

CALIFORNIA, 1849-1913

TRIP ACROSS THE PLAINS. The year 1849 has a peculiarly thrilling sensation to the California Pioneer, not realized by those who came at a later date. My purpose in recording some of my recollections of early days is not for publication nor aggrandizement, but that it may be deposited in the archives of my descendants, that I was one of those adventurers who left the Green Mountains of Vermont to cross the plains to California, the El Borador—the Land of Gold.

In starting out I went to Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, St. Louis and Independence, Missouri. Here I joined the first mule train of Turner, Allen & Co.'s Pioneer Line. It consisted of forty wagons, one hundred and fifty mules, and about one hundred and fifty passengers. We left the frontier on the fourteenth of May 1849, and here is where our hardships commenced. Many of us had never known what it was to "camp out" and do our own cooking. Some of the mules were wild and unbroken, sometimes inside the traces, sometimes outside; sometimes down, sometimes up; sometimes one end forward and sometimes the other; but after a week or two they got sobered down so as to do very well.

Our first campfire at night was on the Little Blue River, a few miles from Independence; it was after dark when we came to a halt, and it was my friend Gross' turn to cook, while the rest brought him wood and water and made a fire for him by the side of a large stump. I knew he was fractious man, so I climbed into one of the wagons where I could see how he got along. The first thing that attracted my attention was the coffee pot upside down, next away went the bacon out of the pan into the fire. By this time he was getting warm inside as well as outside, and I could hear some small "cusswords"; next he looked into the Dutch oven, and saw that his dough had turned to charcoal. I got down into the wagon out of sight, and peeked through a crack; he grew furious, danced around the fire, and the air was full of big words. Finally we got a little coffee and some cakes and bacon, then I undertook to do a little sleeping but it was no go. Thus ended my first night on the Plains.

In the morning we started on our journey to travel over a level untimbered, uninhabited country for nearly four hundred miles, without anything of especial interest occurring save cholera, from which there was terrible suffering. We lost about seventy-five of our number before we reached Fort Laramie, seven hundred miles from Missouri.

There was a Dutchman in my mess by the name of Lamalfa, who understood but little of English. We had dubbed him "Macaroni" for having brought a lot of the stuff with him and on our second night out it came his turn to stand guard. He was detailed to the inner guard and instructed as to his duties. On the relief of the outer sentinel and his return to camp, Lamalfa issued the challenge which was to repeat three times "Who comes there?" and in case of no response to fire, and as the outer sentinel came upon him he called out "Who comes there three times" and fired; fortunately he was a poor shot and no harm was done.

It seems that "Macaroni" was not aware of there being an outer guard.

When near Fort Childs, four hundred miles out, all the passengers left the wagons, except the drivers, and walked on in advance, leaving the wagons light (they were canvas covered),. There came up one of those terrible hailstorms, common in that country, which pelted the mules with such severity as to cause them to take fright and run away, breaking loose from the wagons which were taken by the storm in another direction, first wheels up, then top, until the latter was all in rags; then they stopped. When we came into camp at night they looked sorry enough and you would have thought they had just come out of a fierce fight.

We pursued our journey along the southbank of the Platte until we reached Fort Laramie, capturing some antelopes and occasionally a buffalo. Up to this time we had

had a great deal of sickness in camp. I remember one poor fellow (his name I have forgotten), we called him Chihuahua Bob; he was a jovial, good natured fellow and drove one of the eight-mule baggage wagons. I enquired about him one morning and was told that he had died during the night of cholera, and had been left in his shallow grave.

We met some returning emigrants that morning who had become discouraged and were going back to their old home. This made me think of home and friends, the domestic happy fireside, and all that I had left behind, "but," said I to myself,
5 "this won't do, I am too far out now; pluck is the word and I'm not going back on it."

Early next morning we were once more upon our long journey, slowly traveling towards the far, far West.

The first place of interest that presented itself to our view was a narrow passage for the river between two perpendicular rocky banks, which were about one hundred feet high and looked as though a man could jump from one to the other at the top. This was called the "Devil's Gate," Above and below was the broad prairie.

At intervals along the Platte were villages of prairie dogs, who were about the size of large grey squirrels, but more chunky, of a brownish hue, with a head somewhat resembling a bulldog. They are sometimes eaten by the Indians and mountaineers. Their earth houses are all about two feet deep; are made in the form of a cone; are entered by a hole in the top, which descends vertically some two or more feet and then takes an oblique course, and connects with others in every direction. These towns or villages sometimes cover several hundred acres and it is very dangerous riding over them on horseback.

We will now pass to another interesting object called "Chimney Rock" which is not altogether unlike Bunker Hill Monument. It stands by itself on the surrounding level country, with a conical base of about one hundred and fifty feet in diameter and seventy-five feet high where the nearly square part of the column commences, which is about fifty feet on each of the four sides. It is of sandstone and certainly a very singular natural formation. Altogether it is about two hundred feet high. I will mention here that the banks of the Platte are low, that the bed is of quicksand, that the river is very shallow and that it is never clear. One of our company attempted to ford it on foot. When about two-thirds over, in water up to his waist, he halted, being in doubt as to whether he should proceed or return. While hesitating between two opinions his feet had worked down into the quicksand and became so imbedded that he could not extricate them. Realizing his perilous position he at once gave the Masonic Grand hailing sign of distress and in a moment there were several men in the water on their way to his relief. They reached him in time and brought him safely into camp.

About this time there was considerable dissatisfaction manifested in camp on account of the slow progress we were making. Some left the train and went on by themselves, others realized the necessity of holding together to the last, in order to protect

6 themselves as well as to care for those among us who were sick. The peculiar characteristics of the party at this time seemed to be recklessness and indifference to the situation, but the better judgment finally prevailed and we went on in harmony.

The next three hundred miles were devoid of any especial interest. This brings us to the summit of the Rocky Mountains (at South Pass) which divides the rivers of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and ends their course thousands of miles apart. . .

Compiled by M. J. Mattes - 1945
Transcribed by Louise Ridge - 3/46

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California, 1849-1913
Oakland, 1913
(Newberry Microfilm 3-20)