

David Staples of the Boston-Newton Co., and Charles Gould reached the campsite the evening of May 15, 1849 (Camp Bryant)

CHAPTER 6

Independence to the Little Blue

On the first phase of the trip across the plains, California-bound emigrants headed out of Independence in a southwesterly direction. They traveled along the old Santa Fé Trail for about forty miles, parting company with it where a crudely lettered sign proclaimed ROAD TO OREGON. The Boston-Newton party followed the custom of halting for two or three days at a "trial camp" a few miles out from Independence in order to give the inexperienced men a chance to put in practice techniques of camping on the trail. Here, for example, the men were drilled in circling the wagons at nightfall for protection in case of an Indian raid, and were broken in to stand guard.

David Staples' report of the first two days at trial camp is extremely succinct.

May 14

From the 9th to the 14th was spent in preparing for the journey. All being ready we made a final move from Grove Camp, as we call it, at Independence. We moved out 13 miles where there was plenty of grass. The mules wild and roads muddy. It was hard for man and beast.

May 15

We lay by and arranged our loads, etc.

⁷⁵
* 13 miles from Independence, Mo., is Abit Grove

Charles Gould's journal gives a much fuller picture:

May 15

It rained heavily all last [night] with severe lightning and thunder. R. Coffey and myself slept in our wagon. After much delay we started off upon our long expected journey at 12 o'clock N. The heavy rains of last night had rendered the roads very muddy and unsafe. We found the roads almost impassable in places, sometimes going up steep hills and then again going down into deep gullies which almost shook the wagon to pieces. After proceeding about 5 miles, we came to the Blue prairie. It differed very much from my idea, it being a rolling instead of a level prairie; but it exceeded in beauty and richness anything I ever beheld.

We had proceeded on our way without any particular event until about sunset, when we found ourselves stuck fast in the mud, from which we did not get extricated until after dark; and after wandering about for some time, we found the camp, it being about 11 P.M. when we got our team put up. *13 miles out from Independence, Mo.*

May 16

R. Coffey and myself slept in our wagon last night. It was decided that 6 mules should be sent back half way to Independence to get a loaded wagon left there by Noyes. Whittier and myself went and drove the team. We got into camp about dark. The situation of our camp is too wet to be very pleasant, although it has the advantage of a good supply of excellent water. The grass is about 6 inches high, giving our animals a good chance to graze. Mr. Noyes arrived in camp a few minutes after I did with a new wagon, thus giving us much relief, for our teams were too heavily loaded for expedition or success. There is a man in the tent next to us very sick with the cholera. They have called upon our M.D., theirs having deserted them.

Asiatic cholera, apparently brought to New Orleans by vessels from overseas, was carried up the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. On May 9, 1849, one traveler noted that a steamer arriving in St. Louis that day from New Orleans carried five hundred emigrants, forty-seven of whom had died of cholera en route.¹ The disease followed the forty-niners out onto the prairies and struck again and again between the western settlements and Fort Laramie.² The Mount Washington company lost five men to cholera between Independence and the Red Vermillion River, and by June 5, 1849, thirty-eight graves had been dug near the crossing of the Red Vermillion.³ The dread disease was raging in many parts of the United States that summer, particularly in cities where travelers changed from one form of transportation to another, and it was also rampant in port cities of foreign countries.

May 17 was the last day in trial camp. On that day Charles Gould wrote:

¹ See Georgia Willis Read and Ruth Gaines, eds., *Gold Rush: The Journals . . . of J. Goldsborough Bruff, 1849-1851* (2 vols.; New York: Columbia University Press, 1944-1949), I, 439.

² Contemporaneous accounts differ about the number and location of deaths from cholera on the trail, but most agree that they occurred before the emigrants reached the mountains. In early June, 1849, one correspondent reported: "I hear of no epidemic among the emigrants beyond Ft. Kearny [in present Nebraska]. As near as I can learn, about 200 have died on the road from cholera." *Publications of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, XX, (1922), 205. Later in the month the correspondent signing himself "Joaquin" reported 58 marked graves between St. Joseph and Fort Laramie. The number of deaths from the Missouri River to that point was estimated at 1½ per mile. *Ibid.*, 208, 209. This estimate also appears in a standard source, Leroy R. Hafen and C. C. Rister, *Western America* (New York: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1941), p. 357.

³ But the Granite State company, with which the Mount Washington company was traveling, lost no men. See D. M. Potter, ed., *Trail to California* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1945).

The Boston-Newton Company Venture

R. Coffey and myself were routed out at 3 A.M. in consequence of Messrs. Crist and Evans taking our wagon back for the purpose of having it mended and to get some more bread and other things. *William Ray's Blacksmith Shop?*

All are busy today preparing for the journey, which is to commence in earnest. Some are repacking their wagons, others are training their mules. Some of the scenes presented in breaking the mules are exceedingly ludicrous. Sometimes one mounts the animal, 2 more have hold of his head and another goes ahead with a rope. The mule pulls back for awhile and then he springs to throw; but finding himself overpowered, he finally allows himself to be dragged along, only to renew his tricks when he can get a chance.

It is clear from David Staples' account that he was responsible for providing one of the ludicrous scenes:

May 17

Today we divided the rideing horses by lotery. They were all brought up and numbered, horses and mules, and as bad luck would have it I drew the smallest Spanish mule we had in the lot. It was a cream colored one. I riged on a Mexican sadle and trimmings and mounted. Being full six feet tall I must have presented a picture truly ridiculous. My feet came within less than a foot of the ground. He used his best endeavours to throw me off but failed. And many a hearty laugh the boys have had at my expense today.

My friend Hough was more unfortunate haveing been thrown several times from a similar article of horse flesh. . . .

From here on, the two accounts of the journey are paired under the date for the day, unless otherwise indicated. Charles Gould's entry appears first.

May 18

All hands are busy in preparing to resume our journey this morning, but owing to unavoidable delays we did not

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get started until about 12 N. For 2 or 3 miles the country had the same general appearance of that we had passed over since we came upon the praire. About 4 miles from our camp brought us to the Little Blue Creek [of Missouri]. This is a small stream about 25 yds. wide, but it is quite difficult to cross owing to a sharp muddy pitch upon its opposite bank. We were stalled here and were obliged to partly unload our wagon to get through. After we had proceded about 2 miles farther, and while we were waiting for the rest of the teams to come up, my near forward mule took fright at a cow and calf that was passing and suddenly turning around started the rest of the teams, turning the wagon so suddenly around as to break the pole. The rest of the teams encamped about 1 mile ahead of us. We were obliged to stay where we were.

[Staples]⁴

. . . We got ready and moved 7 miles over a very rough road and crossing quite a stream. Here the hard work comes for men lifting and prying out of the mud waggons. We camped on the edge of the prara and a fine sight it was, as far as the eye could reach nothing but roleing plane. During the day we had two poles (or touns) broken by our mules being wild and teamers not acquainted with driving.

We camped tired and hungry.

May 19

R. Coffey and myself staid to keep guard over our wagon last night. We were so fortunate as to find a blacksmith and wheelright's shop within a mile ahead of us.

Our repairs were completed by noon and the whole company were on their way at 2 P.M. We entered upon a praire which was beautiful and rich beyond description. It differed from the praire that we passed before we came to

Blue Prairie

⁴ This entry was a part of the May 17 entry, but clearly describes events of May 18. Similarly, the next Staples entry describes events of May 19 though it is dated May 18. There is no May 19 entry in the journal.

Wasson's Prairie

the Blue Creek, it being much more level and having no gullies, but still the swells rise quite high and the road seems to ascend quite fast as we proceed. The richness exceeds anything which I have ever seen, the whole appearance being that of a high cultivation. We reached a spring about dark where we encamped for the night.

Distance about 12 miles.

[Staples]

We spent the first part of the day in mending our waggons. We passed on 13 miles over the most beautiful country man ever beheld. Prara pinks were in abundance and the odor arising from them delightful to one's allfactory's. One that has never seen these plains can form no idea of their vastness. It looked like an ocean of prara. Only one thing we observed to mar the scene. That was quite a number of new made graves, and the voluntary thought and wish was that he had laid up for himself treasure in heaven in seeking treasure across the plains and the thought naturally occur it may our lot next but large hope and stout hearts will do much towards sustaining us. We arrived in camp late. Found water but no wood. This will be our great trouble in passing over this woodless country.

Sunday, May 20

We resume our journey at 9 this morning.⁵ The route continued over the same prairie that we were on yesterday and the scene presented had the same rich and luxuriant appearance.

At 2 we reached a very small stream, on the banks of which were encamped the parties of Gen. Bodfish and Dr.

⁵ Although the company originally intended to rest on the Sabbath, for the reasons David Staples gives in his entry for this date it was necessary to push onward.

Ormsby and E. Johnson, all of whom intend to accompany us on our journey.⁶

It rained quite hard for a short time before we left our camp, but after we had been encamped about 1 hour it began to rain again and it soon increased to one of the most powerful storms that ever I witnessed. Owing to the storm it was decided not to move until morning.

[Staples]

We felt it our duty to move today as we had no wood to cook with and poor water. We traveled some 12 miles to what is called Indian Creek. This is inhabited by the Shawnees.⁷ Most of them have left their houses on the road on account of the Emigrants having the Cholera.

We saw one half breed, quite intelligent. He said, "Great many go never get there." Here we found wood and a fine spring. Here we found quite a number of emigrating parties.⁸ Before we got unharnessed there camp up quite a shower, and such showers as they have on the prara beats all I ever saw. We put up our tents but were blessed with a soft bed by the ground being well soaked. This is one of the beauties of camp life.

⁶ The fourth member of this party was Major William Ormsby, a brother of Dr. Ormsby. The brothers are mentioned in Evelyn Teal, *Flying Snowshoes* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1957). The Ormsbys reached California shortly before the Boston-Newton party arrived at Sutter's Fort. Major Ormsby was killed in a fight with Indians at Pyramid Lake, Nevada, in 1860. (Information courtesy of Verla M. Stinson, Ormsby County Recorder, Carson City, Nevada.)

⁷ The Shawnees, an eastern, Algonquian tribe, had gradually been forced westward to Kansas, where they had a reservation from 1825 until 1845, when a large part of the tribe moved on to Indian Territory, settling along the Canadian River.

⁸ Emigrating parties commonly rendezvoused at Indian Creek and made arrangements to travel on together for the sake of greater security. The Boston-Newton company, however, decided to remain independent.

The Boston-Newton Company Venture

May 21

We got started this morning between 7 and 8, the other parties being in advance of us. Owing to the heavy rains of yesterday, the travelling was very severe and slow. The rich soil of the prairie when wet by rains becomes very soft for 3 or 4 inches and causes the animals' feet to slip and the wheels to stick. We encamped at noon upon the border of a small stream about 4 miles from our encampment of last night. We continued on our way until near night, when we came to a small creek which was very difficult to cross. I succeeded in crossing with great difficulty with the help of oxen, but the rest of the teams not getting to the creek until dark, could not get through until morning, some of them getting stalled in the mud.

[Staples]

We got started at 8 o'clock as it is a great job to harness up wild mules. We stoped at noon, baited our mules on the banks of a fine creek. Moved on till six o'clock and camped, haveing had a hard day's work for our mules, it being muddy by last night's shower.

May 22

We left camp at 9, the rest of the teams having succeeded in crossing the creek. After travelling 3 or 4 miles over the prairie, we came to the *Wakarusa* River, which is about 75 feet wide, the banks being so steep that it became necessary to attach oxen to the wagons to pull them out. The river bottom for about 1 mile is very heavy timbered and the trail horrible muddy, so that it became necessary to double the team to get them out. From timber to the high prairie, a distance of about 2 miles, is a mirey marsh and proved the most difficult place to get our teams through that we have yet passed, the wheels in many places to their hubs. This marsh is covered with grass about 1 foot deep which seems to be a great haunt for snakes, two of which sprung upon our men,

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but very fortunately did not bite them. They are the Moccasin snake, very poisonous.

[Staples]

Today we crossed the *Wakarusa* River. The banks were steep. We had to let our wagons down by ropes and hired some Santa Fee oxen to get our teams up the opposite bank. There is heavy timber for a half mile on each side of the river. For three miles we had to pass over a wet bottom prairie. Had to double teams and much of the way the wheels went down to the hub. However we have got through it at dark and camped on [a] fine rise on the high prairie. Tonight for the first time our ears have been saluted by the howling of wolves about our camp.

May 23

There was a heavy thunder[shower] about sunrise this morning in consequence of which we did not start until 11 A.M. After proceeding 2 or 3 miles we rose by a circuitous road to some high table land, which is mostly surrounded with a stone wall,⁹ which could be taken as a work of art, were it not for its extent. After traveling about 1 mile farther over a very good road, we camped for the night in consequence of the severe labor that our animals had been subjected to for the last 2 or 3 days. A good many prairie hens were seen, but none were shot. Wolves were heard howling at a small swamp 1 mile distant. 2 of our men started for them, but did not succeed in shooting one. There was another heavy shower this evening.

[Staples]

Today we have traveled over a rolling prairie and as we passed along the ridge we could see where the streams were by the lines of wood.

⁹ The stone wall is near the present town of Lawrence, Kansas.

mt. Oread

tents. The train, which intended to depart for California in company with Colonel Russell and his group, was composed of the following Hamilton County, Ohio residents:*

| | | |
|----------------------|-------------|-------------|
| John Friend | A. Price | J. McKune |
| C.W. Friend | H. Wyckoff | J. Dumont |
| P. Campbell | A.J. Riddle | J. Langeman |
| William Elliot /sic/ | L.N. Dunn | |

A fourth group from Ohio camped on the outskirts of Independence on April 9, 1849 was a group from Morgan County. This company had one wagon, two tents, mules and other goods necessary for the trip to California. Members encamped were:

| | | |
|---------------------------|-------------|----------------|
| P. Burgess (?) (Burgeon?) | G.B. Wright | R.T. Sprague |
| Major J.S. Lone /sic/ | W.C. Palmer | A. Hawkins |
| | | J.A. McConnell |

Another company from Ohio, camped at Independence on April 9, 1849, was from Huron County. This train was made up of three wagons with provisions for two hundred days. They also carried three tents and intended to utilize mules on the wagons. The unit was formed as a joint stock company and was the first to leave Ohio for the State of California. They procured their mules and outfit in St. Louis in February, 1849 and had been camped out of Independence for four weeks. Personnel in the company consisted of:

| | | |
|------------------|------------------|---------------|
| Stephen Dunton | Elisha Guthrie | John Jonson |
| ____Beech | ____Talbert | L.H. McGeorge |
| S.G. Whipple | T.B. Gardiner | D. Jefferson |
| W.C. Pettibone ✓ | Solomon Bardshar | M.M. Young |
| H.M. Jennings | H.B. Barney | |

The final Ohio company camped out of Independence, Missouri on April 9, 1849 was at a point six miles out of town, where the eye of a traveler seldom penetrated, and so located for good reason. This small group of individuals was from Richland County and had selected a remote campsite to isolate one of its members, a solitary female—the only one in all the wagon trains parked around Independence that day. The company had one wagon, an ox team, one large tent, and was organized as a joint stock venture. It carried ample provisions for six months. Members of this group consisted of:

| | | |
|---|----------------|---------------|
| Simon Hackett | Jonas Brantney | W. Van Scoyse |
| Susan Hackett (an orphaned sister of Simon Hackett) | John Welkel | |

A single wagon company from Knox County, Tennessee was also encamped near Independence on the same day as the above listed company. Bound to California to dig gold, this company was moving by ox team and it was composed of:

| | | |
|--------------------|------------------------|----------------------|
| John L. Osborne | D.F. Wood | A.W. Rogers, of Knox |
| A.P. Osborne | Samuel Hunter, of Knox | County, Tenn. |
| C. Harvey, of Knox | County, Tenn. | |
| County, Tenn. | | |

The final company that was located out of Independence on April 9, 1849 was a unit from Wisconsin. Their goods were aboard two wagons and the

| | | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| L. McCummings, of Racine County | Perry McCummings, of Racine County | Andrew _____ of Racine County |
| C.F. Jenks, of Rock County | William Pixley, of Rock County | |

ST. JOSEPH, MISSOURI (April 10, 1849) A number of wagon trains were located in the vicinity of St. Joseph, Missouri on April 10, 1849. Most of them were getting out within two or three days. Great fears were anticipated that large wagon trains, if they gathered together, would reduce the grass on the plains faster than nature could grow it. To obviate this, companies were departing in parties of from ten to twenty wagons for their own protection, and starting at intermediate times. The following companies departed for St. Joseph on April 10, 1849 and preparing to move:

The "South Bend Joint Stock California Mining and Operating Company" had twelve tents, twelve wagons, thirty-six yoke of oxen, and provisions for six months. It had purchased most of their goods in St. Louis, Missouri. It was bound to depart for California after their arrival by by-laws, and organized into messes of five for travel. The company was armed with a rifle, bowie knife and a pair of pistols. They anticipated leaving St. Joseph within a few days, moving to a camp ground in the Indian territory. The sufficiency of grass to justify proceeding on to California. Members

| | | |
|---|----------------|-----------------|
| C.M. Tutt (President) | Abin Allen | A.G. Reed |
| G.W. Haines (Secretary) | E.C. Johnson | D.E. Gifford |
| C.S. Fassett (Treasurer) | Charles Traver | C.W. Leitch |
| T. Lindsey | P.N. Johnson | W.S. Mendenhall |
| William Norton | John Day | J.E. Wood |
| W.G. Whitman (?) (W.O. Whitman?, W.B. Whitman?) | P.W. Kinsey | J.A. Miller |
| | Samuel Harris | Francis _____ |
| | C. Caldwell | E.G. Caldwell |
| | J. Armstrong | L. Bressler |
| | A.G. Ford | |

(above from South Bend)

| | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|---------------|
| M.A. Kidwell, of Plymouth, Ind. | G.S. DeGraff, of Michigan City, Ind. | J. Trainor |
| Enoch Belangee, of Plymouth, Ind. | William W. Stewart, Captain of the Company of New Buffalo, Michigan | J.S. Silliman |

A company on the field and ready to move on this date was a group from Indiana. They were organized as a joint stock company and they possessed two wagons, ten mules, and carried provisions for six months. Members

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|-------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------|
| Samuel J. Gist, Captian | J.B. Lemon, Secty and Treasurer | James I. _____ |
| M.M. McCoy | Benjamin Rusk | Stephen _____ |