

LETTERS OF JAMES D. LYON

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DAILY ADVERTISER.  
DETROIT.  
OFFICIAL PAPER OF THE CITY.  
MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 1849.

¶ We are indebted to an esteemed friend for the privilege of publishing the following letter from a California emigrant from this county:

THE MILLS EAST OF FORT LARAMIE,  
July 1th, 1849. }

DEAR SIR: In truth, I can say that peace, prosperity, health, and happiness, are present with us, and sensibly felt by us all, on this, the 73d anniversary of the birth of our country's liberty—a day too sacred with Wolverines to be desecrated by travelling. We have a good camping place, and have had one of the best celebrations that I ever took any part in. By placing our wagons in two lines, 12 feet apart, and attaching the covers from one to the other, it formed a nice shade, under which many a true heart beat quick with the pulsations of true patriotism. The company was formed in a procession by the Captain, and marched a few rods from the camp, under our national flag, where we listened to a prayer, the reading of the Declaration of Independence, and then to an able and appropriate oration from our worthy friend, W. T. Stanton, delivered in his usually eloquent manner. We then retired to our hotel, formed of our wagons, where we partook of a very nice dinner—I say a nice dinner, and it was decidedly so. We had pies, cakes, puddings, meats, coffee, and several kinds of sauce, all well cooked, although done by rude men. After partaking of this rich repast, we spent an hour in drinking toasts, many of which were very appropriate and interesting. The most perfect union and good feeling existed during the whole performance. Never did I see any number of men who enjoyed themselves better. Every heart seemed filled to overflowing with the true spirit of patriotism. This was to me a novel sight—ninety-three men on their way to the peaceful shores of the Western Ocean, halting on this vast prairie to commemorate the Sabbath of our liberties, and doing it in such perfect order, and with such a show of civilization, in a savage country.

While I am writing this evening, the boys are having a cotillion party on the spot, the evening being very pleasant. When they get tired, they fill the air with their sweet voices, in singing some favorite song. Taking it all in all, I hardly think that ninety-three men ever had so much pure enjoyment in the same time. You may think this almost impossible; but they were as happy as men could be conveniently.

We are still making an average of 20 miles per day, and our oxen are in good condition, except a few tender feet, which we dress in moccasins made of buffalo hide. We frequently meet disheartened emigrants, even at this point, who say they have certainly found the "Elephant," and are returning; but we have heard this so many times, that we begin to discredit them entirely. Our course is still "onward and upward," ever hoping that we may soon commence descending toward the golden valley.

Mr. P., allow me to describe, in an imperfect manner, some of the sports and disasters of the 30th of June, 1849—a day that with us will be ever remembered. On account of a heavy rain during the previous night, we remained in camp until 7 o'clock—one hour later than usual. We proceeded slowly onward for a few miles, when we discovered some buffalo between us and the river, about a mile distant; after which, some horsemen immediately started with the intention of driving them to the train. In this, they succeeded admirably. As soon as the buffalo began to advance toward the train, the men, (or about fifty,) well armed, stationed themselves at different points where they could best secure themselves, (the ground being rolling,) all anxiously awaiting the arrival of their "wounded" friends. Driven by the horsemen, they advanced with apparent fearlessness, until they were halted by the Rangers, who sent them some lead; after which, they began to dodge and run from one point to another, but were entirely unsuccessful in escaping the well-directed fire of our expert riflemen. Terrified at this scene, and maddened by pain, they finally started thru' an opening in the bluffs; but, before they reached them, three large ones were brought down, and others severely wounded. From these, we soon procured all the meat we wished, and marched onward. The one that I helped to dress was judged to be well advanced in his "teens," and to weigh 1400 pounds. He received more than 20 balls, several of which passed through his vitals— one grazing his heart; several more penetrated his skull. The meat is sweet and quite tender—some of which we have yet, and can keep it until we return, if we wish, although we have used no salt on it, but cut in small strips, and dried it on the sides of our wagon. We have been well supplied with fresh meat since we left Fort Kearney, having killed several buffalo and many antelopes.

But to return to the day. The excitement was great, filling every one with life and merriment.—I thought of Peter, and what he used to tell us.— Just as we were preparing to move, (after dining on buffalo steak,) we saw a cloud arising in the West, which gave the appearance of a terrible storm, and it was not in the least deceptive; for we had not proceeded far, when we heard a tremendous roaring, and soon the hail began to fall. At this time, I was driving our team in the rear of the train. I made all possible haste in getting loose from the wagon, which I did just in time to save it. What a scene here presented itself!—Sexton, Winchester, McFarlan, and myself, were under our wagon, where we could view the whole scene in safety. The whole aerial world seemed filled with the most vivid lightning. The thunder was shaking "Terra Firma" to its centre.— The hail was falling in a manner, and of a size, almost unheard of. Twenty wagons, with these and four pairs of oxen in each, were whirling about round in the road, and running to the lee across the prairie, at the top of their speed, frequently intersecting each other. The teams that were unhitched, loose cattle and horses, were intermingled—all trying to escape the pelting of the storm. The storm lasted about 20 minutes, in which time the ground was completely covered with hail, from the size of a robin's egg to that of a goose, (or very nearly,) and these driven by a fierce wind, made rather a severe storm. After the storm had ceased, the first thing was to gather the things together again. The teams were scattered nearly, some of them being a mile distant; four tongues were

broken, and one load, box and all, was left near the starting point. Some of the drivers who could not get their teams unhitched, hung to them during the whole storm, and the most of the men were out in some of it, the wagons being mostly gone, so that they were obliged to run some distance to find shelter. Some covered their heads with hats, knives, and some with their coats; others clung to the coupling poles of the wagons, as they were moving rapidly over the prairie. All the wagon-covers that were either painted or oiled, looked as if they had been used during the Mexican war as a breastwork, or had received a shower of buckshots; and the men one would have thought had received a shower of Indian arrows, to have seen the blood streaming from their heads as they gathered themselves together after the storm. The heads of many were badly cut, but none of them had any fracture of the skull. Haskell, while attempting to keep his team, was knocked down by a stone; after which, his cattle passed over him, bruising him some, but not so as to entirely disable him. He could still do more than some "huswood men." He came to our wagon immediately after the storm, where we washed and bathed his head with camphor. The cattle were many of them cut through on the hips and back by the hail, and some of the ponies were hardly able to travel the next day, on account of their bruises. This was decidedly severe—a touch of the terrific—something of the "Elephant."— The tongues were hatched, the wagon reloaded, everything arranged, and we were on our march again in less than two hours. We had seen many severe storms on the prairie before; but they were infants compared with this. Some of the men, who went back about two miles for their ponies, found hail-stones there (one hour after the storm) that were three inches in diameter. This is rather a hard story to believe; but it is less than reality.

On the south fork of the Platte River, 36 miles from its mouth, near the ford described by Fremont, we experienced this disastrous scene. We forded it about 50 miles above, at the upper fording place. The river here is about one mile wide, and of an average depth of 2½ feet, with two channels, an uneven and quicksand bottom.— By raising our wagon boxes 5 inches, and doubling teams we crossed without receiving the least damage. From here we passed over rather a hilly road 15 miles to the North Fork, which we have followed the most of the way to this place. Seven miles from Ash Hollow, on the North, we saw Castle Rock, 50 miles above this is Court House Rock, 12 miles farther is Chimney Rock, 19 miles from this are Scotts Bluffs. Here some of the men on horseback had some rare sport chasing and shooting buffalo. One after they had wounded him severely turned about and "fought them manfully" with his horns, he threw one of their horses nearly a rod, and his rider as much farther. The horse was then quite severely wounded, and the rider frightened much worse.— I would try and describe some of these rocky bluffs to you, but friend Sexton has done it in J. J. Wright, and I presume you will see his letter, you will find it quite interesting. From Ash Hollow we have found many cold springs, and in their vicinity we found nearly double the usual number of graves, and on the head stones of many we saw that dread word Cholera. We use the river water in preference to any other, it being much more healthy for us now. Kind Providence seems mindful of the emigrants this season, sending us

DAILY ADVERTISER  
Detroit, Michigan  
September 10, 1849

- Page 2 -

(as all the traders tell us) more rain than has fell in any three years of their remembrance, producing very good food where it has been scarce before. Near Scotts Bluffs there is a Blacksmith shop and store, owned by a Frenchman who says he has been there trading with the Indians for 14 years. He shoes horses for one dollar a shoe and settles the tire on a wagon for \$3; all other work in proportion. He sells flour at eight and Bacon at \$10 per hundred. We, however, had no occasion to pay him any such prices, being furnished with all the necessaries which he had for sale. It is astonishing to see how some companies live in this unfettered land. I will tell you how one man, who was packing through on mules, told us he lived. In the morning before packing his mules he cut off a chunk of bacon, hung it on his saddle and filled his pockets with crackers mounted his mule and cut his bacon and crack'rs as he travelled along the road; at night he unpacked his mule and took out a new supply of the same, and so on, living (or existing) day after day on raw bacon, crackers and water. We have not had the pleasure of seeing any Indians since we left the Kansas. I have often been in company of a friend several miles from the camp and without arms, we are in no more danger than in our own State. We are still meeting the disheartened and retarding emigrants. Beyond Fort Laramie, over the Black Hills, we are told that the "Elephant" is waiting, ready to receive us and greet us with a hearty welcome. This will be very pleasant to us, but if he shows fight or attempts to stop us on our progress to the golden land, we shall attack him with sword and spear. I am stopped suddenly. Give my respects to all enquiring friends, and above all things write to me in California, and oblige your humble friend,

JAMES D. LYON.

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### Our California Correspondence.

FROM A GENTLEMAN OF PLYMOUTH, WAYNE COUNTY.

*Overland Journey to California—On the Wrong Track—Lansons' Cut-off a Humbug—Dead and Dying Oxen—Suffering on the Desert—A Man Drinking Blood to Quench Thirst—Boiling Hot Springs—Teams Abandoned—Rice Dog Meat Repudiated—Fasting on Crumbs—The Straightness of Pine Trees—Seeing the Elephants—A Dump Bed—Letter-Writing—Men Dying by the Road-Side—The True Character of Women—Abundance of Gold—Gambling.*

SAN FRANCISCO, Dec. 24, 1850.

DEAR SIR: I take the liberty of addressing a few lines to you, in regard to some of the difficulties, privations, and miseries, to which emigrants are exposed in coming across the country; and, also, some few things to be regretted in this, "the land of glittering dreams." I will endeavor to write nothing but the naked truth; and, if any of my friends think of coming, please tell them what they will probably encounter; and, if they have any regard for their own comfort, I think they will remain under the care of their parents and friends, unless they come merely for the sake of seeing the country between here and the States. The country is indeed worth seeing, and will well pay a man for his time and trouble, if he has any relish for the beauties of wild scenery. If more wealth is what they are after, it will hardly pay the cost.

From the time we left Fort Laramie, we were travelling over the most uneven, rocky, and mountainous countries, that teams ever were driven over, except some few river-bottoms and deserts. I will here mention that I have lost my journal, and am unable to give correct distances.

From Fort Laramie, we had about one week's travel, with but little or no feed for our teams—roads rough and hilly—water scarce—cattle getting lame, their feet being worn through—men worn out from night drives—and yet our journey just begun, comparatively.

While crossing the Black Hills, we made a drive of 18 miles on the darkest night I ever experienced. We were obliged to do it on account of the scarcity of feed and water. It was with the greatest difficulty that we kept the road. The foremost team was preceded by a light, and the remainder followed from the sound of the wagon. We could not see even the length of the team we were driving, and the road was so rough and uneven, that three or four men were required (in many places) to keep the wagons from upsetting. In many places, we were obliged to lock three wheels, and then let our oxen slide on all fours.

Before reaching the Sweet Water River, we came to some large alkali springs and lakes. In many places, the earth is covered with a crust of saleratus of good quality, from one-half to an inch in thickness, caused by the evaporation of water from the springs. Hundreds of oxen were killed along here by being permitted to drink from these springs.

We made the South Pass Aug. 4th, and had two stampedes, which resulted in the breaking of our wagon-tongue, and one horn from our near-wheel ox—more spent than damage, by half.

After crossing the summit, we had above 80 miles' travel, with little or no feed, and only two watering places, (the Little and Big Sands.)

From the Big Sands to Green River—49 miles—the road was very rough, and no water. This drive is called the dead cattle shoot, very appropriately—for the road was quite well lined with dead cattle, horses, and mules. This is an Sully's cut-off. Here we began to see wagons deserted; and, at the crossing of Green River, it was estimated that there was one hundred wagons burned, and their loadings destroyed.

At the north bend of Bear River, 5 miles west of those beautiful soda springs, instead of going the Fort Hall road, we took the emigrants' cut-off, leaving the Fort about 40 miles to the north—a rough one, in no way very good for a mountain road. As a specimen, we descended one hill, where we were obliged to lock three wheels of the wagons for one long mile; and the passage down the mountain is very rocky, and just wide enough to admit a wagon to pass—the teamster being obliged to walk, or rather slide down, on the side of the slope. It was not infrequently that we travelled all day, and until 10 or 12 o'clock at night, without finding any water. Deserted wagons and dead cattle are like mile-stones.

While we were travelling on St. Mary's River, we travelled nights and rested days, on account of the heat and dust. Before reaching the Humboldt Valley, we had the most extreme heat during the day; and, during the night, it would freeze ice one inch thick, in our buckets. Here, too, we found the deadly scorpion. Some of them were of common size; but they were mostly small.

About 70 miles from the sink of St. Mary's (or Humboldt) River, we were induced to leave the old trail, and take the northern route, known as Lawson's cut-off. Some designing rascal and Indian wretch had put up notices along the road, and at the forks, advising emigrants to take the northern road—stating that there was another road leading directly to the mines, and running between Lawson's and Truckey's routes, called the Cherokee cut-off. In this, there was said to be more water, better feed, and much less of desert, and, greater than all, only 92 miles to the upper mines on Feather River. The Cherokee route, we soon found, was like "Mormon miracles" and "hoop snakes;" it existed 'only in names.'—When we left the River, we expected a short desert, and prepared ourselves accordingly. At the close of the first day, we found a small spring on the side of a high and steep mountain, one mile from the road. We stopped, fed some hay, (there being no feed,) and commenced, at 9 o'clock P. M., to take our teams on the mountain for water. Never was there a set of men that worked more faithfully than we, and it was  $\frac{1}{2}$  o'clock A. M. before we could get water for all our teams—

We then started immediately, and reached water again at 4 o'clock P. M. Here we found dead cattle without number. After resting a short time, and giving our oxen a little water, (which was very poor,) we started again, expecting to find a creek in 8 miles. We were very tired, and our teams seemed nearly exhausted, having had no rest for 2 days, and but little food or water, and the weather exceedingly hot, and the roads very dusty. From here, we travelled till 4 o'clock, over the most barren and desolate country I ever saw. Seeing no signs of water, we halted four hours to give our teams rest, and rest some ourselves. For my part, I was a very little weary about the ankles, having been constantly on my feet for upwards of 40 hours, and travelling over the mountains, where the dust and sand were ankle deep. At eight o'clock A. M., we arrived at Black Rock Spring, about 25 miles from our last watering place. Nearly the whole distance is a dead, level, barren desert, with a soil similar to leached ashes. In several places, there had been holes dug; but the water was quite salt. On the last 18 miles of this desert, there were nearly 100 wagons; and oxen, horses, and mules, were thick enough to have formed a complete line the whole distance. The road was completely lined on both sides, and the stench arising from them was almost suffocating. The sight was indeed horrid. In several places, we saw from 6 to 12 oxen in a gang, some of which could stand upon their feet; but most of them were so faint and weak, that they could only raise their heads, and make an attempt to low, as they looked at us very imploringly. As we passed along, we could hear the groans and moanings of the dying oxen, which had been left to perish from thirst and starvation. Such sights are indeed horrid for any person to look upon, who has any feeling of sympathy for the brute. Many persons who started on the last 25 miles in the fore part of the day, suffered very much from thirst. The water at the last place being very poor, and all expecting to find water in a short distance, no one brought but a small quantity, and many not any. Thus they were situated—teams reduced from fatigue and privation—weather extremely hot—the air full of dust. Some were obliged to remain on this desert for more than 36 hours, on account of their teams, and suffered very much.—In one case, a Dutchman, with his wife, was left on the desert for three days before they could

get a chance to escape. They brought some water once at the rate of 50 cents per quart, which kept them from perishing. One man, in crossing, was obliged to tap the veins of oxen by the road-side, and drink their blood; and then he came near perishing before he could reach Black Cuck Spring. This spring is far from being refreshing, as it is boiling hot, and highly charged with alkali. The water, after running some distance, became cool enough for our teams to drink. Still it was very hurtful, so account of the alkali. Mules lost their entire teams. For nearly 100 miles from this place, we found but very little except warm, alkaline water, and no feed except dry or dead grass.

We crossed the Sierra Nevada Mountains Oct. 12th, 3 miles south of the Oregon line. Here we were obliged to double teams for nearly two miles. The ascent is very steep and difficult.—We were from sunrise until dark getting over the

mountain with 2 wagons. When we had safely passed the dividing ridge, I concluded that I had driven over long enough. My head was pained from fatiguing—my lungs were sore, and my patience was nearly exhausted. Here we met the first relief train sent out by Government, and obtained correct information in regard to the distance and condition of the road to the valley. We gave our team and wagon to a kind gentleman and lady—(Sexton and myself had bought out the other boys)—took a pack of 40 lbs. upon our backs, and started for the diggings, the nearest of which were 400 miles distant. We made quite a quick trip, and arrived safely in the valley, without meeting with serious difficulties.— We were sometimes rather cool, sleeping on the mountains with nothing but a single blanket—the nights being quite cool, and our clothing often wet with perspiration; and our food was not of the best kind; but still we did not eat any "raw dog." Now and then, a good fat crow was killed, and roasted on the coals; but we would generally get beef. We might have had venison and bear enough; but we hated to spend time in hunting.

Bread we could not beg, buy, nor steal, on account of its scarcity, and for my part I did not wish to as long as there were women and children destitute. At one time we were in the mountains for three days, where we saw no sign of a white man. This we did to shorten the distance, and probably gained about one day's travel, (36 miles,) besides seeing some of nature's richest scenery and rarest beauties. On some of the most elevated peaks over which we travelled we found white pines 7 feet thick, 250 feet high, and as straight as the path of a christian: Pine, spruce, cedar and balsam, are here in great abundance and of an enormous size. The Rangers left all their wagons in the mountains between the dividing ridge and the valley. More than 200 teams perished in the mountains, leaving all their loading a prey for the rude savages who had stolen large numbers of animals from the emigrants, besides killing ten or twelve men. The emigration have all reached the valley. The women and children were brought in by the relief trains sent out by the government, but they were put on short rations for several days. The men packed in, some of them travelling in snow from 2 to 3 feet deep. This was verily "the Elephant" in earnest. There is no jelling about that I assure you, and what was worse, the most of them, like myself, arrived in the valley without money—100 miles from the mines—and heard \$5 per day. No labor could be had short of the mines, not even for your board. I went immediately to the mines on Feather river, where I found provisions very dear. Flour, meal, pork and beans being \$1 to \$1.50 per pound; potatoes, butter and cheese, \$1.50 when we arrived, but was soon \$2.00 and \$3.50. One thing was in our favor—the traders will trust miners to almost any amount; so Sexton Bentley and myself bought provisions and mining tools, and soon paid for them. Then the rainy season set in, and of 16 days 12 only were rainy, and there is no more, you soon find it out. I have seen Feather river rise 20 feet in 6 hours—covering the richest dig-

off hundreds of cradles, (by the way, ours walked off down stream one night.) I concluded that I was expending my health too much, and that without any prospect of getting much gold, consequently, I came to this city, where I intend to spend the winter. On my way from the mines to Sacramento City, I was caught out in a storm, and after travelling out 10 o'clock P. M., I laid myself down on a point that was not overflown and soon fell asleep, although it was raining very hard.— When daylight dawned I found that I was quite damp, the water being more than an inch deep where I was sleeping. At first I had a mind to transform myself into a fish and swim to the city; but the water was too shallow in many places.— Of the 20 miles that I had yet to travel, I waded in water from 2 to 15 inches deep nearly half the time, besides swimming several sloughs. This was indeed rather more than I had bargained for, or been accustomed to—but suffered no great inconvenience from it. By many, this is called an unhealthy climate, but I think it the reverse, I know that one-half the exposure that I suffered here, would laid me low in the grave had I been in Michigan. How long could a man live in the States to be wet from day to day, and sleeping on the wet earth night after night, and that with his wet clothes on, without any protection except a blanket? All this I have undergone, and I was never more healthy in my life than at present. I have hardly seen an ill hour since I left the Rocky Mountains. There is some considerable sickness here to be sure, and the only thing to be wondered at is, that they don't half die.

I have many extracts from letters said to have been written in California, (in the New York and Boston papers,) which are not wholly true. Some I think, are written by business men here, in order to induce more people to come here that they may fleece them, as they will most assuredly do. There are too many here now for their own good. Thousands would have been home before this, had they money enough to pay their passage; but that is not my case. I am quite content, gold being not my only object here. The amount of suffering on the latter part of the route, was almost incalculable. No one except those who saw or experienced it, can have any idea of its extent.— Sights, the thoughts of which, would make the blood chill in any human breast. After I left the train, I saw men sitting or lying by the road side, sick with fevers or crippled by scurvy, begging of the passers by, to lend them some assistance; but no one could do it. The winter was so near, that it was sure death to tarry, and the teams were all giving out, so that the thought of hauling them in the wagons was absurd. Nothing could be done, consequently they were left to a slow lingering death in the wilderness. This was, certainly, an awful state of things—and beyond repair. The women claimed the first attention, and all the assistance that could, under the circumstances, be given. Many of them suffered more than I ever supposed any female could endure. The days were extremely hot, and they travelling day after day, week after week—over roads very dusty, rough, and mountainous—making evenings—sleeping on the earth with a scanty supply of blankets—in fact, deprived of every comfort of life and many of the necessities— all without a de-

always ready and willing to do anything in their power that could facilitate their progress. It was no rare thing to see ladies young and old lifting at the wheels to assist their reduced teams in ascending the steep and rugged mountains. No false modesty was exhibited here. The more noble and elevated the mind, the more she felt it her duty to keep life and energy in her companions; and the stronger were her exertions. Here was a great place for the display of character. It was remarked by many, that the ladies evinced more activity and energy on the latter part of the route, than most of the men—(a shameful truth, some may say.) A person who says that woman (in the time of peril,) possesses less activity, energy, cool calculation, or power of endurance than man, is either ignorant, deceitful, or basely selfish. Our boys were all well when I heard from them last. They were in the mines, 250 miles from here, on Feather river. There are many stories told here about the mines, as well as in the States; but the fact is, there is gold enough in this country, but not

so easily obtained as many suppose. There are many more here now, than will ever get rich.— Perhaps it is owing to their instability. Thousands spend all they can earn at the gaming table, which are very numerous here. Some make a fortune in a short time, while many make nothing. On the morning of the 24th, a fire broke out on the lower side of Portsmouth square, between City and Washington streets, which consumed 25 or 30 buildings, at a loss of about one and a half millions of dollars. Business is very dull here this winter, that is, for this place. Remember me to all my friends. Tell them that I am "alive and kicking." I am quite thin in flesh, weighing only 203 pounds, thirty clad. Excuse all imperfections.

JAS. D. LYON.