

“Overland to California”
In the Memorable Year of 1849
William G. Johnston
1948

1849 TRAIL DIARIES

MARCH 1849

March 15, Thursday

Wm. G. Johnston: Party reached Wayne City on Steamboat Sacramento. Later went into Independence. "It soon became evident that it would be several weeks before we could proceed on our journey westward. We had yet to purchase mules and numerous things needed on the plains, and time would be required for the grass to grow upon which the animals must subsist. Accordingly, it was determined to select a suitable for camping....With this in view after dining, four of our party rode to the country west of Independence, eight miles distant thereon, where, at the edge of a scrub oak forest, belonging to the plantation of a Mr. Rice, they selected a site for our new mode of life." They stayed overnight in the Independence Inn.

March 17, Saturday

Johnston: "we proceeded to the place chosen for permanent camp, reaching it about five o'clock. Our route, after passing through some beautiful woodlands immediately west of town, lay over an undulating plain called the "Blue Prairie."We pitched our tent in a small clearing, surrounded by hickory saplings, behind which was a dense thicket of scrub oaks. Convenient to the camp was a spring of excellent water.....the night was wintry cold...."

March 15, Sunday

Johnston: "We spent the day reading and in taking short walks in the neighborhood."

March 19, Monday

Johnston: "Appearance of an approaching storm in the afternoon led us to dig a deep trench around our tent, and to place our goods under secure cover. But the clouds passed harmlessly by."

March 20, Tuesday

Johnston: Went a mile or two distant to the Big Blue River to fish. Made the acquaintance of a Mr. Irvin, formerly of Pennsylvania, who invited them for the noonday meal and showed them the way through the forest to their camp site.

Members of the party purchased eight Spanish mules from a dealer, Mr. Irwin. Paid \$72 1/2 for each.

March 21, Wednesday

Johnston: Went to Irwin's farm to brand their mules with a diamond K, <K>. Members brought a piece of muslin to make sacks for their provisions now packed in boxes and barrels.

March 23, Friday

Johnston: Members went to Independence to get mail; others went to the corn fields to hunt prairie chickens. No letters and no game.

March 24, Saturday

Johnston: Spent the morning packing groceries and other provisions in the sacks recently made....will greatly reduce our load....will prove serviceable in our travels..being light and easily handled.

March 25, Sunday

Johnston: "A thick coating of ice was found on the water bucket beside our tent door....We visited some new neighbors today, encamped a short distance off..They invited us to become their companions on the intended march...we concluded that it would be highly advantageous to unite with them. Another cold night."

March 26, Monday

Johnston: Had a letter from home;

Daniel : Edwin Bryant had assembled forty-two men, in Louisville, ready to depart for California

March 27, Tuesday

Johnston: Working in the camp making picket pins. "this evening there was rain,..."

March 28, Wednesday

Johnston: "Rain..when we awoke...In a few hours it ceased, but the air was chilly, and mud abounded in an unpleasant degree. By noon the sun came out, which it became pleasant....McBride surprised us with an excellent cake of his baking. Our first warm bread we have had...Rain fell heavily through the night, easing about daybreak."

March 29, Thursday

Johnston: Bought two more mules. Received letters. Day pleasant.

March 30, Friday

Johnston: "grass grows slowly....prevailing expectation is that in about ten days its growth will be sufficient to allow us to start on our journey. News that Captain Wm. J. Ankrim, and others, tore up Independence. They intend to start from St. Joseph.

March 31, Saturday

Johnston: "Lowry Adams, grandson of Mr. Rice, owner of the plantation on which we are encamped, is anxious to emigrate with us, in the capacity of teamster. He complains of ill-treatment on the part of his grandfather, and proposes to run off. To this we are unwilling to assent, but will accede to his proposition if he will first notify the old planter,..... "

April 1, Sunday

Johnston: "Whilst taking a walk with Mr. McBride over the neighboring prairie, we visited the camp of Col. Russell, composed of a large party, among whom we had numerous acquaintances, with whom we spent some pleasant hours."

Gray: At Independence

April 2, Monday

Johnston:" A cold rain fell upon us whilst we prepared breakfast....McBride and myself rode to town this morning to exchange one of the mules...We dined at Noland House...The little town was crowded with people, oxen and mules. The stores were jammed with customers; whips were cracking in all directions; and the utmost confusion prevailed....I returned alone. It was still raining, but I was enveloped in an India rubber coat, and but for the miry road, would not have been greatly inconvenienced by the storm.....Lowry Adams having concluded to remain with his grandfather, I made a number of inquiries as to teamsters... I found a number of Pittsburghers preparing to emigrate, among them Messrs. Joseph C. McKibben, James B. Mitchell, A.W. Brockway, Harry Meyers and Thomas Kennedy...it was still raining.."

Bryant (Daniel): Arrived at Independence, and was encamped on Neville Ross farm, where he was buying mules from a large number of Santa Fe traders present

Gray: At Independence

Josselyn: The "South Zanesville Company" of '49's was composed of 10 members. They left Zanesville April 2, 1849. Each of the ten men put \$200 in a pool for expenses. Each furnished a team of horses and a wagon, fully equipped with camp utensils, beds, wagon tools, etc. They went westward over Ohio's roads to Cincinnati, thence by steamboat to Independence.

April 3, Tuesday

Johnston: "All night long therein continued to fall, and fell unceasingly through the day (part of party) sat shivering in the tent..(some) preferred working in the rain. Gathering stones we built a substantial fireplace; and when this was finished went with our axes to a clump of hickory saplings, and laid in a large supply of fire wood."

Gray: At Independence

Price: Hugh Morgan Price and three others had left St. Louis on the steamer, Mary Blane, on April 3, 1849

April 4, Wednesday

Johnston: Mr. Edwin Bryant and members of his company have just reached Independence, and intend camping near the town, while awaiting the growth of grass."
(Bryant-Daniel reported Bryant had reached Independence, April 2.)

Gray: At Independence

April 5, Thursday

Gray: In Camp No 1 near Indept+

April 6, Friday

Johnston: Rain fell during the night, and again heavily about noon. Clearing up, I undertook to do some laundry work...received to-day from Colonel Sam. W. Black, some letters of introduction; one to General Bennett Riley, Military Governor of California, and another to Persifer F. Smith, commanding the Pacific Division....Rumors are prevalent of cholera having broken out among some emigrants encamped near Independence."

Gray: In Camp No 1 Indep+

April 7, Saturday

Johnston: A reporter for the St. Louis "Republican" paid us a visit, taking down our names for publication...As a result of today's hunt...three squirrels and a wood duck brought in..Again we had rain in the evening.."

Gray: In Camp No 1 Indep+, wrote home

Price: Landing 3 miles of Independence, arriving a 4 P.M. This evening we laid our bodies in an old stage coach or wagon bed. Rainy. Disagreeable and muddy. Hard beginning for California boys. Missouri River full of sand bars and snags. All the way up its banks are very broken, rocky & hilly. (Corrected) Now and then a flat cottonwood marshy bottom.

April 8, Sunday

Johnston: Our Pittsburgh friends dined with us to-day. At dusk a rain storm began, accompanied by loud peals of thunder and vivid lightning, continuing after night.

Gray: In Camp No 1 Indep+

Price: Arrived at Independence the 8th. This night we lay under a shed in the suburbs of town.

April 9, Monday

Johnston: "As rain continued falling we ate breakfast in the tent. When the rain ceased a heavy wind swept the prairies, increasing to a gale towards night."

Gray: In Camp No 1 Indep+

Price; This evening we rented a house of Mr. Joseph Stone at one dollar per month.

Good health enjoyed among us in Independence. Here F. Price had a spell of sickness, cold settled on the lungs and measles connected with cold. Here we found the virtue was in cold water, its effects producing good health immediately.

Independence is situated in a rolling and fertile country containing about 1600 inhabitants. Articles of provisions and clothing about as cheap as in Ohio. Business is conducted on quite a busy scale here. Cattle, horses and mules somewhat cheaper than in Ohio or Sty. Louis. Plenty to be bought.

April 10, Tuesday

Johnston: "...spent the day hunting in the woods, and on our return to camp we brought nine squirrels as a result of the tramp."

Gray: In Camp No 1 Indep +

Price: In Independence

April 11, Wednesday

Johnston: "One large cat-fish was the sum of to-day's fishing in the Big Blue River....decided the mess should be performed by each one in turn, for a month at a time...arranged by drawing cuts."

Gray: In Camp No 1 Indep+

Price: In Independence

April 12, Thursday

Johnston: "Rain fell steadily throughout the day, so we clung closely to the shelter of the tent; occupying our time mostly by reading and writing."

Gray: In Camp No 1 Indep+

Price: In Independence

April 13, Friday

Johnston: "Scouring the country around for a mule which strayed off, gave us employment for the day; but without success."

Gray: In Camp No 1 Indep+

Price: In Independence

April 14, Saturday

Johnston: "Ice fully half an inch in thickness was found in our water bucket this morning....At nine o'clock the neighboring camps of Paul and Johnston struck their tents, to begin the march westward....becoming impatient at our delay, they concluded to proceed without us....Whilst at dinner, a blinding snow storm came up, lasting an

hour...McBride...in search of the lost mule, returned this evening, having found it tied to a fence about a mile east of Independence."

Gray: In Camp No 1 Indep+, Ice 3/4 of an inch in thickness

Price: In Independence

April 15, Sunday

Johnston: Captain Maury and Stewart, our fellow travelers on the steamer Sacramento, and several others of their friends from Louisville, dined with us to-day, after which they rode out to the Big Blue River, intending to form a camp there. Several of our party accompanied them to assist in the selection of a site. On our way we stopped at the camp of Colonel Russell, and were hospitably entertained by the gentleman and others. Whilst there, Mr. Edwin Bryant, who had been at the river selecting ground for his company, rode up, and with him and Dr. Clinton I returned to camp, where I found Messrs. Mitchell and Kennedy, who were paying us a visit.

Gray: In Camp No 1 Indep+

Price: In Independence

April 16, Monday

Johnston: "An Illinois company, which has been encamped in our neighborhood, to-day took up its line of march. We had a visit this morning from a number of Kansas Indians - "Kaws....among them was a chief, two squaws, a roach (young warrior)." (This is a long story..the essence..the Indians had documents of various types, many having no relation to the Indian....They asked for sugar but was given a cup of molasses into which they, one by one, dipped their fingers, much satisfied....they were also given some bread and tobacco..had to be driven away at the point of a musket.)

Gray: In Camp No 1 Indep+

Price: In Independence

April 17, Tuesday

Johnston: "The tide of emigration westward increases, and almost hourly we have fresh evidences of this, as wagon after wagon, some drawn by oxen and others by mules, roll past. Our proposed guide, Jim Stewart....sends us occasional greetings, always telling us to be in no haste.

He says that parties starting thus early are making woeful mistakes, as there is no grass to sustain their animals,...Daily we witness the breaking in of mules by emigrants who go past, and thus have a foretaste of what is in store for us. Plunging, kicking, throwing off the uncomfortable gear, lying down, rolling and running off, with heels striking in every direction....All hands are at work to-day laying in a fresh supply of wood for fires...I also made leathern cases for my pistol and hunting knife, which are to be carried on a belt around my waist in the regular backwoods style. With a wooden stocking I covered my tin canteen, as in this way when carrying water on the march it can be kept cool, even when exposed to the rays of the broiling sun...lastly I cast bullets for my fire-arms, moulding enough for a seven-year's war."

"Colonel Russell's large train began its march to-day."

Gray: In Camp No 1 Indep+ (Total of 13 days in Camp No 1)

Price: In Independence

April 18, Wednesday

Johnston: "Among the many teams that rolled past to-day were those of our friends Brockway, McKibben, etc. A large number of government wagons from Santa Fe went by. These will probably be sold in Independence".....our party returning from Mr. Irwin's brought with them eight mules and three horses.....one of the mules strayed off...

"A lot of oxen, about sixty in number, were driven past us to-day; some were yoked together, but the greater part having no restraint, seemed wild and uncontrollable, fighting and goring each other, pulling down fences, and cutting antics generally. We obtained quarters for the mules in Mr. Rice's barnyard."

Gray: In Camp No 2, 8 miles out from Independence

Price: In Independence

Josselyn: Arrived at Independence Landing at day light and spent the day in getting up the bluff. Camped just up the hill. Day fine.

April 19, Thursday

Johnston:"We also entertained members of Col. Russell's company.. Mr. McBride astonished us at dinner by setting before us a pot of apple dumplings..."

Gray: In Camp No 2, 8 miles out from Independence

Price: In Independence

Josselyn: Spent the day in packing our goods. Weather fine.

April 20, Friday

Johnston: "The passing of emigrant trains westward bound is become so common an occurrence each day as to be no longer a novelty, and to note the fact would be both wearisome and monotonous. About forty wagons, mostly drawn by oxen, went past us in the course of a few hours to-day, while large numbers going other roads, of course escape observation.

Our neighbors in general gathered around our camp fire to-night, and with song and story until near mid-night we passed the hours cheerily."

Gray: In Camp No 2, 8 miles out from Independence

Josselyn: In camp all day putting things in order. Weather fine.

Price: April 20th moved into the country 2 miles south of Independence. Having bought our mules a day or two prior to this time we were preparing our harness, feeding up our mules &c, the number of mules bought were 5, but finding they were insufficient I bought a pony of the Indians on Kansas River.

April 21, Saturday

Johnston: "Camp business took me to Independence this morning. Noise and confusion reigned supreme there. Traders, trappers and emigrants filled the streets and stores. All were in a hurry, jostling one another and impatient to get through with their business. The salesman were overworked, but good nature aided them in preserving their tempers. Mules and oxen strove for the right of way. "Who" and "haw" resounded on every side; while the loud cracking of ox goads, squeaking wheels and rattling chains, mingled with oaths of teamsters.

Our guide, Jim Stewart, for the first time visited our camp, staying over night."

Gray: In Camp No 2, 8 miles out from Independence

Josselyn: Left camp and went into Independence and found it to be quite a business place. Fine weather.

April 22, Sunday

Johnston: "A large company of Mexican traders from Santa Fe went by. Some of their wagons were drawn by as many as ten mules."

Gray: In Camp No 2, 8 miles out from Independence

Josselyn: Stayed in camp all day. Weather fine.

April 23, Monday

Johnston: "A hard rain began falling in the night, continuing through most of the day,...."

Gray: In Camp No 2, 8 miles out from Independence, wrote home

Josselyn: Rain nearly all day which prevented us from being in no hurry put it off until the next day.

April 24, Tuesday

Johnston: "Among the tide of emigrants to-day was a large company from Cincinnati, well equipped. They wore uniforms similar to those of Uncle Sam's soldiers. Their wagon beds were made of iron, light and portable, and it is claimed for them that they will be found specially suited for crossing rivers, not requiring caulking to make them water-tight.

"A letter from ex-Governor Boggs, of Missouri,...advises certain of his relatives to drop everything and start for the land of gold.

"Three more mules, a recent purchase, were brought to camp this evening.

"We are completely surrounded by camps of emigrants, and to-night another large party from Steubenville has been added."

Gray: In Camp No 2, 8 miles out from Independence

Josselyn: Left camp at 8 o'clock and drove 6 miles and camped three miles S W of Independence. Fine day.

April 25, Wednesday

Gray: In Camp No 2, 8 miles out from Independence

Josselyn: Left camp at 8 1/2 o'clock and drove to Mr. Rice's (6 Miles) where corn was plenty at 1.25 per bl1

April 26, Thursday

Johnston: "Edwin Bryant's company with one hundred and fifty pack-mules went past us this morning all looking in fine trim.

(Bryant- Daniel): "On the date of Edwin Bryant's departure there was gathered in Independence approximately 1,500 emigrants and the number was swelled hourly by new arrivals. Specific attention was focused on the Bryant's party which numbered forty-eight men. It was provided with eleven tents, one wagon, an India rubber boat capable of rescuing and bearing the wagon body, a medicine chest, hospital stores and other necessaries. Each man had three mules for his own use, with three extra to each mess of four, and was armed with a rifle, a pair of holster and a pair of belt pistols. They carried provisions enough to sustain them for 120 days."

Gray: In Camp No 2, 8 miles out from Independence

Josselyn: Drove back 1 mile to a smith shop and got our tyre cut. Fine day.

April 27, Friday

Johnston: "We spent several hours shelling corn in Mr. Rice's barn; a laborious operation. The mode was this: the edge of a shovel was so placed so as to rest upon, and project over the side of a wooden box, while the sheller, sitting astride the handle, drew the ear of corn athwart the shovel's edge; the loosened grains falling into the box.

"..we harnessed the mules and made a trial trip. The animals were refractory, and not at all pleased with the restraint put upon them. Everyone seemed to be suddenly possessed of a dozen legs, and each one of these so set as to be able to strike simultaneously to all strike in all directions. They turned themselves constantly to all points of the compass, and had their inner and outer sides been reversed, I would scarce think such changes would have excited surprise.....

"Our march will begin tomorrow. To-day ends the sixth week of camp life, attended much of the time with great discomfort,...

Gray: In Camp No 2, 8 miles out from Independence

Josselyn: In camp all day working at wagons, fixing ox tongue, etc. Fine day.

Price: 27th April moved out to Mr. Rice's 8 miles from Independence. Here Capt. McCaddon of the Zanesville Company died with the cholera.

In laying in provisions we determined in nothing but the real substantials of life. Our provisions consisted of 600 lbs. flour, 440 lbs. bacon, 227 lbs. crackers, 25 lbs. rice, 20 lbs. sugar, 18 lbs. coffee, 1 lb. sassafras tea, 85 lbs. salt for selves and mules.

April 28, Saturday

Johnston:" The greeting of a bright sun this morning seemed to augur well for the commencement of a lovely day....The corn shelled yesterday had to be put into sacks, weighed, and placed in the wagons. Then the harnessing began, with experiences about similar to yesterday. Next we struck our tent, and wrapping the canvas around the poles, flung all into the wagon; then strapping the mess chest to the tail-board, and hanging the camp kettle below, we finally cracked whips and started

"The two wagons of Captain Pye's mess took the lead, getting off at ten o'clock. We got started about an hour later. Our mules bothered us greatly. When only a few rods from camp, they came to a dead halt in an insignificant ravine. Neither mild persuasion nor severe drubbing for a while had the effect of making them pull together. But when our patience had fairly oozed out, when our strength was about gone, and it seemed as if no more exertion could be put forth, they started off themselves, and walked quietly on as if nothing had happened.....

"Fresh troubles, constantly occurring, gave us little chance to observe the beauties of nature. but one flower in the vast plain did not fail to attract notice. Upon an eight-by-ten shanty on the roadside, which some enterprising individual had erected, and in letters as large as the house itself, was chalked the one word: "WHISKY!"

"At three o'clock we reached Blue River, a stream about ten yards wide, and three feet deep at the crossing. Its current was swift, with a gravelly bottom. On either side of it was a belt of timber, and quite a large number of emigrants were encamped in these woods....We had much difficulty in crossing the Blue River, for its banks were deep and precipitous. Our mules refused to enter the water.... the neighboring camp a yoke of oxen, which pulled the wagons high up on dry land with wonderful ease. While fastening a chain from the ox-yoke to the axle-tree of our wagon, I became thoroughly drenched and chilled to the innermost bones.

"At six o'clock we reached the frontier line of Missouri, which marks the separation between civilized and uncivilized life..."

Gray: In Camp No 2, 8 miles out from Independence

Josselyn: Hitched up and drove 8 miles to Blue River; before leaving Rice's we bought corn enough to feed our teams for 6 to 7 days thinking the grass would be good enough for grazing by the time the corn was out. Weather fine.

April 29, Sunday

Gray: In Camp No 2, 8 miles out from Independence
Wrote home

Josselyn: Remained at Blue River all day. Weather fine.

Price: 29th very cool weather, rainy nearly every day. 8 miles from Independence the country is beautifully interspersed with prairie and timber. well watered with fine springs. Limestone soil.

April 30, Monday

Gray: In Camp No 2, 8 miles out from Independence
Wrote home

Josselyn: Left camp at 9 o'clock and drove to Lone Elm 16 miles. Weather fine. Good roads but water scarce.

Price: At Rice's, 8 miles from Independence

MAY 1849

May 1, Tuesday

Gray: Started in earnest at 10 o'clock, a beautiful day, but very cold at sunrise, road good, with exception of a few steep hills & some sloughs, two of our 8 wagons broke their tongues, detain+ 2 hours to repair them and the whole afternoon (this other) . Stop+ this other side the Big Blue, had dinner & then moved forward 3 miles & encamped; Slept in the common stock wagon, on the anvils & spades & this wagon the common property of the C+ received no attention particular has no curtains & the storm consequently beat in, wetting my companion & myself pretty well, awoke with lame back & a pain in the side. The name of this place is call+ "Point of the Woods" - water scarce & little wood. Distance third day 12 miles Making from Independence 20 miles

Price: At Rice's, 8 miles from Independence

May 2, Wednesday

Price: At Rice's, 8 miles from Independence

May 3, Thursday

Price: At Rice's, 8 miles from Independence

May 4, Friday

Price: At Rice's, 8 miles from Independence

May 5, Saturday

Price: 5th May left Rice's and travelled 4 miles then encamped till Monday morning

May 6, Sunday

Price: 4 miles from Rice's

C. Dulaney: Charles Dulaney, letter to his brother Robert L. Dulaney, Camp Bryant, Jackson County, Missouri, May 6, 1849

"Bryant and company looked upon the adventure of crossing the plains as a lark, and before they left Missouri they gave a Kentucky barbecue and asked their Missouri neighbors to share it with them. Women of the community were invited as special guests. A brief program was organized, and it was expected that one of the ladies would make a sweet little speech, and Calhoun Benham would respond. The Kentuckians, adaptable though they were on such occasions, were not prepared for the turn of events. Charles Dulany of Louisville described for his brother Robert in Clarke County, Illinois, the fiasco. A "gentle dame," he said, arose and delivered verbatim Daniel Webster's Bunker Hill Address. He thought it about as appropriate for the occasion as would be a discussion of the emancipation question with an Arab Bedouin....It was replied to by Calhoun Benham,...This was too much, the party immediately got down to the business of eating and drinking. Both Kentuckians and Missourians got as drunk as lords and were unable to dance or accompany the women home....Dulaney observed that "The most unpleasant feature in our day's festivity was that Benham & others got to fighting, tho, fortunately none were injured, thus ended this eventful day..."

"With aching heads from drinking and fighting at their farewell party on departing civilization, Bryant started up the California Trail toward the South Platte..."

May 7, Monday

Price: Travelled 8 miles, encamped near Big Blue

** Route unknown..John O. Boggs, Lewis Jones, John Bartleson, Major Hickman, "crossed the plains with ox teams (Possibly with Hudspeth train)"

May 8, Tuesday

Price: Travelled 7 or 8 miles, King Bolt crossed into Territory at 4 P.M.

May 9, Wednesday

Price: Travelled 6 miles. Today we spent in unpacking and repacking; finding our load too heavy and we commenced selling and throwing out unnecessaries.

May 10 - Thursday

Price: Travelled 6 mi. Moderate distance; passed Lone Elm

SOURCES

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