

CALIFORNIA LETTER

From one of the Richmond Boys.
Johnson's Settlement
Upper California, Aug. 4, 1849

Dear Father:- Yesterday I arrived at this point, well, healthy, and still hearty. After the most tedious, toilsome, painful, doleful journey of 95 days, that ever fell to the lot of man to accomplish. I have at last arrived at El Dorado - at the centre of the gold regions. It would be absolutely impossible to condense in one small sheet, a mere outline of a complete history of our travels to this point. You must draw from your own fancy a conception of all the hardships, troubles and difficulties that it would be possible for men to endure, to have even a faint idea of a miserable overland journey to California. In order to give a slight picture of the pleasant pastime on this route, I will detail some little incidents which transpired and which filled the soul with abundant pleasure. After we left Fort Childs, we had a miserable hard tug through muddy roads, until we arrived at the first crossing of the Platte. This river is a very rapid stream, flowing through sandbars mountain high - the water dark and muddy and deep - the ford one mile and a half in width and filled with sandbars continually changing places. Well, there was no ferry here, and we were compelled to ford it with our wagons at whatever hazard. In we plunged, and when we reached the middle of the channel, down went wagons, mules and all into the sand; the mules struggling, plunging and swimming, and the wagons buoyed up by the beds. Twenty men plunged into the water, (myself included) above our waists and the water as cold as ice, and after a good deal of exertion, succeeded in liberating wagons and mules from this quick-sand only to deliver them to others equally as bad; and in this manner one quicksand succeeded another until we reached the opposite shore, which consumed an hour and a half of painful and incessant labor, which exhausted us so much we could scarcely stand when we reached the opposite shore. Our wagons were stalled fifty-three times between this point and Fort Laramie. Sometimes we had all of the mules down in the mud at the same time and were forced to take them out of the harness and push the wagons out by hand or hitch on double teams to the fifth-chain. Some days we would travel 25 or 30 miles, and others only 8 or 10. Before we reached Fort Laramie, we had to cross a stream that was very rapid and boisterous - we raised our hard bread up as high as the wagon bows and myself and another person jumped on the backs of the lead mules and rode them over - the mules swam and the wagon floated over. We found Fort Laramie to be a poor, miserable, mud fort, tenanted by a lot of lazy, lounging, loafing, renegade Indian-French - drunken and swollen. It gave us all the dolefuls to look at them. We found at this fort about fifty wagons left broke to pieces and cast aside as useless, on account of the weight.

The Cincinnati company bursted up at this place. Some of them packed and others left new wagons which cost them \$250 a piece and bought old light wagons at enormous prices in order to travel as fast as ox teams. Bacon, salt, hard bread, dried beef, Bologna sausage, and other provisions, were strewed all around the fort. Over 10,000 lbs. fine bacon was cast out on the road side here.

Bar iron, chains, bolts, whole sets of harness, bags, boxes, trunks, nails, &c., were to be found scattered around. The gold fever had infatuated some persons to such a pitch that they were almost crazed - every man striving to lead off to the land of golden promise, expecting to realize a princely fortune in a short space of time. Poor, deluded creatures! Many of them have already suffered and are now suffering for bread to satisfy the cravings of nature.

But to continue - after a long and deplorably hard travel up the South Platte, through sand often 12 inches deep, we reached the crossing. This branch was also swift and deep and we were obliged to ferry it. The ferry was owned by three Mormons. The throng of wagons was so great here, that we were forced to wait two days and a half until our turn came. They had but two boats running, and such boats! They were made by lashing three canoes together, and could carry but one wagon at a time. The emigrants pulled the boats up stream near a half mile, assisted to load, push their wagons on the boat, take them off, and then had to pay the infernal Mormons \$3.00 per wagon. One man was drowned at the crossing while we lay there. After we crossed this stream we entered upon a road called Sublets Cut-off, one of the most difficult routes that ever was passed by wagons. Only think of traveling through sand half hub deep - through mud holes hub deep - up and down long hills or mountains almost perpendicular, and along hill sides where three persons would have to hold the wagon from upsetting. In one place we went down a mountain one mile and a half high, and near the foot we found a perpendicular of thirty yards, where we had to take off the mules and let down the wagons with ropes. Another mountain we passed over, we had to place two men to the wheel mule's heads, while four men held on to a rope attached to the hind part of the wagons. You must recollect that we were traveling all this time with large trains. The first mountains which we struck were the Black Hills, a few miles beyond Fort Laramie. Very soon after we entered them, we came in sight of the first snow-capped mountain called Laramie's Peak a tall, majestic one, that looked grand and lofty. But I have now become so accustomed to such sights, that they fill my mind no more with awe or wonder. In fact, I have had such an awful time among them that I detest the sight. We approached the South Pass in the Rocky Mountains on a gradual elevation, and descend on the same scale over a very handsome road, so that it was impossible for us to know when we were on the highest point of elevation. In the Rocky Mountains we first found beds of saleratus and alkaline water. The first spring we reached of this character, was one called the Willow Spring, which was strongly impregnated with alkali; tasted like lye-water and created a burning thirst. We were foolish enough to allow our mules to drink of it, and it swelled them up prodigiously. We cured them with lard and powder.

At this point commenced our sufferings on account of bad water.-- One man who drank of the alkaline water was sick for three days. After incredible hardships and a good deal of heavy bone-labor, we reached Green river. At this point we waited two days for the ferry. Three emigrants were drowned in attempting to cross this stream in a boat constructed by themselves. But before we reached Green river, we had to cross a desert destitute of grass and water, a distance of 48 miles. We started through this desert on one Sunday at 4 o'clock P.M., and reached Green river at 11 on the day following, men and animals completely used up. From Green river to

Fort Hall we had the usual trials, hardships and labor to undergo; in many places our mules suffered awfully for grass and water. Just before we reached Fort Hall, we had some bad streams to cross, which it was barely possible for our jaded mules to pull over, and mud holes where they were all down at the same time. I had forgotten to mention that we left one of our wagons at the Sweet Water Creek, because our mules were unable to haul it, being fagged out; so we put the load into the other wagon and put in six mules which pulled the other wagon to Fort Hall. We reached the Fort on the 4th of July, at 3 o'clock, P.M.

When we reached Fort Hall, having but one wagon and that being heavily loaded with the provisions and baggage, and the most arduous part of the journey yet to be undertaken and a number of the members of our company persisting in hauling the whole load through, our whole company commenced wrangling and quarrelling, until a dissolution was decided upon. A young man named O'Brien (from Cincinnati) and myself resolved to accomplish the remainder of our journey on pack mules. So we bought a couple of pack saddles, packed up a hundred pounds of provisions and our clothing - sold our wagon for \$25 - jumped astraddle of a mule a piece and left Fort Hall on the 8th of July. The rest of the company packed also, but we left them behind. We had comparatively a pleasant trip until we had traveled down the Mary's river, within 100 miles of the sink. Then commenced the succession of hardships and trials, enough to try the fortitude of angels. The water became either brackish or alkaline; the grass scarce and of very poor quality; in many places we had to travel for miles over saleratus beds, the dust flying in our faces - mouth, nose and eyes filled with it continually; our throats parched with thirst and the water we drank either brackish or alkaline. Never do I wish to travel over this route again. When we arrived within 25 miles of the sink of Mary's river, we were within 30 miles of the Desert. - There is a peculiarity about this Mary's river, which I shall notice. It is a stream narrow, deep and very swift and runs about 400 or 500 miles and sinks away into a large saleratus bed and is lost entirely. Well, we started one morning at 6, 25 miles up this Mary's or Humbolt river and reached the sink about 3 o'clock, P.M. Stopped here and rested our mules for three hours and allowed them to feast on some miserable rushes which we found afterwards were saturated with salt; gave them some of the sink water which we obtained by digging below the surface of the river. By the way, in one hole which we dug, we found saline water and in another alkaline. Well, we left the sink about 6 o'clock, P.M., and passed on 5 miles to a Sulphur Spring and watered ourselves and mules, filled our canteens and commenced upon a passage of the Great Desert. (I omitted to mention that O'Brien and myself travelled alone after we left the fort, for 150 miles right through the Indian root-diggers country, and finally fell in with three other packers, and five of us travelled through together.) As ill luck would have it, our little company got in behind Bryant's large pack mule train at the entrance of the Desert; a circumstance that done us an injury, for Bryant's train had made a forced travel that day of over 30 miles, and his mules were in a bad condition to travel. We had not advanced in the desert more than three hours, before one of our mules give out and we were forced to wait half an hour in order to give time to remove the pack on to another mule. We were hindered in this manner the whole night, for before daylight 12 of his mules had give out and were left on

the desert. In the meantime, during the night, my riding mule gave out, though at the time I was not riding him, for he had become so weak several days before that I had purchased an Indian pony and was riding him.- Painful as it was, I was forced to leave my poor faithful mule in the midst of the desert, to perish for thirst or food, for delays are dangerous in this valley of desolation. We could judge very little about the aspect of the desert during the night; could only see a range of rusty looking mountains on our right and left, and could see the whole earth dry and naked, except here and there a few sage bushes and greasewood were scattered along, indicating nothing but barrenness and sterility - but so soon as day appeared, the awful scene loomed forth and displayed all its terrors. On our right and left was a range of old, rusty, kiln-dried mountains, without a bush or spear of grass; they resembled old brick kilns or potteries, and looked as smoky as tar-kilns; the valley between was covered with cinder, grass, and yellow sand and melted stone, and resembled an old blacksmith shop: the heated air almost stifled us, while the dust we inhaled gave us an uneasy sensation in the stomach. About 5 o'clock in the morning, we reached the Boiling Springs. At this point, I felt as though I was in the vicinity of the infernal regions. These springs were situated at the foot of an old, rusty looking mountain, covering about two acres of ground. In one place was a large pool or basin of water boiling hot, as clear as crystal, not agitated and having a taste like broke water used in washing; in other places water was boiling up with great noise through a heavy mass of rocks - the whole earth beneath our feet appeared hollow or filled with saleratus or lime. The water in those cavities boiled up and fell back, but did not run out. Our little company took breakfast at those springs, and made coffee out of the water, but it did not taste right, in despite of all the sugaring it would taste like lie.

We left the springs about 9 o'clock, and started for Truckey river, a distance of 25 miles.- We had no water to drink except some which we had taken out of the Boiling Springs and cooled a little, which was a good deal worse than none, and our poor mules were hungry and nearly parched up with thirst. Now commenced the tug of war in earnest. When we left the Boiling Springs, we were all thirsty, and the draught we took of the alkaline water only aggravated our thirst; so our cases were truly deplorable.- Twenty-five miles to travel over a road so hot that it scalded our feet and the air so heated that it dried up all the moisture on our lips. We traveled along as fast as our jaded mules could carry us, which was no faster than a fast walk, until we had gone some five miles, when my pony began to show some signs of failure, so that I was forced to dismount and take it on foot, driving the remainder of the journey. When we arrived within 10 or 12 miles of Truckey river, three out of the four of my companions, became so much exhausted that they could scarcely sit on their mules; so that the other one and myself had to drive all the pack mules and those which they rode upon also. About eight miles from Truckey river the stoutest one and myself saddled up two of the loose mules and sent two of them on to the river, in charge of two persons who had fresh mules, while the remainder of us trudged along as we could. When we arrived in 3 miles of the river, a man came out loaded with canteens of water and gave us a quart a piece of pure water from the Sierra Nevada Mountains, for Truckey

river flows out from them. This water to me appeared to be the best I ever drank in my life, because I was thirsty. I do not believe that I could have travelled five miles further without drink. Truckey river seemed the prettiest stream I ever saw; in fact, it is a very handsome stream - the water is clear as crystal, and runs with great rapidity; it was adorned with fine green trees, and shores covered with beautiful grass waist high. It looked more handsome when contrasted with the rusty plains and hills which we had just left.

At this river my partner and I finding that we were running short of provisions, bought 15 lbs. of flour and 10 lbs. of bacon, from a pack mule train at the following prices; bacon 25 cts. per lb., flour 20 cts. per lb. Our route lay right up Truckey river to Truckey lake. We forded this river 47 times, and often swam our mules; for as soon as we started up this stream we commenced crossing the Sierra Nevada Mountains. In some places we had to ascend and descend abrupt rocky steps scarcely accessible to man; but I believe pack mules can go where a man can. At the summit of the Sierra Nevada, I ate snow on the 1st day of August. To reach the summit we had to cross a mountain very steep, one mile and a half in height, and from here until we reached Johnson's, we had traveled over a continued succession of mountains and hills.

I have heard nothing from the Wayne county company since I left Independence. I have^{re}ceived no news since I left the States. At least three thousand wagons are enroute for these regions. You may expect to hear sad accounts of suffering among the emigrants on this route, and especialt between this point and the sink of Mary's river, for on this scope hundreds of cattle and mules will die and I much fear many poor creatures will starve to death. Our little company was the second company which reached Johnson's this year over the land route. No wagons have yet arrived. We beat Bryant's company about 2 hours. We traveled in 4 days over the Sierra Nevada a distance of 80 miles, that will take wagon trains over two weeks to accomplish. I enjoy and have enjoyed very good health throughout the trip. I have had the infinite satisfaction of killing a buffalo on the Platte river. Four of us left the train one morning and crossed over the bluffs into the plains, and soon came in sight of a herd of buffalo in a ravine: we surprised them completely, and I managed to run close up to a bull and shot him through the neck, though close to his head; in the meantime the other three had discharged their guns with various success. One managed to shoot one in the head close to the ear, and he fell stone dead. Mine, however, ran a half mile and received three pistol shots before he fell. We would only take the choice parts, as a buffalo weighs 15 or 20 hundred. I killed an antelope at Scott's Bluffs and that is all that I have killed. I have seen thousands of antelope, but not many buffalo. While we were on the Platte, we feasted on buffalo and deer all the time.

What is called Johnson's Settlement, consists of one double dauby or dirt house, made of unburnt brick one story high and covered with clap-boards, having five doors and three windows in it. In one chamber is kept a kind of doggerly store, and in another is kept a kind of boarding house, in another lives an Oregon family - and in the other two lives a dirty brood of half starved root digger Indians. The store is filled all the time with drunken miners lying around and spending their earnings. Well, I

have now travelled over 3300 miles after gold, and I shall strive very hard to obtain a little. I shall proceed to give a plain statement of facts relative to the gold mining - the quantity of gold - the wages in the mines, &c., as far as I am able, confining myself to a statement of facts only without exaggeration, leaving you all to draw your own conclusions. In the first place then, I will state that there is plenty of gold here - but not to be obtained with as great facility as the papers represented at home. It is found generally either in beds of the rivers or in Kennions of the Mountains - it is often found, however, in the valleys, and sometimes on the tops of the mountains. The dry diggings are said to be at present the richest region found in California. It is very difficult to get to the dry diggings in some places - to gain access to one rich mine recently found on the Juba river, miners have to cross a range of hills and mountains, and to descend one so lofty and rugged that it requires two hours to accomplish it. The channel of this stream is filled with huge rocks, weighing several tons - under those rocks gold is found in large quantities and big lumps - and to obtain it, miners either will have to remove them from their beds or change the channels, so as to draw the water away - for the current runs very strong, and the gold lies entirely under those rocks. Gold is always found under the sand in the bottoms of the rivers, for it is so much heavier than sand that it sinks, and the sand flows up. Gold dust is the only circulating medium in this region; an ounce of gold in the mines is worth \$16 - but at Sacramento City, or San Francisco, it is worth \$18, a discount of so much per cent, is made on account of the dross, or impurity found in it. The wages in the mines for a common laborer is \$16 per day, and no mistake - for every member of our company was offered that sum for their services. A man will not work for less than an ounce of gold per day, at any kind of work. The miners say \$16 per day, or an ounce of gold, is but an ordinary yield of it. The mining business is variable, some days a miner will obtain but a half ounce, and other days 15 or 20. I was told that a week ago a miner struck a heavy vein of gold on Juba river, and obtained about a thousand dollars in two days. I have been in the region of the mines only one day, and cannot of course tell anything about the gold from actual experience; I know only from hearsay - but the best evidence of the abundance of gold that I can find is the large quantities that I see the miners carrying about their persons - men on a spree here sometimes spend \$500 or \$600 in two or three days. The gold dust found in the beds of the rivers, is found in grains resembling in size and shape flax seeds. I saw yesterday, a lump of gold weighing over two ounces. Wages are fair, but provisions high in the mines. I will give you the prices current in the mines. Flour \$35 per hundred; Bacon \$1.50 per lb.; fresh beef 50 cts. per lb.; coffee 50 cts. per lb.; sugar 50 cts. per lb.; tobacco \$2 per lb. But these prices are paid for provisions in the mines. At Enbarcadaro only 45 miles distant, provisions are plenty at the following prices. Flour \$8 per cwt; bacon \$12 per cwt.; coffee 25 cts. per lb.; sugar 20 cts. per lb. Boarding in the mines is \$4.50 per day.- Topers pay \$4.00 per bottle of liquor or 50 cts. per horn. To-day two persons of our party start for Enbarcadaro for provisions, while the remainder of us start to the mines to try our luck -- it is said to be hard service but it pays remarkably well. We calculate that our expenses will be about \$2.00 per day, so we will each have \$14 per day at any rate, with a chance of \$50 or \$500. Mining appears to be the king

of loteries. Trading at the mines is a good business. Ex Gov. Shannon from Ohio is here - he owns a Rancho or farm and is engaged in trading, and making money fast. Some say that the mines are inexhaustible, while others say that the mining will not be worth anything in another year. In the course of a month the country will be full of gold hunters. I would advise every person who comes here from the States, not to take the land route.

I have not been here long enough to advise any person to come here. There is plenty of gold.

No more, but remain your son,

Samuel Suffrins.