

# PLATTE RIVER ROAD NARRATIVES

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A Descriptive Bibliography of Travel  
Over the Great Central Overland Route to Oregon,  
California, Utah, Colorado, Montana, and Other  
Western States and Territories, 1812-1866

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MERRILL J. MATTES

*with a Foreword by*  
JAMES A. MICHENER

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Staats says Captain Barlow was the first Oregon emigrant to reach The Dalles. It is not clear if he and Staats were in the same party. Reference is also made to Colonel Tetherow's company of sixty-six wagons. Staats calculates the total migration for 1845 at around 600 wagons and 2,500 people, with most companies taking five to six months to reach The Dalles.

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**W. F. SWASEY**

NEWB/YUBL

Recollections, in *The Early Days and Men of California* (Oakland, 1891), pp. 1-35.

Fort Laramie to Sutter's Fort.

Swasey, a trapper in residence at Fort Laramie, "commences interviewing" passing emigrants and wound up forming a packtrain with J. R. Snyder and Dr. W. B. Gilder of St. Louis. At Fort Hall, Captain Grant was skeptical about a feasible way to California but they proceeded to blaze a trail via Thousand Springs Valley to the Humboldt River. John Greenwood, Jr., volunteered as guide to the expedition but was driven from camp after he killed an Indian without provocation. The Truckee route was blazed across the Sierra Nevada. They passed Johnson's Ranch on Bear River before reaching Sutter's Fort, the main California outpost for migrating Americans.

Swasey joined the American Fur Company at St. Louis in 1843. In the winter, he and a companion were captured by Arapahoes. "Chaumie" was burned alive, but Swasey was "adopted." He escaped and was associated with Joseph Walker and Solomon Sublette before his move to California. Excellent syntheses of the several accounts in this bibliography relating to the California crossings of 1845 are to be found in *California Trail* (New York, 1962, pp. 83-105), by George L. Stewart, and in *Old Greenwood* (Georgetown, Calif., 1965, pp. 182-204), by Charles Kelly and Dale L. Morgan.

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**JAMES TAYLOR**

ORHS

Recollections, ms., 6 pp.; t.t., 7 pp.

Leave Lima, Ohio, March 6. Depart from Independence May 6. Platte route to Fort Laramie. Oregon Trail to Oregon City October 10.

At Independence assembled 100 head of cattle and a "fit out" for five months' travel. Left with "a large crowd." There were 1,000 wagons on the road, averaging six persons each, and perhaps 8,000 head of cattle. The Indians were "perfect land pirates" but at the moment were "at war with each other." Platte River road was "the best ever traveled for the distance," with all rivers low and fordable. On North Platte the migration, scattered along for 200 miles, enjoyed immunity from Indian attack because they were preceded by 300 U.S. Dragoons, who inspired terror among the natives. North Platte landmarks were "the highest peaks of sand rocks I ever saw rise in the middle of puraries." Twin forts Laramie and Platte each had forty or fifty employees. There were two deaths

out of 4,000 people on the road, both of these being "sick before we left," and "most consumptives got healthy."

Taylor's company avoided Stephen Meek's allegedly "better route to Oregon," and met eastbound Dr. White on the way to The Dalles, where they "found Colonel Barlow and party cutting a road across the Cascade Mountains." When traveling over the Rocky Mountains, says Taylor, they went through "what is now Yellowstone Park," by which he refers, rather, to Soda Springs, Idaho. He also refers to "Fort Laramie and Fort John," meaning instead Fort Laramie (officially Fort John) and Fort Platte. Unfortunately, many other emigrant writers make a similar jumble of nomenclature at Laramie River.

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**MIRIAM A. TULLER**

DPLW/ORHS

"Crossing the Plains in 1845," *Transactions of the Oregon Pioneer Association* (1895):87-90.

Leave Putnam County, Illinois. Cross Mississippi River at Quincy and the Missouri River at Lexington. Jump off from Independence vicinity May 11. Platte route to Fort Laramie and South Pass. Oregon Trail to Forts Bridger, Hall, and Boise, and The Dalles. Cross Cascade Mountains to Oregon City.

In 1845 the writer was Mrs. Arthur Thompson. She and her husband joined the big migration, 480 wagons, most all drawn by oxen. Beyond the South Fork ford, the buffalo were in solid masses "as far as the eye could reach, and we had fresh meat galore." Laid over one day each at Forts Laramie and Bridger. At Fort Hall, "Captain Grant gave us the consoling information that the Indians would kill us before we got to Oregon," but "we had little trouble with Indians. . . . We saw thousands of them, many of them in the same style as Adam and Eve." At Fort Boise, Mr. Craig of the Hudson's Bay Company "was more polite than Captain Grant; he only said we had better wait for more companies. . . . He sent a French servant with a large canoe to take us women across the Snake River when we crossed it a second time." Since there were too many emigrants for all to go down the Columbia River in the small boats, the Thompsons and others joined S. K. Barlow in going over the snowy Cascade Mountains via the base of Mount Hood. They were met by men from Oregon City, with "provisions for emigrants in distress."

Stephen Meek was the company guide out of Independence, but he was rejected by this company when at Fort Boise he proposed an untried alternate route. Miriam is stingy with details and gives only one date—May 11 for jump-off—but she has a refreshing viewpoint. Mr. Thompson was murdered by Indians in California, where he went in 1848 upon rumors of gold there.

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**CLAIBORNE CAMPBELL WALKER**

ORHS

Diary, t.t. of original ms., pp. 1-19.

Leave Walkersville, Missouri, April 20. to Independence May 5. Rendezvous at Lone Elm. To Kansas

River May 12 and Platte River June 1. Cross South Fork June 14. To Ash Hollow, Scotts Bluffs, Independence Rock July 27, and Pacific Springs. Sublette Cutoff to Green River and Soda Springs. Oregon Trail via Fort Hall August 7 to Whitman Mission October 6.

Over "Caw River" on a Frenchman's flatboat ferry, and next day "Meak was chosen Pilot." While emigrants celebrated a wedding, the Indians put on a war dance for their entertainment. On the Little Blue, overtaken by 250 Dragoons under "Col. Carney of St. Louis," with "Fitzpatrick their Pilot." They had nineteen wagons pulled by "the finest mules I ever saw." On the Platte, a child was run over by a wagon. Inscribed names on Independence Rock. Crossed Snake River below Salmon Falls, recrossed at "the Boisias."

*This diary ends at Whitman Mission. Walker refers to "Parmer," by which we conclude he was in Palmer's division. Other division heads mentioned were Welch and Brown. Brown's company crossed the South Fork at the lower ford, but the others crossed at the upper ford, taking two days in the process. "Ash Creek" here refers to Ash Hollow and is not to be confused with an "Ash Creek" that flowed into the South Platte or "Ash Point" in the vicinity of the Forks. "Round Top Mound" referred to at Scotts Bluffs was probably Dome Rock within the present national monument, while "Ice Spring" where they camped the next day would be the one at Robidoux Pass.*

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**W. W. WALTER**

ORHS

Recollections, typescript, 3 pp.

Leave Iowa home in March. Cross Missouri River at St. Joseph. Platte route to South Pass. Snake River to Fort Boise. With "Lost Wagon Train" to The Dalles. Down Columbia River to Fort Vancouver, December.

Joined sixty-five-wagon company of "Captain Tetheroe." Along the Platte buffalo so thick, at times threaten to overrun the wagon train. By some kind of natural telepathy the oxen communicated their fears. One resulting stampede involved sixty-five wagons, "tearing along 5 or 6 abreast," like a Roman chariot race; miraculously, only two wagons were demolished and only one person seriously hurt. After the false cutoff, reached The Dalles "starving and sick." Crossed Columbia River on rafts and descended the north bank to reach Vancouver.

*An account of Sol Tetherow, Wagon Master (Portland, Ore, n.d.) and his company, located in the Oregon Historical Society, was edited by Fred Lockley as part of the Federal Writer's Project.*

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**DR. ELIJAH WHITE**

NEWB/HUNT

Narrative, *Ten Years in Oregon: Travels and Adventures of Dr. Elijah White and Lady*, compiled by Miss A. J. Allen (Ithaca, N.Y., 1848), pp. 265-314.

Leave Willamette Valley August 15. Via Columbia River to The Dalles. By horseback to Grand Ronde, up Snake River to Fort Hall. Via Sublette Cutoff, Soda Springs to South Pass. Oregon Trail reverse to Fort Laramie October 18 and Westport in late November. To St. Louis and Washington, D.C.

In 1844 solicited by the "legislative body" of Oregon to go to Washington with a petition "praying the government to extend jurisdiction over the country." An effort to leave in summer of 1844 thwarted by an aborted effort to find a road through Cascade Mountains. A year later left by "the usual route" with Moses Harris as pilot, but beyond The Dalles Harris and others returned, leaving White without an interpreter. Despite these desertions and despite warnings against "a small party in the Indian country," he continued with three others who had brought horses over the Cascades. At "Grand Round" met the first emigrant company of eighty-seven wagons, headed by "Barlow, Knighton, and McDonald." Other companies met along Snake River, including Joel Palmer's, which he called "the St. Joseph's company." Reached South Pass by "a new route." Along Sweetwater and Upper Platte passed through thousands of buffalo, villages of peaceful Sioux, and bands of trappers. At Warm Springs, "they performed ablutions for fort Laramy" and were there received hospitably by "Pappin, the governor" (Pierre D. Papin). Noted "a small fort under Daniel Finch" eight miles below Laramie. On "the woodless Platte" met endless buffalo herds and unruly Pawnees who attacked them, held them in captivity, and finally released them after appropriating their mounts and supplies; they were left only "poor Indian ponies and some dry corn." Suffering from head injuries and starvation, White finally reached Westport with the aid of Shawnee Indians and was greeted by "Mr. Boon, nephew of the distinguished hunter Daniel Boon."

*White led the first organized emigration to Oregon in 1842 (see entry 70). His journey of 1845 is doubly significant, not only as hard evidence that the Americans in Oregon wanted land to be incorporated into the United States, but also as an eyewitness account of the progress of the westbound migration that in itself was helping to ensure a favorable outcome. Nancy Jacobs (entry 143) and Joel Palmer (entry 146) were among emigrants who record having consultations with Dr. White when they met him, and entrusting letters to him. White compared notes with Grant, Hudson's Bay Company's factor at Fort Hall, and at Soda Springs with "Dr. Burke, collecting botanical specimens for the English Government." His "new route" to South Pass was the so-called Sublette Cutoff, which had been worked out by Caleb Greenwood early in 1845 and should therefore have been named for him. (In fact, some travelers do refer to "Greenwood's Cutoff.") Prophetically, White thought the mouth of Laramie River was "the best point for a military post, being the most dangerous part of the route between the United States and the Willamette Valley."*

Oregon Trail. Her letter of August 1854 is mainly concerned with dismal adventures after leaving Fort Hall, when they were "decoyed off the Oregon Trail by a rascally fellow who came out from Oregon, assuring us that he had found a cut-off." This unpopular fellow was Jesse Applegate, whose new route coincided in part with the later ill-famed Lassen Cutoff, going from the Humboldt River to southern Oregon mountains.

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**EDWIN BRYANT**

HUNT/DPLW

*What I Saw in California: Being the Journal of a Tour by the Emigrant Route and South Pass* (New York and London, 1849), pp. 1-208. Frequently reprinted with change of title, such as *Rocky Mountain Adventures* (New York, 1885).

Leave Louisville, Kentucky, April 18. By boat to Independence May 1. Cross Big Blue River May 30. Reach Platte June 8. Cross South Platte June 17. To Fort Laramie June 23, South Pass July 12, and Fort Bridger July 17. Via "Great Salt Lake Desert," Humboldt and Truckee rivers to Sutter's Fort August 31.

At Independence, observed color and hubbub of Santa Fe freighters. Before departure for "the Blue Prairie" was beset with rumors of threats by Indians, Mormons, and English spies. Rendezvoused on Indian Creek. Upon departure, company led by Colonel Russell mustered sixty-three wagons, 119 men, fifty-nine women, 110 children, and 700 animals. Trials and tempers soon resulted in disintegration of this unwieldy crowd. Bizarre appearance of Kansas Indians and returning Rocky Mountain trappers, accompanied by Delawares. Net population gain of one when Mrs. Hall was delivered of twins and, at Alcove Springs at Big Blue crossing, elderly Sarah Keyes of the Reed party died. Delay caused by Big Blue in flood. On the Platte, a "useless and barbarous operation" on leg of a boy crushed by a wagon, another birth, and a wedding, all "within a diameter of two miles." The idea of navigation of the Platte was a joke, for it could be forded "without wetting the pantaloons if rolled above the knee." Mackinaw boats from Forts Laramie and Platte were stalled on sandbars, waiting for wagons to transport fur cargo. At Ash Hollow there was "a small cabin . . . turned into a sort of general post-office with an array of nailed up letters and advertisements." North Platte landmarks were likened to the Acropolis, a Mexican pyramid, an Egyptian temple, a mausoleum, and the ruins of Thebes and Babylon. At Fort Bernard encountered traders from Taos and the Arkansas, who sold mules to Bryant to convert his outfit to packtrain. At Fort Laramie dined with Chief Factor "Bordeau," and Sioux performed pageant of dancing and marching. At Fort Bridger, Hastings and Hudspeth recommended new desert route south of Salt Lake. Despite misgivings, Bryant and party adopted it "because we were mounted on mules, [had] no families, and [could] afford to hazard experiments." Proceeded safely with Hudspeth accordingly, though following Reed-Donner party of families ran into disaster. Was greeted by proprietors of Johnson's Ranch and Sutter's Fort.

This classic work appeared in time to serve as one of the more dependable guides for the forty-niners. With its ponderous narrative it was clearly not designed as a guide, but in the course of the narrative it does describe the route. Carriger (entry 167), Thornton (entry 204), and the two Garrisons (entries 178 and 179) also throw light on the company Bryant was with as far as Fort Bridger. Others on the roster included former-governor Boggs of Missouri and a grandson of Daniel Boone. On the Humboldt, Bryant met Applegate and others from Oregon working out a new route between the Humboldt and the headwaters of the Willamette in Oregon. In the 1849 gold rush, he became a conspicuous figure, leading a big packtrain. The Sarah Keyes grave near Alcove Springs, Kansas, is one of few well-known monumented graves of the Oregon Trail.

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**DAVID CAMPBELL**

CAHS

Recollections, t.t. of article, "A Pioneer of 1846," in *Porterville Weekly Review* (1899), 9 pp.

Reach Independence May 1. Overland to South Pass and Fort Hall. Via Humboldt-Truckee route to Johnson's Ranch and Sutter's Fort October 10.

One of a crowd of emigrants with 250 wagons in rendezvous at Independence. Whole company under Colonel William Russell initially, but decision soon made to divide into companies of 25-30 wagons each. Campbell's company traveled about twelve miles per day, laying over one day each week. This year was exceptionally dry, with "only one rain all the way across the Plains." As a result, all the rivers were forded with ease. Those who expired from mountain fever or Indian arrows were buried within the corral, and their graves trampled by the cattle so that Indians could not filch their clothing. Forty-sixers were profligate with buffalo, killing "5 to 10 each day." Flatheads congregated around Fort Hall. Some fifty wagons went to Oregon, but the majority went to California. Thirty miles from Johnson's Ranch they were overtaken by Reed and Eddy, who have been expelled from the Donner party in the desert. Reached Sutter's Fort six months out of Independence.

*Campbell does not disclose his origins. His own date of April 1 for the rendezvous at Independence, with departure "the following day," is obviously a month off, according to other followers of Colonel Russell.*

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**NICHOLAS CARRIGER**

DPLW/UCBL

Diary and excerpts from "Autobiography," in *Overland in 1846*, vol. 1, edited by Dale L. Morgan (Georgetown, Calif., 1963), pp. 143-58.

Leave Andrew County, Missouri. Cross Missouri River April 29 at Iowa Point. Via Nemaha and Saline rivers to the Platte June 1 at Pawnee village. Cross South Fork at middle ford, to Fort Laramie June 25, Upper Platte July 4. Sublette Cutoff to Green and

packhorse and to borrow twenty-five dollars from the genial missionary, described as "6 feet tall, straight as an Indian, and of fine presence. His face was florid, his hair chestnut. [He was] quick for a big man."

*Cone soon repaid his loan, was a member of the jury that tried Whitman's murderers, and joined the first wagon train from Oregon to California when gold was discovered there. Trimble's fate is touched on also by Harrison (entry 182) and Palmer (entry 192) in 1846, and Ross (entry 268) in 1847.*

171 ☆

**JOHN CRAIG**

NSHS/HUNT

Letter of Oct. 4, 1847; printed in *Overland in 1846*, vol. 1, edited by Dale L. Morgan (Georgetown, Calif., 1963), pp. 133-35.

Ray County, Missouri, to St. Joseph to Sutter's Fort.

On May 3 Craig and friend "started to visit Oregon and if possible California. We each took a waggon and ox team. . . . Our two waggons having only 8 men in all traveled from Fort Hall to California alone. We arrived at frontier settlements on the 13th day of September, . . . 4 months 10 days from one frontier to the other." There were immense herds of buffalo on the plains and "thousands of the red Sons and daughters of the great American desert" who would approach on horseback "at full speed thundering and dashing." "The . . . road from the confines of the State of Missouri to the eastern foot of the California range of mountains is equal if not Superiour to any road of equal distance in the States."

*William Taylor (entry 203) was evidently one of Craig's companions, all the way from Missouri to California. In 1847 Craig returned to Missouri. His report of that experience (entry 224) is much more informative.*

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**ANGELINE SMITH CREWS**

HUNT

Recollections, "A Brief Sketch and History of an Oregon Pioneer," ms., 7 pp.

William Smith's outfit for Oregon included his wife, nine children, three wagons, and six months' provisions. They "hoisted the sails of their prairie schooners and started for the grate northwest" in a company of 300 ox-drawn wagons. All went smoothly until "some where in Ore neare the line of Californy they meet one Jessa Applegait who was a trator to the amergration." By following the cutoff through the Siskyou Mountains, they got bogged down in the canyons of Rogue River. "Wm. Smith died in the Cow Crick Canyon, Captain of the Lost Emigrants. Left wife and 9 children. Remained there 3 weeks waiting for the sick to die or get well. . . . Young men of the train got through and a relief pack train rescued the survivors."

*Angeline was nine at the time, but says she kept a "direy." At its inception, the Applegate route was in the same class as the Meek Cutoff of 1845 and the Lassen*

*Cutoff of 1849, all blind trails that got the takers into deep trouble.*

173 ☆☆☆

**GEORGE LAW CURRY**

UCBL/MOHS

Letters to *St. Louis Weekly Reveille*, May 4 to July 10 passim; reprinted in *Overland in 1846*, vol. 2, edited by Dale L. Morgan (Georgetown, Calif., 1963), pp. 503-611 passim.

By boat from St. Louis to Independence April 28. To "Russell's Encampment" twelve miles out. Cross Kansas River May 18. Via Platte to Forts Bernard and Laramie, and Sweetwater River July 12.

Fell in with the imposing "Colonel Russell" on steamboat. In camp on the "trace," emigrants soaked by heavy rains and worried about rumors of hostile Mormons having crossed the Missouri River. Company of 250 people ("135 fighting men") elected Russell as captain; Curry became his aide-de-camp. On Platte encountered Fort Laramie "mackinaw boats under Mr. Papin" making little progress because of low water. On the South Fork met "Mr. Wall from Oregon" who counted 490 westbound wagons. At Fort Bernard, reporter enjoyed hospitality of Richards, the proprietor. (The fort had been reconstructed the previous year, though "yet in an unfinished state.") Sioux congregated at Fort Laramie, having thirty-five Pawnee scalps and preparing to go and "thrash the poor Crows."

*Morgan identifies Curry as the "Laon" who signs dispatches to the Reveille. His last dispatch was written "15 miles from the dividing ridge of the Rocky Mountains," reporting fast pace of the packtrain of twenty-five mules made up at Fort Laramie. Its twelve-man crew included Russell (entry 201), Bryant (entry 165), and "Captain Wells," a mountaineer. Reference is also made to "the advance company" of Elam Brown (entry 162) having been molested by the Sioux. Other letters were written on April 28 at Independence, on May 6 on "Santa Fe Trace," on the eleventh at "Shawnee Country," on the fifteenth on the Wakarusa, on the nineteenth on Kansas River, on June 12 on main Platte, on the sixteenth on South Fork, and on the twenty-fifth at Fort Bernard, eight miles below Fort Laramie.*

174 ☆

**MARIANNE H. D'ARCY**

ORUL

Recollections, ms., pp. 1-19.

Council Bluffs to Oregon.

Age four at time of crossing. Over Missouri River with her mother in an Indian canoe while her father took the cattle over, "I know not how." In crossing the Platte, the wagon tipped over and she "went floating off" until "the men ran and brought me out." They got caught in a buffalo stampede, "no light affair," and one beast jumped over the wagon tongue. Indians tried to steal her mother,

The brothers were with Colonel Russell's company until the breakup at Fort Laramie mentioned by Bryant (entry 165), Thornton (entry 204), and McKinstry (entry 189). Thereafter they were with others, not identified.

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**ANTONIO B. RABBESON**

UCBL

Recollections, ms., 31 pp.

New York to Independence to Oregon.

This man was with the train of sixty wagons under the command of former-governor Boggs of Missouri when they left Independence May 18. Other notables in the party were Jessy Q. Thornton (entry 204), "Captain Gilliam and Preacher Gilliam," and the Donners. The company was divided by original objective—forty wagons for California and twenty for Oregon. Rabbeson does not give his own experience but tells what happened to others, including "Boone Helm, the cannibal. . . . He was a Dutchman." West of Fort Hall they met Nathan Olney, who "tipped us off about the Barlow Road."

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**AMANDA ESREY RHOADS**

UCBL/NSHS

Letter, ms., 3 pp.; paraphrased in "Thomas Rhoads, Forgotten Mormon Pioneer of 1846," by J. Kenneth Davies, *Nebraska History* 64 (1983):81-95.

Leave Ray County, Missouri. Cross Missouri River at St. Joseph May 6. To Platte River May 26. At Fort Laramie June 15.

Letter of June 15 mailed at "fort larimous," 700 miles from home. Rhoads company composed of ten wagons. When they complained to the Sac and Fox Indian agent about stolen horses, the agent made restitution. They were one week going up "the blew." On the "big plat" they had some brushes with Pawnee Indians who attempted to steal horses; in one incident some of the men had to race for their lives when the Indians tried to cut them off from the train. They encountered Oregonians on the trail "that went last spring . . . returning for their families."

In the Bancroft collection of Rhoads letters, this is the only one related to the overland experience. When the main body of Mormons fled from Nauvoo early in 1846, the leadership sent word to splinter groups elsewhere to move west likewise, hopefully to meet somewhere "in the Indian country." Unaware that the main body would be stalled until April 1847 at Winter Quarters, these groups found that, in obeying orders, they were left in limbo. Two groups reached Fort Laramie and, when no Mormon brethren appeared, went south to winter at Pueblo in the Upper Arkansas. These were the company of John Brown (entry 163) and that of the Crow clan of southern Illinois, who joined the Pioneers in the spring. A third group was led by Thomas Rhoads, Amanda's father-in-law. Davies seems unaware of the existence of a letter written by Daniel Rhoads, Amanda's husband (entry 199), which clarifies the balance of their journey to California. The date of Amanda's letter

is also the date of the arrival of Francis Parkman (entry 193) at Fort Laramie.

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**DANIEL RHOADS**

CASL

Letter, 5 pp.; reproduced in *Quarterly Bulletin of California Pioneers of Santa Clara County* 5, no. 1 (March 1965):4-8.

Fort Laramie to South Pass to Humboldt and Truckee rivers to Sacramento Valley, October 1.

Reported travel "mostly upriver" from the Platte to "Mary's River," otherwise known as the Humboldt. "We had good roads till we came to Truckee's River [which] we crossed 27 times one day." After the bad crossing of the Sierra Nevada, they sold the old wagon for thirty dollars. "One ox died when we got in, after hauling us 2,000 miles." Father Thomas Rhoades "got in 7 or 8 yoke of oxen and 18 head of loose cattle and 3 horses." Provisions ran out and they had to rely on corn brought in from the settlements. Learned of the tragic fate of a late company that foundered in snow and resorted to cannibalism; Daniel participated in the rescue of seven survivors. Wife Amanda was in good health, with a new son born November 4.

*Daniel Rhoads, son of Thomas Rhoads, offers testimony that complements that of his wife Amanda (entry 198), who makes no mention of her pregnancy in the Fort Laramie letter. This Mormon company had men who later joined the American takeover of California, among them Thomas Rhoades, Jr., who enlisted for three months, "determined to gain the country or die in the pursuit of it."*

200 ☆

**WILLIAM RILEY**

MOHS

Letter, facsimile of ms., 10 pp.

Missouri to Independence to Oregon.

To escape fever and ague of Missouri, resolved to go to Oregon. Made up an outfit of two wagons, ten yoke of oxen, loose cattle and horses, and provisions for four men for five months. Joined a large unidentified company making rendezvous twenty miles west of Independence. At start, train had fifty wagons, 500 work oxen, and 1,500 head of loose cattle, so Riley was "on horseback from dawn to dusk." Coming down with his old ailment, he had to ride a wagon to Fort Laramie where he expected to "wind up my business in this world," but he recovered after being "bled" by a doctor. On July 20 reached "the great southwest pass." The route to Fort Hall was by way of "Vascus and Bridger's Fort." On October 9 arrived at "La Dalls Missions," then floated down the Columbia.

201 ☆☆☆

**WILLIAM H. RUSSELL**

NSHS/MOHS

Letters, in *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, May 18, 28, and 29, and *Columbia (Missouri) Statesman*, July 24;

reprinted in *Overland in 1846*, vol. 2, edited by Dale L. Morgan (Georgetown, Calif., 1963), pp. 519–609 passim.

Independence, Missouri, to Sweetwater River.

At the outset noted that "Oregon fever has abated" and most emigrants were headed for California. Colonel Kearny had notified him that 2,000 Mormons had crossed the Missouri River "with artillery" but appeared peaceful. Along Platte oxen were "vexatiously slow." This, coupled with the long delay at Big Blue crossing, caused bickering. He tried to resign on the Platte but was "reelected." On the Sweetwater, he explained that he finally resigned on reaching the North Platte, "where I considered all safe," and he was now traveling with twelve men on mules, from Fort Laramie.

While Russell's contribution is incomplete, it is an important one because he was the leader of the biggest emigrant company of 1846, which had some semblance of cohesion as far as Ash Hollow. His four letters are marked May 10 in "Indian country, 20 miles west of Independence"; May 19 "4 miles west of Kansas River"; June 13 on "Nebraska or Big Platte River"; and July 12 on the Sweetwater, "80 miles west of Independence Rock." The company was protean in size, beginning with 100 wagons at the rendezvous and reaching a maximum of 150 by accretion. Though Russell had nominal leadership up to the North Platte, this oversized company broke up early into separate divisions, for efficiency of handling. (Under his immediate control were forty-six wagons, with ninety-eight "effective men.") The maximum number of people in his sphere of influence was around 700. He characterizes them as "intelligent and respectable, representing about every state in the Union, though the majority were from Missouri."

202 ☆☆☆

**CHARLES TYLER STANTON**

NSHS/UCBL

Letters, in *New York Herald*, Aug. 7 to Nov. 4 passim; reprinted in *Overland in 1846*, vol. 2, edited by Dale L. Morgan (Georgetown, Calif., 1963), pp. 531–620 passim.

Leave Independence May 13. To Platte River June 12, Fort Laramie June 28, and South Pass July 19.

Traveled with the big Russell company. On "the Great Platte" had an encounter with Pawnees who at first threaten them, then took to "hugging the men and embracing the women." Traders "going down with boats" mailed letter. From Fort Laramie reported that they crossed South Fork at middle ford, but Dunbar's company went up too high and "are now stranded." Regretted the resulting loss of "many fair and amiable young ladies" with whom young blades of his company had been having furtive courtships. Ash Hollow memorable as the place where "the level prairie suddenly sank down into a deep gorge." Letter from "Beaver Creek 9 miles from Fort Laramie" carried by "Mr. Ewing of Santa Fe" related that at the fort the Sioux put on a great show, approaching in "3 columns, with music and color." Now the missing Oregon company rejoined them, and "3 marriages have

taken place." On the Sweetwater July 12 the main body split, with "Governor Boggs and Colonel Boon . . . sliding out," leaving him in the Donner party with eighteen wagons to continue on to their fateful meeting with Lansford Hastings.

Stanton is identified as a young bachelor member of the Donner party who escaped death in deep snows of the Sierra Nevada, only to die of exposure in January 1847 when, insufficiently equipped, he attempted a rescue of those still stranded on the east slope. His letters, supplementing the Miller-Reed diary (entry 191), contribute to an understanding of progress of the Donner party as far as South Pass.

203 ☆☆☆

**WILLIAM E. TAYLOR**

NSHS/SFHM

Diary, in *Overland in 1846*, vol. 1, edited by Dale L. Morgan (Georgetown, Calif., 1963), pp. 118–33.

Leave Ray County, Missouri, April 20. Cross Missouri River "5 miles above St. Joe." Jump off May 6. To Platte River May 21. Ford South Fork May 30. To Fort Laramie June 10, South Pass June 30, Fort Bridger July 8, Soda Springs July 17, and Snake River junction August 2. Via Raft, Humboldt, and Truckee rivers to Donner Pass August 28. To Johnson's Ranch September 13.

In group with John Craig. Joined company of twenty-seven wagons and fifty men under Captain Martin. Recognized the Kansas-Nebraska prairies as "land of the richest kind." On Little Blue paused for a woman "who brought an increase in the emigration." At Chimney Rock, the Ray County boys joined seceders from the Martin company. Along Sweetwater saw thousands of buffalo. At Fort Bridger left "the main crowd" in a group of seven wagons; at Soda Springs, the original two-wagon outfit from Ray County, having decided for California, parted from Oregonians. Near Humboldt Sink, overtaken by Russell-Bryant packtrain.

Taylor's diary is laconic but highly informative. Morgan points out that the "Craig-Stanley party" of which Taylor was a charter member "was always in the forefront of the emigration," and was "the first company to bring wagons across the Sierras in 1846." His account is supported by Craig's letter (entry 171). The ferry five miles above St. Joseph, which Taylor calls "parrot's ferry," became known as Duncan's Ferry during the California gold rush.

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**JESSY QUINN THORNTON**

NEWB/ORHS

Journal, in *Oregon and California in 1848*, vol. 1 (New York, 1849), pp. 13–239; reprinted as *The California Tragedy* (Oakland, 1945). Recollections, "Occasional Address," *Transactions of the Oregon Pioneer Association* (1878):29–71.

Leave Independence to rendezvous at Wakarusa River May 15. To Platte River around June 1. Cross South

Fork June 17. To Fort Laramie June 28, South Pass July 17, Little Sandy July 19. Sublette Cutoff to Bear River. To Fort Hall August 7, Fort Boise, The Dalles, and Oregon City.

Colorful Independence crowded with emigrant wagons and big Santa Fe wagons. At rendezvous, census revealed seventy-two wagons, 130 men, sixty-five women, 125 children, and 710 cattle and horses. At Kansas River, news of war with Mexico. Meeting called "to prepare a system of laws to govern the company." Laws notwithstanding, disintegration of oversize train began; upon reaching the Platte "20 wagons including mine, separate from the main body." Reverend Cornwall performed three wedding ceremonies on the Platte and gave funeral service for a small boy run over by a wagon. At Fort Laramie warned of hostilities between Sioux, Crow, and Snake tribes. At Little Sandy beyond South Pass a general debate, and here the greater number of Californians turned left, to go via Fort Bridger to meet Lansford Hastings to learn of his "better route." Premonition of disaster expressed by Mrs. George Donner. Thornton's company turned right to Green River, there united with company of Wm. Kirquendall. Beyond, country was "exceeding in dreariness and sterility anything we had seen." At Fort Hall abandoned wagons in favor of pack mules. Ignoring Applegate's preaching about his "new route," Thornton's company stayed on the orthodox Oregon Trail.

*Thornton is a primary source of information for the eventful year 1846. He has a flowing literary style. The dramatic events along the Platte make fine material for his purple prose soliloquies, and there is ample room for his poetic skill in his lavish descriptions of the great landmarks of the North Platte valley, dripping with classical allusions to ancient ruins. Apparently Thornton was in "Dunbar's company," which included also Rabbeson (entry 197), and which like the company of Boggs and Curry had the wisdom to resist the blandishments of Hastings and Applegate alike. All were initially part of the original ungainly company led by Colonel Russell.*

205 ☆ ☆

**PETER L. WIMMER**

DPLW/UCBL

Recollections, in *California Gold Book*, by W. W. Allen and R. B. Avery (San Francisco, 1893), pp. 50-68.

Leave Illinois home. Overland to Independence in April. Platte route to Fort Laramie and South Pass. To Salt Lake, Thousand Springs Valley, and Humboldt River. Undesignated route over Sierra Nevada to Johnson's Ranch and Sutter's Fort November 15.

Wimmer and family, of Irish extraction, joined forces with Captain George W. Harlan's company. In neighborhood of "Fort Independence" made up a train of eighty-four families with 100 wagons. An unusual item of equipment was "a stout windlass" to winch wagon-bed boats across rivers; this came in handy in crossing the Platte, with its quicksand "greedy for victims." It was also useful later in helping to hoist wagons over the Sierra Nevada.

Morgan in his *Overland* in 1846 refers to a Harlan-Young party of forty wagons when they left Fort Bridger, but evidently they traveled separately from the Reed-Donner party and were ahead of them in crossing via the Hastings Cutoff. Unfortunately Wimmer, the only one in that company to leave a literary trace, has almost nothing to say about the desert experience. In 1847 Wimmer was employed by Captain Sutter, along with James Marshall, to build a sawmill at Coloma. The author quotes an affidavit by Elizabeth Jane Wimmer to the effect that her husband should share honors with Marshall for the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill because on January 19, 1848, they jointly "picked up" the nugget that changed the course of frontier history.

1847

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**ANONYMOUS (Oregon Battalion)** NSHS/MOHS

Letters, in the *St. Louis Missouri Republican* Sept. 30, Nov. 30, and Dec. 6, 1847; reprinted in *Publications of the Nebraska State Historical Society* 20 (1922):174-76.

In letter of September 16 from "the Little Nemahaw" indicated that the Mormon Battalion left Fort Leavenworth on August 28 for Grand Island on the Platte, but on September 3 received a countermarching order to proceed to Table Creek on the Missouri River, "build quarters and winter there." In letter dated November 9 at "Fort Kearny" reported: "We are getting along here quite comfortably. We have erected, and nearly completed, some sixty or seventy log cabins, with slab, dirt and straw roofs."

*The first two letters are signed only by "Oregon Battalion." That of November 9 purports to be from "a volunteer." In any event the writer (or writers) is a member of an outfit properly styled "The Oregon Battalion of Missouri Mounted Volunteers." The fort was of very short duration, for in 1848 this new fort suddenly became "Old Fort Kearny," being replaced by Fort Childs (soon to become "New Fort Kearny") at Grand Island on the Platte migration route. These letters reveal the origins of Old Fort Kearny—later the site of Nebraska City—which beginning in 1849 became the locale of a steamboat landing for the disembarkation of California gold seekers and also a ferrying point for those who went north from St. Joseph by land. The abandoned log huts, along with a small blockhouse, were mentioned by several emigrants of 1849 and 1850.*

207 ☆ ☆ ☆

**ANONYMOUS (Papin)**

NSHS/MOHS

Report, in *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, May 28; reprinted in *Publications of the Nebraska State Historical Society* 20 (1922):172.

Six fur traders came in from Fort Laramie on the twenty-fourth, having left there April 20. The party under P. D. Papin brought in 1,100 packs of "buffalo robes, etc."

versations and took excursions with greatly admired Sioux of the "Black Hills" neighborhood.

*With another proper Bostonian, Quincy Adams Show, as companion, Parkman undertook this strenuous journey—which proved injurious to his health—because he wanted to observe "wild Indians" at first hand to prepare himself for composition of his great masterpiece, the multivolumed France and England in North America. (By this date the eastern Indians who populated his epic history of earlier centuries had been pretty well tamed.) While his Oregon Trail is acknowledged to be the most famous classic of overland literature, his recently discovered field notes published in the Journals are far more important as source material. The original publication, which his friends urged him to write for popular consumption, is brilliant narrative but awkward history, being "diluted triply" by Byronesque over-romanticism, bowdlerization (the deletion of indelicate details), and the omission of significant historical data. "The immediacy and vigor of the original notes," reflecting the twenty-three-year-old Parkman's fresh observations of trail pageantry, barbaric tribes, and a score of historical figures on his "great triangular sweep of the west," heightens his stature as the first and greatest of American field historians.*

194 ☆☆☆☆

**VIRGIL K. PRINGLE**

NSHS/ORHS

"Diary of Virgil K. Pringle. 1846," *Transactions of the Oregon Pioneer Association* (1920):281-300; same in, *Overland in 1846*, vol. 1, edited by Dale L. Morgan (Georgetown, Calif., 1963), pp. 159-88.

Leave Hickory Grove, Missouri, April 15. To Independence May 7, depart May 8. Via Kansas, Big Blue, and Little Blue rivers to the Platte, arriving about June 1. Ford South Fork June 12. To Fort Laramie June 22, South Pass July 15, Soda Springs, and American Falls of Snake River August 9. Via Raft and Humboldt rivers and Applegate route to Klamath Lake, Rogue and Umpquah rivers to Willamette Valley November 10.

Started down the old Santa Fe Trail, turning north on the new Oregon Trail to cross the Wakarusa where company organized, with Wm. Keithly as captain and "O. Brown" as pilot. "Kansas River" crossed in flatboats owned by a Shawnee Indian. At the head of Grand Island, the death of child from scarlet fever was balanced by birth of another. On June 6 "pass 13 boats for St. Louis from Fort Laramie, all loaded with peltry and furs. They draw about a foot of water and seldom float clear." Near the mouth of "Ash Creek," a fine spring and a cabin called the Ash Grove Hotel. "Inside at the bar we found the cards of all the companies that had preceded us." Scenic bluffs of the North Fork "have a tendency to fill the mind with awe and grandeur." At Fort Laramie saw "about 200 lodges of Sioux." There camped with seventy wagons and all united in giving the Indians a feast and presents of powder, lead, and tobacco. At Bear River observed a vil-

lage of 600 Shoshones. At Soda Springs six-year-old George Collins got his head crushed under a wagon wheel.

*This journal is crisp and businesslike, with emphasis on route and mileage. The "southern route to Oregon" was a dreadful way to go, but Pringle is not among the majority who condemn Applegate for his bad advice. He calls Court House Rock "Parker's Castle" and Little Blue River "Blue Earth or Republican Fork."*

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**POLLY JANE PURCELL**

HUNT/DPLW

*Autobiography of a Pioneer* (n.p., n.d.), 7 pp. Reprint (Fairfield, Wash., n.d.), 20 pp.

"The Platte River road was terrible. So much wind they often could not stretch a tent and [they could] do but little cooking." People who died for various reasons were buried in the road and all the wagons drove over them, so Indians could not find and rob them. Her family lived to get through. Father started with three wagons but was forced to abandon one. All but one of the oxen died, and they were "forced to work the cows." Once squaws "tried to take my sister away from my mother, but father drove them away with his ox whip." Another time 500 painted warriors rode by, to make war on another tribe. Emigrants often paid Indians to help drive their teams across rivers, "as they knew the fords."

*The writer was only three years old when her parents ferried across the Missouri River on April 4 at an undesignated place. Accordingly, Polly's story seems to be partly her own recollections and partly what she later heard from others.*

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**NATHAN and CHARLES F. PUTNAM**

NSHS/ORHS

Letters, in *Overland in 1846*, vol. 2, edited by Dale L. Morgan (Georgetown, Calif., 1963), pp. 496-634 passim.

Lexington, Kentucky, to Independence to Fort Hall.

In letters of April 11 and May 6 from Independence the brothers reported preparations while "California fever rages." On May 11 in "Indian country 25 miles from Independence," Governor Boggs had issued "passports" and they mustered 141 fighting men, seventy-one women, 109 children, and seventy-five wagons. On June 17 at a point "18 miles above the junction" on South Fork, they predicted that they would cross it twenty miles above. On June 11, "Sweetwater 220 miles from Fort Hall" they received advice from Hastings, the promoter of a new route, but decided to ignore it. So far the road had been—almost—"a perfect turnpike." Though the last to leave the States, they were now "ahead of all California companies." The big attraction at Fort Laramie was Indians, two or three thousand of them on the move—women, horses and dogs all "packed to death" while the men pranced around and "done nothing." Letter of August 8 from Fort Hall indicated that they would aim for Oregon City and that "Applegate will pilot us."