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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

OCT 14 1992

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

NATIONAL  
REGISTER

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

## 1. Name of Property

historic name Upper Oak Creek Descent Ruts of the Woodbury Cutoff, Ox Bow Trail of the California Road  
other names/site number Oak Creek Ruts on Ox Bow Trail (NeHBS BU00-73)

## 2. Location

street & number N/A not for publication [NA]  
city or town Brainard vicinity [x]  
state Nebraska code NE county Butler code 023 zip code 68626

## 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this [x] nomination [ ] request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property [x] meets [ ] does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant [x] nationally [ ] statewide [ ] locally. ([ ] See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Lawrence Sommer 10/8/92  
Signature of certifying official Date  
Director, Nebraska State Historical Society  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property [ ] meets [ ] does not meet the National Register criteria. ([ ] See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date  
\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

## 4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:  
 entered in the National Register. Patrick Andrews 11/27/92  
    [ ] See continuation sheet. \_\_\_\_\_  
 determined eligible for the \_\_\_\_\_  
    National Register \_\_\_\_\_  
    [ ] See continuation sheet. \_\_\_\_\_  
 determined not eligible for the \_\_\_\_\_  
    National Register. \_\_\_\_\_  
 removed from the National Register. \_\_\_\_\_  
 other, (explain): \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Keeper Date of Action

Upper Oak Creek Descent Ruts  
Name of Property

Butler County, Nebraska  
County and State

**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property**  
(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

**Category of Property**  
(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

**Number of Resources within Property**  
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
_____	_____	buildings
1	_____	sites
_____	_____	structures
_____	_____	objects
1	_____	Total

**Name of related multiple property listing**  
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A \_\_\_\_\_

**Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

0 \_\_\_\_\_

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

Transportation \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Current Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

Agriculture/Subsistence \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

N/A \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Materials**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation N/A \_\_\_\_\_  
walls N/A \_\_\_\_\_  
roof N/A \_\_\_\_\_  
other N/A \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Narrative Description**

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**8. Statement of Significance**

**Applicable National Register Criteria**

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations**

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or a grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions)

Transportation, Military, Exploration/Settlement,  
Commerce

**Period of Significance**

1847-1860

**Significant Dates**

1847

**Significant Person**

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

**Cultural Affiliation**

N/A

**Architect/Builder**

Lt. Daniel Woodbury

**Narrative Statement of Significance**

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

**Bibliography**

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary Location of Additional Data:**

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

Upper Oak Creek Descent Ruts  
Name of Property

Butler County, Nebraska  
County and State

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### 10. Geographical Data

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Acreege of Property 80 acres more or less

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
1.	14	670730	4554925	3.	14	669950	4554500
2.	14	670740	4554535	4.	14	669985	4554880

[ ] See continuation sheet.

### Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

### Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

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### 11. Form Prepared By

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name/title Terry Steinacher, Greg Miller and David Murphy

organization Nebraska SHPO date August 1992

street & number 1500 R Street telephone (402) 471-4775

city or town Lincoln state NE zip code 68502

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### Additional Documentation

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Submit the following items with the completed form:

#### Continuation Sheets

#### Maps

A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A Sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

#### Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

#### Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

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### Property Owner

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(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Mr. and Mrs. Leonard Novacek

street & number RR 1, Box 146 telephone (402) 545-3975

city or town Brainard state NE zip code 68626

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Upper Oak Creek Descent Ruts Cutoff

Name of Property

Butler County, Nebraska

County and State

Section 7, 8 Page 1

### Description

A one-quarter mile segment of trail ruts is preserved in a rare section of unplowed prairie located in southeastern Butler County Nebraska. The wagon ruts in this quarter section represent one of the rare preserved segments of the Woodbury/Ox Bow/Mormon Trail variant, which originated at Nebraska City on the Missouri River, and provided an early avenue for government supply wagons and immigrant travel west across the Plains. Few segments of the network of trails generally known as the Ox Bow remain today in eastern Nebraska. Extensive agricultural development has removed almost all traces of the trails and associated support sites from the eastern half of the state.

The preserved fragment of trail runs generally east-west across the southern segment of the quarter section. The east end of the trail ruts consists of two sets of wagon ruts, approximately 20 feet wide, entering from the east edge of the quarter section and running along the top of a ridge above and east of Oak Creek. The trail extends southwest along the ridge top for approximately one-eighth of a mile at which point the trail curves gently toward the west. During this turn toward the west the trail begins a descent from the ridge crest toward the bottom land along Oak Creek. This descent is along a toe slope of the ridge taking the trail down some 110 feet to the floodplain of Oak Creek. A total of some 2,315 feet of trail ruts remain.

The ruts are well incised with minor damage to their northern edge from modern vehicle traffic into the pasture. At the point where the trail begins the descent toward the creek bottom the two trail ruts begin to fan out, with up to seventeen ruts present at the bottom of the slope. The width near the bottom of the group of ruts is some 180 feet. This pattern has been noted on other wagon trails associated with the California Trail, and the Sidney to Black Hills Trail. It appears to represent the fanning out of individual wagons for safety in descent and braking down steep grades.

Modern cultivation and pond construction along the bottomland of Oak Creek have destroyed most further traces of the trail. Two or three means of leaving the bottom site are possible. It is believed, based on a small but distinct segment of ruts located in the adjoining section to the west, that the major trail ascent continued northwest up the creek bottom to near the north section line. Crossing of the Oak Creek valley at this point may have provided a watering location for stock and avoided a wide detour around the head of the valley. Another possibility, not verified with ruts, is a continuing up the slope of Oak Creek, rejoining the ridge road at the headwaters of the creek. The third option, which is verified by a short segment of multiple ruts in the northwest corner of the nominated property, indicates ascent up the first toe slope east of the creek, directly north of where the "fanned" trail ruts become invisible.

The integrity of the remaining ruts are generally good. A modern vehicle access trail parallels the wagon ruts and runs from the top of the ridge down the slope to a livestock watering tank and windmill. Some water erosion along the lower reaches of the slope has occurred leaving small gully channels intersecting a few of the ruts. The surrounding area of original unplowed prairie enhances the intact trail rut setting adding to the overall integrity of the site location.

### Statement of Significance

The nominated trail ruts, located in southeastern Butler County, are significant at the national level under Criterion A for their association with pioneer travel, westward expansion, and road development. Identified as being part of the Woodbury Trail, these ruts are the longest contiguous

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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Upper Oak Creek Descent Ruts Cutoff

Name of Property

Butler County, Nebraska

County and State

Section 8 Page 2

### Statement of Significance (continued)

sequence of ruts known to still be extant along this road. These ruts have additional significance because they reveal a manner of descent of a wagon train from a ridge. The "fanning" of the ruts along the descent of the ridge demonstrates the need for wagons to leave their line for safety reasons, and in preparation for establishing a camp site. The period of significance, 1847-1860, includes the year the trail was established and ends when the popularity and usage of other routes led to decreased traffic on the Woodbury road.

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Starting in the early 1840s the migration of settlers moving west of the Missouri River began in earnest. As they travelled through Nebraska these pioneers followed trails whose names later became synonymous with westward expansion. The Oregon (or California) Trail was the name generally given to the route south of the Platte River; while the northern course later became known as the Mormon Trail. It was not hapchance that the migrants chose to follow the Platte River. Early exploration indicated the land on either side of the Platte formed a natural corridor well suited for travel. In 1812 a group of men employed by John Jacob Astor journeyed east from the Columbia River and eventually followed the Platte to the Missouri River. The first wagon train trip occurred in 1830 and was followed in 1832 and 1833 by two more. The first large migration of settlers bound for Oregon left Independence, Missouri in 1843. From this time on traffic along the Platte River route increased substantially as pioneers set out primarily for Oregon and Utah.

Although the names Oregon and Mormon imply there are only two routes, each trail had various starting points on the Missouri River. The major ones were Independence, St. Joseph, Weston-Leavenworth, Table Creek (Nebraska City), and Council Bluffs-Omaha. These five main travel routes "sprouting from a 200-mile arc of the Missouri River were fused together into one grand trunkline" at Fort Kearny, near present-day Kearney, to form what has been called the Great Platte River Road (Mattes, p. 103). But in some cases even these main jumping-off places had more than one departure point. For instance, pioneers leaving from Council Bluffs-Omaha could choose from the North Ferry, Middle Ferry, or the Trader's Point-Bellevue Ferry. These three trails eventually merged near Fremont.

Even while wagons followed established routes, alternative trails continued to be developed. One such trail was laid out by Lt. Daniel Woodbury as he searched for a site where a new fort could be established. As pioneers began moving westward in the 1840s the army built forts to provide protection. In May, 1846 construction began on what became known as Fort Kearny at Table Creek (near present-day Nebraska City). But, as the number of wagons going west continued to increase the army realized their newly founded fort was not in a good location to fulfill its designated mission. For this reason Lt. Woodbury was sent out in 1847 to find a more desirable site. Evidence suggests that he took two different routes, one going and another on his return to Table Creek. Since his primary mission was to find a site for the new fort the route out was more direct, but not suitable for a road. After establishing a site, however, he used the return trip to plot a route for a new trail to the fort. It was this road that became known as the Woodbury Cutoff of the recently established Ox Bow Trails. It is at this point, because of a dearth of information, the picture becomes less than clear. In spite of routine reference to Ox Bow Trails by numerous scholars, no actual research nor field documentation has established, definitively, the route(s), character, river landings, and dates of use of the so-called Ox Bow Trail.

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**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

Upper Oak Creek Descent Ruts Cutoff

Name of Property

Butler County, Nebraska

County and State

Section 8 Page 3

**Statement of Significance (continued)**

There seems to be three and possibly four trails between Table Creek (which was still being used by pioneers as a jumping-off place even though the army had abandoned it) and the new Fort Kearny. The following is a description of the four routes beginning with the northern-most road. Going northwest from the Saline Ford at present-day Ashland, one route seems to have followed the old Platte River bed to near present Morse Bluff, then followed an old Indian trail west past Linwood (this was a Pawnee village, later named for the nearest Euro-American town). A second trail followed the Wahoo and Cottonwood Creek beds northwest from Ashland, striking the Platte River just south of Linwood. The third route again went through Ashland and followed the ridge between the Wahoo and Cottonwood Creeks, and the Rock and Oak Creeks, then took a more westerly line before gradually heading north to the Platte northwest of present David City. The fourth trail, Woodbury's, did not go through Ashland, but rather followed a west-northwest line from Nebraska City that crossed Salt Creek near its confluence with Stevens Creek, then ran about five miles south of present Valparaiso before turning north, where it intersected with the third trail about six miles southeast of David City. All four trails eventually linked-up near Bellwood on the Platte.

Trail ruts southeast of Ashland and on the east side of Salt Creek (SD00-125) indicate that the first three roads all crossed at this point. On the other side of the creek the trails went their separate ways. The first route is not documented in records, but is marked by ruts about two miles north of Ashland (SD00-3) and again near Morse Bluff (SD00-4). Other tracks may not exist because the wagons would have been able to spread out in the old and very flat river bed. In From the Missouri to the Great Salt Lake, William Lass describes what appears to be the second trail (Lass, p. 69). An 1860 survey map identifies the third route as the Fort Kearny and Nebraska City Road and as the California and Nebraska City Road (The Territory of Nebraska, M782, 1860, Q4). Ruts have also been identified on this route (SD00-124) and others have been reported west of Touhy. The same map names the fourth route as the Woodbury Trail to Ft. Kearny. It is on the Woodbury trail where the nominated ruts lie.

The Woodbury Trail or Cutoff is significant because it plays an important role in the evolutionary process of finding a more accessible and direct route to Fort Kearny. The first two roads described here are probably part of the original Ox Bow Trail, first used in 1846. The third trail came into use at an unknown later date. The fourth route was laid out in 1847 and designed to shorten the trip from Table Creek to Fort Kearny. The Woodbury Trail was later used by the Mormons on their migration to Utah and became known as the "Old Mormon Trail" or "Mormon Variant". Originally leaving from Florence north of the Platte, beginning in 1847, the Mormons moved their staging area to Wyoming, Nebraska south of the Platte, beginning in 1859 mainly because of Indian problems. The new site was selected because it provided a large space for travel preparations and was removed from the bad influences of a large town. Wyoming was used as a jumping-off point by the Mormons from 1859 to 1866.

After the territory was opened to settlement in 1854, the desire to establish an even more efficient road from Nebraska City, to facilitate freighting and other travel, eventually led to the establishment of the "airline" road to Fort Kearny. This road also seemed to evolve over the years, crossing Salt Creek south of present Lincoln, first at Olathe, then later at Saltillo and still later at Yankee Hill.

The nominated ruts are the longest contiguous sequence of ruts known to still be extant along this Woodbury Trail. The Woodbury Trail ruts are significant as an excellent representative of an important site-type; that is, ruts which reveal the manner of descent of an immigrant train. The "fanning" of the ruts along the descent of the ridge clearly reveals the need for wagons to leave their line as variations in

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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Upper Oak Creek Descent Ruts Cutoff

Name of Property

Butler County, Nebraska

County and State

Section 8, 9, 10 Page 4

### Statement of Significance (continued)

load and braking capability could cause accidents if the line was maintained. This method of descent is probably most typically associated with this type of transportation system, and is quite distinct from the more technological method employed at the famous Windlass Hill in western Nebraska (GD00-002, NRHP). This site-type may also be typically indicative of the breaking of a wagon train for camps, where wagons would spread out in order to create an arc or other configuration of closely spaced wagons for overnight camping. Although there is a problem with finding research material on some roads, this is not true of the Woodbury Trail. It is well documented by government surveys, and by a reliable series of identified trail ruts and other reported ruts.

### Bibliography

- Andreas, A.T. History of the State of Nebraska. vol. 1. Chicago: The Western Historical Company, 1882.
- Breese, Floyd. "Overland Freighting in the Platte Valley, 1850-1870." Master's Thesis, University of Nebraska, 1937.
- Kimball, Stanley B. "Mormon Trail Network in Nebraska, 1846-1868: A New Look." *BYU Studies* 24:321-336.
- Lass, William E. From the Missouri to the Great Salt Lake. Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1972.
- Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society. File BU00-073. Larry Doehling letters.
- Mattes, Merrill J. The Great Platte River Road. Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1969.
- Sheldon, Addison E. Nebraska: The Land and the People. vol. 1. Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Co., 1931.
- \_\_\_\_\_, ed. Publications of the Nebraska State Historical Society. vol. 21. Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1930.
- Wilson, D. Ray. Fort Kearny on the Platte. Dundee, IL: Crossroads Communications, 1980.

### Verbal Boundary Description

The property is a rectangular tract of land described as the South 1/2, Northeast 1/4 of Section 4, Township 13 North, Range 4 East.

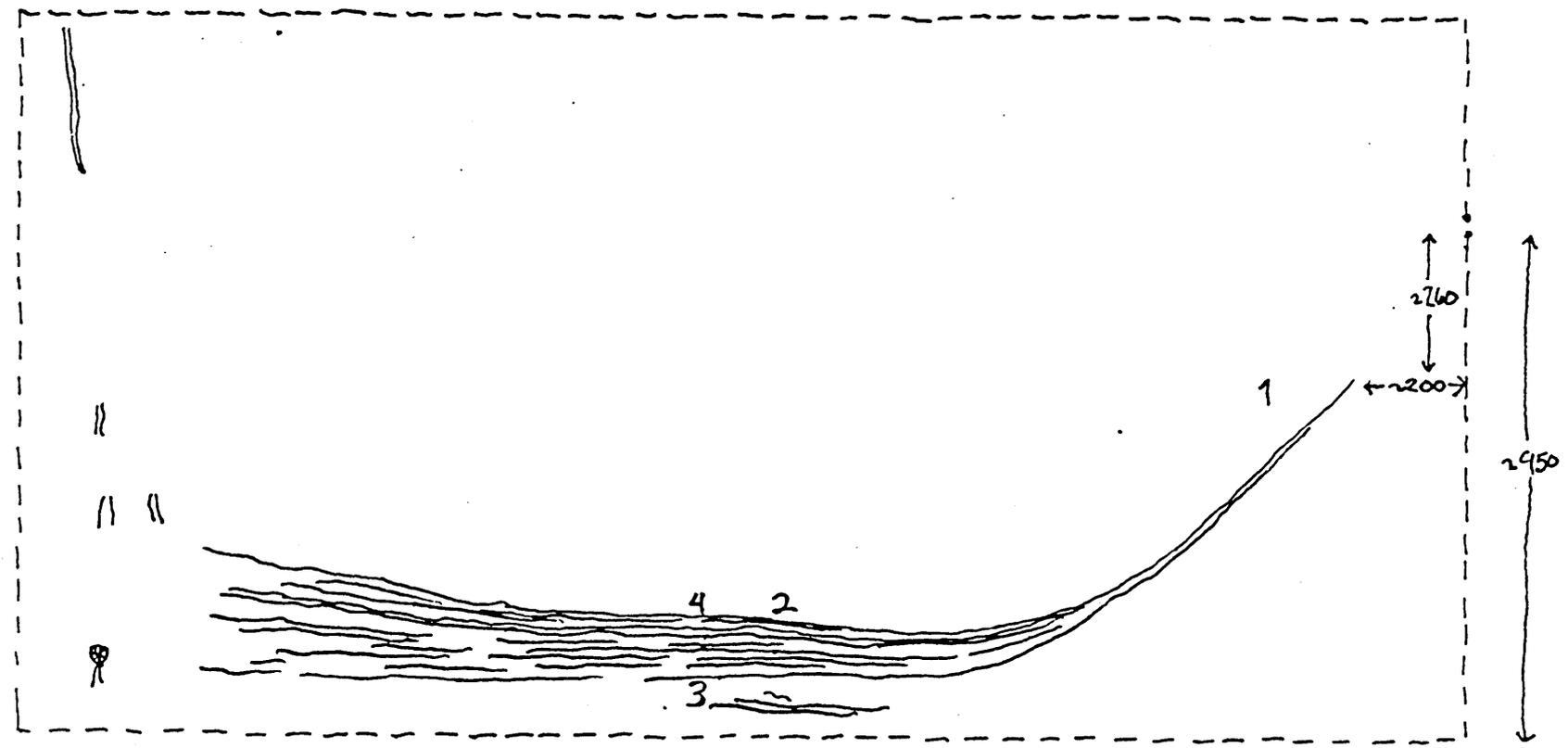
### Boundary Justification

This area includes all contiguous ruts and remnants of the contiguous ruts included in the nomination.

Upper Oak Creek Descent Ruts of the Woodbury Cutoff, Ox Bow Trail of the California Road BU00-73

S 1/2, NE 1/4, 4, 13-4E

N  
↑



SE Corner  
NE Quarter