



For Granted

► by **Eric Grant**, Angus Productions Inc. Creative Media manager

American journey

Perhaps the most poignant landmark along the old Oregon Trail is the Parting of the Ways. Located a few miles west of South Pass, Wyo., where wagon trains once trundled across the Continental Divide, the trail split into two, with one fork heading west across the Little Colorado Desert, and the other southwest toward Fort Bridger.

Point of decision

To the thousands of immigrants who came to this spot, the split in the trail presented a difficult and unexpected decision. To go to Fort Bridger meant good water and grass, a chance to replenish provisions and to rest for a few hours in the shade of cottonwood trees.

But to take the Sublette Cutoff meant a shortening of the distance to Oregon or California by nearly two weeks. It was the quicker, more direct route, but it was also waterless for five days.

"I'm told that families often spent many hours here debating the merits of both paths," a rancher once told me. "More often than not, a wagon train would split in two, with half its members choosing the safer, slower path and the other voting to go the quicker way."

No doubt, neither path was easy. A thousand miles still spanned the distance from the fork in the trail to their ultimate destination, the fertile valleys of Oregon or the goldfields of California.

A difficult trail

The Sublette Cutoff itself offered its own unique set of risks and calamities, and the immigrants who chose this path left behind plenty of evidence of its inherent hazards. To lighten their loads, they dumped chests, chairs and even an occasional piano along the trail. They left their dead in shallow graves in the sun-baked, windswept ground. Some went mad from thirst.

Others made it quickly across, and made it to the West Coast before the mountain snows set in.

Standing amidst the sagebrush range of

central Wyoming, where the trail parts into two, it's easy to comprehend the magnitude of decisions and the ramifications of being empowered to make them on your own terms.

The greatest tragedy, I tell myself, is not that so many people perished for making the wrong decision, but that so many people in other parts of the world never have the chance to choose their own way like these immigrants did.

**So many people
in other parts
of the world
never have
the chance to
choose their own
way like these
immigrants did.**

A free people

Indeed, the split on the trail still resonates with one of the greatest lessons of freedom: Having a choice — and ultimately being responsible for that choice, no matter the outcome — is the definition of a free people living in a free land.

An old friend of mine once told me, "The greatest gift I can give you is the freedom of choice.

The power to choose — to choose in your own way, on your own terms — is the straightest arrow in your quiver."

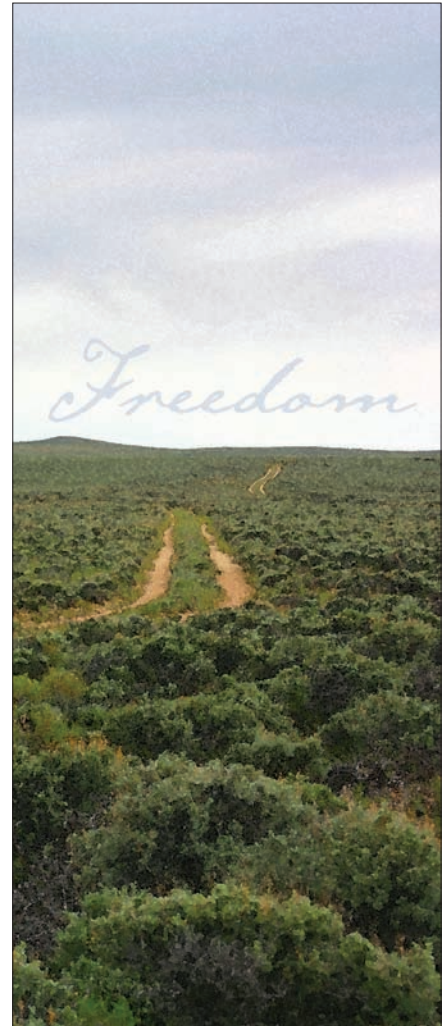
Over the years, I've spent a lot of time on the old trail. Many of the ranches that I visited were still scarred with wheel ruts from wagon trains that once traced across the continent.

I now live in Saint Joseph, Mo., which anchored the eastern end of the trail and represented the jumping-off point from civilization to the great unknown.

Just across the Missouri River, where the far bluffs of Kansas rise from the valley floor, the wilderness once began.

I often tell people who know very little about the cattle business that ranching is an industry of freedom, comprised of free people who are free to make their own decisions on their own land.

Ranchers are individual capitalists who choose to live their own way, to forge their



own paths, to endure "triumph and disaster and treat those two impostors just the same," as Rudyard Kipling once wrote.

But we often forget the gift of freedom. As a free people, we represent the tiniest minority of human beings living on the planet today; most of earth's six-plus billion population lives in bondage, denied from birth to death the power to choose which path they prefer to take.

Looking west from the Parting of the Ways it's easy to understand what we truly have: The freedom to choose is the greatest gift we have, and one we should never take for granted.

E-MAIL: egrant@angusjournal.com

Editor's Note: "For Granted" is a monthly column written for the Angus Journal by Angus Productions Inc. Creative Media Manager Eric Grant. The column focuses on marketing beef, the beef industry and seedstock in particular — aspects of the business that are often taken for granted as day-to-day tasks take center stage.