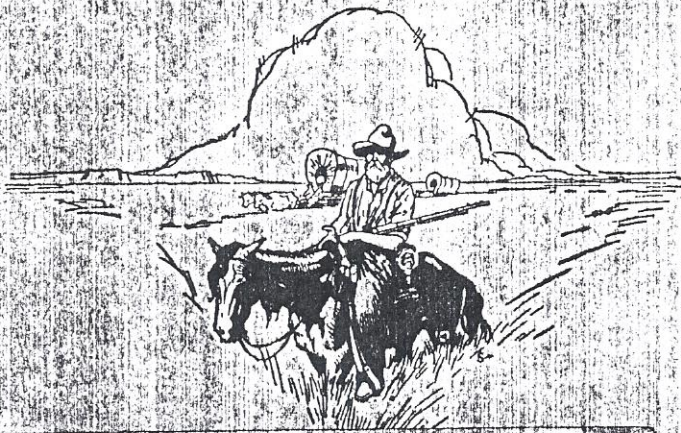


# THE DIARY OF A PIONEER

AND OTHER PAPERS



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# *The Diary of a Pioneer and Other Papers*

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Being the diary kept by Niles Searls on his journey from  
Independence, Missouri, to California, between May 9th and  
October 1st, 1849,

*Also*

Brief autobiography written by Judge Searls in the year 1900,

*Also*

Excerpts from letters written to and by his wife, Mary C. Searls,  
1848-1859.

Copied and compiled from original documents by their grandchildren,  
May Searls Heuer, Fred Searls, Jr., Carroll Searls, and Robert M.  
Searls, and printed as a memoir for their descendants.

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Reference

## FOREWORD



One hesitates to add to the mass of printed diaries and memorabilia of the California Pioneers. Yet to the increasing number of their descendants a permanent first-hand record of the daily lives of those who had the hardihood to face the five months' trek over prairies, mountains and deserts, or the tedious and dangerous voyage on paddle-wheel steamers via the Isthmus route to San Francisco, is not without interest.

The following diary and autobiography were taken from the papers of Niles Searls and were often discussed with me during his lifetime, so I know them to be authentic. In addition, there has been added a little compilation of excerpts from letters written by his wife, Mary Corinthia Searls, during her voyage as a bride to California, and from Nevada City, the little mining town where she settled with her husband, which revealed something of her brave, sweet character and woman's impressions of early California.

Due acknowledgment and appreciation is due to May Searls Heuer for copying the almost illegible original script of the diary with painstaking care, and to Carroll Searls and Cornelia Niles Gilmore for compiling the letters of Mary Corinthia Searls.

ROBERT M. SEARLS.

Dated, San Francisco, California,  
October 1, 1940.

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# The DIARY of a PIONEER AND OTHER PAPERS

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## I.

### DIARY OF NILES SEARLS,

kept and written daily on the occasion of his journey across the plains from Independence, Missouri, to California in 1849.

[Copied from original in possession of  
May Searls Heuer.]

The fall of 1848 found me travelling through the western part of the State of Missouri in quest of a location suitable for a future home and for the practice of my profession. Finding the task of making a selection a difficult one, I resolved upon spending the winter with some newly found acquaintances, by the expiration of which, I would be better able to judge of the advantages and disadvantages of the country in general and to contrast each particular location with that of others. Having in accordance with this resolution spent the winter in canvassing the country, its resources and its prospects, I was beginning to make preparations for my return home to New York (my native State) when I received intelligence from a friend, that he was soon to leave New York for California, via Independence, and at the same time urgently requesting me to accompany him in the anticipated journey. As I had already more than half decided upon "Seeing the Elephant," which is but another name for going to California, I was not long in deciding that the present opportunity was quite as favorable as any I could expect for visiting the gold region. With Charles W. Mulford (the friend before alluded to), I had long been on terms of the closest intimacy and from a thorough knowledge of his character and habits, was fully satisfied that a more judicious selection of a companion could not be made. Like myself, he is attracted more by the novelty and pleasure of the expedition than by the prospect of obtaining *wealth* on our



arrival in California. My friend arrived in the latter part of April, 1849, and we immediately set about making preparations for our departure. Our first intentions were to fit out a mule team to convey our provisions and baggage across the plains, but after a few lessons in the troubles of such an outfit and the perplexities of such a conveyance to the uninitiated, we gave up this idea and concluded to go out as passengers in the "Pioneer line," an organization for the conveyance of passengers from Independence, Mo., to San Francisco. The conveyance is by carriages capable of containing six persons each, covered, seated upon springs and drawn by mules. Accompanying these is a number of baggage wagons sufficient to contain the provisions and baggage for the company, the former of which as well as tents, cooking apparatus, etc., are furnished by Turner Allen & Co., the proprietors of the "line." Determined to go well prepared both for comfort and pleasure, we procured each a good horse, to be used in hunting and to ride when fatigued with the carriage.

After procuring the necessary outfit in Independence, we sought a temporary retreat from the dense throng that crowded that place, in the house of Mr. Caldwell, one-half mile from town, where we remained till May 9th in preference to going into the camp which had been formed by the Company eight miles out on the Santa Fe road. \*

May 9th—We left Mr. Caldwell's this morning and rode into camp. The Corral was formed on a beautiful elevation in the undulating prairie known as "Blue Prairie." Our first business was to look after our baggage which had been sent out the preceding day and which had been stowed away among other baggage in the wagons where we could not obtain it. Our company will consist of about one hundred and twenty passengers, who are to be formed into messes of six persons each, each mess to occupy their own carriage—to be furnished with a set of camp equipage, do their own cooking and to drive their own mules when put before the carriage. As much of the harmony of our journey will depend upon our luck in obtaining mess mates, we are looking around with some solicitude upon that

\* Archibald Rice Plantation,  
Elevation at site of Rice's  
residence: 1,040 ft. above  
sea level.

point. This is the day appointed for our final departure, but owing to the want of several additional baggage wagons we shall only move a few miles at a time till Saturday which is now named as the day for our "Rolling" in good earnest. To-day everything has been tumult and confusion in camp; those who could obtain provisions were deemed highly fortunate to say nothing of being unprovided with utensils for cooking it when obtained. Charles and I succeeded in discovering a barrel of pilot bread, upon a portion of which we lived, and started for a pure gurgling fount beside the cooling waters of which we made our first meal upon bread and water alone.

The business of "hitching up," as it is termed, commenced at nine o'clock this morning but owing to the difficulties of harnessing one hundred and fifty mules for the first time, it was not completed till late in the evening. Nearly every animal was caught with the lasso and choked down, harnessed by main strength and placed before the wagons, there to perform sundry feats that would astonish any but a juggler or one accustomed to ground and lofty tumbling. After sundry mishaps such as breaking wagon tongues, harnesses, etc., we at length got under way and proceeded two miles, where we again encamped for the night. \*

Our first business, after picketing our horses for the night and pitching our tent, was to seek for wherewithal to satisfy the cravings of appetite. After an hour's delay we succeeded to the number of four in procuring some coffee, bacon, pilot bread and sugar. One of our number soon levied upon a fence rail with which a fire was kindled and culinary operations were for the first time commenced. Another hour and we were seated in a circle around our humble supper eating by moonlight this, the first fruits of our own cooking. No useless table was spread. The Earth is to be our future bed, seat and table and we reclined upon her bosom. We partook of our creature comforts with a relish that in our former plentiful hours was wholly unknown.

May 10th—Rose this morning from our bed upon the ground with sensations similar to those I imagine must pervade

\* Second encampment was 10 miles southwest of Independence.



the frame of the inebriate after a week's spree. We have succeeded in forming a mess today and in procuring our carriage and camp equipage and are beginning to feel quite at home in our new situation. We were started from our grassy couch while at dinner by a fire which was communicated to the dry vegetable matter of the Prairie immediately behind and around us, and which was extinguished with some difficulty. The fire probably originated from some coals left where we had cooked our noonday meal, though some of the mess suggested the possibility of its having been communicated by us to the grass and to have originated in our superhuman efforts at masticating dry pilot bread. Our mess is made up, with a single exception, of young men, three of them from Michigan, one from N. Hampshire, and Mulford and myself from New York. Judging from present appearances they are all intelligent, moral men and, with perhaps one exception, are all enterprising industrious persons who, if spared to reach California, will turn their time to good account. We shall not move from camp today, and not for any great distance before the 12th, as the company are awaiting extra baggage wagons which will not be completed before that time.

May 11th—Rose this morning under the influence of a severe cold contracted from exposure in camp and in sleeping on the ground. The most deleterious consequence which I apprehend is the effect which it appears to be having upon my eyes. They are now very weak and to-day scarcely permit my reading or going about. At nine o'clock A. M. word came to "hitch up," when we again had a repetition of the sport of catching wild mules. When duly prepared, which was not till late this evening, the baggage train filed off in advance, the passenger carriages bringing up the rear in ludicrous style. At one moment we might all be seen rolling on at a slow pace with all the solemnity of a funeral procession; while in the next, some refractory team, enraged at their recent captivity, would plunge from the procession and, after a few gyrations by way of ascertaining if their locomotives were in moving order, dart off across the broad Prairie at the top of their speed and in

AUTOBIOGRAPHY, OF Niles Searls

Copied from manuscript in possession of Fred Searls, Jr.-  
written at Nevada City, California by Judge Searls, July  
26, 1900.

~~IbnNilesa~~

I, Niles Searls, Sr., was born on the 22nd day of December, 1825, at the town of Coeymans, in the county of Albany, the same place, and on the same farm that I was. (State of New York. My father, Abraham Searls, was born at the same place, and on the same farm that I was, in January, I think, 1802...

p. 68 When I was seventeen years of age, I was sent back to Albany (had been living at Wellington, in Prince Edward County, on the north shore of Lake Ontario, Canada, since 1837.) and placed in school where I continued for some years, and finally read law with O. H. Chittenden at Rensselaerville, N Y, for some two years, and then to the Fowler Law School at Cherry Valley, Otsego County, N Y, from which I graduated in the spring of 1848. I was admitted to practice law on the 2nd day of May, 1848.

I then started West in quest of a location at which to commence to practice

Traveling through Ohio, parts of Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois, I finally fetched up on the western border of Missouri probably because I could go no further.

I opened a law office at Harrisonville, Van Buren County (now Cass County), Missouri, so called by Democrats because Van Buren ran against Cass for the Presidency, which so disgusted them they changed the name of their county from Van Buren to Cass.

p. 67 We left Independence, Missouri, on the 9th day of May, 1849. I was accompanied by Charles W. Mulford, with whom I became acquainted at the law school at Rensselaerville, New York.

We came in a passenger train. There were 120 passengers at starting and about forty or fifty teamsters, herdsman, etc.

We paid \$200 each for our passage and were furnished with light spring wagons, each carrying six passengers. Allen and Turner of St. Louis were proprietors of the Company, and it was called the "Pioneer Line." They promised to bring us through in sixty days, and also brought U S mail. At starting we were the envy of most of the emigrants, because of the supposed comfort we would enjoy during our trip. We were furnished with army rations, were to do our own cooking, and drive our mule teams, which were to be harnessed and unharnessed by the employees of the Company.

It commenced raining the day we left Independence and for forty days rained more or less every day. As a result, the rich bottom lands of eastern Kansas became a perfect morass.

We drove the wagons, though often sunk to their axles. Our baggage train was heavily laden, and it often occurred that we did not make more than two or three miles a day. We often harnessed twenty mules to a single wagon, hauled it to a hard ridge, and then went back for others, and thus they labored.

Charley Mulford and I each had a riding horse, with which we



expected great pleasure in hunting buffaloes.

By the time we reached THE Platte River, our mules were broken down more or less and, to make a long story short, we were 105 days in making the trip, reaching Sacramento City on the 14th day of October, 1849.....

We had lost both of our horses, Charley having shot mine by accident while we were hunting buffalo on the Platte River, after which we rode the other horse indiscriminately.

Not less than twenty-five percent of our passengers perished during the trip.

In California:

March 1852 elected Dist. Attorney of Nevada Co

In the East, May 25, 1853 married Mary C. Niles

In Cal. law partner of Wm. M. Stewart

1855 elected Dist. Judge 14th Judicial Dist, including counties of Nevada, Sierra and Plumas

Jan 1862 resumed law practice

Sent family East July 1863, followed Feb 1864, came back 1869, resumed law practice

1885 appointed Supreme Court Commissioner until April 1887, then Chief Justice of Supreme Court until Jan 1889