

Swain, W^m of Michigan

THE WORLD RUSHED IN

The California Gold Rush Experience

J. S. HOLLIDAY

Simon and Schuster / New York

Wm. Swain
of Michigan

were making a late start—they did not know the lead companies had passed Fort Kearny (315 miles to the northwest) on May 7 and 8.

There seemed no need to hurry, no reason to feel anxiety about their place in the migration. West of Independence they could see for miles across the oceanlike swells of prairie. The trail ahead was marked to the horizon by an undulating line of white-topped wagons and to the rear back to Independence. No dust obscured the astonishing scene; mud and the crowd of wagons slowed the advance. At night the glow of campfires nearby and far off to the west gave everyone a sense of security.

Forty-five miles southwest of Independence the trail forked. The Santa Fe Trail led southwest through Arkansas, on to present-day New Mexico, Arizona and finally to southern California. Relatively few gold-seekers chose that route—at most 3,000. Like the vast majority, the Rangers turned north, heading for the crossing of the Kansas River and on to the first military outpost, Fort Kearny.

The emigrants who set out from St. Joseph traveled a trail that led due west, to merge with the Independence crowd at a junction about one hundred miles from the Missouri River. Farther north at the Council Bluffs crossing of the river, another trail followed the north side of the Platte River. This route, generally known as the Mormon Trail, attracted about 2,500 emigrants in 1849.

On leaving the western settlements, these trails entered what maps labeled "The Indian Territory," a vast area intended by the government to be a permanent location for western tribes and for those Indians removed by the government from their traditional homes in the States. The first Indians the emigrants encountered were the "civilized" Shawnee and Potawatomis—peaceful, poor, altogether a contrast to expectations. But farther west, to the north of the Kansas River, the trail entered the country of the Pawnee, a tribe much feared by travelers on the plains. By spring 1849, the once-powerful Pawnees had been sadly weakened by frequent attacks by their old enemy, the Sioux. As well, during the spring and summer of 1849 they suffered over 1,200 deaths from cholera brought to them by the invading goldseekers.

Having so long anticipated the danger of Indians and consequently equipped themselves as if an army, most goldseekers experienced the ironic disappointment of not seeing any "wild" Indians. Where were the Pawnees? One of the Rangers explained: "We are armed to the teeth but on account of the consternation among the Indians because of cholera, we could hardly get a sight of them. . . . Our arms are useless, for we carry with us in their imagination a protection more formidable: the dread scourge which has spread among them."

Army life at Fort Kearny! In addition to all the questions they asked and all the food and equipment they dumped in the area, the emigrants burdened the military with thousands of letters they confidently expected to have delivered back to the States. William Swain wrote from there, as did several other Rangers, including James Pratt. His letters in the *Marshall Statesman* occasionally had the tone and broad viewpoint of the editor he had been before the spring of 1849: "This California movement if it does nothing else cannot fail to open the eyes of the people to the vastness and richness of the land over which we move, and cannot fail to bring about a reconsideration of that policy of the government which restrains the white man from occupying and cultivating it."

Another letter written May 17, 1849, not far from Fort Kearny and published in the *Oquawka*, Illinois, *Spectator* caught the mood of many of the young men far from home: "Tell Charles that I have not been chased by a squaw nor bit by an antelope, yet!"



May 16, 1849. This morning we started for Independence—breakfast over and all ready by eight o'clock. We traveled smoothly into town where we stopped about three hours while the company all went shopping. With our wagons all regularly numbered, we made a grand appearance. [Using axle grease, the members had printed "Wolverine Rangers, Mess No. —" on each wagon cover. In other companies "the wagon covers are nearly all painted with the names of owners, and their residences. Many of them have various mottoes and devices. . . ." such as Wild Yankee, Rough and Ready, Live Hoosier, Never Say Die, Patience and Perseverance, and Have You Seen the Elephant? "Others have drawings—a sprawling eagle or a huge elephant, a tall giraffe, a rampant lion, or a stately ox, done in charcoal or black paint with an artistic skill that is bold if not accurate."]

I went to the post office and got a letter from George, in which he advised me to come back home if we had the prospect of having cholera on the plains. If I had received his letter before I had made my arrangements for going, I think that on account of the prevalence of the sickness on the route I would have done it, although it would be crushing to my feelings to give up the route now. But trusting in the Almighty, I will go on, nothing daunted, with courage and high hope.

We left Independence about noon on the Santa Fe road, which for four miles is very hilly. The road, wet at this time, is very bad.

We crossed bad bridges and a short pitch without any accident and

very comfortable. We traveled all day with only now and then a tree in sight.

The plains are good pastures and covered with beautiful flowers. If I ever get home and have the means to do it, I will travel through the whole western country with my family.

This evening we encamped on Bull Creek. ["We are traveling through a country which for its vastness and beauty calls for exclamations of astonishment and delight. . . . Our train is so large that we seem like a village whenever we stop. We are scarcely out of sight of emigrants at any time, though the throng is in advance of us.

["Here at Bull Creek . . . the Santa Fe road and the one usually traveled by the California emigrants separate. When we move again we shall leave the Santa Fe road to our left."]

May 20. Sabbath. This morning I was called at four o'clock to assist in taking care of Mr. Highly, who is sick but will, it is thought, get well.

The wind is quite high on the plains, like that on our own lakes, and the clouds look like rain. We have had no preaching today. I have spent most of the day in writing to Sabrina, and I shall send it home by the first opportunity.

This afternoon we had a heavy thundershower, which makes camping disagreeable both for men and beasts. We are obliged to turn the cattle out of the corral onto the plains and keep guard around them all night. I had my watch from two until four-thirty in the morning, being my second watch since we left Independence.

["We were joined today by Mr. Smith, a young man from Battle Creek, with two companions. They are to travel under our regulations but own their wagon and outfit."]

This is a place of general camping for the emigrants, and the amount of death among them is plainly told by the number of newly made graves in the vicinity, it being no less than ten which I have seen. Poor fellows! They little thought that this would be their fate when urged on by the laudable hope of benefiting themselves and their families. They left their homes and friends to endure hardship and toil, hoping to meet again the loved ones and to make them comfortable through life. Sad is their fate, buried here in this wild of wastelands, where not a mark will denote their last resting place far from loved ones.