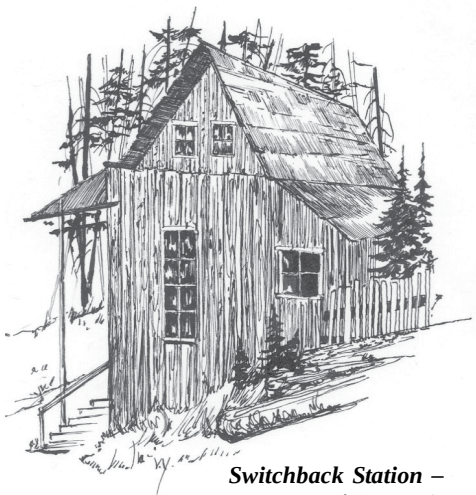
-  Elk City Wagon Road
-  Original Wagon Road
-  Other Access Routes
-  Southern Nez Perce Trail
-  Rivers
-  Historic Sites
-  Ranger Stations
-  Campgrounds
-  Picnic Areas
-  Lookouts



## ⑦ Switchback Station (13.4)

Built in 1895, Switchback provided a full-service overnight facility and the first major stop-over en route to Elk City. The large barns could accommodate 100 head of stock. Patches of nettles grow over the manure-rich soil where the barns were located.

The original switchback of the Elk City Wagon Road is a few yards beyond these nettle patches to the north. (Stay clear of these patches. Nettles sting!)



*Switchback Station –  
circa 1920.*

## ⑧ Haysheds (13.7)

Freighters switched loads from wagons to sleighs in winter. A pole structure was used to store hay and supplies at a commonly used transfer site near here.

## ⑨ Water Spout (14.8) – Wall Creek

Freighters filled water containers from a spout eight feet above the road. (Play it safe. Don't drink the water!) Many of these sites were reference points rather than significant landmarks.

Storm Creek Saddle (mile 15.2). Junction with Road #1851; follow Elk City WR markers to the left.



*Replica of watering trough at  
the Water Spout site takes you  
back in time.*



*Driver Steve Burtis stood before a loaded wagon at Corral Hill Station circa 1900.*

*– collection, Friends of the Elk City Wagon Road*

## ⑩ Corral Hill (17.0)

Built in 1896, Corral Hill Station provided lodging and a livery stable. The house was north above the road; the barn and stock facilities were on the ridge to the south. A spring and a house platform remain.

The mountains to the south are (left to right) Pilot Rock, Buffalo Hump, the Gospels and the Seven Devils.

## ⑪ Southern Nez Perce Trail (17.5)

Here the Elk City Wagon Road intersects the original Southern Nez Perce Trail. Used for centuries by Nez Perce Indians to journey between the Camas Prairie and Montana, the trail was the main route east before the wagon road was built. The road intersects the trail in several places ahead.

Lloyd Magruder, Elk City merchant well-known and respected in the Idaho Territory, followed the Indian Trail to

transport goods from Lewiston to his store in Elk City. In 1863 robbers murdered him and his traveling companions, taking the gold dust miners had paid them for goods purchased in Magruder's Elk City store. (Ask for your copy of the Magruder Road Corridor brochure at local Forest Service offices.)

## ⑫ Ten Mile Cabin (18.9)

You are at the junction with Road #1852. Here, ten miles from Riebold Station, a small log cabin was used by mail carriers in winter. It provided a bunk, fireplace and bare essentials for preparing meals.

The road for the next half mile was reconstructed in 1987 to harvest timber in Clear Creek to the north. Follow the signs as you continue on your journey.

Junction with Clear Creek Road #1855 (mile 19.6). Stay right.

### **13 Grangeville Tree (19.8)**

A large fir tree once marked the spot where stage drivers stopped to give passengers their first view of Grangeville and the Camas Prairie.

### **14 China Point (20.2)**

This landmark was named for three Chinese who lived nearby. Legend claims the men were evicted from the Newsome area and later murdered. The site bears no trace of historic debris.

Near this site the Forest Service built the Jackpot Ranger Station early in the 1900s.

### **15 Log Corduroy (21.0)**

The next two miles traverse the highest elevations on the route (6000-6280 feet). Snowdrifts are common until late June. The road may be muddy.

Freighters placed logs in the worst mud holes all along the Wagon Road. Remnants of this original "log corduroy" are still visible in a couple of spots.

### **16 Mountain House (23.0)**

The three-story log structure that sat here was especially important in winter. Freighters were often stopped here by heavy snows. Passengers on snowshoes sometimes broke trail for the horses. The building sites and a few timbers are all that remain.

Junction with Pilot Knob Road #466 (23.4). Stay left.

### **17 Pilot Rock (23.5)**

Pilot Rock, seen one-half mile to the south (elevation 6952 feet), is important to Nez Perce Indian tradition and culture.



*Modern-day travelers slow down to recreate the trip across the Wagon Road.*

**⑱ Big Switchback (24.3)**

This was a tight turn for wagons pulled by many teams. From here the Wagon Road descends six miles to Newsome Creek.

This road is steep. Drive with caution on this stretch. Gear down!

**⑲ Toothacher Springs (25.2)**

Named for a nearby spring with cold water, this area was a rest stop for freighters coming out of Elk City hauling heavy loads.

**⑳ Newsome Townsite (30.4)**

The main stop at Newsome was a hotel with excellent food operated by the Shissler family.

There were several buildings here, including a post office. There was a morgue for temporary storage of bodies to be transported to Grangeville. Gold dredging in the 1940s eliminated all remnants of the buildings. A cemetery still exists between the Wagon Road and private roads. The dwellings here are privately owned. Please respect private property.

Junction with Newsome Creek Road #1858 (30.5). Turn right.

**㉑ Newsome Cabin (32.0)**

The Forest Service now maintains toilet and picnic facilities at the site.

Across Newsome Creek is the site where Sing Lee, a Chinese miner, fed and sheltered travelers in the late 1890s. The site is now a campground with toilets and picnic facilities.

**㉒ Elk City Wagon Road (33.9)**

The original Wagon Road to the left follows Smith Gulch up Vicory Creek. This 2.2-mile segment is on the National Register of Historic Places. It is closed to vehicle traffic by slides. Continue going straight.

Allison Creek Road #307 (36.6). Turn left.

**㉓ Elk City Wagon Road (40.0)**

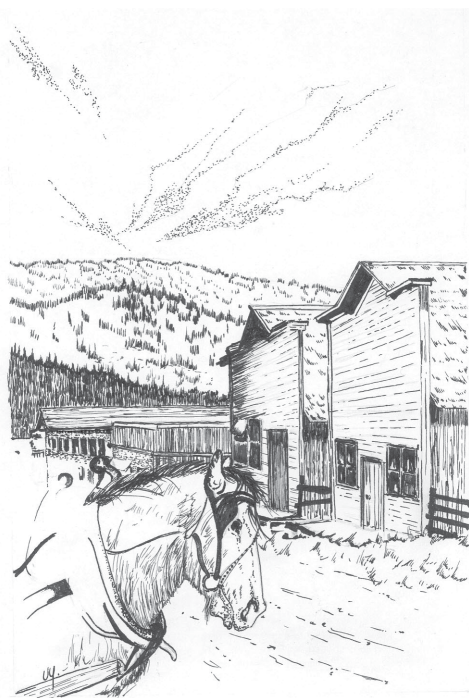
The route rejoins the original Wagon Road. Stay right.

**㉔ Mud Springs (41.0)**

This site included a road-house built in 1896. The old roadbed is still evident. Several buildings and a pond were built below the spring area in recent years.

**(25) The Big Mailbox (43.5)**

A log structure about five feet square was anchored between two trees here. It served as a mailbox and supply drop for the South Fork Mines located down the ridge on the breaks of the South Fork of the Clearwater River. The box was placed high so people could reach their mail even when the snow was 6-7 feet deep.



**(26) Whiskey Creek Flat (44.7)**

Some freighters, so heavily laden they could not reach established way stations within a day, camped here.

**(27) Montgomery Cabin (45.0)**

This is the site of one of the earliest mines in the Elk City Mining District. An old prospector stayed on for years without much success. An ore crusher can still be seen at the site.

**(28) Buffalo Gulch (46.9)**

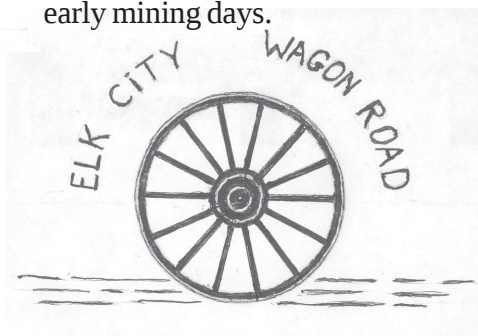
Here was another campsite used by heavily loaded freighters. The original road is to the left, not passable by vehicles. Continue going straight.

Junction with Elk Summit Road #1199 (48.5). Continue straight on the original Wagon Road route.

**(29) Elk City (51.5)**

You have reached the junction with State Highway 14 and are almost to Elk City.

The town was established in 1861. It burned almost completely in 1930. Several old cabins in the basin and a store on Main Street remain from the early mining days.



***We hope you have enjoyed your tour!***

***Keep this brochure as a souvenir,  
or return it to the box at the Elk City site.***



*Friends of the Elk City Wagon Road gather each summer for a tour of the historic route followed by prospectors and packers.*

***Friends of  
the Elk City Wagon Road,***

***Thank you for your unselfish  
and unstinting commitment to  
the preservation of this route, and  
for bringing its history to life.***

***For many of you, the route holds  
a key to your personal history.  
You've grown up here, and  
you've heard the Wagon Road's  
colorful history all your life. You  
know the importance of keeping  
it alive for all who follow.***

***Be prepared for your trip!***

***Take with you:***

- Food
- Water
- Insect repellent
- Nez Perce National Forest map
- Camera and binoculars

***Wear:***

- Serviceable shoes

***Be sure to have:***

- A full tank of gas!

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

### NEZ PERCE NATIONAL FOREST

1005 Highway 13  
Grangeville, ID 83530  
208-983-1950  
TDD 208-983-0696

### CLEARWATER RANGER DISTRICT

1005 Highway 13  
Grangeville, ID 83530  
208-983-1963  
TDD 208-983-0696

### RED RIVER RANGER DISTRICT

#### *Elk City Ranger Station*

P.O. Box 416  
Elk City, ID 83525  
208-842-2245  
TDD 208-842-2935

#### WEBSITE:

[www.fs.fed.us/r1/nezperce](http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/nezperce)

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*Most illustrations provided by Valeria Yost.*

*Logo provided by Bryce B. McLean.*

*Photos provided by Esther Morrow unless otherwise noted.*

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