

Overland to California in the Early Sixties

By WILLIAM CARTIER MOSS

In the spring of the year 1861, there was a great exodus of people from the lake states and middle west to California. The Civil War was now an assured fact. Many sought to avoid the issue by traveling westward. There were adventurous ones who made the trip for the novelty of it. Some had previous business relations in the far west and went to execute them.

Among these was the writer who had signed a contract to start with two men from Boone County, Illinois, and proceed by wagon westward, overtaking Captain B—— from Ohio at Council Bluffs or farther on, with a band of horses en route for the California market.

The start was made from Belvidere on Thursday, May 9, 1861. When goodbyes had been said to family and friends, we took one last look back at the old home and were off for the land of golden treasures.

Fat horses proudly prancing, new harnesses with silvered buckles glistening in the sunshine; new, elegantly painted, canvas-covered wagons containing the many necessities for the journey; last, but not least, a round dozen of as jovial, hearty young fellows as one could meet, and one lady.

On we go, south one mile to the town line road; thence west to Cherry Valley, a very bright little place but not to be considered, only as the first town to witness the departure of the Emigrant Train bound for California. As we pass along the road, people stare at us and ask, "Where are you bound for?"

"Oh, just out for a buggy ride," says one.

"Going fishing," says another.

"Going to Iowa," says a third.

Now we can see the church spires and some of the tall buildings, and yes, almost the whole city of Rockford. Beautiful place. Here we stop only long enough to feed the horses. Just twelve miles from home so we mail post cards home just to let them know that we are all O. K. so far and all aboard again for California. Every girl on the street seems to think we are going to start a colony off somewhere in the far west. Maybe they think some of us might need a cook, but as we have a little sheet-iron stove, frying pan and coffee pot, we think we can cook anything that is worth cooking.

"Say, Ed, got any tobacco? I'm getting kinda lonesome riding all this whole day in a lumber wagon. Got to get used to it though, I suppose."

Byron, a small town on Rock River, was our first night on the ground. "Cold, rain, wind." This almanac lies about the rain anyway, but the cold wind is here in abundance.

"Who is cook, boys?" I will go over to that store and buy something to eat while you make some coffee on that neighbor's stove—fine, fine—now supper and go to bed in the wagon. Slept fine—Breakfast. Horses hitched up and on the road again.

"Good morning, stranger! How far is it to California?"

"None of your business!"

Passed Oregon to Polo and camped for the night. Slept in the wagon. No feathers to disturb our peaceful repose. But, hark! About forty vicious boys are racing about town—some with tin horns, some with tin pans, others with cow bells, fifes, goose quills, brass kettles, etc.—serenading a newly-married couple—good luck to the couple. At last morning dawns and after "grub" we're off. Passed a small town and camp only twelve miles from the great Mississippi River.

Fulton City—almost a beautiful town—rocks and hills aplenty.

Monday morning, ferried the river to Lyons on the Iowa side. Passed Clinton, De Witt—over the Buena Vista Ferry—over the Wausepinegan Ferry to Tipton and camped.

Tuesday, May 14, drove past Cedar Bluffs Ferry—no bridges in this country—to Iowa City, a large town on the map but a shattered, rickety lot of old wooden buildings with a few ragged inhabitants. Homestead—pretty, neat, new little town on a beautiful broad prairie, we leave you behind.

Marengo? Thou present terminus of the railroad! We greet you as being the last R. R. town on our route. Passed Brooklyn and took a passenger aboard for California; Ed, a blacksmith. Passed Westfield and Malcom to Newton and put up at the Phelps' House.

Saturday the 18th—drove thirty-five miles to Des Moines.

Sunday, 19th—drove to Adell and camped for the night. Next day passed Irish Town to Morris Town. Here Ed, the blacksmith, discovered that he had lost his overcoat—carelessness! Before we hook up we must just notice that poor old hog lying in the mud, almost dead—a lead pill, a shudder, and one less hog to influence the market report of Iowa. But, in this connection, I will finish the mortality report by introducing an obituary on

the death of Old Pike, a most valuable horse belonging to our outfit.

"Old Pike he died,
And none of us cried
Knowing he'd soon be forgotten.

We needed no ditcher,
The ground would be richer
To leave him on top—so rotten."

These lines are prompted by a true feeling of sympathy and are purely original.

Drove 35 miles and camped near an old farm house. Very hospitable, Eastern people. Piano music is a rarity to us but acceptable.

"My Darter; Oh My Darter: She tuk mowsick in the East—some celebrated mewsickers."

Passed Grove City, Lewis — and camped again—ready after an all-day ride for "Grub" and sleep—smoke thrown in, of course. Here I regulated my satchell and found that same little testament tucked nicely in one corner by so noble a mother. Only one tear—it won't do, you know, among the boys to show any signs of faint heart.

Drove 30 miles to Silver Creek and made camp for the night. Now come two strange and mysterious-looking men on horseback. They have guns, perhaps they are officers. No, they enquire the road to some where. I swapped guns with one. They went on. But the boys are crazy to see farther ahead so we hitched up and drove 16 miles to Council Bluffs. This is truly romantic! A beautiful city upon a table land back from the grand Mississippi and just among the bluffs—so magnificent! Here we shall recruit our stock, renew our list of supplies with quantities sufficient to last to Salt Lake City—1000 miles distant. All is bustle—business lively—people hurrying to and fro as though their very life depended upon immediate action. Steamboat runners are allowed all liberty. Hacks and busses are not limited in price, so you may judge something of the result in a large town where there is a transient population and through which there is a constant stream of emigration passing.

We purchase Coffee, Sugar, Bacon, Tea, Tobacco, Whiskey, Matches, etc. We pack them all in the wagons leaving no room for our beds, only as we eat our way into the load. But the first night out we will repack and make more complete arrangements. These Council Bluffers are all alive over the prospect of the

completion of the railroad to this place when they expect to be second only to Chicago! It may be well to note just how Council Bluffs acquired so romantic a name. We find that at an early day, when Indians were numerous in Iowa, the Pottawattamies and Sioux became incensed at the operations of the pale faces or Boston men ploughing up their hunting grounds—appeared in battle array and proceeded to exterminate all the Yankees from their possessions. But Mr. Yank got wind of the movement and the settlers armed themselves for the battle. Then the government, always alive to the interests of her citizens, sent an Indian agent and an interpreter forward to call a council and have the affair adjusted without bloodshed, if possible.

The place of meeting was on the bluffs where the town now stands. A treaty of peace was made and signed by both parties, which ended the trouble.

At 10 a. m. Wednesday, we drove down to the river and waited seven long hours for that old rickety ferry boat to take us, together with a large train of emigrants, across the Mississippi River to Omaha. All safely landed we drive from the river one mile through sand, sand, sand, meeting teams of all descriptions passing to and fro in a rough, unfeeling manner—teamsters bawling out at the mules, horses or oxen all too heavily loaded, struggling hard in the heavy sand. While the poor ox, lolling and panting, his galling yoke pressed deep into his neck, is only urged on by his cruel master. One or two streets on either side and parallel with this Ferry or Main Street—some few buildings and many, many vacant lots or rather a great barren waste with numerous little pegs here and there to mark the boundaries of lots and streets—this is Omaha—not a very inviting spot. We knew that when we had passed it we should see no more civilization for a long time. I confess to a slight attack of homesickness—super-induced by the disgusting scenery of Omaha, and my general health not of the best. Drove to Rawhide Creek and camped just beyond Elkhorn, the capitol of Rawhide Creek, I suppose. A couple of sod houses each about 10 feet square—dirt roofs, no floors, no windows, an old gunny sack hung up for a door, and two or three long-haired, greasy, dirty-looking men comprise the town.

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Overland to California in the Early Sixties

(Continued from page 6)

Rain comes down in wild confusion all night.

Friday morning came. Rain over. Cooked and ate our breakfast. Change of clothing from wet to dry. Started on our way. The road better, no dust, no wind. I feel better. South Pass. Many dirty Indians here with all manner of trinkets to sell. Among them were Indian saddles. These look like toy saw horses, each saddle composed of two frames, each frame of two pieces of wood somewhat crooked and fixed together in the form of the letter "x," covered with a piece of rawhide. I buy some mocassins from Mrs. Indian. We drove to a spot of higher ground and made camp. No lodging house in sight, so we just spread our blankets down on the sand, lie down along one edge, then roll till the cloth is all rolled about us and sleep until relieved by the guard who permits us to get up, go out and refresh ourselves by standing out upon some lone rock and watch 75 or 100 head of horses graze until daylight. How delightful! Especially so as there are many Indians in the hills close by, ready to run off the stock and leave us afoot. Morning dawns, Saturday, June 1. Traveled 25 miles in a wide valley country along the Platte River which runs east from its source and empties into the Missouri at Plattsmouth. This valley is in many places ten miles wide and only a wagon road between the river and the bluffs with an abundance of grass for the horses.

Sunday, June, 2nd. On and on

past Columbus, a small village at the junction of the Loup Fork with the Platte River. We forded the stream which is now a half-mile wide and quite shallow generally, but numerous channels or gulches are being continually made by the action of the water upon the sand which forms the entire bed of the river, making the crossing very dangerous for travelers. Near the north bank the water is very deep so that a kind of raft or coarse boat is used to ferry the teams and passengers as far as shallow water. Then they must wade and never stop even for a moment or the swift current would wash the sand out from under the wheels and capsize the craft, soon burying the whole outfit with sand. "Get up there!" "Go on!" "Go on!" As the wheels turn round, the wagon jolts as though you are riding over a very rough road of cobble stones.

Now we are on terra firma and so thankful that the great danger is over. Many Indians are lurking about, hunting, fishing, drinking, gambling, smoking, playing cards and trading as opportunity offers by the emigrants. These are Pawnees. The tribe occupies all the country between Omaha and Fort Kearney a distance of 250 miles east and west. Many trains are camped here. Many more are arriving and some are moving on after having recruited their stock, as the feed is abundant and good. But here the smaller trains must double up, organize and elect a captain so as to be better fortified against Indians, and also to assist each other through difficulties. Our train numbers 48 men, besides women and children. We expect to join another train of about the same size who are about three days in advance of us. We are now known as the "Combs Train," but after consolidation, we will travel under the direction of Captain Crum from Ohio, who is making his third trip from the Atlantic to the Pacific Coast.

Monday, June 3. Passed Prairie Creek with the water so high it would come into the wagons. Every man takes a sack of flour, a roll of blankets, or what not and wades the creek with his load upon his back or on his head; then back for more till all is piled up on the bank. The wagons are brought across and reloaded, "Oh, this is going to California!" Now the teams are doubled and we prod along through mud and mire—a perfect lake of it for

miles. Horses give out; children cry; both men and women worn out with hunger, fatigue and anxiety. We finally reach higher ground. So glad to rest for the night.

Tuesday, June 4. Good roads for 28 miles along the table land. Here we rest again; but see that large band of Indians just across the creek only a half mile from us, riding their ponies furiously—shrieking wildly their well-known war whoop! Now all stop near together as if in counsel. Now separate. Come together again. Madly practising all sorts of savage equestrianism, such as throwing the lance, hiding or screening themselves about the bodies of their horses in various positions. These are Sioux warriors on the warpath and soon to fight the Pawnees who are preparing to meet them. I understand the issue is title to hunting grounds. No law—no court—but WAR, and the victor will hold the property by right of conquest and possession.

"Double the guard tonight!" shouts the captain. "All hands keep your arms in order!" So we spend the night. Morning comes. No Indians in sight. Stock all right. Hot coffee and grub.

Wednesday drove past Grand Island, a large tract several miles in length with a portion of the Platte running on either side. A small town of rough adobe huts and tents of very rude description, merely a trading post bearing the name of the island, attracts our attention. On to camp at Wood River. Good grass, wood and water—the three most necessary things in our program. Four o'clock p. m. and we turn out the horses. No buffaloes in the valley but plenty back in the hills—also elk and antelope. Here on the north side of the Platte the valley is only about three miles wide. Looking away to the north an unbroken and numberless chain of hills and mountains greets the eye. To the south, the same, only down in the deep wide valley rushes the wickedest of all western streams, the Platte, or Silver River in the Sioux dialect, which is a mixture of Spanish and Indian.

Thursday, June 6. Four genuine buffaloes came in the heat of the day down from the hills to get a drink in the river. We all enjoyed the sight as they passed only a short distance from the wagons.

Friday morning. Fine weather. The boys went hunting in the hills and overtook the train farther west at night with but scanty success after a hard day's tramp. Saw some antelope and hares. Beautiful animals but too far away.

Saturday, June 8. Another curiosity today—a Prairie Dog Town. A wonderful little city. Many writers have described the habits of these little animals; but how far the de-

scription is from the genuine reality! Hundreds of little mounds in regular order, with streets running parallel and at right angles with each other—covering perhaps two acres of ground; located on a table land gently sloping to the east and south. A beautiful location for a city laid with mathematical precision. The little fellows are so funny, too. Now you may see perhaps all the residents sitting erect upon the house tops and sentinels all around the outskirts watching—when, at a given signal, everyone disappears in an instant and not a sound is heard.

Today we travelled 30 miles over a fine level road except for one steep place where we were obliged to chain the wheels, tie a rope to the axle and 20 men held the rope and so let all the wagons down the hill, where grass, wood and water were plenty. Here we were overtaken by the "Six Horse Boys." Three brothers with their wives and two or three small children in an omnibus and six fine horses attached.

Monday morning, June 10. We drove past the wonderful "Ice Lake," a great curiosity to travelers. A slimy-looking sheet of water about one mile long and half as wide, covered with an alkaline deposit which resembles a mixture of earth, lime and salt forming a filthy slush or jelly about twelve or sixteen inches thick. On top of which is a crust of saleratus about two inches thick and as white as driven snow. Underneath the composition lies a solid bed of ice. After chopping with an axe till tired, no bottom or limit was found to the ice, which may have been there for a century. Exposed bluffs or bare-topped hills, no grass, not a stick or stone—we go on to the Platte and camp.

Tuesday, June 11. Passed Grand

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Spring—cold, clear water. Wednesday, June 12. Bluff Creek and Cold Spring. Not a stone since we left Omaha. Upland and mountains, dry and parched with here and there patches of cactus, of different species. Everywhere little innocent lizards and horned toads creep out in the sunshine, while all along the roadside are carcasses of horses, mules and oxen that have succumbed to the strain of the journey to California. Eagles, vultures, ravens and wild beasts devour the inside, leaving the frame whole and covered with the hide. It becomes a very gruesome sight. Very many skulls of buffaloes line the roadside. Some have been placed by the traveller in the form of a landmark with a name pencilled across the forehead or rudely daubed with tar from the wagon wheels.

Thursday, June 13. Plodding along through 24 miles of hot, burning sand. Here the feet of the horses become feverish and if not attended to will contract and become diseased and cause death. Huge bluffs and mountains of sand—only a few Indians, almost a God-forsaken place. Saw a young antelope, the handsomest little creature extant—surely "the wild gazelle with silvery feet."

Friday, June 14. Mountains everywhere, Twenty miles over bluffs of sand 40 feet deep. But today our eyes were relieved by a sight of stone, rocks jutting out from the brow of a hill—good mountain spring water, so acceptable! Here one member of our party got his back up and another fellow got his back up too. Some harsh words, but all quiet again—great place this in which to show off human nature.

Saturday, June 15. After a hard day's drive over a hard road, through some more prairie dog towns, we attempt to sleep but are kept awake by the howling of a band of wolves, their howl being different than the music of coyotes with which we are quite familiar.

Sunday, June 16. "All the civilized world observed the Sabbath Day" said a good old Presbyterian deacon and so, in a little ravine, away to the north of the Platte, among the foothills where there is

a little stream of cold spring water and a large grove of second growth forest trees, our company of fifty persons took the pitch from an old cracked violin and joined in singing some old-fashioned congregational tunes and tried to be really devotional.

Monday, June 17. All feeling jolly. Stock refreshed. We pass huge bluffs of sand and Rock Castle, an immense sand stone worn to the shape of a castle by the actions of the elements—also pyramids of very queer shape, like men; some large, some smaller. Only yesterday this place was the scene of a terrible tragedy. Some white horse thieves had formed a league with the Indians, and, watching an opportunity, had stolen four horses from the Robinson train, which being one day in advance of us, had camped night before last at the foot of the bluffs. The men of the train mounted other horses and rushed after them. They soon overtook and surrounded them, shot the two whites or half-breeds and also two Indians. The bodies were lashed to backs of the horses and brought back to the road where they were covered with sods from the wall of an old deserted sod house. Some one had removed the sods from the faces of the men and a ghastly sight was there. Their names had been rudely cut in a board. Just above the names was written in pencil, "Horse Thieves." This about 4 miles west of Crab Creek and all was left to the wild beasts and the gaze of the many trains of people who are passing along this way. After a bath in the Platte, we started on.

Tuesday, June 18, over good roads and forgot the romance.

Wednesday, June 19, alongside of bluffs of sand all day. Disgusted with sand and heat.

Thursday, June 20. Many rumors are afloat regarding Captain Robinson's engagement — all predict trouble with the Indians.

Friday, the 21st found us at Fort Laramie, camped in a little grove of trees on the north side of the river, while the fort is on the south side and about a mile away on quite an elevation from the river.

Just before our arrival, the soldiers having been informed of the Crab Creek affair, had been ordered out. They halted Captain Robinson's train and took the principal actors over to the fort where many Indians were counseling with General Smith, the Indian agent. An examination and trial followed. The matter was fully adjusted by giving the Indians some sugar and flour. The friends of the wounded Indians claiming that they were only employees of the horse thieves and not responsible for the theft, so a settlement was affected in order to forestall a repetition of the tragedy. After gathering all the letters to be mailed at the fort, four of our young men, including your humble servant, made application to the Ferryman who has only a small skiff, the only means of crossing, and were informed that four men were drowned only a short time since and that the waves ran so high as to forbid any attempt to cross. But we were not to be put off in that manner with important letters to dear ones at home so we stripped ourselves save shirt and overalls — tied nine letters each on top of our heads, and, walking about three-quarters of a mile above the Fort, we plunged in and quartered for the south shore. The river here is about half a mile wide and our hardy young fellows pulled bravely against a heavy current, now tossed by the white caps, or buried in the trough of the sea until fatigue and death stared us in the face. The shore was lined with people who stood with breathless anxiety, wringing their hands as they saw our peril. The water was so full of sand we could hardly keep up — now our feet touch bottom — a shoal of sand and as we try to get breath, the sand goes out from under our feet and we keep stepping, hardly able to keep our balance in water chin deep. We can no longer maintain an upright position so must struggle for the

other bank. Down, down, the stream is hurrying us and we hardly gain an inch. Twice caught in a whirlpool I was swiftly hurried to the bottom, came to the surface, took my reckonings, and again battled against the current which took us down about two miles near the mouth of the Laramie River but into deeper and more quiet water. Two of us were near together and in advance of the others about fifteen rods, but exhausted and turned over on our backs, rested and spoke encouragingly to each other, soon gained an eddy, caught hold of some long roots, held on and summoning strength, beckoned to the boys to be sure to make this point. One came safe with us but the other strangling in the water, almost gone. We got roots, and holding each other by the hand reached him and pulled him in, saved! But we could not get up the bank which was about ten feet high jutting out over the water — we kept close to it and floated down till the bank was low enough and we dragged ourselves out. Then came a prolonged shout from a score of our friends on the other

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John G. Ellenbecker, Author
Marysville, Kansas

Overland to California in the Early Sixties

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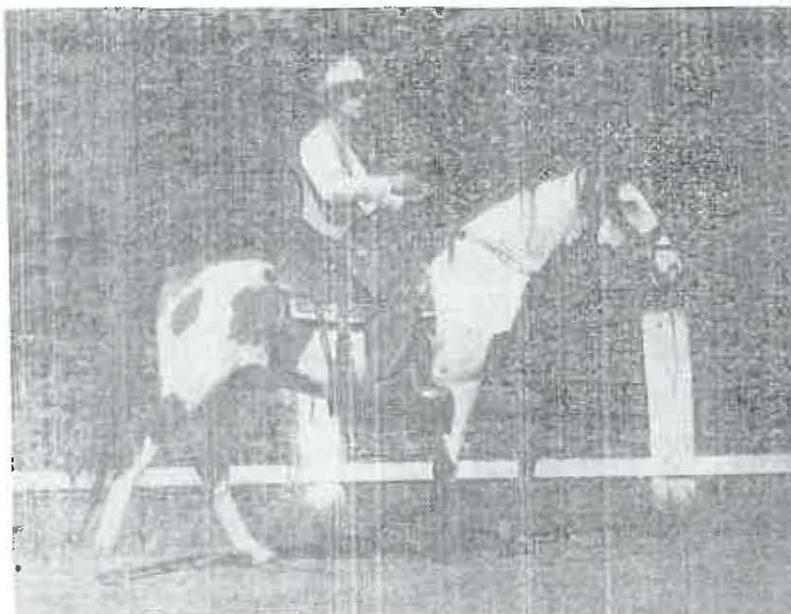
side. But this last poor boy we thought was drowned. We turned him over and let the water out of his mouth. Then they shouted, "Rub him!" and we did until he came to, then we lifted him up and whipped him smartly, compelling him to walk and finally to run towards the Fort. And thus were we ourselves saved for in helping him, we gained strength. All four, cold, wet, barefooted and nearly famished, went limping along—now stumbling and falling over the least uneven ground, now stepping our bare feet upon beds of cactus, and each whipping the other till we reached the Fort and were taken to the barracks. Placed before a huge fireplace and every comfort administered to us, we opened the letters, dried them, gave them new envelopes and mailed them, but did not attempt to re-swim the Platte River at Fort Laramie.

Saturday morning four men, lame and stiff, secured the little skiff—the wind having subsided, recrossed the river and joined our train after a most bitter experience. We moved about six miles and found grass, wood and water.

Sunday, June 23. Remained in camp all day, resting ourselves and recruiting the poor horses, for they were getting very thin and poor. Here we overhauled the wagons and divested them of everything that could possibly be spared, for what could we do if the horses should give out? No one was allowed more than one suit of clothes, no overcoat, one pair of boots. All trunks, boxes, bags, carpet sacks, extra guns, bullets, bedding and clothing were piled on the ground—my pet rifle too, I left standing against a sapling, keeping a shotgun in preference. My new valise and overcoat, all left behind, and then we walked as much as possible to lighten the load.

Monday, June 24. — Twenty-five miles to the Black Hills, so named from their appearance, being covered with a growth of scrubby pine which the Indians have burned over every fall, leaving them black, but more pines and pines, quite a novelty to us "suckers." We picked gum and chewed it, cut sticks for canes, and on over many a sharp point of rocks, through many a deep gully and over steep hills till we camped in a little ravine. Here lives an old man "trapper" with a wife and four children. During the night he had packed up his few belongings, loaded them in his wagon, and in the morning hitched up his horses and joined our train for California. He had cultivated no ground, but depended upon trading, hunting and fishing and found himself and family down and out.

Tuesday, 25.—Drove 25 miles and



S. M. STRONG, M.D., Director of Pageant, Dutchess County Fair, N. Y. 1938, on "Pancho" the North Dakota outlaw. Photo by M. F. O'Connor.

camped on the Platte near Captain Robinson's train and opposite to Laramie Peak, a very high mountain named by General Fremont at the time his expedition passed through this way. This peak has been in sight several days and only now are we even with it. Here we have overtaken our friend "B" who got anxious to make better time and left us at Laramie. His horses are jaded and he must fall back and recruit his stock. Just over that little range I see an animal. Without a word I chamber 9 buck shot in each barrel of my gun and crawl up behind a rocky point in short range of two fine elk, raised my gun cautiously and fired the trusty left-hand barrel, jumped out and fired the other barrel at the other which was bounding away unhurt—but one, a fine, large female was killed. A feather in my cap!

Wednesday, June 26. — Remained here to rest the stock and to eat elk meat, quite a luxury! On Thursday we traveled 24 miles and were obliged to carry water and wood $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile, country very rough and broken, deep ugly gulches and ragged bluffs.

Friday the 28th. — Fine road, 22 miles to camp on the Platte — no wood to cook with so we just walked out along the river bank and picked up those large, flat buffalo chips, so dry they burn readily and we are glad to get them — after a few months on the plains you lose your delicacy—and the stomach does not

spleen against the mode of cooking or the particular kind of food.

Saturday the 29th. — Twenty-five miles today as usual.

Sunday the 30th.—Circumstances compel us to travel today so we cross the Platte on what is called the lower bridge, of which there are three rough looking structures made of round poles and so old and shaky as to render crossing very dangerous, but the road on the south side is reported better and we venture over and camp near high mountains—but learning that the road is not so good on this side, we travel on to the upper bridge, and on Monday morning, July 1st, recross to the north side at the upper bridge. Here I swapped with a red skin and got some mocassins, one mile north from the bridge station.

Tuesday, July 2.—Started at five o'clock—drove 12 miles but feed so poor we got breakfast and go on 14 miles to good feed, fuel and water.

(Continued in December Issue)

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C. T. ("Little") Stanton of the Donner Party

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did not complain, only endeavored to keep up the spirits of the party although his own flesh would scarcely respond to the whip of his will.

At last, one morning he said "Go on boys, I'll catch up before dark falls." Reluctantly, but with the urge for self-preservation in their hearts the party left him. That was the last of "Little" Stanton, the BIG man of the Donner Party.

A large and imposing monument has been erected near the site of the Donner Tragedy to honor the pioneers who crossed the plains and the Sierra to settle California. It might be appropriate to erect another tablet on a modest boulder with the following words inscribed thereon:

"To the memory of C. T. "Little" Stanton,

Who also gave his life, that others might live."

WOOL SUBSTITUTES IN UTAH

Due to the scarcity of wool, dogs were shorn annually and their hair woven into cloth and used for clothing. Buffalo hair also was gathered from sagebrush and combined with cow's hair and used for weaving blankets, by the Mormons.—wpa

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