



Lorenzo Sawyer

WAY SKETCHES

CONTAINING INCIDENTS OF TRAVEL
ACROSS THE PLAINS

FROM
ST. JOSEPH TO CALIFORNIA
IN 1850

WITH

LETTERS DESCRIBING
LIFE AND CONDITIONS
IN THE GOLD REGION

By **LORENZO SAWYER**

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SUPREME COURT OF CALIFORNIA

WITH HISTORICAL NOTES COMPILED
FROM RARE SOURCES AND AN INTRODUCTION

BY

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CHAPTER I

FROM ST. JOSEPH TO FORT KEARNEY

Departure from St. Joseph—on the Prairie—Campfire Social—Dead Horses—Pass the Delaware and McPike Trains—Indian Mission—Emigrant Graves by the Way—Prairie Skull Messages—Cross the Nemaha and Big Blue Rivers—Travel up the Little Blue—Encounter disheartened returning Emigrants daily—Scarcity of Grass—Reach the Platte—Fort Kearney.



MONDAY, May 6th, 1850. Early this morning we left our camp 3 miles east of St. Joseph, drove into town, completed some arrangements there, crossed the Missouri, and commenced our journey across the plains.¹ The roads are good and the weather pleasant. Our route for the first six miles lay through the Missouri Bottoms; afterwards over a high, rolling and

¹The frontier outpost of St. Joseph, Mo., is thus described by Silas Newcomb, *Journal Kept during an Overland Journey to California and Oregon, 1850-51. MS.* (In the collection of W. R. Coe, Esq. Photostats of this journal are in the Huntington and Ayer Collections). "April 19, 1850. This place contains some two thousand five hundred inhabitants and at present is a very busy place on account of the California emigration which seems to centre here; Hills and dales are white with their camps. Many have crossed the river and encamped on the west side in the Indian Territory. Find all classes well represented here and to find a drunken Indian at every square is nothing uncommon. Place contains four good sized Hotels, about twenty Stores and the residue is made up of groceries, bakeries, &c." Another account, written April 30, 1850, within six days of Sawyer's departure, says: "St. Joseph is quite a village, and doing quite a great deal of business at this time; but the way they fleece the California emigrants is worth noticing. I should advise all going to California by the Overland Route to take everything along with them that they can, as every little thing costs three or four times as much here as at home. The markets are filled with broken down horses jockeyed up for the occasion, and unbroken mules which they assure you are handy as sheep. It is the greatest place for gambling and all other rascality that I was ever in. We had to stand guard on our horses as much as if we were in the Indian Country. It is said that one or two men have been shot by the Emigrants, while in the act of stealing." Eleaser Ingalls, *Journal of a Trip to California by the Overland Route across the Plains in 1850-51.* (Waukegan, Ill., 1852). (W. R. Coe Collection. The original manuscript diary is in the Collection of C. Templeton Crocker, Esq.). The Missouri, says Mrs. Frizzell, "is considered the starting point—from this river is time reconed (*sic*) & it matters not how far you have come, this is the point to which they all refer, for the question is never, when did you leave home? but, when did you leave the Mississouri (*sic*) river?" Lodisa Frizzell, *Across the Plains to California in 1852.* (New York, 1915), p. 12.

in many places considerably broken prairie country. As we passed over the higher points of land, we had frequent views of St. Joseph in the distance, till near night. Having purchased 3 extra wagons for conveying grain for our animals, our train now consists of 13 wagons, 72 animals and 29 men. We traveled 16 miles west of the Missouri, and encamped at a small grove in a ravine on the left of the road, where we found plenty of water and wood for cooking. There is but little appearance of grass yet. Most of the emigrants who crossed the river before us have gone on; many, however, are still in camp on the Missouri Bottoms. About 9 o'clock p. m., Mr. Ranney, of Delaware, O., with two ladies, Mrs. Ranney and her sister, whose husband is now in California,² came to our camp. Most of his train with the tents and supplies being several miles behind. We invited him to camp with us, tendering such accommodations as we could offer, which were gladly accepted. We ranged our water casks to give them seats, clove the oaks to renew their camp fires, gave them bread of our own baking, and resigned to their use our best tents. The ladies were in excellent spirits and conversed freely. They appeared intelligent and accustomed to refined society. Thus passed pleasantly our first evening in the Indian Territory. At the usual hour we set our watch³ and retired for the night.

²In the Sierra's, two and a half months later, Sawyer chanced to meet this husband, who, driven frantic with worry for his wife's safety, was crossing to the Humboldt Desert on foot in the hope of finding her.

³Once the frontier was reached guards were posted at each night's camp. Here, emigrants from all points met, and the wagon-train as an entity—quasi-military in character—came into being. Officers were chosen and bristling codes of rules were drawn up and adopted. *e.g.*, Capt. R. B. Marcy, *The Prairie Traveler*. (N. Y., 1859), p. 22-3: "After a particular route has been selected to make the journey across the plains, and the requisite number have arrived . . . their first business should be to organize themselves into a company and elect a commander. The company should be of sufficient magnitude to herd and guard animals, and for protection against Indians . . . In the selection of a captain, good judgement, integrity of purpose and practical experience are the essential requisites . . . His duty should be to direct the order of march, the time of starting and halting, to select the camps, detail and give orders to guards, and, indeed, to control and superintend all the movements of the company. An obligation should be drawn up and signed by all the members of the association, wherein each one should bind himself to abide in all cases by the orders and decisions of the captain and to aid him by every means in his power . . . and they should also obligate themselves to aid each other, so as

In our journey across Illinois and Missouri⁴ the hogs, those necessary accompaniments of civilization were a great pest to us, and we feel now a great relief from their absence, much preferring to take our chance with the Indians than with them. One can scarcely realize that he has passed the bounds of civilized life, the prairies are so much like the large ones we passed in Illinois. Whole distance travelled today, 18 miles.

May 7th.

Last night at 10 o'clock it commenced raining and continued to rain violently with slight intermissions till near daylight, when it changed to snow and sleet. The snow continued to fall rapidly till late in the morning. It was almost impossible to light a fire, and it was the most disagreeable morning for preparing our meals we have had since we left Wisconsin. The prospect for those who are on the plains without grain for their animals, (and there are many such) is gloomy enough. Our men, however, are in good spirits. About 9 o'clock the weather cleared up. In the afternoon we harnessed up, drove 10 miles and encamped near a small creek in a ravine at the right of the

to make the individual interest of each member the common concern of the whole company." A typical pact of the kind was that printed for the Beloit Company on the day of the Sawyer set-out. The original agreement in broadside form is preserved in the Newcomb Journal, *op. cit.* In part it reads:

"At a meeting of a Company of Californians on the Banks of the Missouri, May 6th, 1850, the following Preamble and Resolutions were unanimously adopted:

Whereas we are about to leave the frontier, and travel over Indian Territory, exposed to their treachery, and knowing their long and abiding hatred of the whites; also many other privations to meet with. We consider it necessary to form ourselves into a Company for the purpose of protecting each other and our property, during our journey to California.

Therefore Resolved, That there shall be one selected from the Company, suitable and capable to act as Captain or Leader.

Resolved, That we, as men, pledge ourselves to assist each other through all the misfortunes that may befall us on our long and dangerous journey.

Resolved, That the Christian Sabbath shall be observed, except when absolutely necessary to travel.

Resolved, That there shall be a sufficient guard appointed each night regularly, by the Captain.

Resolved, That in case of a member's dying, the Company shall give him a decent burial."

⁴Sawyer started from Wisconsin, as is revealed in the next day's entry.

road. We crossed in the course of our travel, Cedar creek, (called by some Mosquito creek) where we let our wagons down the bank by ropes passed round the hind axle. Country today very much broken and prairie. We saw some dead horses by the way. We also passed a sign fastened to a tree, which bore the inscription, "J. Morely, Physician and Surgeon." Saw nothing of the Doctor however. Distance 10 miles.

May 8th.

This morning we crossed Wolf creek⁵ 2 miles from our camp, on a toll bridge owned by the Indians. Several long trains were ahead of us, and the road as far as we could see, was lined with wagons on the march. Several trains came in on the Savannah road⁶ just as we passed the junction of the roads. Three or four miles west of the Missouri, which we passed early in the morning, we came to a creek supposed to be Salt creek. The crossing was difficult, and we were detained an hour while the several trains ahead were passing. The Delaware train⁷ consisting of 17 wagons was ahead of us. As we rose the hill west of the creek, we saw the road for miles ahead lined with emigrants. As it is difficult passing a train on the march, we expected to be

⁵Wolf Creek, a tributary of the Missouri, rises in Brown Co., and runs through Doniphan Co., Kansas. At this point it cuts through a rocky gorge 20 ft. deep and some 40 ft. wide. Potter, May 10th, 1852, says: "The only bridge at Wolf River was owned by a person living at the Pawnee Indian Mission nearby, who charged \$5 for each wagon that he allowed to cross. Such was the crowd of people and so exorbitant the price that our party joined with some other trains and built a new bridge. . . . There were four such bridges built in two days." T. E. Potter, *The Autobiography of Theodore Edgar Potter*. (Concord, N. H., 1913), p. 31. The inexorable law of supply and demand seems to have been well understood by the red men; for on the following day when the Frizzell train arrived, the toll charge had fallen to 50 cts per wagon. Frizzell, *op. cit.*, p. 13. Langford, in his *Vigilante Days and Ways*, tells of one of these pioneer toll bridges upon which the following plausible sign was erected: Notis. No vehacle drawn by moar than one animile is alloud to cros this Bridg in opposite direxions at the Sam Time.

⁶The Savannah road led from the town of Savannah, about 14 miles above St. Joseph. Many emigrants followed up the east bank of the Missouri to this point, and crossed the stream by hand-ferry at Savannah Landing, now Amazonia, Missouri. G. L. Cole, *In the Early Days Along the Overland Trail*. (Kansas City, Mo., 1905), p. 15.

⁷Presumably the train in which the Ranney family, mentioned by Sawyer on May 6, were traveling.

delayed. But after traveling a short distance, we came to a place where the road to avoid a ravine, sweeps round a bend of several miles in extent, then comes back in sight of our position again. We saw at a distance in the ravine, to the right, a number of emigrants encamped in a clump of trees, and the road just beyond them. Thinking if they could pass the ravine, we could, and finding a good place to descend into the ravine when the Delaware train ahead was over a hill, we turned to the right and had made considerable progress before our object was discovered by those in advance. As soon as we were perceived, the Delaware train also turned off at a point nearer our destination and endeavored to head us. We put our animals upon full trot down hill and over rough mole hills at no small risk to our wagons, and were so fortunate as to get in ahead of the other train.⁸ We found a bad ravine at the trees, but the emigrants while camped there had bridged it for the purpose of crossing their train when ready to move, and we passed over. The Delaware train and a great number behind us passed over the same way. We were told that it was seven miles round the road, whereas it was not over a mile across. Thus we passed all the large trains that were in sight in the morning. We also passed a great number at their nooning,⁹ and many others in the afternoon. We must have passed from 100 to 150 wagons on the march today.¹⁰ Our route lay over a beautiful undulating country, with a rich soil, but with only now and then a few scattering trees in sight. Towards night we crossed three very bad slues, and just beyond the last, turned off to the left, where we found wood and water in a ravine about a mile from the road. This is the only camping ground we have seen for several miles, wood and water having been scarce on our route. We

⁸"There were many advantages by being in the lead. Less dust and the choice of camping-ground. The men in the lead would pick up every stick of wood or kindling." Thissell, *Crossing the Plains*. (Oakland, 1903), p. 38.

⁹This term applied to the mid-day halt rather than to the noon hour. Thus a train which started early often "nooned" about 10 o'clock.

¹⁰Abbey, on May 4, observes: "While grazing our stock at noon I counted 200 horse teams, 80 mule teams and 60 ox-teams pass." James Abbey, *California: A Trip Across the Plains in 1850*. (New Albany, Ind., 1850). (W. R. Coe Collection).

camped about 4 o'clock. The other trains were coming in till after dark. The Delaware train was two hours behind us. All who camped here had mules and horses. A company of Iowa Indians are in camp amusing the men by shooting at a mark. We saw a few log houses and some cultivated fields at the Mission¹¹ this morning, the first seen since we left St. Joseph, and probably the last we shall see till we get to California. The bridge tender at the Missouri, said 1400 teams had crossed the bridge.¹² The Savannah road comes in this side of the bridge, and several hundred teams must have come in by that road, so there cannot be less than 2000 wagons ahead of us on this road. Distance 20 miles.

May 9th.

This morning we left our encampment at half past five o'clock.¹³ The Pike Co., Mo. train however, got out before us. Several trains were behind. As we moved on, the companies which had camped along the road for the next ten miles, fell into the road one after another so that we again had a full road ahead before noon. We followed along behind, passing the ox teams as opportunity offered till noon, and then passed the horse and mule teams at their nooning. We passed the Pike Co. train in this manner. We fed on corn at noon, while the rest fed on grass, thus although we were the last to stop, we were the first to start and so kept ahead. We passed a number of wagons and one train while on the march in the afternoon, so that all in sight

¹¹The Iowa and Sac and Fox Mission, situated on the emigrant road about twenty six miles northwest of St. Joseph, and four miles north of Wolf Creek. It was established by the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions in 1837. Kansas State Historical Society, *Transactions*, II, p. 268.

¹²Thissell, *op. cit.*, p. 19, who crossed at Council Bluffs, notes on March 25, "Over fifteen hundred men anxiously waiting to be ferried over the Missouri. The boat was busy from daylight till dark."

¹³"We were now in the Indian Country and traveled by *rule*, as it were. Before daylight the cry would break the slumbers of all, 'Roll Out, boys! Roll out!' The mess fires were kindled and breakfast under way in a trice; the mules driven in by the night herders and fed their grain while being harnessed; breakfasts were bolted, teams were hitched on and the long train would stretch out like a snake from the place where it lay corraled during the night, just as the sun's broad disc rolled up in the East." Paulson, *Across the Plains*. (New York, 1867). (W. R. Coe Collection).

were in our rear before night. There is a good camping ground about four miles from our last night's camp and others at short distances for the next 8 or 10 miles, by occasionally going a short distance from the road. We passed no good place near the road in the afternoon. We camped on the first we found which is in a ravine a mile to the right of the road. Here we found timber and good water. It can be seen from the hill on the road. We have passed over a beautiful country today, but almost destitute of water, with no timber. The surface is gracefully undulating and there are many extensive views. The soil is excellent. We have seen no live animals except horses and mules. We passed several graves today, where emigrants of last year found their final resting place. One was near the road, over the head was placed inverted a pair of huge antlers, once worn by an elk. They were full four feet high and formed an arch over the head of the grave. A board bearing the name, age and date of the death of the person who sleeps beneath, was fastened across the horns. Another grave was indicated by an elk's horns with the inscription carved on the horns. Another, that of Dr. Byan, had a block of stone placed at the head of the grave. This must have been brought several miles, as there is no appearance of stone near here. These deaths all occurred in the Month of May, '49. We saw whitening on the plains, many bones of animals which died on the way last year. These bones whenever seen, always bear some inscription written by those who have gone ahead to their friends in the rear, giving them various kinds of information. They are to be seen in conspicuous places all along the road. Thus the bones of those animals which last year were alive and used to carry out the emigrants to California, are now employed as messengers of thought. And these are the only means the emigrants have for this purpose.¹⁴ Today

¹⁴"There is one thing peculiar on this route—the practice of writing on buffalo skulls scattered along beside the track—names of men and companies, and dates of their passing, that their friends who follow may read." Silas Newcomb, *op. cit.*, *Cf.*, Lambourne: "We passed one of those prairie letters—an ox-shoulder blade or skull—on which was written: 'Captain Chipman's train passed here August 14 . . . 8 deaths, 90 head of cattle driven away by the Indians. Great scare in camp.'" Alfred Lambourne,

we passed a large drove of cattle on their way to California. Distance about 24 miles.

May 10th.

This morning we were on the march at 15 minutes past 5 o'clock. Our object was to reach the ford of the Nemaha¹⁵ before any of the trains which camped near us, which we accomplished. We were not delayed here. We crossed in three-quarters of an hour, letting our wagons down the steep bank with ropes. This is about five miles from our last night's camping ground. A large number of emigrants came up before our wagons were all over. We had no wagons ahead to hinder our march. The Nemaha is said to be the boundary between the Iowa and Pawnee Indians.¹⁶ It is a small clear river with a rocky bottom, and affords good camping ground; it is a beautiful stream. Found good camping grounds today, about every five miles. The first fifteen miles was over a country similar to that passed on the preceding day, only better watered. The latter part of our route was more broken. We passed another large drove of cattle. We have also found several dead horses and some sick ones abandoned by the owners. We pass more or less every day. We have met quite a number of men on their way back, having seen enough of "the elephant."¹⁷ Some have been out two hundred miles. We camped near a small

The Pioneer Trail (Salt Lake City, 1913), p. 45. Likewise Mrs. Frizzell, p. 28 observes: "We frequently find a buffalo head stuck up with a notice that there is a spring in such & such a place; nearly all the skulls and shoulder blades along the road, are more or less written upon."

¹⁵The Nemaha River, in the southeastern part of Nebraska, emptying into the Missouri two miles below the present town of Rulo. "Twenty-one miles above the mouth of Wolf river is the entrance of the Grand Nemahaw, a considerable river, which rises in the plains between the Platte and the Republican Fork of the Konzas (*sic*) river, and running eastwardly about one hundred and fifty miles, discharges into the Missouri." Edwin James, *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains, 1819-20*. (Philadelphia, 1823), p. 141.

¹⁶By the Treaty of Fort Leavenworth, Sept. 17, 1836.

¹⁷B. F. Dowell, *Letters, MS.*, p. 3 (Bancroft Library): "Bought a horse from one who turned back after having traveled 700 miles; he had seen the elephant, and eaten its ears." A perhaps not altogether unwelcome desertion from the Frizzell train occurred near here. It was that of a somewhat opinionated old lady who "said that we had all better turn back, for if grass began to give out now, what would become of us if we went on until our teams were not able to turn back; she said she was going back,

stream about twenty miles from the Nemaha. Distance about 25 miles.

May 11th.

We started this morning at half past five o'clock, before any who camped near us. Many were camped on the prairie as we passed. There are a number of places within the next fifteen miles, where water can be had for camping, but no wood. About eighteen miles brought us to the crossing of the Big Blue river,¹⁸ a fine stream and fordable. Wood is plenty along its banks. The country east of the river is beautiful prairie, gently undulating and having a rich soil. On the west it is high rolling prairie. We took on wood and water at the ford, and drove seven or eight miles and encamped near a small ravine at the left of the road, just before reaching the summit of a hill of considerable height. There was no wood at our camp, and none between it and the ford of the river. There was no water suitable for culinary purposes, but we found water that would answer for our animals. Distance about 25 miles.

Sunday, May 12th.

Having neither wood nor water for culinary purposes, and but little grass near our camp, we resumed our march.¹⁹ A large number of emigrants had encamped within the next five miles beyond us. These, also, kept on their journey today. Among them was McPike's train. We found ourselves in a larger crowd than at any time since we left the Missouri river, but we passed them all before noon. We passed McPike while he was harnessing. This is the

for she had made a living before she had ever heard of California, & the rest might go on & starve their teams to death if they liked." Frizzell, p. 17.

¹⁸The Big Blue, or Blue Earth River as it was originally called, is an affluent of the Kansas. It rises in Nebraska and runs southward into Kansas. The St. Joe road crossed the stream near the site of the present town of Marysville, Kansas. Ingalls, arriving here on Sunday, May 12, one day behind Sawyer, says: "Here we found a large city of tents. There was probably 2,000 men camped within two miles of the crossing."

¹⁹It will be noted that this was Sunday, hence the explanation for not laying over. As in the case of the Beloit Company, (see Note 3) most trains rested on the Sabbath "except when absolutely necessary to travel." The Sawyer train put the question to a vote each week, and on all but two occasions decided to push ahead.

passenger train about which so much was said in the newspapers, and which was designed to make the quickest trip of the season. We passed him early on the morning of the 7th day out, and he had four days the start.²⁰ We saw none lying by today. About two miles from our camp we came to the junction of the Independence and St. Joseph roads.²¹ Many of the wagons camped beyond the junction down the Independence road. About three miles from the junction we crossed Willow creek. We found a little water for our animals in slues along the road, but none suitable for cooking. Saw timber occasionally to the right of the road. About eighteen miles further brought us to a creek bounded by bluffs. Water good and bordered with timber. We took on wood and water and camped on the prairie. Weather cold yet and but little grass. The first five miles today was over high and rolling prairie. The next ten miles the prairie was quite level. The remainder of the route was more broken. Distance about 25 miles.

May 13th.

We resumed our march at five o'clock. The country for the first eight miles is rolling prairie, after which it is broken by frequent ravines running into the Little Blue. There is timber frequently at short distances from the road, on the left and occasionally on the right. The road for the last nine miles is over a level prairie. We have found but little grass, wood, or water on our route today. The prairie seems to be suffering for want of rain. We have seen a less number of emigrants today than on any day previous.—We met some on their way home. This evening several antelope were seen and fired at by our men, but without effect. Distance about 25 miles.

May 14th.

We resumed our march a little before five o'clock. The country is much broken by ravines putting into the Little

²⁰On May 25th this train was destined to lose 25 horses and mules by a stampede during a tornado.

²¹The Independence Road followed the southern side of the Kansas River to Papan's Ferry, the site of the present city of Topeka. Here, crossing the stream, it ran northwest, finally striking the St. Joe trail some ten miles west of the Big Blue.

Blue, which runs here but a short distance to the left of the road. The loose, deep sand, when so dry as it now is, absorbs the water in the streams, except what little is found in deep holes. We struck for the first time to the banks of the Little Blue,²² a fine clear stream of water with a rapid current, at this point about 20 yards wide. Many of the emigrants turned off the main road before reaching this point, and come along the bottoms with a view of obtaining grass. Very little is to be found on account of the drought under which the whole region is now suffering. We followed up the Little Blue about 14 miles and encamped on the bluff at the right, just beyond where the road comes up to the river, and where a steep point of the bluff approaches so near the river as to leave barely room for a road. Immediately after passing this point the river bottoms widen again. This morning we saw at a distance, running over the prairie, some large animals which we took to be elk. Near our encampment one of our company found a human skull on the ground. We also found two human skulls stuck up on stakes by the side of the wood, with messages written on them by some persons ahead to their friends in the rear. We pass every day more or less graves of persons who died on their way out last year, but I have as yet seen no grave made this spring. We meet more and more on their way home. Their teams are so worn down with labor without food as to render them incapable of performing the journey. The weather is extremely dry and the grass more backward than on any previous portion of our route. If this weather continues, there must be an incalculable amount of suffering and it will be impossible for the emigrants to go forward.²³ Distance about 28 miles.

May 15th.

We resumed our march at five o'clock. Followed up the Little Blue twenty-nine miles; occasionally cutting off a

²²Little Blue River rises in southeastern Nebraska and empties into the Big Blue in Marshall Co., Kansas. The trail followed up the north side of this stream for some 60 miles, then turned northwest, striking the Platte a few miles below Fort Kearney.

²³Ingalls, on the Little Blue May 16, reports: "We found the grass poorer than before which is discouraging as there has not been enough yet

bend of the river. We started from our camp across a large bend. Some ten miles brought us to the river again. The bend is full of emigrants waiting for grass to become better; some of whom left St. Joseph as early as the 2nd of April. About noon we found Dr. Clark, of Beloit, (whose company was a few miles ahead) setting a fractured leg. The unfortunate man was from the western part of Wisconsin. In attempting to stop his oxen when frightened, he was run over and his leg severely fractured. At the last place where the road comes up to the Little Blue, we took on wood and water,²⁴ then drove two miles toward the Platte, and encamped on the open prairie. The country along the Little Blue is beautiful and rich prairie. The dust was very annoying today, almost suffocating and blinding us. We passed a company of packers that left St. Joseph on the 2nd of May, traveling all the time. Distance 31 miles.

May 16th.

Five o'clock this morning found us pulling away for Platte River. In the morning we crossed a couple of small creeks, nearly dry, except in the deep holes in the bed of the stream. We found no more water, except a little in a slue, till we reached the valley of Platte river, twenty miles distant. The creeks will be dry in the course of a few weeks. For the first fifteen miles of our journey today, the country is gently undulating prairie. Thence onward our route lay over the dividing ridge between the waters of the Little Blue and Platte. This portion of the country is broken by many sand hills. The Platte bottoms, which are here several miles wide, are bounded by a range of broken sand hills. The bottoms are white with an alkaline deposit like soda. We drove five miles up the bottoms and encamped on the

anywhere to feed a team. One company intended to stop three days, and if rain did not come, to go back home." Here, on May 8, Smith writes: "It looks hard to meet misfortunes so soon, but many have had to submit to them, as is apparent all along the route. Horses, mules and oxen have died, wagons have broken down, and sickness fell to the lot of some. Some of the teams have consumed all their feed and begin to travel more moderately." C. W. Smith, *Journal of a Trip to California in 1850*. (New York, 1920), p. 26.

²⁴This was known as the "Last leaving of the Little Blue." Water was always taken on here, as there was none fit to drink between this point and the Platte some thirty-odd miles beyond.

bank of one portion of the Platte river, opposite Grand Island.²⁵ We drove our animals across to graze on the Island, where we found good grass. We saw plenty of antelope and two buffalo today, but could not approach near enough to kill them. There are many emigrants encamped along the Platte waiting for grass. Distance 31 miles.

May 17th.

Our march was resumed at five o'clock. Nine miles from our camp brought us to Fort Kearney,²⁶ from which place most of us sent letters to our friends. We followed up the Platte twenty miles and encamped near the river. The main river where we first struck it, above the garrison, as well as the whole distance we have traveled along its banks, is two or three miles wide at least, and perhaps more. It is a very muddy shallow stream, with a rapid current. We saw persons fording it on horseback. The opposite bank is lined with emigrant trains on the Council Bluff road.²⁷ The bottoms on this side are bounded by a range of sterile

²⁵The Platte River was usually struck at Grand Island. Near here the trails from Westport, Independence and St. Joseph reached the great Oregon Trail. This river characterized by Washington Irving as "the most magnificent and most useless of streams," was called by the Indians the Nebraska, which word in their language signified flat. The French settlers, who seem to have been the earliest to occupy the valleys of the stream (in 1719) gave to it the French equivalent, "La Platte," carrying out the idea of a broad and shallow stream. Since that time the name has been modified into the present one of Platte River. The stream is shallow and variable, at times compressed into a bed a few hundred yards across, then spreading out to a mile or more in width, with a multitude of channels and a network of sand-bars and islands. Its bed is generally quicksand, in which it is necessary to keep constantly in motion to avoid sinking.

²⁶Fort Kearney (originally Fort Childs) was established for the defense of the Oregon emigrants under act of Congress of May 19, 1846. It was named after Col. Stephen W. Kearny. Sawyer's spelling of the name, although erroneous, has become statutory. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 27, writing at the Fort on May 11, says: "Nine hundred wagons had been reported as having passed this Spring." Two days later, when the Abbey train arrived, the report was that "three thousand two hundred wagons had passed before us."

²⁷The Council Bluffs road was the old Mormon Trail which followed the north bank of the Platte to Upper Ferry, where it merged with the Oregon Trail. On it the emigration was equally heavy. McKeeby, writing on May 26 says: "The road on our side of the river for miles ahead are (sic) lined with teams [and] from our camp to the Missouri behind us is one continuous line of wagons." Lemuel Clarke McKeeby, *Memoirs*. Original typed Ms., p. 14. (W. R. Coe Collection). Reprinted in California Historical Society *Quarterly*, iii, p. 49.

sand hills, from two to six miles distant from the river. The bottoms have a rich soil, but are, on this side, destitute of timber. We have found no wood since we struck the Platte, except fragments of wagon boxes and a few sweet poplar and cotton wood limbs, brought from the islands by emigrants who have preceded us. We found some water in slues before reaching Fort Kearney, but none this side, except in the river which is very muddy. The barracks at Fort Kearney are mere mud houses. There are two or three respectable frame houses.²⁸ We met two trains of fur traders today, returning from the Rocky Mountains with the furs procured last winter. They had a large quantity.²⁹ Distance 29 miles.

²⁸"At Fort Kearney," says Smith, p. 27, "there are several plain looking buildings mostly composed of unburnt brick and turf, and some tents, though the best houses are wood." Ingalls observes that while "It has no decent houses for the officers . . . it answers the purpose of keeping the Indians in awe, although it would not stand fifteen minutes cannonade from heavy artillery."

²⁹Ingalls, passing these traders two days later notes that they had "five wagons loaded with skins;" and that he "sent back letters by them, for which we had to pay 25 cts apiece."

CHAPTER II.

FROM FORT KEARNEY TO PLATTE FERRY

The Platte Valley—Scarcity of Wood—Wagons Burned for Fuel—Romantic Scenery—Vast Herds of Buffalo—A Buffalo Hunt—Terrible Slaughter—Reach the "Forks of the Platte"—Deer Creek—Snow-capped Mountains in Sight—Cross the Platte—The Mormon Ferry—Rough Country.



AY 18th. We resumed our march at the usual hour. Twelve miles from our camp we crossed Plum creek. We drove eighteen miles further and encamped on the open paririe near a small slue on the left of the road and about a mile from the river. This is the only water, except Plum creek, we have found off from the river. We dug a well near the slue, about five feet deep, and procured water suitable for cooking. We found no wood today on this side of the river. There is some sweet poplar on the island. We used "buffalo chips" as a substitute for wood. These burn tolerably well when dry. Grass is better today. There is but little variation in the general aspect of the country, only the bluffs, in some places, approach nearer the river, and are also covered with grass; presenting a more agreeable appearance to the eye than the barren sand hills we passed yesterday. The Platte valley thus far is a rich and beautiful country. There is probably no stream in the west that furnishes so abundant a supply of grass. The "bottoms" appear to be from one to five or six miles broad. Whole distance today, 30 miles.

Sunday, May 19th.

Today we traveled by vote of the company. The country is similar to that passed yesterday. The bluffs, however, are higher, more rugged and irregular, and more sterile. The river is much narrower than at the point where we first struck it. We found little grass today, as the valley had been but recently burned over. We encamped about a mile from the road, on the right and but a short distance from the river. We found some wells dug near the river, which supplied us with good clear water. Having no fuel and

one of our grain wagons being no longer needed, it was burned.³⁰ Distance 25 miles.

May 20th.

Our captain thinks our camp last night was nearly opposite the "forks"³¹ of the Platte. There appears to be a difference of opinion on this point. I do not think we have reached the "forks" yet. This morning after our train had started, I rode out to the Bluffs alone, some two miles distant from the road. I spent an hour or more in climbing to some of the most elevated points, to obtain a favorable position for viewing the surrounding country. The views from the highest knolls were beautiful in the extreme. Before me lay the lovely valley of the Platte, attired in the bright, unfaded robes of spring. Many miles of its course were disclosed to my unobstructed view. Opposite at a distance of some miles from the river, it is bounded by a range of hills. At each end, the hills on the opposite sides appear to meet, thus enclosing the valley and apparently forming a broad and beautiful basin. The more rugged features of the far-off Bluffs were softened by distance into gentle and graceful undulations, presenting to the beholder an outline of exquisite beauty. Those portions of the valley

³⁰The destruction and abandonment of material which had outlived its usefulness, or which as was frequently the case should never have been brought along, was a conspicuous feature of the overland migration. Diarists almost without exception refer to the constant and necessary casting away of objects whose further presence in the train constituted a serious and often dangerous hindrance to progress. An incident related by Leeper well illustrates the point. "We had not been out many days beyond the confines of civilization, when, in a stroll some distance from the train, I discovered a good wagon tire. Such reckless abandonment of property was something new to me. I rolled the valuable article along for a while, striving vigorously to reach the moving train with it, but had at last to abandon the effort in despair. From about this time onward, we saw castaway articles strewn by the roadside one after another in increasing profusion till we could have taken our choice of the best of wagons entire with much of their lading, had we been provided with the extra teams to draw them." David Leeper, *The Argonauts of Forty-Nine*. (South Bend, Ind., 1894), p. 16. Similarly, McKeeby, *op. cit.*, p. 49, tells of an "old man [who] would pick up all the old iron lying along the road even to old iron tires which he would bind up with his immense strength and throw in the wagon telling his companions that it would come in good play later on. And his companions, later on, when the old man was not observing, would throw them out again."

³¹The junction of the North and South Platte Rivers.

which have been burnt over, are covered with fresh, though short grass, giving them the appearance of smooth shaven lawns, while the portions still covered with old grass, resemble fields of ripe grain waving in the breeze and just ready for the harvest, thus affording the striking, but agreeable contrast of the verdure of spring arrayed against the golden hues of summer. To complete this enchanting picture of nature's own painting, the Platte river like a broad, bright ribbon winds at a distance in a serpentine course throughout the whole valley. Its broad placid surface reflected back the rays of the rising sun with peculiar brilliancy. The scene was truly enchanting, and I lingered upon the spot till a view of our train several miles ahead admonished me that it was time to depart. The country back of the valley presented a striking contrast to the scene just described. It is wild and broken. Lofty bluffs rising higher and higher as you recede from the valley. Sometimes precipitous, sometimes sloping gradually to the summit—deep ravines and yawning abysses of every form and description, and running in every direction, impede the progress of the explorer and give to the country an air of wild and gloomy grandeur, rarely observed in a country destitute of timber. I penetrated this wild region, clambering over the highest knolls more than a mile. As far as I could see from the highest point attained, the character of the country was the same. I now descended into one of the deep ravines and followed its devious windings to the Platte valley again, regretting that I had not time to penetrate further into this rough, but interesting region. It took me till nearly noon, riding at a pretty good gait, to overtake the train. While contemplating the various scenes this morning, scenes calculated to excite every emotion, from that of the most exquisite beauty to the sublime, I could not but wonder why persons of wealth and leisure, instead of seeking to recover health by dancing out a "season" in over-crowded hot and unhealthy saloons, at such resorts as Saratoga, do not fit out an expedition to the upper Platte, and spend a month of real pleasure in admiring the beauties of its scenery, and in pursuing, for more exciting sports, the

fleet and graceful antelope or the more stately and dangerous buffalo. I believe that such an expedition for a party of gentlemen and ladies is practicable, and that with a suitable outfit for the purpose, it would be as exciting and agreeable to the parties, as the proposition may seem romantic. The exercise, the exciting sports of the chase, and the pure air of that region, would do more to restore health, or the waning beauty of our city belles, than a dozen seasons dancing at the Springs. About ten miles from our camp we crossed the dry bed of a creek. Here the bluffs approach near the river on this side, but soon recede, not however in the form of bluffs, but the surface assumes the form of a gradual rise from the river. We encamped on a clear running stream half a mile to the right of the road, some two miles from the point where the road leaves the hill (along which we had been traveling for some miles) and descends towards the river again. This is the only stream where water can be had, except at the river, which at this place is several miles distant from the road. Judging from the indications, there must be an immense number of buffalo in this region. Four were killed near our camp just before we arrived. We procured a portion of the flesh, which, though rather poor and tough, was palatable. There has been but little grass on our route today. A slight shower last night, but not enough to benefit grass much. Distance 30 miles.

May 21st.

This has been an exciting day for our company. About sunrise on looking to the bottoms, which are here 3 or 4 miles wide, to our astonishment we beheld it literally black with buffalo. On the bottoms, too, beyond the river as far as the eye could reach, appeared to be one living mass of buffalo. Several large herds on this side of the river were moving at a slow heavy gallop towards the bluffs directly across our path. In an instant all was bustle and excitement. Every man unconnected with the teams seized his rifle and spurred on to meet them at the point where they would cross the road. Even those driving the wagons hurried their animals into a brisk trot to enable them to be as near

the scene of excitement as possible. It was a magnificent sight to behold the immense solid moving masses as they swept by, herd after herd, over the broad prairie. Our men on horseback, myself among them, were instantly in pursuit at the utmost speed of their animals. Horse and rider appeared to partake equally in the excitement. Rifles were heard cracking in all directions, some shooting from their horses and others leaping down to shoot from the ground. The pursuit was continued for several miles by the horsemen, who, after the commencement of the chase, never looked back to see what was transpiring in the rear. The men with the wagons and the footmen had their share of the sport too, for long after the horsemen were out of sight, herd after herd continued to come sweeping past the train, breaking it up and running between the wagons. The drivers had their hands full to manage their teams. They found it necessary to turn their wagons crossways with the road, heading the teams in the direction the buffalo were running. In this way they succeeded in controlling them, though the mules danced and snorted furiously, becoming almost unmanagable. The footmen were surrounded on all sides by buffalo, and were well pleased if they could keep themselves from being trampled under foot. Some bellowed most lustily with a view of alarming the animals and turning them in another direction, the game being in rather too close a proximity to comport with their ideas of personal security. Some of the men about the wagons played among the buffalo with their pistols, not without effect, as some were brought down after receiving several shots. Our company killed five and wounded many more. Some of them received six bullets before they were secured. None were brought down by a single shot. When one was crippled he was generally followed up till secured. Two hundred emigrants must have camped near us last night. Some from each party were out, at one place or another in the chase, as the field of operations extended over several miles. Most parties were more or less successful, and I presume that not less than fifty buffalo were slaughtered that morning, whereas not three in all were

used. Such a wanton destruction of buffalo, the main dependence of the Indians for food, is certainly reprehensible, but still the desire of engaging once at least, in the "buffalo chase" by the emigrant, can scarcely be repressed.³² We have a pet mule in our train, small in stature, but remarkable for his peculiarly odd physiognomy, and his sagacity. He was once trained for a circus, and is now a source of more amusement to our company, perhaps, than anything we have along. From some fancy, perhaps from the remarkable expression of countenance and the demure and sagacious look of age, he has been by common consent christened "Old Ned." Ned, when not under the saddle is generally allowed to run at large, as was the case this morning. Upon the starting of the cavalcade on horseback, "Ned" joined the pursuit on his own account, and followed as closely as any of the horsemen, braying at times most lustily, and performing various gyrations, and exhibiting specimens of mule gymnastics that were ludicrous enough for any stage. On the whole however, he was rather more annoying than useful to the pursuers. Having enjoyed the sport as long as we thought it prudent, we cut some of the choicest pieces from the hump and haunches of a fine fat two-year-old, the best killed by our party, and filled two corn sacks which we happened to have with us for saddle blankets. As "Old Ned" had enjoyed all the sport and endured none of the labors of the chase, it was voted that he should pay for it by packing the spoils till we could overtake the train. We came up with the train at their nooning 12 miles from

³²Abbott, a member of the Newcomb train observes: "There were wagon-trains all along the road 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 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, and they looked upon the emigrants as a white tribe infringing upon their rights . . . 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. C. S. Abbott, *Recollections of a California Pioneer*. (New York, 1917), pp. 26-27.

the place where we struck the road, which was some miles from where we left it in the pursuit. This has been one of the most exciting days I ever experienced. The immense number of buffalo, and the novelty of the chase over the broad rolling prairies, rendered the scene intensely exciting. There is a grandeur about the buffalo chase corresponding with the magnificent scale upon which the great Western plains and rivers are constructed. No man can appreciate the scene till he has been one of the actors in it. It is estimated that there were at least ten thousand buffalo in sight on the bottoms and prairies this morning. Great as the number may appear, I think the estimate cannot be too high. Herd after herd covering acres in solid columns, were seen for miles around. Eight miles from camp we came to the lower crossing of the South Fork. Here the valleys of the two streams fork and this is by some called the "Forks of the Platte." The two streams then run parallel for some distance in the same valley, as I am informed, before they unite; and some appear to call the junction of the branches the Forks. This may account for the discrepancy in opinion expressed by those who have traveled over this region before, as to where the Forks are. The emigrants do not see the junction unless they go in pursuit of it. We still kept up the south side of the South Fork.³³ About six miles further we came to the bank of the river, but left it again. We found water in a small creek some 4 miles further on, and at several other places in slues or small brooks at the right of the road. We passed some prairie dog villages in the course of the afternoon. The inhabitants were all at the entrance of their boroughs, barking at us most furiously. They soon retire to safe quarters however, when approached. They are about as large as the wharf rat, and are of the color of

³³The St. Joe road followed the South Fork of the Platte, rounded O'Fallons Bluff, crossed the South Fork, and reached the North Fork at Ash Creek. R. G. Thwaites, *Early Western Travels*. (Cleveland, 1904-07), XXI, note 58; XXX, note 54. The trail followed the South Fork and the Emigrants followed the trail. "I have never known why this early trail led up the South Platte instead of crossing the main stream at the junction and moving directly up the North Platte, as was done later by all the Emigrant trains." J. W. Gibson, *Recollections of a Pioneer*. (St. Joseph, Mo., 1912), p. 22.

the red squirrel, but not quite so bright. We camped near some slues on the left of the road, about ten miles from the last named point. Distance 28 miles.

[At this point in the narrative, the editor of *The Family Visitor* has inserted the following note:

"We pass over ten days of these Sketches, and commence again as our travelers enter the Sweet Water valley approaching the dividing ridge between the Atlantic and Pacific slopes. We find them pursuing their way through a desert region, surrounded by high mountains (the Rocky Peaks) in the distance, and some three hundred miles from Fort Laramie."]³⁴

June 1st.

Four miles from camp we struck the Platte river. Five miles further on we crossed Deer creek, a large, rapid and fine stream of water, with groves of timber on its banks.³⁵ Nine miles from Deer creek, we crossed a small creek with difficult crossing; we let our wagons in with ropes. Ten miles further brought us to the Platte, at the point where the emigrants of last year crossed. We drove a mile further, and camped on the left of the wood; we drove our animals some three miles back towards the mountains for grass. For the first few miles this morning, grass was plenty, but the rest of the way it was scarce. The country is broken and the soil poor. A range of mountains on our left was covered with snow. We had a slight shower in the afternoon; weather quite cool. Distance 29 miles.

"This is an error. Three hundred miles was more than the total distance traveled in the ten days mentioned. During that time the Sawyer train crossed over to the North Fork of the Platte and followed up this stream past Court House Rock, Chimney Rock, Scott's Bluff, Fort Laramie, La Prele Creek and the Fourche Boise, from which point—about one hundred miles west of Fort Laramie and four miles from the Platte—the journal resumes.

"Deer Creek; about 30 feet wide and 2 feet deep. It is the largest tributary of the Platte between the mouth of the Sweetwater and the Laramie. Emigrants generally, describe the stream as "abounding in fish and a good place to camp."

Sunday, June 2nd.

This being the Sabbath, we lay in our camp. Our animals were grazed some three miles from camp, towards the mountains.

June 3rd.

Drove six miles to the ferry and crossed the Platte river,³⁶ ferryage \$4 per wagon and 25 cents per head for the animals. There were four boats running, one of which belonged to the Mormons.³⁷ About thirteen miles from the

³⁶The Upper Ferry, or Last Crossing of the Platte, later known as Platte Bridge and the site (although the name it perpetuates is misspelt) of the present town of Casper, Wyoming. Here, in 1865, Fort Caspar was erected, the name being bestowed upon the post by direction of Major-General John Pope, whose *Order* of November 21st of that year reads: The military post situated at Platte Bridge . . . will be hereafter known as Fort Caspar, "In honor of Lieutenant Caspar Collins, who lost his life while gallantly attacking a superior force of Indians at this place." C. G. Coutant, *The History of Wyoming*. (Laramie, 1899), p. 478. This youthful hero was the son of Lieutenant-Colonel William O. Collins, in whose honor Fort Collins, Colorado, was named. The Platte turns southward at the Upper Ferry and the Mormon and Oregon trails, merging into one, strike across country some 40 odd miles to the Sweetwater.

³⁷This Mormon ferry had its inception in June of 1847, at which time the Saints, almost destitute of food but equipped with an abiding faith in the Lord, and a "skiff of sole leather that would carry 1,500 or 1,800 pounds," reached the crossing a few hours in advance of the Oregon emigration. The river being swollen and the ford 15 feet under water, the brethren called a halt, launched their craft and sat down to await the on-coming emigrants. The latter, on arrival, found the ferry in readiness. Negotiations ensued, based on the obvious fact that the potential Oregonians had to get their goods across the stream, and a bargain was concluded at the very low price of \$1.50 per load. It developed however that cash was something the Saints had no use for, they stipulating that payment be made in provisions, including flour, at the rate of \$2.50 per hundred pounds (here worth many times that price). As a result of these ferry operations the Oregonians proceeded on their journey with appreciably lightened loads, while each member of the Mormon migration obtained a sustaining store of flour, meal and bacon. This signal dispensation from on high so overwhelmed Elder Wilford Woodruff that he wrote: "It looked as much of a miracle to me to see our flour and meal bags replenished in the Black Hills, as it did to have the children of Israel fed with manna in the wilderness. But the Lord has been truly with us on our journey." Andrew Jensen, *The Historical Record*. (Salt Lake City, 1890), IX, p. 51. It is hardly necessary to remind the reader that the Mormons had been the victims of unrelenting persecution and abuse which culminated in the murder of their Prophet and his brother, and that they were now fleeing westward to escape renewed mob violence and possible extermination. The method of river crossing in 1850 is described by Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 48, as follows: "A long line is stretched across the river, secured at each end. To this are placed two pulley wheels, which are fastened to ropes attached to the boat at each end, and the forward rope being the shortest, the side

crossing, over a rough country, brought us to the Mineral Springs and Lake.³⁸ Seven miles further on, we entered Rock Avenue;³⁹ thence two miles to Alkali swamps and springs.⁴⁰ The water of all Alkali swamps and springs should be carefully avoided by emigrants. It is poisonous to animals.⁴¹ At a distance of four miles from these, we came to a small clear stream⁴² and encamped. The country has been rough, with a sandy soil, today. We found but little grass during the day or at our camp. Distance 32 miles.

of the boat is brought to the force of the current and forced across. Two wagons are placed in a boat each trip, which is made in about ten minutes." A week later (June 13) when Ingalls arrived, he met the "celebrated Kit Carson here with a stock of horses and mules for sale." The following day, Newcomb reached the crossing and notes that "the bluffs and country south of the ferry are covered with the stock of the emigrants." Indeed, the congestion had become so heavy since Sawyer's departure that the ferries were no longer able to handle the outfits as they came, and it was necessary to register with the ferryman and for each train to await its turn, which, under the most favorable circumstances meant a delay of from several days to a week. In this situation, Abbott, *op. cit.*, p. 40-41, reports that the captain had "sent Newcomb on horseback to make the 125 miles to the ferry . . . as fast as his horse could carry him. Arriving, Newcomb informed the ferryman that he wanted to register . . . 'Where is your company?' asked the ferryman. 'Just down the river, a bit outside this crowd, where the feed is better than it is here,' said Newcomb. Our train was at once registerd, although it was nearly 100 miles away, and as a result of this foresight . . . we had to wait but three days at the ferry."

³⁸Horn thus cautions the emigrant: "Poisonous; the water is clear, and has no bad taste until disturbed; in that case it turns black, and will doubtless destroy the life of whatever drinks it." Hosea Horn, *Overland Guide from Council Bluffs to Sacramento*. (N. Y. 1852), p. 21.

³⁹*Ibid.*, "The rocks here form a gateway through which the road passes." The descent through these rocks was about a quarter of a mile in length. At the bottom, Thissell, p. 68, came upon "great piles of bacon and flour, piled higher than my head, a notice on every pile 'This is clean; help yourself' . . . here in one pile was more than five tons of flour and bacon, left behind to lighten up loads. This the Indians would not eat for fear of poison."

⁴⁰"This ought to be avoided as a camping ground—it is a small valley surrounded by high bluffs. The land exceedingly miry, and smells bad. There is a creek of good water northwest." W. Clayton, *The Latter-Day Saints' Emigrant Guide . . . from Council Bluffs to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake*. (St. Louis, 1848), p. 14. (W. R. Coe Collection).

⁴¹Abbey, *op. cit.*, (June 8) observes: "I saw today sixteen skeletons of cattle that had died last year from drinking this Alkaline water, all within two steps of one another." On the 16th Newcomb "counted eight dead oxen and one horse" near the Springs.

⁴²Clear Spring Creek. A "good camping place. Plenty of grass, but no wood." Clayton's *Guide*, p. 14.

CHAPTER III.

FROM PLATTE FERRY TO THE SOUTH PASS

Alkali Lakes and Marshes—Animals Poisoned by the Water—Stores of Salaratus Renewed—Reach the Sweetwater—Independence Rock—Devil's Gate—Wind River Mountains—View of Fremont's Peak—Deep Snows Encountered—Winter Sports in June—Reach the Summit—Discussion of the "Pass" and the Erroneous Ideas Held by the Emigrants—Over the Divide to Pacific Springs—Inaccuracy of the Guide Books—Junction of the Salt Lake and Oregon Trails.

JUNE 4th. Drove two miles to "Willow Springs;"⁴³ water excellent, but grass scarce on account of the great number who have camped here, and the small space capable of producing grass. One mile further is "Prospect Hill," from which there is a fine view of the country to the Sweet Water. Thence five miles to a creek, some 300 yards south of the road; thence two miles and a half to a small creek at the left of the road, thence two miles to Green Wood creek;⁴⁴ thence six miles to the Alkali lakes and marshes.⁴⁵ There are several of these marshes, and the alkali is found in a crystallized form in large quantities.⁴⁶ At these marshes emigrants frequently renew their stock of saleratus, as it is easily gathered. We made use of some of it to raise bread,

⁴³*Ibid.*, "About three rods west of the road, at the foot of willow bushes. Water cold and good—grass plenty, but creek some miry."

⁴⁴"Grease-wood Creek, an affluent of the Sweetwater; 10 feet wide. "A fine clear-running brook. The Greasewood grows in clumps like goose-berry bushes, and like them, bristles with thorns or prickles. The foliage resembles that of the Cedar, and the green bush will burn readily, with a bright white flame, as though saturated with oil or turpentine—hence the name greasewood." Paulson, *op. cit.* From here to Soda Lake the road led through heavy sand.

⁴⁵Variously known as Soda Lake, Alkali Lake and Salaratus Lake. Paulson thus pictures this desolate waste: "The sand lay drifted in heaps—then the ground dipped lower, and was covered with shallow pools of water, red with the deadly alkali, which lay over all the ground not covered by water in a thick white crust, cracked and blistered through the fervent heat of the sun. The only green thing visible was the pariah greasewood, which grew in stunted clumps, sapping its foul sustenance from the noisome pools which fretted the plains for miles and miles."

⁴⁶Clayton's *Guide* advises the Emigrant: "Here gather your saleratus from a lake west of the road. Land swampy and smells bad. Water poisonous."

and found it answer well.⁴⁷ A larger quantity was required however, than of that brought with us. A little over four miles brought us to the Sweet Water river,⁴⁸ a fine stream of water with a rapid current. Nearly a mile further is the far-famed "Independence Rock."⁴⁹ This rock rises from the midst of the valley in a regular oval form, to the height of a hundred feet or more. It is of granite, and said to be 600 yards long, by 120 broad. It is quite smooth and regular in its shape. Thousands of names of emigrants are painted on the rock.⁵⁰ A short distance above, we forded

"We used this soda for our bread, biscuit and pancakes, and it seemed to answer the purpose as well as the store soda that we had purchased in St. Joseph and had carried with us for eight hundred miles." Potter, *op. cit.*, p. 57. In the Sixties, according to Paulson, this deposit was being worked by a company of men who dug the soda out by the wagon-load, hauled it across the Rockies in ox-teams and sold it on the other side for thirty cents per lb. Leeper, *op. cit.*, p. 69, reports that in 1849 the article was worth sixteen dollars a pound in the mines.

"General Ashley, the fur trader and explorer, is said to have given the river its name. In 1823 he reached the stream, and noting its excellent quality (his men had suffered greatly from drinking the alkali waters) he is said to have called it the Sweetwater. Another tradition concerning the name of this river is that a party of trappers in early times were going up its banks having with them a mule loaded with sugar. The animal fell into the stream and his load of sugar dissolved in the water, hence the name Sweetwater. Coutant, p. 122, says: "I have been told by old pioneers who lived with the Indians in early days that the red men claim the name Sweetwater is the English for the Indian appellation." The Sweetwater is an affluent of the North Fork of the Platte. It rises in the Wind River Mountains, is about 120 miles long, 6 to 8 rods wide, and from 2 to 3 feet deep. The road along the stream was mostly sandy and heavy traveling, with many ascents, and for the first fifty miles, dangerous to the animals because of the numerous alkali springs.

"So named, according to tradition, from the circumstance "of a company of fur-traders suspending their journey, and here observing, in due form, the anniversary of our national freedom." Samuel Parker, *Journal of an Exploring Expedition beyond the Rocky Mountains*. (Ithaca, 1838), p. 74. Wyeth, who visited the spot in 1832 (three years before Parker) describes it as a huge rock "in the shape of a bowl upside down," and states that "it bore the name of Independence, from, it is said, being the resting place of Lewis and Clark on the 4th of July; but according to the printed journal of those meritorious travelers, they had not reached, or entered the American Alps on the day of that memorable epoch." John B. Wyeth, *Oregon; or a Short History of a Long Journey*. (Cambridge, 1833), p. 33. Another theory is that the name was given the rock in token of its isolated position, it standing on the plains alone and independent. Still a third possible origin of the name is suggested by the appellation given it by Lobenstine, who calls it the "Indian Dance Rock." William C. Lobenstine, *Diary*, 1851-58. (New York, 1920), p. 35.

"Father De Smet for this reason called it the Great Register of the Desert. Potter, *op. cit.*, p. 58, reports that "a party of Mormons with stone-cutting tools were located on the spot and did a profitable business in cutting

Sweet Water river. Something over five miles brought us to the "Devil's Gate." This is a defile in the mountain about 100 feet wide, through which the Sweet Water bounds between two solid perpendicular walls of granite 400 feet in height. Distance through about one fourth of a mile; this is a great curiosity, and is a short distance to the right of the road.⁵¹ West of the "Gate" at a distance of half a mile apart are two small creeks. We camped about one mile west of the last, on the bank at the left of the road, a short distance from the river. The grass was

names in the rock at a charge of from one to five dollars, according to the location . . . We learned that the scheming Mormons made a nice fortune from the emigrants by cutting their names for a fancy price, and when they had passed on erasing these names and cutting others in their places. So transient is our fame!" Townsend, who accompanied Wyeth's expedition of 1834 says: "On its smooth, perpendicular sides we see carved the names of most of the mountain *bourgeois*, with the dates of their arrival. We observed those of the two Sublette's, Captains Bonneville, Serre, Fontenelle, &c." John K. Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey across the Rocky Mountains*. (Philadelphia, 1839), p. 67. Here, in 1842, Fremont engraved the symbol of the Christian faith. The incident is told by him as follows: "Among the thickly inscribed names, I made on the hard granite the impression of a large cross, which I covered with a black preparation of India-rubber, well calculated to resist the influence of wind and rain. It stands midst the names of many who have long since found their way to the grave, and for whom the huge rock is a giant grave-stone." John C. Fremont, *Memoirs of My Life*. (Chicago, 1887), p. 153. The carving thus so "well calculated to resist the influence of wind and rain," seems to have been blown from the rock by a party of emigrants who, according to Coutant, p. 695, "loaded some old wagon hubs with powder and exploded them in the crevices." Finally, in 1856, when Fremont became a candidate for the Presidency, the episode of the carved cross was revived and used against him.

"Cole, *op. cit.*, p. 66, thus describes it: "A crack or rent in the mountain . . . the surface of the walls showing that by some sort of force they had been separated, projectings on one side finding corresponding indentations on the other. The river in its original course had run around the range, but now it ran leaping and roaring through the Gate." Delano, after an examination of this singular chasm, ruefully observes, that "it did seem as if his Satanic majesty had been cutting queer antics in this wild region . . . 'Honor to whom honor is due.'" Alonzo Delano, *Life on the Plains* (Auburn, 1854), p. 100. Brigham Young essayed an exploration through the fissure during his overland march of 1847, but gave up the attempt and "reported that the devils would not let him pass." William Clayton, *Journal: A Daily Record of the Journey of the Original Company of "Mormon" Pioneers*. (Salt Lake City, 1921). Colonel Wheeler states that as late as 1877 "it was said that no one had ever been able to pass through owing to the great masses of boulders and the volume of water rushing through it." In the summer of that year, Colonel Tom Moore achieved the passage on muleback. "It was during low water, and he had great difficulty. It was considered a daring exploit." Col. Homer W. Wheeler, *The Frontier Trail*. (Los Angeles, 1923), p. 196.

thin on the hill, but as good as any in this region, off from the bottoms. Although the grass was more abundant, we avoided the bottoms on account of the alkali on the surface. The roads for the last six miles before arriving at the Sweet Water are sandy and heavy, and so continue up the river most of the day's travel. The Sweet Water mountains on our left, are mere bare rocks. We found no timber today. Wild sage is the only fuel to be had. Distance 32 miles.

June 5th.

About six miles from camp, we crossed a creek, and about one mile further another; about eight miles further we crossed Sage creek.⁵² This is on the river road. Some two miles from the last creek, the river and table roads come together again, and strike the river near a high rock to the left of the road. At this point, all had our first view of Fremont's Peak⁵³ far to the north-west. Another creek is found two miles further on. Then three miles, we come to Bitter Cottonwood creek,⁵⁴ on the banks of which stand some ten or twelve trees, the first we have seen for many miles. Six miles further on, the road arrives at the river again. At this point, we took the old road on the south side of the river, instead of fording.⁵⁵ We traveled four miles from the ford over very deep sand, and camped on the plains near the mountains, where we found tolerable grass. The road today has been mostly over a sandy country with heavy roads. We took on water at the ford. There has been but little grass today. Distance 32 miles.

⁵²So named by Elder Kimball, because its banks were lined with sage instead of grass. Clayton's *Journal*, p. 257.

⁵³Fremont's Peak, the loftiest summit of the Wind River Mountains. Its altitude is given by Fremont as 13,570 feet. On its top, August 15th, 1842, he "fixed a ramrod in a crevice and unfurled the national flag to wave in the breeze where never flag waved before." Fremont, p. 150.

⁵⁴Clayton's *Journal*, p. 258, states: "There being no name on the map for this creek, it was named Bitter Cottonwood Creek to designate it in our future travel."

⁵⁵Clayton's *Guide*, p. 15 counsels the emigrant: "By fording here the road is shorter, and you avoid much very heavy, sandy road." Horn, p. 25, gives similar advice, but observes that "the crossing is probably deep." "From this point to the South Pass, some 100 miles beyond, the trail crossed the Sweetwater several times and there were numerous optional fords and routes." Thomas Turnbull, *Travels from the United States across the Plains to California*. (Madison, Wis., 1914), p. 176, Note.

June 6th.

Seven miles travel brought us to the ford where the new road crosses and comes into the old again. From this point there is a stretch of seventeen miles without water or much grass, till we arrive at another ford of the Sweet Water. This point has heretofore been considered a good place for grass; we found none however. A short distance from the ford is another creek, or it may perhaps be a branch of the river running round an island. We now passed over a bluff one and a-half miles to the summit, and returned to the river where we forded, and within a short distance forded back.⁵⁶ We took this course to avoid a sandy bluff. This is about four miles from the last ford; we continued our march some six miles and came to the river again, on the bank of which we camped, and drove our animals across to graze. Several of them were taken sick, caused by the alkali water on the bottoms. The roads lay over a sandy country today, and in many places they were heavy; the latter part was somewhat hilly. The soil is very poor, and we are obliged to make a long drive to obtain grass. The mountains on our left are covered with snow. The Wind River mountains⁵⁷ have been in sight far to the north-west for two days. One of the lofty peaks is Fremont's Peak. These mountains are covered with snow. Distance 32 miles.

June 7th.

Two and a-half miles from camp, we passed over some rough rocky ridges. Traveled three miles further to a small stream; thence two miles to another small creek and

⁵⁶Known as the Three Crossings. So called "because the trail crossed the stream three times within a quarter of a mile; a place always difficult to negotiate and in times of high water actually dangerous." I. S. Bartlett, *History of Wyoming*. (Chicago, 1918), i, p. 330. From here to the Red Buttes, 76 miles eastward, was, in later years known as Cody's "run," it being ridden back and forth by W. F. Cody so long as the Pony Express was in existence.

⁵⁷The Wind River, or Snowy Mountains, a range of the Rockies running northwest and southeast in Fremont County, Wyoming. This range is named from the river of the same name which rises in the north end of these mountains and was called the Big Wind by the Indians. The prevailing wind along this stream comes through the notch between the Shoshone and the Wind River Ranges, and at nearly all seasons of the year it amounts to a gale.

another a short distance beyond, then to Strawberry creek two miles, and Quaking Aspen one mile beyond. There are some groves of small Quaking Aspen a short distance to the left of the road, in which the creek of that name has its source; thence three miles to a branch of the Sweet Water, some two rods wide; thence three miles to Willow creek; thence five miles to the last crossing of the Sweet Water. We camped at 2 o'clock in the afternoon, two miles beyond the ford on the bank of the road. The several streams crossed are represented by our guide book as affording abundance of grass. We find but little this season, and it is difficult to find sufficient along the road for our animals. The soil is generally dry, sandy and barren. Large snow banks are seen on both sides of the road, and in one place the road passed over one several feet in depth. Our men amused themselves with snowballing each other. The nights are quite cold and the days are sufficiently cooled by the breezes from the snow-covered mountains to make overcoats comfortable at mid-day. The ranges of mountains on our right and left are about twenty miles apart. Distance 22 miles.

June 8th.

Traveled eight miles to the Summit,⁵⁸ which is about one mile west of the Troin Mounds;⁵⁹ thence three miles to "Pacific Springs,"⁶⁰ so called, I imagine, from the fact

⁵⁸The Summit, or South Pass of the Rocky Mountains. Fremont, pp. 137-8, thus describes the approach: "We left our encampment with the rising sun. As we rose from the bed of the creek, the snow line of the mountains stretched grandly before us, the white peaks glittering in the sun . . . The ascent has been so gradual, that, with all the intimate knowledge possessed by [Kit] Carson, who had made this country his home for seventeen years, we were obliged to watch very closely to find the place at which we had reached the culminating point . . . Approaching it from the mouth of the Sweetwater, a sandy plain, 120 miles long, conducts, by a gradual and regular ascent, to the summit, about 7,000 feet above the sea; and the traveler without being reminded of any change by toilsome ascents, suddenly finds himself on the waters which flow to the Pacific Ocean."

⁵⁹Twin Mounds. "At a distance of seven miles from the ford, the road passes between two mounds known as "Twin Mounds"—about twenty-five or thirty feet high with gentle slope and gravelly." Newcomb.

⁶⁰"At this point," says Ingalls, "the California Express mail stops to take back letters for the Emigrants." Newcomb mentions a unique drink which he here enjoyed: "Reached Pacific Springs . . . and drank the waters of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans mingled in one cup." Burch

that its waters flow into the Pacific Ocean, while those just left, flow into the Atlantic; thence one and a-half miles to crossing of Pacific creek;⁶¹ thence nine miles to Dry Sandy; thence six miles to the junction of the Salt Lake and Oregon roads. Greenwood's (or as it is sometimes called Sublit's [Sublette's]) cut-off,⁶² the right hand road—starts here; thence three miles by the cut-off to the Little Sandy.⁶³ Here we took on water, and then drove three miles to a point on the left and camped. Most emigrants have a very erroneous idea of the South Pass, and their inquiries about it are often amusing enough. They suppose it to be a narrow defile in the Rocky Mountains, walled in by perpendicular rocks hundreds of feet high. The passage of this point is somehow regarded important, which causes a great rush to get through as the "pass" is supposed to be approached. They are often surprised to find themselves on the west side of the mountains, without knowing when they went through the "pass." The fact is they are in the South Pass all the way up the Sweet Water. The "pass" is a valley some twenty miles wide, with the Sweet Water mountains on one side, and Rattlesnake mountains and the Wind River range on the other. Fremont's Peak is one of the Wind River range to the north-west of the Summit,

describes the region as "the most lovely spot of the wilderness through which I passed on my way to California. The most luxuriant grass, tall green trees sheltering the sward about the banks of the stream which was fed by a watershed gently undulating and giving its currents to the streams running east, whence the salt point upon which we had pitched our tents directed the waters which fall upon its side toward the setting sun, and hence was called "Pacific Spring." John C. Burch, *Missouri to California in 1850*. MS. (Huntington Library).

⁶¹An affluent of the Big Sandy and one of the heads of the Green.

⁶²The road at the left led southward to Fort Bridger and Salt Lake City, from whence it turned north, and skirting the eastern rim of the lake crossed Bear River to rejoin the trail near the City of Rocks. The right hand road, which Sawyer is traveling, led to Fort Hall and the Sublette Cut-off, which branched from the old road a few miles east of the Little Sandy, went across the Big Sandy to Green River, thence southwest to Ham's Fork of Green River, where it rejoined the old trail. Abbey, *op. cit.*, arriving at the junction on June 17, observes that "from the appearance of the two roads, I should suppose that nine tenths of the wagons had taken the Cut-off."

⁶³A tributary of the Green, about 25 feet wide and 2 feet deep. "Muddy water—swift current. Plenty of willows and wild sage. Abundance of grass down the stream. After this, barren and sandy land." Clayton's *Guide*, p. 17.

and has been in sight for the last hundred miles. The summits of the whole range are buried in deep snows, which extend far down their sides. Many also suppose that a succession of mountains are to be passed over. This too, is erroneous. The rise is so gradual from Fort Laramie, nearly 300 miles distant, that the traveler is scarcely conscious that he is ascending at all. At the summit of the "pass" the broad plain between the mountain ranges, has a gently undulating surface. The grass, however, is quite thin. Wild sage and willows found along the banks of the streams, are the only fuel afforded for hundreds of miles along this route. The summit, according to the observations of Elder Orson Pratt,⁶⁴ of Salt Lake City, has an elevation of 7,080 feet. The summit is simply that point in the pass where the waters divide; those on the Eastern slope running into the Atlantic, and those on the Western into the Pacific Ocean. All the streams crossed today, except the Dry Sandy, afford excellent water; the water of the Dry Sandy is brackish and unfit for use. There is but little grass on the route on the west side of the summit. We have but little at our camp, but it is the best we can find. The road has been sandy, but not generally heavy. Emigrants, I find, too, have erroneous and very indefinite ideas about Greenwood's or Sublit's cut-off, some supposing there are two. Some of our guide books are so indefinite as to convey this impression. The fact, according to the best information I can obtain, is as follows: There is but one road to what is called the junction, above mentioned. The old Oregon road from this point, is the left hand road. It runs south-westerly to Fort Bridger. The road to Salt Lake follows this route. Greenwood discovered the route further north, which takes off to the right at the junction. Sublit [Sublette] first traveled this route with wagons, hence it is sometimes called Greenwood's, sometimes Sublit's [Sublette's] cut-off. It strikes Bear river further north than the old road, and is said to save some eighty miles travel. Distance today, 33 miles.

⁶⁴The noted Mormon Apostle. The Journal of Pratt's trip across the plains in 1847 is contained in the *Latter-Day Saints Millennial Star*, XI-XII, (Liverpool, 1849-50).