EXCERPTS FROM THE
DIARY OF
CHARLES I. FONDA
March 1850 to March 1855

ACROSS THE PLAINS IN 1850.

Charles Ira Fonda died in 1908, in the town of Coldwater, Michigan, where he lived his entire life except for five years spent in California and enroute there during the days of the Gold Rush. It was in the family homestead in this town where he and his wife, Eunice, celebrated their Golden Wedding in 1906, and where, as was his custom, he entertained many guests with his favorite story which always began, "Now when I went across the plains in 1850--."

As a child and his granddaughter, I had heard the story many times, sitting on a carpet-covered hassock, which was grandfather's foot stool. I had listened wide-eyed to the thrilling stories of the covered wagon, the Indians and the buffaloes until I knew them by heart. One day near the end of grandfather's story telling days, my father asked a cousin, who was a stenographer, to record the tales as he told them to us, and it is this record that I am submitting for publication on the one hundredth anniversary of grandfather's famous journey "Across the Plains in 1850." The record is a true one and is written in grandfather's own words.

Mildred Fonda Highriter

Coldwater, Michigan.

I was nineteen years old in February, 1850, and on the 26th day of March, 1850, I got the California fever. I got it so bad that I couldn't sleep nights, and my father had not the capital to let me go. The country was poor; everybody was poor; but he gave me a pair of horses and a wagon and told me that if I could get over with them, that it was all he could ever help me.

I sold a half-interest in the whole rig to another young man for seventy-five dollars ($75.00). The rig now would be worth about four hundred dollars.

We put a long box on the wagon, put on a cover, and started right after dinner and got to Bronson the first night.

You might say along there somewhere that I kept my eyes dry until I got away from home, and then I "bellered" for two nights. It was the longest I had ever been away from home in my life.

James Campbell was partner with me in the team, and Marcus Fairbanks was riding on a horse, and we three constituted our wagon.

We didn't go through Chicago, but kept South of Chicago. We crossed the Mississippi at Albany on a ferry boat, two horse power, one horse each side of the boat.

We went on, and in Iowa the settlements were a great way apart. Some nights we camped out. Des Moines was at that time a Fort. We went by there. Just a few soldiers were there, and we arrived at Kanesville on the East of the Missouri River

on the 23rd day of April, and I think the distance, if I recollect it, from here to there was something over nine hundred miles. We lay over in camp until the first day of May.

The first day of May, we crossed the Missouri River in wagons on a row ferry boat, and swam our horses; four men, one man to an oar, and four oars, two on each side of the boat. The River was high and rapid, and we went down stream further than it was across it.

Well, now let's see. We landed where the City of Omaha now stands, and all the building there was there was an old red frame Mission Schoolhouse. My cousin, Marcus Fairbanks, and I went in there. There were two ladies and probably thirty or forty squaws, Omahas and Pawanees. They were friendly tribes, and living together.

They had no boys there, and I asked one of the girls why they didn't get any of the boys there, and she said that boys were mischievous, and that they had to shut them out.

They had hours to read and study and hours to sew and do house-work and cook. They were dressed up and wore calico dresses about the color of dark blue. We spent a day camping there.

The second day of May, 1850, we started out, and we had made considerable calculations on buffalo meat when we got where they were.

When we were at Kanesville, we had organized a large Company. There were over one hundred men and twenty-three wagons to protect ourselves from the Indians.

About the middle of the afternoon on the second day of

May, we sighted our first buffalo. All of the horse-back men got on their horses and the guns were all gotten out, and we started for the buffalo, and he ran. There were a great many revolvers in the Company, the kind called "Allens". We called them "Allen's Pepper Boxes". They wouldn't shoot through an inch thick board.

I presume there were one hundred shots fired into that buffalo. Finally, he fell and the man that shot him was named Hutchins. He got down on one knee and aimed at that buffalo and shot him. We got all we wanted, you bet. We just drove into that old buffalo, cut his throat, skinned his hind flank and back to get our steaks.

We camped that night and had a buffalo feast. We had round steaks that would not lay down in a large frying pan. We had to cut them about into quarters. When we got it cooked and on our plates, we couldn't eat it any more than anybody could chew basswood bark. The grains were as big as a common straw, and it was so tough and dry that we felt very much disappointed in our buffalo feast. But as we travelled along, we found out that there were herds of buffalo that would start to come down to the Platte River for water. All day herds of buffalo were waiting to get a chance to get down to the River to get a drink, but there was such a string of emigrants along there that they stood back. We were driving along the North side of the River. After the emigrants had camped, then they would come down and drink.

We had found out that calves were what we wanted to

get. After that, we fared pretty well on buffalo veal.

About camping time one night, there was a large herd of buffalo just off on the ledge of the bluff about a half a mile to the right. I got on to a riding pony and went around and came up in the rear of the buffalo herd and they divided and ran about me, back over the bluff. I stood watching until the herd had got pretty well past, to get a calf, but the calves all seemed to have stayed behind the old ones, and I didn't get a shot at them until finally, I discovered a young one alone. The old herd was all off, and I shot her. I broke her shoulder, but I had jumped off the pony to shoot. He looked down on the flat where he could see our wagon, turned and ran off toward it. After I had broken the buffalo's shoulder, she laid down and the herd went on and left her. I loaded up my rifle and walked around in front of her and shot her in the forehead. She just jerked her head a little as the ball struck her, and I loaded my rifle again, or commenced loading it, when she jumped up and was after me. It was on a strong grade down hill. I could look back over my shoulder and she had her nose right to the ground and her tail in the air, and she looked pretty ferocious. Finally, she stopped and lay down again. I walked up at the side of her. She had her head up, and I shot her under the ear, and she rolled over on her side, dead.

When that happened, the Company had reached camp, and some of the boys came up and stood on a knoll over-head, laughing. I looked up, and there they stood, watching the show. They came down, and we took about all the meat we could carry.

It was good flesh, and would make pretty nice meat.

But this cousin of mine, Fairbanks, was one of the biggest bore that ever was, and when we got into camp at night, and got our meat in there, he told the Company that he went and measured my tracks when that buffalo was after me down that hill, and it was just twenty-seven feet that I stepped, but he lied about twenty feet, I think.

Well, we travelled along and made an average of about thirty miles a day, living mostly on buffalo meat for our meat, until we came to Fort Laramie, on the 23rd day of May, 1850, five hundred and thirty-five miles from the Missouri River.

There was a squad of soldiers stationed there almost expressly to guard the emigrants if they should get into trouble with the Indians.

Now comes the roughest, as far as the country is concerned. We went over what are the Black Hills and the Big Horn Mountains, and Salt Lake Range of Mountains. We passed over one canyon that ran down into Salt Lake. We crossed twenty-three times in one day to keep along the rocks for the banks would come down so sudden that we would have to re-cross the River.

There was a sand bar on one side or the other, and we would have to cross to keep on that bar.

We got into Salt Lake Valley on the 22nd day of June, 1850. There were a few Mormons there. They were just laying the foundation for their Temple. They were all proselytes then. They wanted to make Mormons of every one that came along. They

wanted us to stop, and we wanted to buy butter and cheese and stock out on flour from them, but they got down on me because I went back on their Mormonism, and I could not deal with them at all.

But this cousin of mine, Fairbanks, went out and claimed he had always been a Mormon, but he was under age and couldn't leave home, but now he said he was of age, and that he had got into a Company that was going to California, but that he was coming back and was going to make his home with the Mormons. He could buy all the butter and cheese and flour he could pack on a horse.

We left there the 24th day of June, 1850. The Mormons had gone out around Salt Lake, and put ferry boats on some of the worst streams there were to cross, and they used to charge awfully big prices to carry us across. Sometimes, if there was a very dangerous stream, we would get our wagons ferried and swim our horses.

The last bill they had on us was crossing Bear River, the other side of Salt Lake. They tried to compel us to pay six dollars a wagon and two dollars a horse and one dollar a man. There were only about ten or twelve of them and there were one hundred of us then in our Company, so our Captain Carey, of Orland, Indiana, held a consultation, and told them that we would pay just what we had been paying, five dollars a wagon and one dollar a horse, and that the men should go free, and that if they would not take it, we would take their ferry boat and ford ourselves across. They said we dared not do it. They would have an

army on us if we did. We were one hundred miles from Salt Lake City, and they had no telegraph, so we went to the ferry, and Captain Carey told the head team to drive on. The Mormons backed out and said we would have no trouble and that they would cross us, so they took us all across at our price.

After we left Fort Larramie, we got out of the buffalo country, but we found plenty of antelope and mountain sheep. Antelope is the finest meat there is in the world.

Well, West of Salt Lake there were a great many large and dangerous streams to cross. Among the worst was the Bear River. The next worst stream was called Green River. That was a very wide and rapid stream. Those streams were all barren to the East. We were going up the Rocky Mountains.

When we came to the summit or South Pass, that is a summit of the Rocky Mountains, it was all full of springs and little currents and for more than half a mile those streams were running to the East, and on the other side, they were running to the West. We had passed the Continental Divide. The streams kept coming in until they formed what was called the "Big Sandy River". Those run into the St. Marie River.

We followed right along down on the North side of that River and other streams coming in all the time, until it was called the "Humboldt River", and that for two hundred miles followed through a very barren country. The alkali water was not fit to use, even in the Humboldt River. Curselves and our stock all suffered for want of water and food.

The further we went down the more barren the country

until we came to the sink of the Humboldt River. There we were getting short of provisions for our wagon, and we tried to get some amongst the other emigrants. We found they were all short.

When we baked up our flour and got things together, we had just five biscuits apiece, pretty good sized ones, and for all we knew, we were three hundred miles away from any place to get any. The desert was supposed to be sixty miles across. We started on it at three o'clock P.M. and got across at ten o'clock A.M., the next day.

Before we got down to the sink of the Humboldt River, we stopped one afternoon and made a lot of hay and placed it in the wagon, and we fed that on the desert. We crossed the desert until we struck Carson River, known as Carson Valley. There clover stood as high as a man's shoulder. We had a feast for the horses, but we had not found anything for ourselves. We found about two or three quarts of damp corn in a sack in our wagon that we had left from horse feed when we started out. We browned that the same as we would coffee. We ground it in our coffee-mill which we had along, and we put ourselves on that rations for about three days,---probably half a teacup full of the meal, sweetened a little, and we ate it with water.

After the horses had eaten, and we were about ready to start, there were five Indians came up, armed with their bows and poison-pointed arrows. I thought I knew right where I had thrown the ax down in the grass where I had it to drive the picket pins to picket out the horses, and when I went to get the ax,

an Indian had bent the grass over it, and stood on the grass so that he had it covered up. I motioned to him to step back, and he didn't stir, and I put my hand on his shoulder and gave him a little push, and the grass sprang up and I took up the ax. He put an arrow in his bow as I picked up the ax. There we stood, facing one another. I was so near that he became aware that I could put the ax down on his head before he could get the arrow up to shoot, so he dropped his bow down and still held the arrow strung in the bow.

Mr. Campbell, my partner, thought I was very foolish. He said those fellows were after our scalps. Well, I told him the very worst thing we could do was to let an Indian know that we were afraid of him. Now, says I, if you will let me manage this thing, I think we will get out of this. "Well," he said, "Go ahead."

So I went around to the front of the wagon and got in and took down my rifle and then I told my cousin, Fairbanks, to get on to the saddle horse and ride right ahead of the others and start right out on a walk as if there were not an Indian within miles of us. I placed myself on the feed box at the hind end of the wagon with that rifle and my eye on the sights, and my gun on the Indians.

Probably you know that Indians never walk up to the side of anything. They always travel one behind another. There were five or six Indians.

I sat there and rode for miles with my eye on the side on those Indians, and a good deal of the time, when the

road was straight, I had all of them in range. If I had hit one of them, I could have hit all if there had been power enough in the bullet to go through.

Well, they would slack up and have a little conversation, to all appearances, and then another one would take the lead in the procession. They would shuffle on up, and when they got about so near,—I didn't calculate to let them come nearer than I thought their arrows could reach, about six or ten rods,—they would hold another consultation, and another one would take the lead. When he got about so close, I took sight on him again. Finally, they stopped and they talked a great deal longer, and we kept going on, our horses on a walk, and finally they struck off up the Sierra Nevada Mountains as if they were going to give up. When my partner, Mr. Campbell, saw them start off to the Mountains, he said "Thank God! I guess we are safe."

We struck Carson Valley in the State of Nevada about three o'clock of the afternoon the Indians left us, and we sighted a tent ahead of us, and when we came up to them, they were some packers that had come out to California with flour and beef to sell to emigrants. We bought three pounds of flour and paid four dollars and fifty cents for it, one dollar and fifty cents a pound. We bought three pounds of beef at one dollar a pound. We mixed up our flour with salt and water and baked it in our frying pan and made hoe cakes, and we ate one pound and then made two pounds more, for we didn't waste any in cooking.

Then Mr. Campbell looked into the tent, and there was a plate set there with two or three cold potatoes on one side of

it and a bowl of dried apple sauce on the other, and a little piece of boiled pork on top of the potatoes. He asked the man what he would take for what there was on that plate. He told him he would take three dollars. Mr. Campbell offered him two dollars. Finally, they split the difference. He bought the plate for two dollars and fifty cents, and brought it out and we divided that up and ate it.

Then my cousin, Fairbanks, looked into the tent, and saw a keg there marked "Whiskey". He asked them how they sold it and they said "one dollar a pint." He said "Let's have a pint of whiskey." So he brought out a pint of whiskey in a cup, we drank it up, on top of that dinner. I have thought sometimes that if it had not been for that dinner, that drink would have killed us. Anyway, if whiskey ever did me any good, it was that dose. I never was drunk in my life, but I think that afternoon, I was the nearest to it. We didn't eat anything more until ten o'clock the next morning, when we met more packers and we got flour and meat for fifty cents a pound.

We camped that night on a little Lake almost on the summit of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and tied our horses up to some willow brush.

We were the first wagon that went over the Mountains in the morning.

The snow ran from twenty to one hundred feet in depth. We were so hindered by the same that we could not get over the Mountains. We unhitched and put our things on the horses and each one of us took a horse and put our clothing and a blanket

for bedding on it and left the wagon standing in a snow bank.

We were now amongst a tribe called the "Root-digger Indians."

The emigrants that went over in 1848 and 1849 went in ox teams and had the idea that a horse never could make the trip, because they had to go very far without grain. The largest emigration was from Missouri. They went with oxon, and the oxen drivers were awful men to swear.

We would meet some Indians and try to find out if we could get over the Mountains on account of the snow. Wagons, we found out, couldn't go over the Mountains, but the horses could.

Well, now you have got me on top of the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

Well, then, after we got onto the West slope there was a grass that grew up in bunches and was very hardy grass. Our horses took hold of it because there was so much snow on the East side and there had not been much food.

After we passed over the summit, we came to a ranch or miners' camp and stayed with them. We had fresh venison. I have forgotten just what I paid them, but I think they got us our supper and breakfast for one dollar a meal, and we lay on the ground on our own blankets.

And the next night, we struck Hang Town, now called Placerville. Hang Town derived its name from a large oak tree on a limb of which several people were hung. One was hung for stealing horses. Another was hung for murdering a man. One man was hung for robbing and killing an old man for his money,

then he didn't get it. I had to help hang an Irishman for robbing.

Well, this Placerville was fifty-two miles East of Sacramento City. There, the next day, the 19th day of July, 1850, we sold our horses for one hundred dollars apiece, and Marcus Fairbanks and I hired out to a man to work in the mines for sixteen dollars a day and board ourselves, which we could do there for about two dollars or two dollars and a half a day. But the meals at the hotels at that time, for board by the week, were one dollar a meal. We only worked a week for this man at sixteen dollars a day. Then we worked for ourselves, and accidently, came across a vein that paid us from eight to twenty-five dollars a day. We got quite a wad out of that. It was a crevice and ran out.

Then we went up and went in with some other fellows and started a bake shop at Placerville. In the Winter of '49, everything that you could eat was worth one dollar a pound in the mines, and one of the parties that went in with us wanted to get a big stock of provisions from Sacramento before Winter set in and thought we could make our fortunes. We invested all our money and went with a couple thousand dollars and got a big stock of provisions. We had no rain to spoil the roads that Winter.

The teams would come up in the middle of the Winter and sell provisions right out of the wagons for half of what ours had cost us, and it just broke us. We all just went to smash. I left there in October with just fifty-five dollars in my pocket.

Well, my cousin, Fairbanks, and I stuck together until

we got into a good mining claim and went to mining again. We got a good start on about ten or twelve dollars apiece. Then I was taken with typhoid fever. I was out of my head from the start and I didn't know where my money ever went to. Every time the doctor came to see me, he had to come four miles, and I had to weigh him out an ounce of gold dust, worth sixteen dollars. It is worth about twenty-two dollars now. Sometimes, he came twice a day. He gave me a bill, which I have now.

We all had gold scales, as we did all our business with gold dust.

Well, when I got well, I was strapped. My money was all gone for the doctor bills and medicine and nurses, and I owed this same doctor two hundred and fifty dollars.

Well, I stayed at the cabin. When I had this typhoid fever, I didn't have any soft bed and delicate hands to brush my fevered temples. I had rough miners' claws around me, and lay on pine boughs and split logs for a bed, and after I got so I could eat something, they kept me on mush and molasses. I didn't eat anything else for a month. My hair all came out and my teeth were all loose, and some of my finger nails came off.

About the first of April, I told my cousin that I was going to go to a town called "Levy Town", as I had one hundred dollars left, and board. It was four miles there, all up the mountains. There were two or three large springs on the trail—just a packing trail. I started one morning and did not take any blankets or anything. I guess I took a little lunch. It took me until three o'clock in the afternoon. I felt a little

tired and stopped and lay down in the shade and went to sleep twice. I got there, and a man by the name of Reade kept a hotel and a store. We had been in to get our dinner there before. If we told him to get the best dinner the House afforded, it was one dollar and fifty cents instead of one dollar. I went to Mr. Reade and asked him what he would charge me a week for board and a place to sleep, and he said twenty-one dollars. I went onto the scales and weighed myself, and I weighed one hundred and twenty-seven pounds. I stayed there three weeks and went back to the Claim, and my cousin was with the same crevice, and I weighed one hundred and sixty-five pounds. Such victuals as I put down there, it was a wonder that it didn't kill me. They have the best beef in California that they have in the world. I believe I ate most a pound to a meal. Every time after I had a good hearty meal, I would start out and trail around the Town and look over the country. I used to make calculations.

Later we organized a Company and went into a Claim on a small scale. Seventeen of us went in, and most all of us were Coldwater boys. Four or five went from Branch County, Pavey was Captain or Foreman, and Jonathan Butterworth was cook. Well, we were very fortunate in that Claim when we went in. We got out with about two thousand dollars apiece, and some of the boys from Coldwater sold out their Claims and came back home.

I sent some five hundred dollars to my father at home by a man by the name of Foster, who came home.

Then we formed a big Company and went into a big river

claim. We worked there all Winter, getting out flume timber. We wanted to work the bed of the River. We sawed over ten thousand feet of lumber by hand and by the first of July we started our flume at some falls in the River and ran water into this flume, and ran it over some other falls forty rods below. Then we put up what they called the current wheel pumps. There was a water wheel set in the flume which carried the water into the flume. We pumped the claim out dry and went to work.

The crevice or vein of gold that we had worked the Fall before followed right up to the River as far as we could work. There was where we started in and made two or three pretty good days' work at one hundred dollars or more per day. But the crevice ran up into the hard rock, and that was all we ever got out of it. We hired help to put in that flume. I sent one hundred and fifty dollars home. I had fifty-five dollars left from the two thousand dollars.

I hired out to a Saw Mill Co. to work in a Saw Mill. I worked there three months at one hundred dollars a month with my board. I sawed half of the day and half of the night. Then this Mill Company bought a team and men came and they had taken a big contract to furnish lumber for the mine, and they had to deliver it up a steep hill three-quarters of a mile long. One of the foremen took this team to draw this lumber to the top of the hill where they had agreed to deliver it. They found out that he had bawky horses and he couldn't make them pull.

I stood watching the Mill one day and, by the way, his name was Parrish, of Coldwater. I said: "Frank, I can drive

that horse." He said "You drive him this afternoon and I will work in your place in the Mill." I didn't put on any lumber at all. They had a big laugh on me. When they saw him starting up the hill with just the wagon, they asked me how long it would take him to get that two thousand feet of lumber up to the mill. He had never been up to the mill with the team when he put on a load. I drove up to the mill with an empty wagon, came back and put on a few boards, drove up to the mill, and came back and put on a few more boards.

The next day in the morning, I was drawing up a good load of lumber, then he thought he could drive it, so I went back into the Mill. He loaded up a load and the horse wouldn't go at all. He said: "Charles, you are the only man that can drive that team."

They paid eight hundred dollars for the horses and the harness. "Well", I said, "I will buy them, but I won't pay what you paid for them." He wanted to know what I would give for them. They owed me pretty near four hundred dollars. I said: "I will pay you six hundred dollars, and you shall wait for the two hundred dollars until I can pay it." I gave him my note. I went on teaming and I paid all my expenses and paid my note in thirty days.

That Winter, I did all the hauling from Sacramento, fifty miles to Coloma. They wanted to buy the team in the Spring, so that they could do their own hauling. So I sold the team for seven hundred dollars.

The next year's emigration was just coming in across

the plains, poor fellows. I went out and met the emigrants and bought four horses and one wagon, and drove out to Sacramento. That was fifty miles.

In the Winter of 1852, in the City of Sacramento, there was three feet of water through most streets. There was a man contracted to drain the streets and fill them up and he paid his men one hundred dollars a month and boarded them and fed the teams.

I hired a boy at forty dollars a month and he drove one team and wagon, and with the two teams on they worked through the Summer until the first of September, and I got my pay and the story got around that the organization was getting a little shaky. I discharged my boy and quit. In the Summertime, they put on ox teams. I had to stay at the hotel. I had a friend who went out in Sacramento Valley. I wrote him to find out what horses were fetching, if they were fetching a good price. He said they were fetching a good price. He said they were fetching all a man might ask for them. I sold them there.

A man by the name of Frank Braner, from Coldwater, went with me and sold my teams, and we worked a day at hunting for the spoil, and finally we took a job of binding four hundred acres of wheat by the acre. We got two dollars and fifty cents for two hundred acres and one dollar and seventy-five cents for the other two hundred acres. We made a lot on that job, and in the Fall after I got paid for my horses, I sent four hundred dollars more home to Father. I went up into the mines again and bought a four-mule team about the first of March. I had taken a cold some way and I had been sick for a week or two, so I thought I

would go home.

I put my team right into the horse market in Sacramento and sold it. They fetched about twelve hundred and sixty-five dollars. I came down and took a boat at Sacramento and came down to San Francisco, thinking to take the 15th of April Steamer for New York.

They only ran Steamers then by the Panama, but they only ran the first and fifteenth of every month. I couldn't get passage without taking steerage passage on the 15th, so I waited until the first of May, 1855. The first of May I paid two hundred and seventy-five dollars for second cabin passage to New York. I came by the Isthmus of Panama and across the Isthmus of Panama was the first Railroad I ever rode on in my life. I crossed the Isthmus of Panama on the 12th day of May, 1855, and the boat left there at 9:00 P.M. the 12th for New York.

We got into New York the 24th day of May, 1855, I think about noon. We went to a hotel and cleaned up and went into a clothing store and bought a trunk and a couple of suits of clothes and fixed up, so we didn't look like California clods, and then started for home by train.

We arrived at Coldwater, Michigan, about 2:00 P.M. the 26th day of May, 1855. I found a man here whom I didn't know, but someone told him who I was. He went to the Depot and got my trunk and I rode out home with him. Hardly any of the folks knew me because in five years, I had changed so.

Charles Ira Fonda

August, 1906.