

Wm. Swain  
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## CHAPTER III

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# The Great California Caravan

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*"The road is literally filled with two weeks' travel. . . . The trouble is to get out of the way or to pass others."*

By the third week of April, emigrant scouts reported to their company captains that the prairie to the west looked dry enough for the wagons to pass and the grass high enough for the teams to graze. Sounds of breaking camp echoed through the ravines and forest groves, teamsters yelling, whips cracking, wagons creaking as they rolled slowly from the campgrounds. Most companies had packed and repacked their wagons; with few exceptions they loaded them too heavily—extra axletrees and wheels, sheet-iron stoves, anvils, chains, personal clothing, boxes of medicines, shovels, pickaxes and gold-washing machines; and quantities of foodstuffs—barrels of flour, sacks of sugar, salt, cornmeal, beans, coffee, salt pork and saleratus. Under the traffic of hundreds of wagons pulled by six and even eight oxen or mules, the trails became deeply rutted, in some places quagmires. Axles cracked, wheel rims tore loose from spokes, wagons sank too deep in the mud to be pulled out and were abandoned. Within a few miles of the camps and westward for many miles, companies began what would be a continuing process for many weeks—they lightened their loads. Some companies left entire wagons when they consolidated weary teams. News of this booty just to the west attracted townsfolk from St. Joseph and Independence who went out in their wagons to take back what the Californians had purchased only a few weeks before.

On May 16 the Wolverine Rangers broke camp, their oxen slowly pulling the eighteen wagons onto the rutted trail crowded with other companies' wagons, headed for Independence, where the Santa Fe Trail led southwest across the sweeping prairies. Swain and his sixty-one companions knew from rumors and various reports from St. Joseph that they

Sabbath, May 20

Dear Sabrina,

We are all well and encamped on the plains forty-five miles from Independence. . . .

Our teams have given us but little trouble, and we shall soon be able to ride in the wagon and take our comfort. We encamp at sunset and have supper ready soon. Our stoves are a great convenience.

The grandeur of these boundless plains can only be realized by the thoughtful eye traversing their bosom. . . . The extent and grandeur of the scene will forcibly remind you of the almighty source of creation and evoke the thought that you yourself are but a speck in the midst of the grand scene. Sabrina, when I get home we will have a route through all this western country and enjoy ourselves together and have Little Cub with us. We could take real comfort contemplating the beautiful scenery.

We have had a high wind today, which we generally have on this ocean of plain, accompanied by a heavy rain which beats through our tent and has dampened my paper so that I can hardly write. I shall send this by the first chance to Independence and will write every opportunity. . . .

I got George's letter of April 25 when we passed through Independence and was glad to hear from home. . . . Tell George that my prospect brightens as I near the land of golden promise, and if good luck attends me, I am confident that the enterprise will be one of advantage to us all.

*O friends, don't you cry for me  
For I am going to California  
With my wash bowl on my knee,  
And a pocket full of rocks I'll bring home.*

Mr. Hutchinson sends his best respects. John Root is well and hearty. Mr. Bailey says tell his folks that he is hearty and well. As to myself, I am growing better all the time. I enjoy myself far better than I expected I could when absent from my family, although my strongest feelings are entwined around the family circle. Tell George to take his comfort this summer, if possible.

As for you—eat, drink, laugh, be merry, and have your fun as much as anybody around you.

As ever, your affectionate husband  
William