

For the Lord thy God bringeth thee
into a good land, a land of brooks
of water, of fountains and depths
that spring out of valleys and hills ;
a land of wheat, and barley and
vines and fig trees, and pomegranates ;
a land of oil olive ; and honey ;
a land wherein thou shalt eat bread
without scarceness ; thou shalt not
lack anything in it.

Deuteronomy 8, 7-9,

read at services held
Sunday, August 19, 1849,
on the trail



THE CALIFORNIA TRAIL

AN EPIC WITH MANY HEROES
BY GEORGE R. STEWART

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THE CALIFORNIA TRAIL

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THE CALIFORNIA TRAIL

...in '49 the diarists wrote of continuous trains six miles long. In a single year the numbers so increased that for ONE person who traveled the trail to California in '48 FIFTY traveled it in '49. (Chapter Nine "49 , THE CALIFORNIA TRAIL , AN EPIC WITH MANY HEROES, by George R. Stewart, McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., NY 1962, Mid-Continent Library), p 217...Young men left wives and little children, convinced that they were acting in the best interests of the family. Doctors and lawyers, abandoned good practices. Hundreds of farmers mortgaged their land.

Page 218 - Thus one man wrote he had little confidence in gold, but had read Irving and Copper, and had acquired a strong passion for travel and adventure." Another stated that he went " wishing to regain my health," as well as gold.

p. 220, Stewart - Moreover, the country was somewhat depressed economically and was in a disturbed and excitable state as an aftermath of the Mexican War. Thousands of young men had returned from the army and had not yet settled into jobs. Many of these had failed to see active service and were still eager for adventure.

Yes, we might call it " The Year of Madness," or "The Year of the Greenhorn."

p. 221- "Sometimes there was fanfare, especially for large organized parties leaving the cities. Thus there was the Sagamore and Sacramento Company of Lynn, Massachusetts, fifty-two young men, including one that was seven feet tall. The company took departure from Boston by parading down State Street. A band led the march. Each member wore a gray uniform trimmed with silver braid, and was armed with rifle, revolver, sheath knife, and saber. Each made - to- order wagon (one for four men) moved behind four horses resplendent in silver-plated harness, and from the rear of each wagon, as the height of absurdity, projected a swivel gun. "

p. 221- Stewart "In early April a thousand emigrants were reported at Independence. By the middle of the month newspaper editors were expressing the fear that excessive number of animals would eat up the grass along the trail. But even yet no one had an idea how large the migration would become. A man writing home thought that the whole number would be between three and four thousand! But on April three thousand were reported at St. Jo alone.

p. 222 - There were many guide books published..."Probably the best book available, and it was vague and misleading in places, was a curious little volume by Joseph E. Ware, THE EMIGRANT'S GUIDE TO CALIFORNIA. The author had got this work together hastily, so that it could be published early

in '49, in St. Louis. Ware had never been to California and did not so claim. He had compiled his data from talking with Solomon P. Sublette, one of the famous fur-trading family, who had captained one of the California parties in '45."

p. 223 - "It was a time of good feeling, and you could expect a cup of coffee at almost any campfire..A youngster from some little Western farm could gape at the fine uniforms and dazzling equipment of the big companies from the Eastern cities.

But the Eastern boys could have learned a great deal, and some of them did, by looking at the Western companies and talking with the men. There were, for instance, some Missourians from Jackson County, where Independence was the county seat. They formed one of the biggest companies, having seventy wagons, about 250 people, with many women and children. At least two of their men had been over the trail before- the captain, Benoni Hudspeth, and the guide, J. J. Myers, who had been Chiles's horsemen in '43. Since that time he had spent five years trapping in California, and had crossed the Sierra Nevada at several places. That would be a train to watch, and Hudspeth and Myers did not mind giving advice.

Another Missouri company was from Ray County, just down the river from Independence. Its "pilot" was Milton McGee, who also been one of Chiles's horsemen.

Other old-timers were there. Edwin Bryant, who had had a successful experience with a pack train in '46, was trying it again, this time with 150 men in his party. Bumbling "Colonel" Russell, of '46, was once more a captain. Young Billy Graves, who had been with the Donner Party, was acting as a guide for the party of Pittsburghers. Another party from that same city had the excellent good fortune to hire James Stewart, who had never been to California, but had years of experience on the Santa Fe Trail, and knew everything about handling mule teams.

You could read enthusiasm in the names painted on the wagons - "Live Hoosier," Wild Yankee,"Rough and Ready," "Enterprise," " Gold-Hunter," Company names were: "Wolverine Rangers," " Ophir Company," "Boston and Newton Joint Stock Association," "Granite State and California Mining and Trading Company," "Washington City Company," "Colony Guard," "Helltown Greasers," "Spartan Band," "Banner Company."

p. 224 Stewart - Late in April a few companies began edging forward, not starting exactly, but jockeying into position. They moved westward a day's journey or two, not depending on grass, but on grain that they carried along....they were excellently prepared to take care of themselves....One of these companies was from St. Louis, captained by G. W. Paul. Another included William Kelly, an I... journalist, who was out to get a story rather than to mine. Also in this advance guard were Russell's company, Bryant's pack train, and Stewart's Pittsburghers.

On April 30 Paul and his St. Louisiana were at the Big Blue (Nebraska) nearly two hundred miles along.

Page 226 - Stewart - The story of '49 can thus be told largely in terms of the differences between it and preceding years. It was, for instance, a wet season. This made the grass slow to start, but brought it along rapidly after it once started. There was rich grazing for oxen and mules over all the prairie country. but the rains, which continued through May, made a muddy trail and heavy hauling. Every little stream crossing resulted in an hour or so delay and frequently a broken wagon. Each company did just enough to get its own wagons across, and the next company frequently had to do the work all over again.

Page 227 Stewart - The overcrowding can be easily exaggerated. Some have written that the trail was a solid line of wagons. Actually if all the wagons of '49 had been organized into a single close-spaced train, they would have extended for some sixty miles - a long distance, but only a small fraction of the whole.

The crowding was certainly bad enough, and continuous lines of five hundred wagons were noted. Sometimes the congestion was eased by two or more lines moving, and sometimes imprudently racing, on parallel trails. But this was really of little advantage, since there was sure to be before long a bottleneck through which only one wagon could pass at a time.

The chief problem of crowding was not on the trail, but at the campgrounds. "This evening," wrote one diarist, "we have somehow got into a perfect nest of emigrants. If I was to guess, I would say there was one thousand head of cattle within a mile of camp."

pp 228-229 Stewart - Overloading the wagons caused lightening the load within a few days. "The more efficient the company, the sooner it recognized the necessity. The Pittsburghers, under their experienced captain Jim Stewart. starts on April on April 28 and dumped on the next day! They unloaded "a considerable amount of clothing, a fair-sized library, two bushels of beans, two pigs of lead, half a keg of nails, implements of husbandry (a plow among the number), and a lot of mechanical tools."....Fort Kearney vicinity became a vast dump.

INDIANA MAGAZINE OF HISTORY, Vol. XLVI-NO. 3, September 1950, 'DOCUMENTS, From Ohio to California in 1849; The Gold Rush Journal of Elijah Bryan Farnham, edited by Merrill J. Mattes and Esley J. Kirk."

p. 298 - Elijah Bryan Farnham, born in Chenango County, New York, May 11, 1825. Family moved to Solsberry, Indiana, later to Cumberland, Ohio. Handwritten diary indicates he had received a good education, some medical training, and possibly a career in business. Diary ended in September, 1849. Left two diaries, one carried on the trail and rewritten later, 211 pages from April 19 to September 23, 1849. left Cumberland, Ohio, April 2, then to Zanesville, down Ohio River, changed boats at St. Louis, up Missouri River to Independence.

1849 TRAIL DIARIES

William Johnston, preparing to leave Pittsburgh, was explicit: "Never having been far from home, the thought of adventure of such magnitude as now seemed to loom up before me, possessed my mind more forcibly than any expectation of getting rich at digging." p. 218, Stewart

MARCH 1849

March 15, Thursday

Wm. G. Johnston: Party reached Wayne City on Steamboat Sacramento. Later went into Independence. "It soon became evident that it would be several weeks before we could proceed on our journey westward. We had yet to purchase mules and numerous things needed on the plains, and time would be required for the grass to grow upon which the animals must subsist. Accordingly, it was determined to select a suitable place for camping.... With this in view after dining, four of our party rode to the country west of Independence, eight miles distant thereon, where, at the edge of a scrub oak forest, belonging to the plantation of a Mr. Rice, they selected a site for our new mode of life." They stayed overnight in the Independence Inn.

March 17, Saturday

Johnston: "we proceeded to the place chosen for permanent camp, reaching it about five o'clock. Our route, after passing through some beautiful woodlands immediately west of town, lay over an undulating plain called the "Blue Prairie." We pitched our tent in a small clearing, surrounded by hickory saplings, behind which was a dense thicket of scrub oaks. Convenient to the camp was a spring of excellent water.....the night was wintry cold...."