

# SCHARMANN'S OVERLAND JOURNEY TO CALIFORNIA

From the pages of  
a pioneer's diary



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TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN OF

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miles. We arrived there on the twentieth of April, pitched our tents, made other preparations, and then waited for the arrival of the committee which was to bring the cattle. The Missouri region may be called a veritable paradise. The dark soil of unsurpassable quality has allured many German settlers, and at the first glance their farms give evidence of their prosperity. Here, in the sunshine of political and civic freedom, work becomes pleasure, and its proceeds, instead of enriching the princely drone, are the reward of the worker.

## CHAPTER II

DEPARTURE FROM INDEPENDENCE—THE PRAIRIE—THE WAGONS—THE KANSAS RIVER—INDIANS—THE CROSSING—FORT KEARNEY—THE PLATTE RIVER—THE HUNT.

After a four weeks' stay we struck our tents, harnessed the horses to our four wagons, each of which was loaded with a minimum of three hundred pounds, and on May twentieth, with

forty cows and four to five yoked oxen we started toward the prairie.

This overland journey is one of the most unfortunate undertakings to which man may allow himself to be lured, because he cannot possibly have any conception before starting of this kind of travelling. To be sure, there is a beaten path which you see clearly before you, but there are no stopping-places with even the slightest signs of civilization. Everyone is going and no one is coming back. You leave your camp in the hope of finding water, and a grazing place for the cattle a few miles further on; but sometimes it happens that you are forced to halt in a place where neither grass nor water can be found. This means intense suffering for the cattle and often an irretrievable loss. In our case, some very serious blunders had been made in securing the wagons, the oxen, and the mules. An ox suitable for the journey over the prairies must not be under four nor over six years old, and must be well accustomed to the yoke. Every yoke must be of the same strength and quality, so that one ox does not pull ahead of or pull down the



other. The mules must also be young and well broken; whoever intends to break them in on the trip will surely not make any headway and will only ruin the animals. Horses are entirely useless.

The wagons deserve special attention. They should be made of dry and firm wood; and tongue and axle should be so strong that it would be almost impossible to break them. The wagon must be able to carry 6,000 pounds on a level road, and yet it must not be massive, and must run very easily. Four yokes of well-trained oxen or six mules should form the equipment for such a wagon, and it should not be loaded with more than 2,000 pounds. If you fall into holes, as is the case a dozen times a day when a wagon crosses a swamp, the oxen in front which have reached firm ground must help the others by giving them room to turn.

On some occasions I have seen the axles break in two, as though they were mere twigs. This happened with a wagon which was made for me by Mr. Ringelmann, a blacksmith and wheelwright in New York. I had the good

luck to be able to choose the best one of ten or twelve wagons which had been abandoned near the spot by other travellers. To this I harnessed seven oxen, and was thus able to ride over hedge and ditch without any danger.

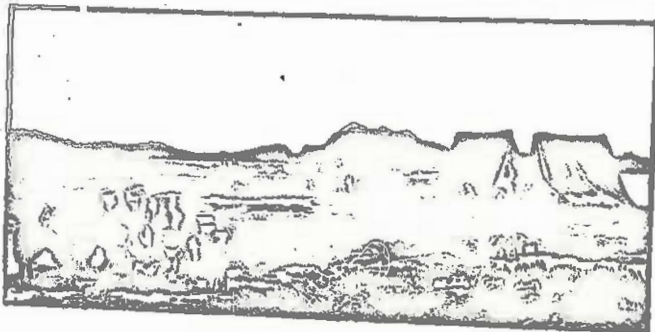
From Independence to the Kansas River, a distance of 130 miles, there is only a boundless prairie of the best grass land, but this landscape is so novel that you never tire of looking at it.

Along the Kansas River I saw Indians for the first time in their primitive condition. Men and women ride; they wrap themselves in woollen blankets, wear beads on hands and feet, and put them around their horses' necks; they paint their faces red and blue. But notwithstanding all their barbarous customs, they act in a fairly decent way. These Indians live mainly on the money which the United States pays them for their ceded territory.

The Kansas River at the crossing is too deep for a wagon to ford it, so a boat has been placed on which they may be taken over. The cattle have to swim. My son Frederic mounted Bill, the

trusty leader of the oxen, and started across. Immediately the whole herd followed him.

From the Kansas to Fort Kearney, a distance of 180 miles, the land is one large meadow with gently undulating hills and valleys. On June twenty-second we reached Fort Kearney, where



INDIAN VISITORS

we rested for two days. The fort, like all the other buildings around here, is built of dried bricks. It is garrisoned by three companies of soldiers and guarded by several guns, in order to keep a check on the numerous Indians of this neighborhood. The site is on an immense plateau thickly covered with grass which could serve as a dwelling-

place for an almost unlimited number of human beings, since the cultivation of this land and the raising of cattle would amply recompense them all within a few years.

I went to the commander of the fort and asked him for some fresh bread to satisfy my wife's longing. In the most accommodating and courteous way he supplied me with an order on the quartermaster's department, where I obtained fifteen pounds of fresh bread very cheaply.

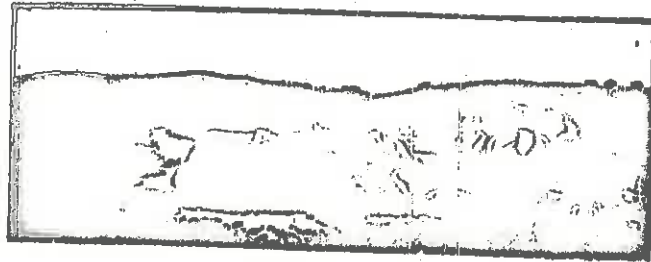
On the twenty-fourth of June we set out once more, this time toward Fort Laramie, which is situated at the foot of the Rockies, about 340 miles from Kearney. In a short time we had reached the Platte River, which has a breadth of a quarter of a mile and whose water is always muddy because its bed consists of a very fine quicksand, constantly stirred up by the strong current. Eighty miles from Fort Kearney, the Platte divides into two branches, the southernmost of which we had to cross. The various parties of emigrants helped each other, and furnished the relays of horses in turn,

so after great labor we safely reached the other side. The water came up to the body of the wagon and threatened to soak our provisions.

As we left the river and passed on toward the west, we came into the region of wild buffaloes. We were almost fifty miles from the south fork when we suddenly noticed some figures on a nearby hill. It was a herd of thousands of buffaloes. It is a most difficult and usually a futile undertaking to chase after these animals on foot. Huge and heavily built, they are nevertheless swift runners, and it is just barely possible that a fast Indian horse may overtake them in a long run. One day I saw three buffaloes and a calf behind a bluff not more than three hundred feet away from me, so that I could inspect them at short range. As soon as they caught sight of me they stared at me with their fiery eyes so that even the devil, if I had still believed in one, could scarcely have frightened me at that moment. I took to flight, but the animals also started to run. When I saw that we had a mutual dislike for each other's society, I

stopped running and watched them gallop off. The buffalo has a very broad chest, its front legs are slightly longer than the hind legs, its head is broad and long, with crisp dark brown locks circling over the forehead. Its flesh is similar to that of an ox.

In my company there were several good marksmen, who crept up stealthily upon the herd in due form and carried



A BUFFALO HUNT

off some booty. The air is so clear here that a slice of meat will dry in twenty-four hours, only the traveller has no time to wait for it. Other hunting is not to be thought of. I have not seen a single stag or deer, and there are no fish in the streams. Wolves, smaller than the European ones and quite harmless, come in hordes and in the evening.



They deafen your ears with their howling roundabout the camp. There are mosquitoes here, especially near the streams, and they are so plentiful that man and beast are continually harassed by them.

Thus the journey went on, always through the midst of the buffalo herds. One stray herd came running into the midst of our cattle, so that our hunters took aim and brought down one of them, but unhappily they also killed one of our best cows. That certainly was an expensive buffalo!

Horses and buffaloes are the mainstay of the prairie Indians. The buffalo meat serves as their nourishment; the skins they use for utensils or they give them to the traders, who pass through the prairie every summer, in exchange for woollen blankets, carmine red and indigo blue, and fine pearls which the squaws use for artistic embroidery on dresses and shoes. Buffalo skins and rare deer skins are dyed most delicately and used to make dresses and shoes.

About 115 miles from Fort Laramie we met a band of Indians which, count-

ing women and children, numbered 230 persons. The chief handed us a document, signed by the commander of the fort, which stated that the Indians of this branch of the Sioux were not hostile, but most friendly, and that therefore every traveller should avoid insulting them. We soon learned that they had come in order to get some of our provisions, but our company was not very abundantly provided and could give them very little. I camped about fifty yards away from the general camp, with my wagon of provisions. Soon I counted thirty-six Indians around my wagon. Among them was the chief, with his squaw and three children. Naturally I was curious to learn something of their customs. So I gave orders that the wash-kettle should be filled with tea and all other available vessels with coffee; also I had three large pancakes baked. My cows still gave quite a bit of milk, and so a supper was prepared for the Indians. The chief thought that he had more rights than the others, so he and his family sat close to the wagon. The others lay around the fire in a circle.

When the other Indians saw that these were being feasted, they all came running up. I indicated to the chief that this was unwelcome to me, whereupon he immediately arose, held up his hand and cried aloud: "Womeski!" As though struck by lightning, the approaching Indians stopped short and then turned back.

After the meal my guests left with many expressions of gratitude; only the chief and his family remained. I was very much drawn to this man, because of his unusual physiognomy and behavior. We sat together some time and smoked. Our conversation consisted of silence and signs. Meanwhile his wife brought my wife a pair of deerskin shoes, finely embroidered in pearls. I made them a few presents in return.

The following morning, before we resumed our journey, I visited their camp. My youngest son drove the wagon and my oldest son accompanied me. Here I verified the truth that all good deeds are rewarded, for these savages strive earnestly to repay everything that they had received at my hands. Their huts

are round, narrowing toward the top and covered with large skins; the camp is circular and in the midst of it is the chief's dwelling.

As soon as the chief caught sight of me he shook hands and then took me into his tent and presented to me some dried buffalo meat. All the women that I saw were busily making shoes and embroidering dresses with pearls. The chief's daughter, who was about nineteen years old, threw a rope of pearls around my son's neck while I gazed at her long and admiringly. My son was fifteen years old, of a strong, manly stature, yet he did not seem to guess at the thoughts which one might surmise were running through the girl's head. I experienced real regret at having to leave these savages who appeared to me to be more civilized than many so-called civilized men.

### CHAPTER III

~~FORT LARAMIE—SOUTH PASS—FLAX—  
SNAKE INDIANS—THE HUMBOLDT RIVER  
—FALSELY DIRECTED—DESERT—HARD-  
SHIPS.~~

At Fort Laramie we remained for three days, caring for the cattle and repairing our wagons. As I wished to hurry ahead as much as possible, I felt that it was advisable for me to leave the company which was making far too slow a progress.

I had to drive along the right bank of the Platte River for about 150 miles before I came to a place where the Mormons had constructed a ferry which carried me across the river. From Fort Laramie to the South Pass the land is only sparsely covered with grass, in altogether insufficient quantity for the countless crowds of emigrants that must pass over it. In addition to this, the road is rough and rocky, although it passes between the mountains instead

of over them. Finally, without any climbing, the South Pass is reached. There a brook splashes merrily over the rocks and a good-sized grassy expanse greets the traveller's weary eyes. The brook is called Pacific Creek. On my arrival I found five thousand oxen and numerous mules and wagons, besides their human owners. These separated here, some to go to the Mormon City, others to join the California travellers. I attached myself to this latter division and so had plenty of company.

At the Big Santee River we rested for a day. Then we went on over a forty-mile desert to the Green River. Here pieces of shattered wagons were scattered all around; but several in good condition were among them, so we had a good chance to replenish our stock. After this I drove on over steep mountains and through deep valleys, continually wondering whether it would be possible to climb over them.

The mountains in this region are called Peak Basement and form a dome in a circle of about one hundred square miles. All are covered by low brush-wood and grass, and present a very



pleasant aspect. The most curious thing in this region is the fact that flax grows everywhere in among the grass. I examined a stalk and discovered that it was very like the European flax in quality. Thus the soil proclaimed its own fertility. The only drawback is that it does not rain here during the Indian summer.

This is the only region during this part of the voyage that seems worthy of a farmer's notice. The land for the rest of the way from Fort Laramie to California is not worth a cent, I think. It consists of nothing but desert-land and bare mountains covered with boulders and red soil which make them resemble volcanoes. The best thing the traveller can do is to hurry on as fast as possible from one river to the other.

At the Bear River, in a valley from three to four miles wide, we gave our cattle a two days' rest. Here there was no lack of grass, but such grazing places are quickly traversed, and it is not possible to remain near them for any length of time. In a beautiful valley along the Snake River I met Snake Indians, who are closely related to the Sioux Tribe.

Their chief occupations are hunting and fishing. They came up to us and begged, but we discovered that if you give something to one of them all the others come running to you. Their intellectual faculties are probably of the very lowest, as their language consists of an extremely limited vocabulary. They wore feathers behind their ears, and many also used them to decorate their heads. We did not bother very much with them, simply giving them something and then

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useless mass of brushwood which looks and smells very much like the worm-wood plant. The mountains here are apparently volcanic, reddish in color, bare and covered with boulders and rocks which have been burned by the heat of the sun. This gives the region