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	Page
But Time Marches On!	130
Could It Be the Quantity and Not the Quality?	130
The Blue and the Gray	130
They Tempered the Tipplers	131
They "Dood It!"	132
Wooden Nickels?	132
A Successful Experiment	132
A Cutting Likeness	132
All Honor to a Hero	133
A Rose by Any Other Name	134
Pistol Packin' Papas	135
Missouri Historical Data in Magazines	136

Illustrations

	Page
EMIGRANTS' CAMP AT ST. JOSEPH, MISSOURI, IN 1849. Cover design by William A. Knox from Bruff's drawing in <i>Gold Rush: The Journals, Drawings, and Other Papers of J. Goldsborough Bruff, Captain, Washington City and California Mining Association, April 2, 1849-July 20, 1851</i> , edited by Georgia Willis Read and Ruth Gaines. See "Women and Children on the Oregon-California Trail in the Gold-Rush Years," page	1
OSAGE WARRIORS, facing	76
YALO-MAH, A FOX WARRIOR, facing	80
AN IOWAY CHIEF, facing	82
THE INDIAN CAMP, facing	84
INDIANS HUNTING BUFFALO, facing	94

(i)

WOMEN AND CHILDREN ON THE OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAIL IN THE GOLD-RUSH YEARS

BY GEORGIA WILLIS READ¹

The number of men, women, and children passing over the Oregon-California trail in 1849-1850, as well as the total tally of their beasts of burden and their wagons, must remain forever a matter of conjecture, within certain broad limits. Such statistics as exist—a count of wagons passing Fort Kearny or Fort Laramie, an opinion by a mountain man or trapper traversing a portion of the route in pursuance of his business, or a guess by government employee or interested emigrant on the size of the great concourse of which he was a part—all are fragmentary and inconclusive. The approximate calculation made in California by the state government at the close of 1849 (see below) is perhaps the most carefully worked out.

Nevertheless, estimates must necessarily be our guide and, naturally enough, the majority of these and the ones commanding most respect originated in the region bordering the Missouri and the Mississippi rivers, in other words, the frontier states. Fortunately, the size of the emigration was a matter of news interest and items concerning it were given space in the newspapers of the day.

On April 28, 1849, the *New-York Tribune*, under the heading, "The Great Migration," cited the *St. Louis People's Organ* of April 16:

The California Emigrants.—It is estimated that 20,000 persons, 4,000 wagons, and 30,000 mules, will be *en route* across the Plains, by the 1st of June next. . . . Their great and formidable trials must be encountered in the arid plains of the Great Basin and in the mountain passes which connect with this Basin.

¹GEORGIA WILLIS READ was born in New Brighton, Pennsylvania. After studying in Burnham school, Northampton, Massachusetts, and Smith college she traveled widely in the United States and abroad. Since 1929 she has been assistant editor of the Columbia university press in New York. She has edited several volumes on western travel, the latest of which is *Gold Rush: The Journals, Drawings, and Other Papers of J. Goldsborough Bruff, Captain, Washington City and California Mining Association, April 2, 1849-July 20, 1851*. Ruth Gaines is the co-editor.

On May 16 of the same year the *Tribune*, under "California Emigrants," stated: "The *Frontier* (Iowa) *Guardian* learns that between six hundred and a thousand wagons are on their way to the Bluffs, from Iowa, Wisconsin, and Michigan, *en route* for the Salt Lake and gold region."

On June 7, 1849, the *Glasgow* (Missouri) *Weekly Times* drew on the *St. Joseph Adventure* for the following:

From the Plains. A Mountain Trader in the employ of Mr. Jos. Robidoux, arrived here on Sunday the 27th ult. twenty days from Fort Laramie. . . . He represents the road as very much crowded, particularly beyond the junction of the Independence and St. Joseph roads; in some places there were several teams abreast, generally going forward without accident or detention. . . . There are probably on the route, beyond Fort Kearney, not less than fifty or sixty thousand oxen, mules and horses.

Stryker's Magazine published in 1849 partial figures on the size of the emigration, based on information from the *St. Joseph* (Missouri) *Gazette*: wagons crossed over the Missouri, from St. Joseph to the Bluffs, 4193; allowing 4 men and 8 draft animals per wagon, 16,772 persons and 33,544 mules and oxen, and those traveling with pack animals raised these figures to an estimated 17,000 emigrants and 34,000 animals.²

Major Osborne Cross of the Mounted Riflemen speaks of the "immense emigration" of 1849 and gives the following estimate, based upon a wagon count at Fort Kearny of above 4000 wagons passing that point up to June 1: 20,000 persons, 50,000 animals ahead on the trail; total figures, including the rear of the emigration and that on the Santa Fe trail, 35,000 persons, with wagons and animals in proportion. He believed that more than 30,000 were traveling the trail he was on.³

The "Report of the Chief Engineer" (Engineer department), Washington, dated November 9, 1849, gives an interesting estimate:

²*The American Quarterly Register and Magazine, Conducted by James Stryker*, Vol. III (1849), p. 58.

³*Senate Executive Documents*, 31st Cong., 2nd Sess., No. 1, Part II, pp. 137, 148-149, 154. The report of Cross in the form of a journal is included in the report of the quartermaster general.

The events of the last eighteen months have added greatly to the importance of Forts Kearny and Laramie. Nearly 8,000 wagons, 30,000 people, and 80,000 draught animals have passed along this thoroughfare on the way to California, Oregon, and the Salt Lake.⁴

Eighteen months prior to November 9, 1849, brings us to May 9, 1848. This date, May 9, is about as early in the season as wagons could have reached Fort Kearny, and the figures in question thus clearly apply to the emigrations of both 1848 and 1849, though they have sometimes been cited as of 1849 only. While the number of persons crossing the plains in 1848 must have been small indeed compared to that in 1849, we can hardly ignore it as negligible or nonexistent, even though the totals given above would not be excessive for 1849 alone.

General Persifor F. Smith, commanding the tenth military division (Pacific division) had arrived in California by the steamer, *California*, on her first trip. At Panama, San Francisco bound, she was met by a mob of gold seekers far in excess of her passenger capacity. He doubtless knew whereof he spoke in the matter of propriety when he reported to Washington from Fort Vancouver, October 7, 1849:

. . . . The route by the isthmus is too expensive and too insignificant for the number of travellers. The steamers can bring with propriety not three hundred a month, while the emigration by land, if divided throughout the year, would average three thousand a month.⁵

In other words, General Smith believed that the overland emigration (including, presumably, that of the Santa Fe and other southern routes) then averaged 36,000 per annum. Allowing some deduction for these southern land routes—a total figure small, of course, in comparison to that for the Oregon-California trail—we find ourselves close to the mean of 30,000.

Nor was General Smith the only one who favored this figure. On March 12, 1850, an interesting document was

⁴*House of Representatives Executive Documents*, 31st Cong., 1st Sess., No. 5, "Report of the Chief Engineer," No. 12, p. 225.

⁵*Senate Executive Documents*, 31st Cong., 1st Sess., No. 47, "Report of the Secretary of War," p. 83.

executed in Washington, D. C. It had been prepared in the then capital of California, "the Pueblo de San José," December 22, 1849, in the governorship of Peter H. Burnett, and was attested by him and by W. Van Voorhies, secretary of state for California.⁶ This document was a "Memorial of the Senators and Representatives elect from California, Requesting, in the name of the people of that State, the admission of California into the Union." It was signed by William M. Gwin and "J. C. Fremont" as senators elect, and by G. W. Wright and Edward Gilbert as representatives elect.⁷ In the presentation of their arguments for the admission of California as a state, these lawmakers naturally included a discussion of the number of people affected:

The population of California on the 1st day of January, 1850, is supposed to have been about 107,000 souls. There are no means of ascertaining with certainty the number and character of the large emigration which has poured into the country since the discovery of the gold mines; but the undersigned having taken much pains to arrive at correct conclusions on this subject, submit the following estimates.

By close check, the arrivals by sea at San Francisco from April 12 to December 31, 1849, were placed at 29,069. The "Memorial" continued:

By the way of Santa Fe and the Gila, the emigration was estimated at 8,000. From Mexico, by land, from 6,000 to 8,000 were supposed to have arrived; of which, only about 2,000 were believed to have remained in the country. Adding to these amounts the 3,000 sailors who have deserted from ships arriving in the country, and computing the great overland emigration (which was variously estimated from 30,000 to 40,000) at 30,000, the following total is the result, viz.: [January 1, 1849, 26,000; January 1, 1850, 107,069]. The foregoing figures and estimates, though known not to be strictly accurate, are thought to be a near approximation to the actual number of the inhabitants. The round numbers are presumed in every case to be below the mark.⁸

⁶Van Voorhies had been sent by the federal government from Washington in 1848 as assistant postmaster general for California. He was a fellow passenger of General Smith on the *California* when she dropped anchor the first time in San Francisco bay, February 28, 1849.

⁷Gilbert, editor of the *Alta California*, served a year as representative and returned to California. He was killed August 2, 1852, by James W. Denver in a duel famous in California history.

⁸*Senate Miscellaneous Documents*, 31st Cong., 1st Sess., No. 68, pp. 15-17.

It is probable that the emigration of 1850 approximated that of 1849 in size. Ledyard says, citing a news item from the *Frontier Guardian* of Kaneshville, Iowa, July 10, 1850:

From the Plains.—The following account of men, women and children, etc., who had passed Fort Laramie prior to the 3d of June, was handed to our friend Elder Moses Clawson, who arrived at this place a few days ago; 11,433 men, 119 women, 99 children, 3,188 wagons, 10,900 horses; 3,588 mules, 3,428 oxen, and 233 cows. He further says, while on his way from the Fort, that he passed, for eight days, 500 wagons per day, on an average; and gives, as his unqualified opinion, that 40,000 persons and 10,000 wagons, must have passed that place before the 7th inst.⁹

Lord, citing Captain William Findley in his report to Colonel F. Foreman, corresponding secretary of the California relief committee of 1850, says that by June 18, 1850, 39,000 emigrants had been registered at Fort Laramie, "and it was estimated that 60,000 had set out to cross the plains by the northern or South Pass route alone."¹⁰

Bancroft speaks of the many women and children on the Oregon-California trail in 1849 and of the impossibility of arriving at exact figures regarding the number of emigrants. He "accepts" the figure of 42,000 overland in that year, "of which 9,000 were from Mexico, 8,000 coming through New Mexico, and 25,000 by way of the South Pass and Humboldt River."¹¹ John S. Hittell thinks "25,000—according to one authority, 50,000" traveled overland in 1849,¹² while Dr. J. D. B. Stillman, a physician who arrived in California by sea in 1849, placed the figure at "more than 60,000."¹³

All such estimates are inconclusive, but valuable none the less in helping us to picture the size of the overland

⁹Loomis, Leander V., *A Journal of the Birmingham Emigrating Company, The Records of a Trip from Birmingham, Iowa, to Sacramento, California, in 1850*, edited by Edgar M. Ledyard, p. 17n. Ledyard's notations are valuable.

¹⁰Lord, Elliot, *Comstock Mining and Miners*, p. 13, 13n.

¹¹Bancroft, Hubert Howe, *History of California*, Vol. VI, 1849-1859, pp. 145, 158-159.

¹²Hittell, John S., "The Discovery of Gold in California," *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, Vol. XLI, n. s. XIX (November, 1890-April, 1891), p. 534.

¹³Stillman, Jacob Davis Babcock, "Observations on the Medical Topography and Diseases (Especially Diarrhoea) of the Sacramento Valley, California, during the years 1849-50," *The New-York Journal of Medicine, and the Collateral Sciences*, Vol. XVII, n. s. VII (November, 1851), p. 289.

emigration. Probably 25,000 for each of the two gold-rush years is too small a figure. Perhaps 50,000 is too high, though this might be hard to demonstrate. Possibly 30,000 represents a golden mean and might be considered a reasonable assumption, leaning toward the conservative side.

If there are but few statistical guideposts to the size of the emigration as a whole, there are even fewer to the number of women and children on the trail in gold-rush years. That they formed a certain proportion of the whole is self-evident, but what proportion is a matter of conjecture, and such conjectures vary widely.

Schafer declared: "In the first gold rush year [1849], as may be supposed, very few entire families crossed, the companies being made up mainly of young or middle-aged men."¹⁴ This was, to me, a surprising statement when I first read it, and year by year the evidence of the trail, in the recorded words of those who traveled it, has convinced me further of its unsoundness.

Hulbert, through the hero in his synthetic diary of the California trail, *Forty-Niners*, figures that in 1849 50,000 persons went overland to California and that of this number there were sixteen men to every woman, and three women to each child.¹⁵ Stated in another way, this would be approximately: men, ninety-two per cent, women, six per cent, and children, two per cent. But even these percentages seem to me definitely too low. Were I to hazard a conjecture, a fairer ratio would seem to be: men, eight-five per cent, women, ten per cent, and children, five per cent; or, on the hypothetical basis of 30,000 human beings, 25,500 men, 3000 women and 1500 children. Even such figures for women and children and perhaps for the total emigration, I should expect to see revised upwards, not downwards.

Those concerned with travel to California in 1849 seemed to expect women to form an appreciable part of the emigration. T. H. Jefferson, in the rare *Accompaniment to*

¹⁴Steele, John, *Across the Plains in 1850*, edited by Joseph Schafer, p. xxvii.

¹⁵Hulbert, Archer Butler, *Forty-Niners, The Chronicle of the California Trail*, p. 22.

the Map of the Emigrant Road from Independence, Mo., to St. Francisco, California, remarked:

Packing [i. e., taking pack and saddle animals, not wagons] is the safest and most expeditious, and in some respects preferable, even for women and children. Side-saddles should be discarded—women should wear hunting-frocks, loose pantaloons, men's hats and shoes, and ride the same as men.¹⁶

Jefferson's detailed map of the route was valuable (he had already been overland to California himself in 1846) and the information in his *Accompaniment* was to the point, but this particular bit of advice fell on deaf ears. The day of slacks had not yet come.

The *New-York Tribune*, February 10, 1849, said:

We find in the Fort Smith (Ark.) Herald, a number of circulars and communications from the agents of companies about to start from that place on the Overland Route to California. . . . We have here selected and arranged the most important items.

The Independence Route The route via Independence or St. Josephs, Mo. to Fort Laramie, South Pass, Fort Hall, the sink of Mary's River, &c. &c. the *old* route—is the best. "Let no emigrant," says the *Arkansas Democrat*, "Carrying his family with him, deviate from it, or imagine to himself that he can find a better road. This road is the best that has yet been discovered, and . . . it is much the shortest. The Indians, moreover, on this route, have, up to the present time, been so friendly as to commit no acts of hostility on the emigrants.

Mrs. John (Am. R.) Wilson, wife of General John Wilson, herself a traveler of the overland trail in 1849 and in spite of extraordinarily favorable circumstances experiencing severe discomforts, wrote from San Francisco, February 28, 1850, to a friend back home in Missouri: "I would not say to any person Come for fear that they would not succeed as there will be hewers of wood and drawers of water everywhere but I do say if any of my friends or acquaintances are coming tell them not to bring females and to come as lightly loaded as possible."¹⁷

¹⁶Jefferson, T. H., *Map of the Emigrant Road from Independence, Mo., to St. Francisco, California* (1849); *Accompaniment to the Map of the Emigrant Road*. . . . p. 1.

¹⁷Unpublished letter of Mrs. Wilson in the files of Professor Frederic A. Culmer, Central college, Fayette, Missouri.

There is to my mind a possible explanation of the fact that women and children were more numerous on the trail in these years than is often supposed to be the case. Contrary to Jefferson's advice, it is highly improbable that many emigrants with families organized to cross the continent by pack train. On the contrary, they traveled in prairie schooners, and the women and children rode much of the time in the wagons, especially in the opening months of the journey. When the going got harder, when oxen and mules failed under the strain with increasing frequency, and the value of every ounce of cargo had to be weighed, then women and children tumbled out and trudged along, mile after mile, day after day. Entries in journals kept on the trail, like those of New Year diaries now, tended in many cases to become briefer as time wore on. Just when more women and children, according to this theory, were increasingly in evidence on the trail, diarists must have found their hands full of more compelling duties than writing details of the exodus about them.

Certain it is that traces of women and children appeared on the trail for those who had eyes to see and ears to hear—a piece of calico at a camping ground, a bonnet lying by the wayside, an infant's tiny woolen undershirt dropped from a wagon, the voices of women raised in song by the campfire piercing the desert stillness.

One of the women who traveled overland to California, Catherine Margaret Haun, wife of Judge Henry P. Haun (later United States senator from California), has left in her reminiscences written many years later a picture of life on the trail from a woman's point of view.¹⁸ On April 24, 1849, a small party including the Hauns left Clinton, Iowa, to travel to the Far West. At Council Bluffs they made final preparations for the journey. These included the reorganization of various small groups of emigrants into one large company of seventy wagons and 120 persons for reasons of safety.

¹⁸Haun, Catherine Margaret, "A Woman's Trip Across the Plains in 1849," MS HM 538. Henry E. Huntington library and art gallery, San Marino, California.

Mrs. Haun describes the basis upon which the parties were selected:

Good health, and above all, not too large a proportion of women and children was also taken into consideration. The morning starts had to be made early—always before six o'clock—and it would be hard to get children ready by that hour. Later on experience taught the mothers that in order not to delay the train it was best to allow the smaller children to sleep in the wagons until after several hours of travel when they were taken up for the day. Our caravan had a good many women and children and although we were probably longer on the journey owing to their presence—they exerted a good influence, as the men did not take such risks with Indians and thereby avoided conflict; were more alert about the care of the teams and seldom had accidents; more attention was paid to cleanliness and sanitation and, lastly but not of less importance, the meals were more regular and better cooked thus preventing much sickness and there was less waste of food.

On the march Mrs. Haun "wore a dark woolen dress . . . Never without an apron and a three-cornered shoulder kerchief, . . . I presented a comfortable, neat appearance."

During the day [says Mrs. Haun] we womenfolk visited from wagon to wagon or congenial friends spent an hour walking, ever westward, and talking over our home life back in "the states"; telling of the loved ones left behind; voicing our hopes for the future in the far west and even whispering a little friendly gossip of emigrant life. High teas were not popular but tating, knitting, crocheting, exchanging receipts for cooking beans or dried apples or swopping food for the sake of variety kept us in practice of feminine occupations and diversions.

We did not keep late hours but when not too engrossed with fear of the red enemy or dread of impending danger we enjoyed the hour around the campfire. The menfolk lolling and smoking their pipes and guessing, or maybe betting, how many miles we had covered during the day. We listened to readings, story-telling, music and songs and the day often ended in laughter and merrymaking.

This, it should be stated, was fairly early on the march, before the harder portions of the trail were reached.

On Sunday the train often rested. That is to say, the men were generally busy mending wagons, harness, yokes, shoeing the animals etc., and the women washed clothes, boiled a big mess of beans, to be warmed over for several meals, or perhaps mended clothes. . . . If we had devotional service the minister—pro tem:—stood in the center of the corral while we all kept on with our work.

The party reached Sacramento City, November 4, 1849. Mrs. Haun states that "for Christmas dinner we had a grizzly bear steak for which we paid \$2.50 . . . and—oh horrors—some *more* dried apples!"

Many who followed the overland route in 1849 and 1850 speak of families traveling near them. Stansbury, advancing up the Platte, June 12, 1849, overtook a family that intrigued him:

We passed also an old Dutchman, with an immense wagon, drawn by six yoke of cattle, and loaded with household furniture. Behind, followed a covered cart containing the wife, driving herself, and a host of babies—the whole bound to the land of promise, of the distance to which, however, they seemed to have not the most remote idea. To the tail of the cart was attached a large chicken-coop, full of fowls; two milch-cows followed, and next came an old mare, upon the back of which was perched a little, brown-faced, barefooted girl, not more than seven years old, while a small sucking colt brought up the rear.¹⁹

Cross mentions a number of families. On June 13, 1849, at the upper crossing of the Platte, he wrote in his diary:

We had with us four families, who remained in their carriages while passing over, and deserved great credit for the firmness and presence of mind they evinced; for there was not only great danger, but the looks of the muddy water, the great width, and the rapid current of the river, were enough to deter the stoutest hearts.²⁰

Five days' journey beyond Fort Hall on the road to Oregon, Cross overhauled a Dutchman, his wife, and two small children, the oxen "entirely given out," the family thus in desperate straits. Cross rescued them by carrying them on with him, first ordering them

to abandon wagon, oxen, and baggage, taking only such articles, with their clothing, as were indispensably necessary. The woman seemed to be disposed to hang on to her wagon as her only wealth, and when brought from it by her husband, her lamentations of grief, with those of the children,

were really distressing. The Dutchman took it more philosophically, although at first he was somewhat loath to leave his all.²¹

Hobart, crossing the Black Rock desert at night during the same season, remembered years later not only his own sufferings, but those of other emigrants and their animals:

As the night wore on we would pass parties sleeping under their wagons with their cattle standing, lowly complaining of their hunger and thirst. Or we would have to turn out for some unfortunate whose team had just given out, whose answer to our query as to what he was going to do, was: "God only knows." When there were women and little children among them, as was sometimes the case, it was very distressing.²²

In the mountainous terrain between the Pit and the Feather rivers on the Lassen trail, Goldsmith (of the same company as Hobart) and a comrade came upon a widow, newly bereaved:

Soon afterward [after a night of terrible wind] we made a short cut from the wagon road, and, going along the edge of a hill, saw a wagon under its brow; hearing noises that attracted our attention, we went closer and listened. We saw a woman on her knees, weeping and praying; three young children were with her, each having on its back a pack as large as it could comfortably carry. The packs were made of shirts, the lower part tied into a bag shape with a string, the sleeves securing the burden to the little bearer's body. We saw that one child was too small to travel very fast and waited for them to come into the road, when we told the woman we would keep with her till we met a wagon or some one who could help her.²³

The father and one son had been killed in their sleep by a tree which fell on them in the storm, and passing emigrants had extricated and buried them. Goldsmith concluded:

The mother then prepared the children to continue the journey, giving them as many provisions as they could carry, and was praying for protection and guidance when we discovered them.

Bruff records in his journal, October 28, 1849, the arrival at his camp in the Sierra Nevada of a woman named Smith,

¹⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 194-195.

²⁰Goldsmith, Oliver, *Overland in Forty-Nine*, p. 138. This work contains the recollections of W. W. Hobart.

²¹*Ibid.*, pp. 77-78.

¹⁹Stansbury, Howard, *Exploration and Survey of the Valley of the Great Salt Lake of Utah*, p. 24.

²⁰*Senate Executive Documents*, 31st Cong., 2nd Sess., No. 1, Part II, pp. 152-153.

whose husband had died on the Platte and been buried at Chimney Rock. With her three children she drove up in an ox wagon, having continued the journey on her own initiative. The same day another widow (perhaps "the widow Taylor" named in the government relief rolls) came up with eight children, one of these practically imbecile from illness, thought to be scurvy. The latter family Bruff had previously met on the trail; the husband likewise had died on the Platte.²⁴

George W. Read wrote at the ford of the Platte, May 29, 1850:

I here saw many women and children; the little fellows appear to stand it as well as their sires. The ladies must, I think, feel keenly their many privations.²⁵

In June of the same year, traveling between the Platte and the Sweetwater rivers, he remarked:

One poor fellow I must mention, whom I passed about ten o'clock second day after leaving Platte—remember we had no water all this time. He and a little son stood by the roadside, one ox dead and the other chained to their little waggon, both crying, far from either end of the road. I could afford no relief and hastened by. Such is a trip overland to California.²⁶

Nor should we forget, among the women and children traveling overland to California during these years, the little folks who found the journey too long, the way too hard, like small Mary Jane McClelland, whose grave marked the turn-off of the Lassen trail at the bend of the Humboldt: "Mary Jane McClelland, departed this life, Aug. 18th, 1849, aged 3 yrs. 4 mos.;" or a lad of twelve, John Hoover, buried on the Platte, "died, June 18. 49 . . . Rest in peace, sweet boy, for thy travels are over."²⁷

Perhaps the worst suffering on the overland route in 1849 befell those emigrants who started from Salt Lake City

²⁴Bruff, J. Goldsborough, *Gold Rush: The Journals, Drawings, and Other Papers of J. Goldsborough Bruff, Captain, Washington City and California Mining Association, April 2, 1849-July 20, 1851*, edited by Georgia Willis Read and Ruth Gaines, pp. 222, 245, 346.

²⁵Read, Georgia Willis (ed.), *A Pioneer of 1850, George Willis Read, 1819-1880*, p. 113.

²⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 115-116.

²⁷Bruff, *Gold Rush: Journals, Drawings, and Other Papers*, pp. 28, 179, 291.

in October of that year to enter California by a southern route under the guidance of Captain Jefferson Hunt, of the Mormon battalion, and who left him contrary to his advice to find a short cut of their own. According to the recollections of J. W. Brier, a child at the time, the dissenting company held a meeting to determine their course of action:

That gentleman [Captain Hunt] was called out, near the close of the meeting, and responded with characteristic bluntness and brevity. "Gentlemen," he said, "all I have to offer is, if you take that route you will all be landed in Hell."²⁸

This statement was the stark truth, but unfortunately not being what the emigrants wished to hear was discounted by them. The trials of the Brier family have become epic, and those of the Bennett and the Arcane families no less so. A fourth family, the Wades, made up of father, mother, three boys, and one girl, made their way out over the Mojave desert and reached California, according to the reminiscences of the daughter, Mrs. Almira Wade Ortleby.²⁹

Over the ovenlike, waterless sands of the Death valley region these forty-niners struggled, too far advanced to retreat, too ignorant of the country to know what lay before them.

The day ended at midnight [says Brier, of the Brier family travel]. Far in the rear [of their companions] the lonely family trudged, the oxen moaning, and the children crying for drink.³⁰

Of the entry of this party into the Promised Land after untold suffering, Brier writes:

Thirty-eight men reduced to skeleton weight, afflicted with dysentery, still wearing their rags with much of dignity and self-respect, the great courage native to them in no jot or tittle abated; one woman clad in garments, worn, torn and tattered . . . ; three children, wan, large-eyed

²⁸Brier, J. W., "The Argonauts of Death Valley," *The Grizzly Bear*, Vol. IX, No. 2 (June, 1911), Whole No. 50, p. 1.

²⁹Burrell, Louisa (Mrs. Edward), "Across the Plains in 1849," *The Pioneer*, San Jose, California, December 15, 1894. The article contains Almira Wade Ortleby's recollections, as told to Mrs. Burrell.

³⁰Brier, "The Argonauts of Death Valley," p. 3.

and patient . . . ; some two score of oxen . . . in whose bones blood and water had taken the place of marrow, and whose fibrous flesh had been wrung of the substance that nourishes and the flavor that satisfies.³¹

Boys would be boys, it seems, even in Death valley in 1849:

Well-worn trails made going easy [between Borax lake and the Mojave desert, says Brier], and a sufficient spring awaited on the Mojave side. The only sensation of the passage was occasioned by the temporary loss of a boy who had taken the wrong trail where the canyon divided. He corrected his mistake in time, and was met by his agitated parents, driving his oxen and whistling in absolute unconcern.³²

Another group, headed by the Bennett and the Arcane families, choosing to wait in Death valley for rescue, were perhaps in worse case. Two young men, Manly and Rogers, set out for California for help. Miraculously, they returned, to guide the little party out of their fiery furnace. The rescuers found on their return to Death valley, according to Manly, eight persons, four adults and four children, huddled in and under their wagons in the burning sun: Asabel and Sarah Bennett, their three children, George, Melissa, and Martha, and J. B. Arcane and wife and one son, Charles. They alone had kept the deathlike vigil at Bennett's camp in Death valley, awaiting the boys' return. The physical miseries, the pitiful trials and sufferings of the women and children are almost beyond belief. Manly's stirring account of the journey and the rescue, though written years later, is one of the most moving documents of overland travel and of human suffering, courage, and endurance as well.

To the west, between these people and safety, stretched the Panamint mountains and Argus mountains, as yet unnamed. To transport the children, one of them suffering from a strange malady which caused him to scream with pain whenever his skin was touched, posed a problem. Rogers recalls:

We got ready and packed our cattle with bedding and clothing. We put two children on the mule with the pack, and packed the two babies time about on our backs. . . . I got tired packing the babies so I took

³¹*Ibid.*

³²*Ibid.*, p. 4.

a long sack and fixed it so that it could be fastened on the ox. A hole was cut on each side like a pair of saddlebags and a baby was placed in each end. The little fellows would ride thus and sleep half of their time.³³

The poor mothers dragged themselves along afoot, kept alive, it would seem, more by will power than anything else, some of the men going ahead each day to make camp ready, with blankets spread and food prepared, when the women came up.

Mrs. Sarah Eleanor (Bayliss) Royce, mother of Josiah Royce, the philosopher and historian, who entered California with her family by the Carson river route in 1849, has left in her reminiscences a pleasing picture of a little girl, her daughter Mary, on the trail.³⁴

In the fall of 1849 many emigrants, arriving at the Sierra Nevada late in the season with their provisions often at the vanishing point, were in danger of starvation. General Persifor F. Smith, with the collaboration of other authorities, appropriated the sum of \$100,000 from the civil fund of California and detailed Major Daniel H. Rucker to administer this in government relief for those in need. This assistance was designed especially for families (women and children) on the trail and was at first intended to cover all routes into California, particularly the Truckee, since it was thought that the greatest number of emigrants, and hence the greatest suffering, were to be expected there. Finding this to be incorrect, however, the chief activities of the relief were centered on the Lassen trail where the most people and the most misery were encountered, Lassen's Rancho serving as headquarters for these governmental activities.

I am well satisfied that the number of families on this road [Lassen trail] far exceeds anything we thought of whilst below [Sacramento City], and I am almost induced to believe that the only suffering will be on this route, as it is 400 miles farther than the other roads,³⁵

³³Rodgers [Rogers], John H., "On the Plains, 1849," *The Merced Star*, April 26, 1894.

³⁴Royce, Mrs. Sarah Eleanor (Bayliss), *A Frontier Lady, Recollections of the Gold Rush and Early California*, edited by Ralph H. Gabriel, p. 6.

³⁵*Senate Executive Documents*, 31st Cong., 1st Sess., No. 52, pp. 127-128. The report of Rucker, incorporating that of Peoples, is contained in the correspondence of General Persifor Smith.

reported John H. Peoples, one of Rucker's aides, on September 22 of that year.

On October 13 Rucker in camp on Feather river on the Lassen trail issued a statement to the emigrants:

For the information of all emigrants on the Lawson's or Northern route

The undersigned is on this road with provisions for the relief of all emigrants who may be in a starving condition. These supplies have been forwarded by order of General Persifer Smith, the military commandant of this country, to be furnished only to those who are in a destitute state. I have a few beef-cattle, (some thirty head,) some hard bread, flour, pork, and a little rice. . . . I would advise all families who may be in the vicinity of the Sierra Nevada, or whose teams are not in fine condition to throw away all heavy articles that they can possibly do without, and push on to Feather river valley [Big Meadows], where there is plenty of grass, and to remain there one or two days to recruit their animals. . . . I believe that it is important that all families should move on to the utmost of their abilities, as the season is far advanced, and the danger of being caught in the snow in these hills is by no means slight.³⁶

The relief continued week after week as the emigration poured in. Snow fell early that year in the Sierra and on November 13 Rucker wrote Peoples from Sacramento City:

I wish you to buy fat oxen, if you can get them; if not, get mules sufficient to bring the families and sick to such a point as you think safe from snow, and within reach, without difficulty, of Lawson's Rancho. . . . Those families must, at all events, be brought into the valley to a point, at which they will be perfectly safe before you leave them. . . . What you do, must be done as soon as possible, for there is no telling how deep the snow will be before the end of the month. You must tell all the emigrants that they must be more active and get to the valley [Sacramento] at once, or they may perish. I cannot conceive what they are thinking of. Their own lives and the lives of their families are certainly worth more than their wagons and effects. Get all the work oxen and mules you can and send them out loose to haul the women and children. . . . Bring in the rear families and keep the rest to the utmost of your means.³⁷

Peoples, an able and energetic man, had already instructed his helpers:

On arriving at our back wagons, you will be particular to notice that no woman or child who can walk will get into the wagons. Issue out the

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 102.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 104.

provisions sparingly to all, and remember that persons can live on half-rations for fifteen or twenty days.³⁸

One company on the trail, the St. Louis company, consisted of thirty-two able-bodied men, and twenty-five women and children. On the night of October 19, at Goose lake near the head of Pit river, the Indians stole all of their stock, owing to the failure of the men to stand guard. This left the company in a bad way and their safe transport to the settlements became one of Peoples' problems.

Many other families were in sad need of help and received it from the government relief. Rucker himself says in his "Report": "From that point [Lassen's Rancho] to where I turned back to Feather river valley, the applications for food were hourly. And in the sixteen days travel [October 4-20] not less than one hundred and fifty families . . . were relieved by me."³⁹ This was exclusive of all aid rendered subsequent to these dates by Peoples and his assistants, their activities comprising the main relief on this route. Almost every page of the report speaks of family trains and family wagons in addition to the individuals named. The manuscript rolls of those relieved for all three routes contain many names but are probably incomplete. While the total number of families would be difficult to determine, obviously the number was high.

Peoples' report to Rucker at the conclusion of the relief, dated Sacramento City, December 12, gives many interesting details. Among other things he says:

On the 30th [October, 1849] it clouded up and snowed, ahead, and in rear of us. . . . On the 3d [November] I laid by in the valley [Feather river] to make arrangements to get away every body with me, and on the morning of the 4th, having dismounted all of my party, I had the mules hitched on to four wagons, and all the healthy women mounted on mules, and started.

In addition, two wagons were filled with women, children, and the sick.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 103.

³⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 137-138.

During that day, I made arrangements to take on three other families which I found at the crossing of the river, and thus left Feather river valley [Big Meadows], with every woman, child, and sick man.⁴⁰

The snow continued, the mules became exhausted, and Peoples decided to leave the wagons and push ahead on mule-back. He placed the occupants of the wagons in some abandoned tents and wagons by the roadside, detailing one of his men to attend them, and proceeded with the rest of his men, with "six young women accompanying us on mule-back, and in three hours we were out of all traces of snow."

In conclusion [he reported to Rucker] I cannot, in justice to the men of my party, omit to mention to you their good conduct, in our most trying scenes. They did everything that men could do to facilitate the progress of the family train; and although not one of the party had a dry blanket, or dry clothes for half a month, there was no complaint, but the harder the service, the greater the exertion. At every river or slough they stood ready to wade over, with the women and children in their arms; and even after reaching the settlements, many of them took the money out of their own purses, and gave to the destitute.⁴¹

In the fall of 1849 Lieutenant George H. Derby of the Topographical Engineers laid out an army post, Camp Far West, on Bear river. On October 15, having completed his survey, he broke camp and marched north in accordance with his orders to examine the valley of the Sacramento to the mouth of Butte creek. On October 26 he struck the Lassen trail, traversing it "some twelve miles further, passing many emigrant-wagons filled with dirty and unhappy-looking women and unwholesome children, and encamped on the bank of Feather river, six miles above the ford [in the Big Meadows region]."⁴²

It is, however, in the pages of the Bruff journals that we find the fullest picture of this Lassen trail emigration so far given to the world. Bruff and his Washington City company, traversing the Lassen trail in the Sierra Nevada country, on October 21 reached the high shelflike plateau between

Mill creek and Deer creek some thirty miles from the Sacramento valley. Provisions being low, the surviving mules exhausted, and the road bad, Bruff volunteered to remain to guard the company property until it could be sent for. His own saddle horse he loaned to the company and he contributed his share of all remaining provisions, thinking to rely on game for his own subsistence. In due course the company sent back for its property which was common stock to all members. It failed to return his horse, as promised, however, or to help him in to the settlements, not a pleasing picture in view of what he had done for the company since its inception. Nevertheless, out of this wrong came right, if we may so consider it. Lingered on at his camp day after day, week after week, he saw and chronicled the remaining successive waves of the emigration of 1849 over this route.

The high proportion of women and children noted by Rucker and Peoples is repeated in Bruff's observations. Even before reaching Bruff's camp, all along the Lassen trail this was the case, and the same situation prevailed to some extent from the Missouri frontier westward. At the grass meadow near Black Rock where exhausted emigrants recruited themselves and their animals after the desert *jornadas* west of the Humboldt, women were to be seen and children were playing about the camps. There is frequent mention of families: near Mud lake, a mother and two very young children; near Little Mountain pass, a little girl sick with scurvy, her mouth very bad; on the ascent to Lassen's pass, little boys not more than ten leading worn-out animals; women blocking wagon wheels, "while the oxen were allowed to blow," a man with an infant in his arms, urging his team up in the thick dust, a wagon with women and children in it becoming accidentally uncoupled near the summit and rolling swiftly backward down the mountain; near Deer creek two children burned by gunpowder with which they were playing.⁴³

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 119-120.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁴²*Senate Executive Documents*, 31st Cong., 1st Sess., No. 47, Part II, p. 12. The report of Lieutenant George H. Derby is contained in the report of the secretary of war.

⁴³Bruff, *Gold Rush: Journals, Drawings and Other Papers*, pp. 191, 203, 243, 297, 306, 310, 343.

At Big Meadows on Feather river Bruff wrote in his journal, October 16:

Women in groups, sitting by their wagons, children playing about, in the grass, Mowers busy cutting hay, others tinkering on wagons, clothes drying on the green grass . . . The tall mountains on the opposite side, clothed with dark timber to their summits; the tents, wagons, &c. make a beautiful and animated scene.⁴⁴

Three days later in the "enchanted valley" of Deer creek in the mountains, he speaks of children, "happily unconscious of the troubles of others":

Wide-spread grassy, pine bottom & oak trees. Children play and laughing. On the green sward, clothes drying, cattle grazing, tinkling of cowbells, &c. Deer plentiful.⁴⁵

On October 22 Bruff, then settled at his camp, notes that an ox wagon came up from the rear with a family of English people who complained of hunger. The same day:

Ox wagons, packed oxen, mules, cows, and pedestrians,—Men, women, & children, coming up, halting, nooning, watering [stock], passing on, & camping all day. Saw one poor couple with their personal effects, goods & chattel, packed on a poor ox,—the man, with shouldered rifle, led the brute, while the wife, with a stick, followed and urged it ahead. Women and small children seen driving loose cattle; the little ones seem to stand the hardships & exposure well. All, more or less, Men, women and children, are dirty and tattered—⁴⁶

On the twenty-fourth "a small Missouri compy having a large family, of sick women & several little girls" came up. The following day Bruff wrote:

It is a queer sight now, to observe the stragglers coming up and going in. Wagons of every kind, oxen, horses, mules, bulls, cows, and people—men, women, & children, all packed. A few weeks travel has wrought a great change in their circumstances. Many of them I recognized as old acquaintances as far back as Pittsburgh, and all along our western waters, and over the long travel.⁴⁷

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 226-227.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 230, 328.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 236-237.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 240-241.

On October 26 "8 ox wagons and a cart, came up in the night and camped. They had about 16 women and 20-odd children, in company."⁴⁸

For the next four weeks emigrants continued to pass in considerable numbers. A family party encamped near, an aged couple, a married daughter with a baby, and five grown boys and girls, all "Hoosiers," talk with Bruff of home, of the hardships of overland travel, and, amazingly, of the development of character!⁴⁹ A Prussian and his family pass, accompanied by a pony and a cow packed with bedding and other necessities, a steer laden with provisions, camp kettles, and implements and driven by a twelve-year-old son who carries an infant tied to his back, Indian fashion, while the rear is brought up by the wife, "budget on arm."⁵⁰ Two women and a little girl warm themselves at Bruff's campfire and share his dinner of venison and hot coffee. A baby boy, "*a mountaineer, 3 weeks old only!*" born to Dr. and Mrs. O'Brien in the Sierra Nevada, rests in camp here with his parents. A woman, wrapped in a blanket, rifle on shoulder, passes, looking "hearty and cheerful." General John Wilson and his family come up from the rear, the ladies accommodated for the night in one of Bruff's tents, the general and his sons in another. A Dutch woman comes up, out of provisions, her child crying with hunger; "some good people" help them. A family passes with a mule bearing "paniers of carpeting on each side, from which protruded the chubby faces of 2 small children."⁵¹

On the morning of October 31 the ground was white in the Sierra portion of the trail and snow continued falling to a depth of two feet. In some places it came up to the oxen's bellies, and wagon wheels became "immense circular blocks of snow," while at every hill the women perforce helped to carry the loads up and then to push up the empty wagons, in an effort to save the exhausted oxen. Many emigrants,

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 242.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 245-246, 346.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 246, 347.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, pp. 256, 257, 634, 637.

among them a widow with a small boy and girl, struggled through this snow afoot.⁵²

On November 21 in weather "truly wintry," a gentleman reaches Bruff's camp with his two daughters, aged ten and twelve, wearing for warmth frock coats of their father's and carrying heavy packs on their backs, bare-handed, naked toes in the snow. Two young women and two boys, brothers and sisters, packs on back, warm and dry themselves at Bruff's fire and "proceed."⁵³

In all, between October 21 when he camped on the hill and November 29, a little over five weeks later when he says, "the emigrants have all gone by now, it is thought," Bruff mentioned in his journal specifically as at his camp about thirty families, seventy women, and ninety children, of whom ten were infants. This was in addition to frequent general mention of women and children passing, sometimes wagonful of them. For his record of the entire journey from Missouri to Bruff's camp the figures are of course higher.

At his camp ground, November 16, he happened on a boy, William Lambkin, "quite pretty, with light curly hair." The father, so Bruff was told, had left a wife in St. Louis, whom he had long abused, then stole the only consolation she had remaining, a tender boy, of about 4 yrs. old, and with some woman came off on this journey. . . . She had an infant, on the latter part of the march, the mother died on the Humboldt, and the infant died, when 4 mos. old.⁵⁴

This "inhuman wretch," as Bruff described him, neglected and mistreated little William and, on the very day that Bruff first saw the child, deposited him at Bruff's tent in order to be rid of him, requesting Bruff to take him. As "a humane action," Bruff cared for the child as best he could in winter cold and snow without adequate shelter and sufficient or proper food. In Bruff's tent, by his campfire, the little fellow passed his days:

I gave him a spool of cotton to play with [writes Bruff, November 28], and while unwinding it, he seemed to be reminded of home, of his mother, &c. by the cotton; saying, "Mother's cotton, Mother's scissors, Mother has

⁵²*Ibid.*, pp. 633-634, 640.

⁵³*Ibid.*, pp. 646-647.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 641-642.

bread, and Mother has cake, and Mother has tea" &c. &c. Poor little creature! abandoned in a wilderness, by his father, to suffer, perhaps to perish! Thy mother will probably never again see her little boy! My compassion may prolong your sufferings, I cannot alleviate them much.⁵⁵

This was true. Through varied hardships and privations the child's life span shortened until about six weeks after his father had deserted him, Bruff wrote in his journal: "We done all we could for the poor little sufferer, but by 11 A. M. he was extricated from all the hardships of this life." For his grave Bruff fashioned a headboard from a piece of plank, inscribing it: "William,—Infant Son of Lambkin— an Unnatural Father, Died Jan. 1. 1850."⁵⁶

An incident of the trail related by Bruff epitomizes the patience, the resolution often exhibited even by children in the hard travel of 1849-1850. On October 18 before Bruff had made his last camp on the Lassen trail, he passed at close of day over a ridge above the ford of Feather river near Big Meadows. Here he overtook a family: "A father, little boy & girl, were driving along some nearly exhausted cattle (oxen) . . . S. W. up & over very stony hill." The oxen were lame, he says, and the children "very small." The scene is not hard to reconstruct: in the forest openings the dust of the trail was suspended in the lengthening rays of the sun, while under the immense trees a twilight gloom already sifting down; Bruff, a slight figure in the travel-worn uniform of his company, his hazel eyes alight with interest and compassion as he thought of his own little boy and girl, thousands of miles away in Washington City; the little fellow on the trail blinking back his tears, strumbling with weariness; his sister hovering beside him, exhorting, cajoling, encouraging, a mother in miniature, "Never mind, Buddy, taint far to grass and water."⁵⁷

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 648.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 686.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 229, 328.