Recollections of a California Pioneer

[Carlisle S. Abbot and his borther Alvin and two others by the name of Mellon and Vetter, forming one mess (with one wagon and four horses), and two other outfits of the same size, left Beloit, Wisconsin March 3, 1850. When they reached the Missouri, opposite Omaha, they joined a company with a captain named Clark. The day before they left the "City of Tents" one man by the name of Pardee died of pneumonia, leaving 52 in their company. On the 20th day of March they crossed the Missouri and the next day started westward over the prairie.]

26 We got started in good time and at noon reached the Platte, where we found the feed much better. That part of the country had not been burned over, and as the old grass protected the new, the horses ate both together, and the combination made fairly good feed.

Nothing of importance happened for several days, the feed, however, getting better all the time. There were wagon-trains all along the road on both sides of the Platte, and everybody was banging away at the buffalo, scaring them away, or killing them and cutting out choice pieces and leaving the rest to rot, while the Indians and their wives and children were starving. It was the most flagrant injustice this Government ever permitted its people to practice. The lines between the different tribes were as distinctly marked as the boundaries between the different States of the Union, each of these tribes claiming the ownership of all the game within its borders, while recognizing the similar claims of other tribes, and they looked upon the emigrants as a white tribe in-
27 fringing upon their rights. Indeed I could not have blamed them if they had cleaned out the whole white tribe within their borders, for they had owned and occupied these lands long before Uncle Sam was born, yet I was not ready to go for the fault of others. We shudder at the massacre of the whole nation of Armenians by the Turks, but no pen can describe the misery and despair of a Pawnee village,--of men, women and children dying of hunger,--while the white tribe was killing, or scaring their game off into the mountains, and I say that our Government here caused as much misery by negligence as the Turks have by savagery.

The next trouble we had was with cholera. It struck the tide of emigration like a cyclone, and on both sides of the Platte. The dates on little headboards along the road were from one to three days old, which showed us that if we had been three days' drive farther west,--or about seventy-five miles,--we would have been ahead of the epidemic; but as all the other trains ahead of us were moving as fast as we could, we simply kept along with the disease. We had just reached that stretch of country where for two hundred miles there was not a stick of timber larger than a whipstock, and where buffalo chips must needs be used for fuel, when John Newell, whom I had helped once to bury in Wisconsin, died of cholera. He had with him two brothers,--from eighteen to
28 twenty-two years old,--and received the best of care and the skill of a good doctor. He was convalescent, but trouble unlooked for was in the air; black angry clouds along the east foot of the Rockies, with vivid streaks of lightning, were seen approaching, to take the place of the hot sultry air.

"Get into camp!" yelled Clark. "Place the wagons in V form, the point towards the west, and tie every horse inside the V."

This done, some of the men commenced to put up tents.

"Hold on there," cried the captain. "No tent will stand what is coming. Spread your tents over the front of the wagons to keep the wind from tearing the tops off. Tie them down to the forward wheels."

This was barely done when the wind and rain struck us with such force that several

men, who were not clinging to the wagon wheels, were knocked down and a number of wagon covers went away in the breeze; but, fortunately, they were carried over a perpendicular bank of the Platte on to a low bar, where they were recovered the following day.

Among the wagons that lost their covers was John Newell's, and the rain was falling on him by bucketfuls. We lifted him out of the wagon, bed and all, and put him under it; but this did not better the matter. The wind and rain came with such force that he was as wet as though
29 he had just been pulled out of the river. The blizzard did not moderate until near morning, and meantime we clung to the back end of the wagons, as wet as water could make us.

During the previous day five men had gone out into the low hills to the north to get a buffalo. They had killed one and had just got it packed on their horses when the blizzard struck them. They got separated and lost their way. Just before sunrise two of them came into camp, two more about ten o'clock, and the last one at noon. All had thrown away their meat.

It was a busy day repairing wagon-tops and drying clothes. Newell had taken a relapse, and the doctor said he would surely die. The following morning, when we were ready to start, the doctor said John would not be alive in one hour from that time, and as no train stopped for a man to die, Clark asked me and my friend Phillips to stop and help the Newell brothers to bury him. We went just back of his tent, and we started to dig a grave; but as only one could work at a time we changed every few minutes, and though we made the dirt fly, John was ready before we had finished. We lowered him down, bed and all, and spread an extra pair of blankets over him, filled the grave, and placed a piece of board, from the footborad of the wagon, at the head of his last resting-place, and upon this we wrote his name, former place of residence, and cause of death.
30 And I presume the Nebraska farmers have been raising wheat over that spot for the last sixty-five years.

While we were saddling our horses, the two brothers came, thanked us and said good-by.

"Why good-by?" asked Phillips. "We will travel together and overtake the train in camp by eight tonight."

"No," they replied; "we are going back."

And they went, so our train of fifty-two was now reduced to forty-nine.

Phillips and I found our train in camp at nine o'clock that night. On the way we counted the graves made the day before, and were surprised to find there were thirteen of them. While the blizzard had killed many, it had also cleared the atmosphere, and checked the epidemic to a great extent. Here there was no wood for fuel, and as the buffalo chips were soaked to the center, we could not burn them; but we did not mind the absence of a fire, as we were prepared with all sorts of bread, sea biscuit, crackers, chipped beef, and so on, and were happy, for the grass was now fine.

One afternoon as we neared the western edge of this treeless region, we saw directly in front of us a clump of trees, which was a welcome sight, for we would camp beneath the spreading branches and probably find some dry wood. It proved to consist of about eight or ten big cot-
31 tonwoods in a low swag in the plain. We drove under them, delighted.

The horses were started off for the river for their evening drink by their care-

takers for the night, and we were all busy with our evening's work when some one said:

"Where in blazes does that stench come from? Have we camped by the carcass of a buffalo?"

All stopped and looked about. Soon some one yelled:

"Look in the top of these trees!"

All faces were turned in that direction, and there in the tops of those trees was the explanation. It was an Indian cemetery. We did not stop to hitch the horses, but twelve or fifteen men would take hold of a wagon and run it off to windward about one hundred and fifty yards, then go for another, and we soon had tents pitched and fires of buffalo chips burning. It was the custom of the tribe, through whose country we were now passing, to wrap a corpse in a green buffalo hide and lash it to the branches of the largest trees that could be found. In the lapse of time the sun, the wind, and the rains would break the lashing, so that here and there would be a skull, a hand, or a shrunk shank sticking out. Bah, what a camping place!

We had now traveled nearly four hundred miles in the valley of the Platte,--a plain almost level and from ten to fifteen miles wide, low
32 grassy hills to the north, the river on the south, with steep bluffs close to the river. Looking east or west, the only thing to be seen, except grass, war emigrant trains every few miles, the farthest being mere dots in the distance, or an Indian village by the river. But a wonderful change has come around during the lifetime of those weary plodders, and there are few left to tell the story.

It was several years before this country was settled, on account of the scarcity of timber, except near the Missouri River. Then a railroad was built, and settlers could get coal at the stations, and the Government gave a certain sum for every tree that was planted and properly cared for until it was five years old.

Then the counties took it up and offered a reward for the man that planted the greatest number of trees during a specified time. In the spring of the year this reward was graduated into first, second, third, and fourth prizes.

Result: Now, looking up or down this plain,--either from the hills on the north or the high bluffs on the south,--a change from savage to civilized life is seen.

The farmers have fuel, fencing material, and wind-breaks; white cottages shine through the open glades in the timber, where roses bloom,

"And olive yards and orchards green
Along that once drear plain are seen."

33 The black smoke from the oil burners along the railroad has succeeded the smoke that curled from the tops of the Indian tepees along the river, and the shriek of the locomotive has taken the place of the crack of the ox-whip.

A few days after leaving the Indian cemetery we reached a point on the Platte opposite Fort Laramie.

34 Here we had to cross the river, and one hundred miles farther southwest we had to cross back again, on account of a mountain that butted up against the river on the north side. It was generally supposed that there was no pass through this mountain for wagons, yet there was, but the inhabitants of Fort Laramie, with their stores, blacksmith shops, and ferrymen, were determined to keep this a secret, as there was five dollars a wagon charged for crossing the river, besides the other trade that could be gathered in. The ferry carried wagons only, and we had to cross with our horses about

two hundred yards above the ferry, there being at that point a good place to enter the stream, and a similar place to leave it on the other side. The river was about a half-mile wide, running quicksand and ice water from the melting snow of the Rockies. It should here be stated that it is very difficult to get a band of horses to cross a stream where they are compelled to swim, and it is practically impossible to do so, unless they have a leader to show them the way
35 over. I had one horse named Pompey (Pomp), a big, sturdy, black animal, which had been bred and raised near Beloit, on the Rock River. He was accustomed to the water, and was not only a very rapid but a very strong swimmer, his extra girth holding him well up on the surface. I had used him to lead the band in crossing the Cedar, the Des Moines, and the Loup rivers, but I now refused to lead the band acfoss the Platte, as I thought I had done my share; so I told Captain Clark to get some one else.

We first put the horses in the river three times, and each time, having no leader, they came back on the same side. The wagons had all been carried across on the ferry, and as no one would undertake to lead the horses, I finally consented to try it. We took the horses farther up-stream for a new attempt. The place selected for the start looked the same as below,--shallow at the shore and then down gradually to deep water,--but when Pomp stepped off the low bank he went down out of sight, and I with him. When we came to the surface my hat, which was the only garment I had on when I entered the water, was sailing merrily down-stream and may be going yet, for all I know. I grabbed Pomp by the tail with my left hand, and in order not to encumber him with my weight, I used my feet in swimming. In my right hand I held a long stick, with which I kept tapping him on the nose on the down-river side,
36 so as to make him lay quartering up-stream. The other horses, were rushed in as soon as I was fairly started, and with the band about twenty feet behind me, we went all right until we reached about the middle of the river. At this point the horses, frightened at some floating object in the water, stampeded, and before I realized the danger, they were practically on top of me, and one of them, reaching over my head and to Pomp's back, forced both Pomp and myself beneath the surface of the murky waters.

Without a leader, the band now stopped and began to "mill" (go around and around in a close pack), while old Pomp and I were underneath, among their flying feet. I managed to get hold of the mane of one horse, and squeezed my head above the pack, whiich was now moving rapidly down-stream with the current. It did not require long for me to take in the situation. The river at this point followed a straight course to the eastward, but about half a mile below the ferry it turned abruptly toward the south. The current, of course, did not turn around this curve, but kept straight ahead and impinged on the east side against a perpendicular bank fifteen or twenty feet high, from which great chunks of earth were falling, as the current struck and undermined it, while nearby were whirlpools and eddies that would quickly swamp and drown any land animal. I feared that the entire band of horses, as well as the
37 leader, would be lost in these swirling waters, and as I was powerless to do anything to prevent this, I determined to save myself, if possible, though the chance seemed slim enough.

I knew that if I attempted to swim directly toward the shore the horses would overtake me in a few seconds and we would all go into the whirlpool together. I scrambled onto the back of one horse and then stepped from one to another, as a boy would cross over a lot of logs in a pond, until I reached the one farthest down the stream. I then dived into the river and swam rapidly down-stream under water as long as I could hold my breath. Upon coming to the surface I looked back for the horses. Old Pomp had got to the surface, and upon seeing a lot of government horses upon the other side of the river, which had evidently been driven there to decoy the band, was heading for the shore and I now knew that the horses were safe, but how about Carr Abbott?

It is a matter of common knowledge that when a stream is rising it is higher in the middle and lowest at the shores, while the situation is just the reverse when it is

falling; and in the case of a large river the extent of the difference will very much surprise one who has never before actually observed it. The Platte was now a raging torrent, yet it was in fact falling, and I therefore had against me the additional circum-
38 stance that I was in a considerable depression, or trough, from which I had to "climb out."

It takes me some time to write it, but it took only a few seconds for me to think and act. I placed my body quartering up-stream, in order to get the aid of the current in driving me shoreward, and here made the most desperate struggle for life I ever had. There was a clump of willow brush just above the turn in the river to which I have referred, and I concluded that I must reach that clump of brush or there was absolutely no hope of my reaching shore at all. I realized also that the ice water in which I had now been floundering for some time was rapidly sapping my vitality, and I fought as only a drowning man can fight. There were about twenty soldiers following along the bank and throwing anything and everything they could get hold of out into the water for me to grasp. I yelled to them to stop, as I had to cross the current and my progress would be impeded by anything in my way, while my getting hold of any floating object would not assist me to the shore. In passing the willow brush, by probably the longest "reach" I ever made, I caught hold of a twig not larger than a lead pencil; but it held. And by pulling it down I was able to catch it higher up where it was larger, and in two or three more grabs I had hold of it where it was two inches in diameter, and was saved.

39 The soldiers beat their way through the brush, and as they were unable to reach me directly, they quickly cut off the limb to which I was clinging and drew me to the bank. I was, of course, as stiff as a poker, and was altogether unable to stand; but they carried me to an Indian tepee nearby, and the squaw spread a buffalo robe by the fire, while the soldiers rubbed me until I was able to walk.

In the meantime Brother Alvin had crossed the river, bringing my clothes with him. These were quickly put on, and as our train was now passing, I climbed into the wagon. The grass was so short hereabouts that we drove on up the river about two miles and went into camp in a grove on the river bank, where we found plenty of dry wood, and of course an abundance of the roiled water water of the Platte. In addition to the little fires that were used by the different messes for cooking, we had a big log-fire, around which we sat and discussed the situation.

There was, of course, the usual growling and grumbling among the dissatisfied. Under the restraint of friends and society, men behave fairly well, but away from that influence, if there is any cussedness in them, it is bound to come to the surface. Some of our company said we were going too slowly and the gold would all be dug out of California before we got there; others said we were going too fast and we would kill our horses and not get there at all,
40 unless we got there on foot. Clark, who was sitting on a stump, after listening to this complaining for a while finally got up and said:

"I have heard all the growl I am going to hear. To-morrow morning I start with my two teams at the usual time, and all who want to go faster, get up early and be off; those who want to go slower, fall in behind, but I want to tell you something you probably have not thought of: We shall have to swim back over the Platte, and probably the Green will have to be ferried and swum, and if there are three companies, there will have to be three men to swim to lead the band,". . . Not a word was said, but next morning we all rolled out together.

Compiled by M. J. Mattes - 1945
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Carlisle S. Abbott
Recollections of a Calif. Pioneer
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