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Sesquicentennial of the Great Migration to Oregon
1843—1993

OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ASSOCIATION

On the cover...

Burros picking their way over a section of Sierra Camino Real. (Courtesy Arizona Collection, Arizona State University, Tempe)

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Ho! for California on the Mexican Gold Trail

Patricia A. Etter

Some 100,000 gold-seekers flooded California during the peak of the gold rush in 1849. About half this number trod overland trails, while the rest chose an ocean voyage around the Horn or went by way of Panama or Nicaragua. Included in this latter group were about 6,000 men, who clambered aboard ships that would land them on Texas and Mexican shores for the start of a unique journey—one that would cross Mexico. They were counting on an uneventful three-to-four month trip to the Golden Gate. Most, however, had begun a saga that would tax them, often severely, for up to ten months. These migrants were all men and, except for a few hardened veterans of the Mexican War, were greenhorns.[1]

The argonauts considered a number of widely advertised travel options. About half boarded ships sailing out of east-coast ports or New Orleans and landed on Texas soil at Galveston, Port Lavaca, Corpus Christi, or Brazos Santiago. Once outfitted and organized into wagon and/or pack trains, they moved west to the Rio Grande, crossed into Old Mexico and headed for the seaport of Mazatlán by way of Monterrey, Saltillo, and Durango. Some groups followed Texas trails to El Paso, turned south on the Chihuahua road to Durango, then went west to Mazatlán. A number of travelers sailed to Vera Cruz, then took in the sights in Jalapa, Mexico City, and Guadalajara as they made their way to the seaport of San Blas. Records show that a handful took ships to Tampico, then eased along a tortuous mountain trail through San Luis Potosi, Lagos, and Guadalajara before getting to San Blas. They all expected to re-board ships on Mexico's Pacific coast and sail to San Francisco.

Historians have largely ignored the stories left by these forty-niners. This is due, in part, to the fact that a minority traveled on Mexican trails, leaving fewer records for study and perhaps diminishing the importance of the route. But we learn from their accounts that a hundred or so spunky and impetuous individuals abandoned ships on the Baja coast and trudged that peninsula's forbidding terrain to San Diego. Scholars have been silent on this aspect of the California trip. Yet the account of the Baja experience is without parallel in the gold rush literature and adds new dimension to the overland adventure.[2]

THE TREK ACROSS MEXICO

What brought the men to Mexico in the first place? There were a number of reasons. They believed they could travel faster. If all went well, a man could cross Mexico and be in California in less than five months. Mexico's mild climate meant that visitors did not have to wait for snows to melt and the grass to be up. They also expected to find long-traveled roads, mainly through settled areas, where they could obtain food and lodging. A number of gold-seekers had served in Mexico during the recent war and were more or less familiar with the territory. Finally, there were those who chose the route simply for the adventure of it. They believed if a man could mind his manners, stay out of trouble and avoid cholera, his would be an uneventful trip.

The threat of cholera was significant. The disease crippled port cities and river towns, where thousands were congregating and recruiting for the start of their overland trek. Dr. Louis C. Gunn noted that a full quarter of the population at Matamoros succumbed to the disease.[3] In addition, many a would-be forty-niner was wrapped in his blankets then lowered with lariats into lonely, unmarked graves. John Woodhouse Audubon sadly recalled the passing of thirteen friends near Rio Grande City.[4] At Laredo, Joseph Wyatt McGaffey watched eight comrades succumb within days, then wrote, "O thou messenger of Death, when will thy hand be stayed?"[5] But George Baker probably echoed the feelings of the majority: "The spread of the cholera occupied the

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attention of some few minds, but it was mostly lost sight of in the spread of the 'yellow fever.'[6]

Roving bands of Comanche and Apache were another force to be reckoned with. Augustus Knapp was headed for Mazatlán on the Chihuahua road, where he was ambushed and captured by Mescalero Apache. Few escaped Apache imprisonment. More often, captives were tortured then dispatched, but, for some reason, the Indians treated Knapp well and he lived to tell his tale:

> Then it was that my whole past came up before me....Here I was in the midst of a band of about thirty savages, all in their war paint. In a condition of semi-consciousness, and weakened from the loss of blood, I was taken to their encampment." Knapp recalled how he was placed in a hammock about eight feet above the ground and kept under the watchful eye of the chief's daughter, who "cared for me kindly enough in the way of binding up my wounds with soothing remedies; and when I was able to eat she gave me parched corn and a sort of mush made from grass seed with square chunks of buffalo meat.

Choosing a time when the Indians were busy with hunting preparations, Knapp stole an Apache mount and escaped. He ultimately arrived in Mazatlán but not without a number of additional misadventures.[7]

The Apache had good reason to be fearful of travelers and emigrants in their territory since the governments of Sonora, Chihuahua and Durango had declared all-out war against them because they regularly raided and harassed residents. Since these governments sponsored bounty programs—$150 for the capture of each live Apache woman and for a child under fourteen and $250 for a live warrior or $200 for his scalp—a number of Americans took time out and went into the Apache-hunting business.[8] Because of these inducements, the governor of Durango had little trouble persuading William Dunphy and his fellow-travelers to head for the moun-

tains, where they spent fifteen days battling the Indians. Presumably these free lancers pocketed a tidy sum as a result of their efforts, but before it was all over the men had buried one comrade and slowed their pace to tend to the wounds of nine others. Dunphy and company were one example among American travelers in Mexico who set aside restraints and showed little respect for the natives. The battle with the Apache apparently did not alter their behavior. Once in Mazatlán the madcaps were astir again, randomly firing pistols and causing residents to think the Americans had attacked once more. This escapade ended when the Mexican infantry marched them off to jail for a cooling-off period.[9]

The majority of Mexican sojourners managed to avoid encounters with the Apache. There still remained the possibility, however, that a traveler rounding a bend would ride smack into a band of evil-looking *ladrones*. Mounted and well-armed, these black-hearted Mexican road bandits had no qualms about dispatching their quarry, snatching up valuables and galloping away. White crosses paralleling the roadways were grim reminders of each ambush, where, the Reverend Daniel B. Woods recalled, "The traveler was, if so disposed, to offer up prayers for the repose of the souls of the murdered."[10] The guerillas, if caught, were usually hung or shot and left hanging from roadside frames, a grim warning for all to heed. It was not surprising, therefore, that Louis Bonestell was downright scared when he rode into a party of "dark, swarthy, and most repulsive" individuals. But the group passed on without a glance. Bonestell later learned that the "swarthies" thought *he* was the outlaw, and he had some difficulty persuading the Mexican authorities of his innocence.[11]

United States citizens had been warned to expect a certain amount of hostility from the natives. Some travelers avoided trouble by staying out of sight and letting a Spanish-speaking spokesman conduct business. But, in spite of warnings, most Americans preferred to organize along military lines for mutual protection. The Mexican government frowned on this course. Its minister, Luis de la Rosa, suggested that because of the recent war, emigrants would be well advised to travel in small groups and avoid any appearance of a military organization.[12] Too few heeded this advice, as the following stories reveal, and ended scrapping with both the citizens and the *soldados*

A.C. Ferris and his 200-man Manhattan Overland Association were not about to split into small groups. As a result, he and his red-shirted, well-armed horsemen faced hostility wherever they went. Crowds tried to dismount them in Jalapa; folks in Mexico City pushed them to their knees and removed their hats during a religious procession; and when they approached Guadalajara, soldiers raised their arms and citizens scattered, shouting, "Revolution!" In spite of these travails, the group managed to purchase food en route and experience the dubious pleasure of a night in a *mesón*, a one story "hotel" built to house both men and animals. Here, Ferris slept with "large colonies of fleas who held preemption rights....[and] the whole night through, there was one continual braying and uproar from the two hundred hungry mules." He concluded that only a page from *Dante's Inferno* would parallel that night in Mexico.[13]

William Perkins was one who had little trouble during his Mexican crossing because, unlike many of his compatriots, he showed sympathy and respect for the citizens. He made sure his men removed hats and guns during Good Friday observances in Monterrey. "The natives were taken by surprise," he wrote, "and pleased with our simple act of devotion and consideration for their religious feelings, were quite disarmed of their anger, and even cheered us heartily as we marched on; many little girls came running up to us, offering us bouquets of flowers."[14]

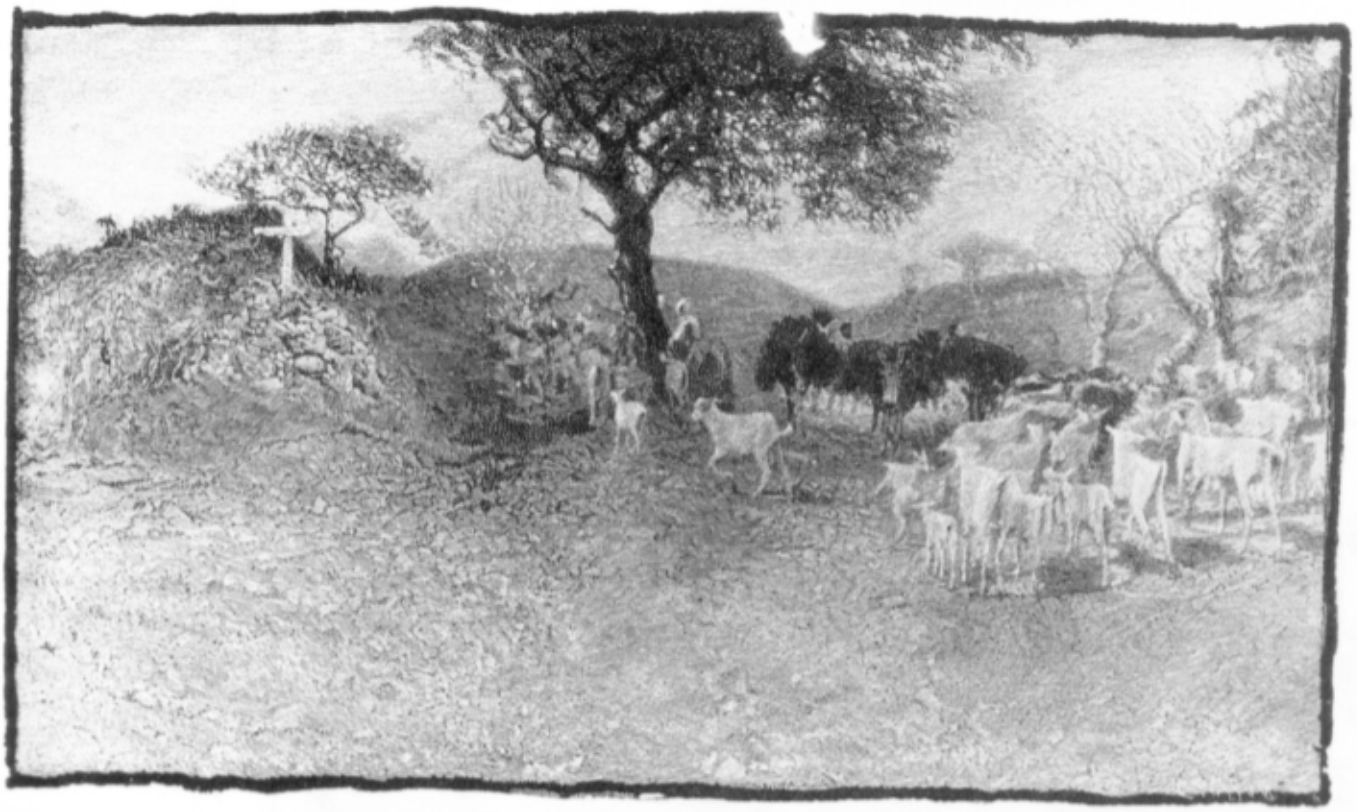
Then there were those who went native, tried their luck at the monte table, drank *pulque* with gusto and danced fandangos with the señoritas. The latter attention did not endear them to the Mexican men, who, according to Ferris, "greeted them with frowns and threats and the significant gesture of a finger drawn across the throat."[15]

Like forty-niners in wagon trains on northern and southern routes, sojourners into Mexico carried too much baggage. The Ferris group, for example, after paying $20 apiece for space on the *Mara* to Vera Cruz, boarded her wearing "wide brimmed soft hats, boots of rubber or leather reaching above the knee, woolen and rubber blankets, red flannel shirts, a liberal supply of tin pans for washing out the gold, shovels, picks, spades, crowbars, camp-kettles, frying-pans, tin plates, tin cups, daguerreotypes, locks of hair, Spanish books, a few patent gold-washers, musical instruments, etc...."[16] It was not long before the excess trappings were discarded.

Bonestell was another innocent abroad. After the American consul advised him that it would be folly to cross Mexico with less than $500 (his bankroll amounted to $150), he and his friends displayed non-essential baggage in Jalapa: "dress suits, white shirts, fancy cravats, dressing gowns, embroidered slippers, such as were not calculated to be useful in a mining camp...and offered them for sale on the sidewalk in front of the Maison." They purchased horses with the proceeds, strapped only what was necessary behind their saddles and continued on their way.[17] Good thing, too, since the experience of surviving with few accoutrements hardened them to the rigors they were yet to face on the Baja peninsula.

W.C.S. Smith was also destined to spend time on the Peninsula. In the meantime, however, he and twenty-one companions left Vera Cruz burdened with wagons and half-broken mules. They followed the Mexican National Road to Jalapa, passing the Cerro Gordo battlefield where Gen. Winfield Scott had overwhelmed the Mexican army. Smith remarked that there were still visible traces and relics from the war.[18] Ferris, who stopped there for his noonday meal, described those "traces" in greater detail: "all around us lay scattered uncoffined bones, and ghastly skulls looked down upon us where in mockery they had been secured among the branches of the trees, and everywhere earth and trees and broken armament gave silent witness of the awful struggles of the little army."[19]

(Right) A Ladrone. (Below) A Wayside Cross. (Both drawings from "To California in 1849 Through Mexico" by A.C. Ferris, The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine, *Vol. 42, 1891. (Reproduction from the Arizona Historical Society Library)*



The travelers were fascinated with Mexico and, whenever they could, took in the exotic sights: bullfights; cock fights; the cathedrals; and the towns. But once out of the cities they faced the reality of travel. They had a hard time of it over the mountainous terrain since Mexican roads were not built for four-wheeled vehicles. W.C.S. Smith wrote that after leaving Guadalajara all traces of a road disappeared, and it took six days to pick a way over a mule trail full of rocks. "How we worked ourselves to the wagons like mules, the descent into the great baranca, a gorge of some 2000 feet in depth, with sides almost perpendicular, letting down the wagons in pieces by ropes; the labor of getting out of that dark, deep chasm, rolling stones to build roads...."[20]

Thomas Eastland also found it rough going between Durango and Mazatlán, as his mules struggled over the Sierra Madre Occidental on a path "too narrow to admit of two animals passing—from long use deep channels are worn out—sometimes the ascent is nearly perpendicular for many hundred feet, so is the descent, and over huge piles of rocks seemingly impassible—immense Gulfs frequently bound the passway, and a certain death would be the fate of the Traveler if his animal should make a misstep—the scenery is magnificent beyond description."[21]

There is no doubt that the forty-niners had been toughened by the arduous trip over the mountainous terrain by the time they reached Mexico's west coast. Most could boast of confrontations with *soldados*, *ladrones*, Mexicans, and the natives. Many straggled into San Blas or Mazatlán with just the clothes on their backs, pockets empty. Now they were anxious to get on with it and rest up on the voyage to San Francisco. But first, they had to find a way.

They faced new frustrations on learning they would have to line up for passage on overcrowded and/or unsafe vessels. Tempers were on short fuse and often exploded after a few drinks in one of the local bars. In San Blas, George Baker watched while

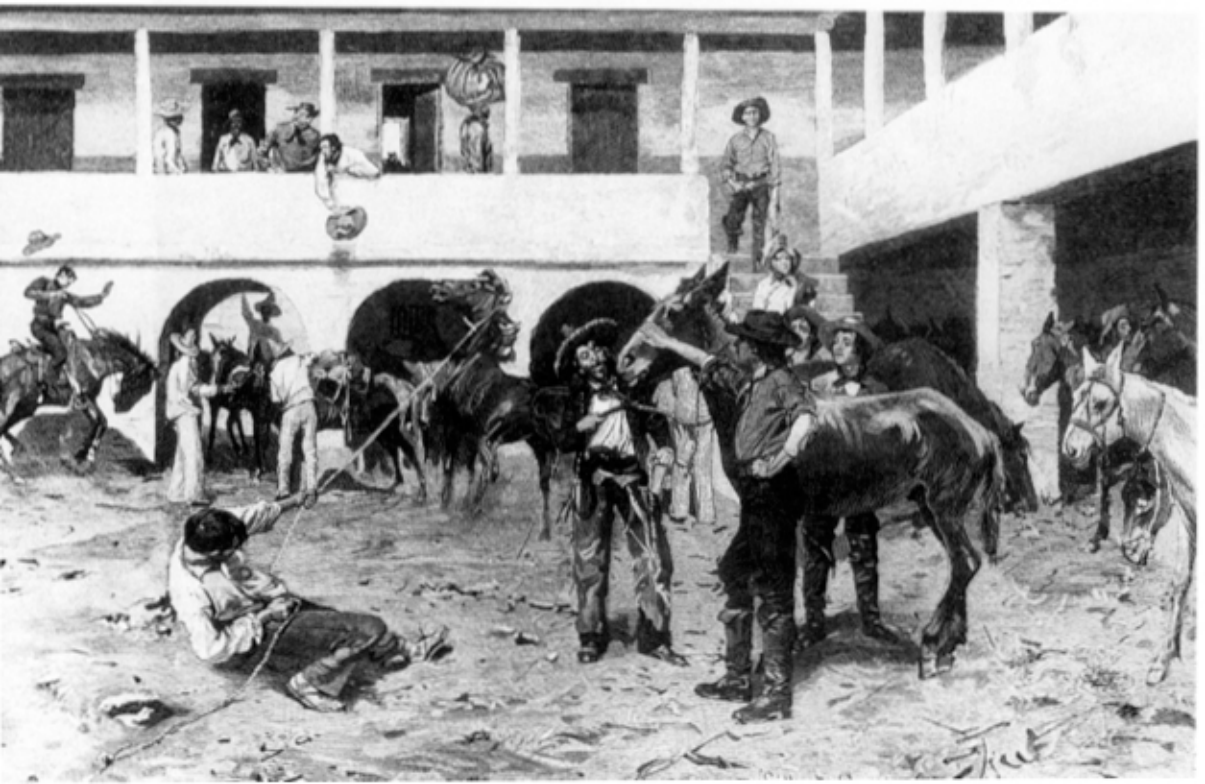
> ...A Mexican with a hatchet struck one of the company, without provocation, on the forehead, cutting him badly. Immediately was a cry of "pistols!" and "one of our men killed!" and the Mexicans were quickly driven from the room, while the door was barricaded. Pistols were used on both sides and stones thrown about quite freely....We ascertained in the morning that one man had been killed and two wounded...[22]

W.C.S. Smith said he looked on while some of his companions fought with some Mexicans at a fandango and recorded that "four or five of the latter were killed and several of our company wounded, one desperately. A body of soldiers from the fort came in good time and hurried all of us Americans aboard the ship to save us from a mob of angry greasers who were anxious to cut our throats."[23]

OFF TO SEA IN SHIPS

By this time the rush was on, and thousands were demanding sea passage. Previously condemned vessels—as a matter of fact, almost anything that would float—were being hastily and badly outfitted and put into service with little concern for safety or passenger comfort. Sea captains often overcharged for passage, purchased cheap and inadequate supplies and pocketed the difference. Some just kept the money, having no intention of sailing anywhere. The majority ultimately found space on a ship and made it to the Golden Gate with a minimum of suffering. A number of travelers, however, found life on board unbearable so disembarked at a number of spots along the Baja coast, thinking that the probability of survival was greater on firm land.

W.C.S. Smith was among those who decided he could no longer put up with the intolerable conditions on board the



Courtyard of a Mexican hotel. Ferris, "To California in 1849," p. 668. (Reproduction from the Arizona Historical Society Library)

condemned 400-ton whaler, *Mary Frances*. We learn that the boat "had been sold to the King of the Sandwich Islands, who had used her as a play warship." Thinking he might turn a profit, the king sent her to Mexico for a load of 400 passengers who crowded into space intended for 200. "To each of us," Smith said, "was alotted and marked on the main deck with chalk a space about 4 x 8 feet where we were expected to keep all our belongings and to sleep." In describing shipboard fare, he added that "the cooks would scald a pig in one of the kettles, then bail it out and break with hammers over the side of the kettle a lot of jerkie and ship biscuit, to which was added a sack of rice and the mess was boiled through the night for the next day's grub. As a fact, we often found hogshairs in the lobscouse." After ten days of this, with supplies running low and water on ration, Smith, William F. Nye, Israel Miller and a man by the name of Van Buren left their "floating coffin" at San Jose del Cabo and prepared for a walking trip to San Diego.[24]

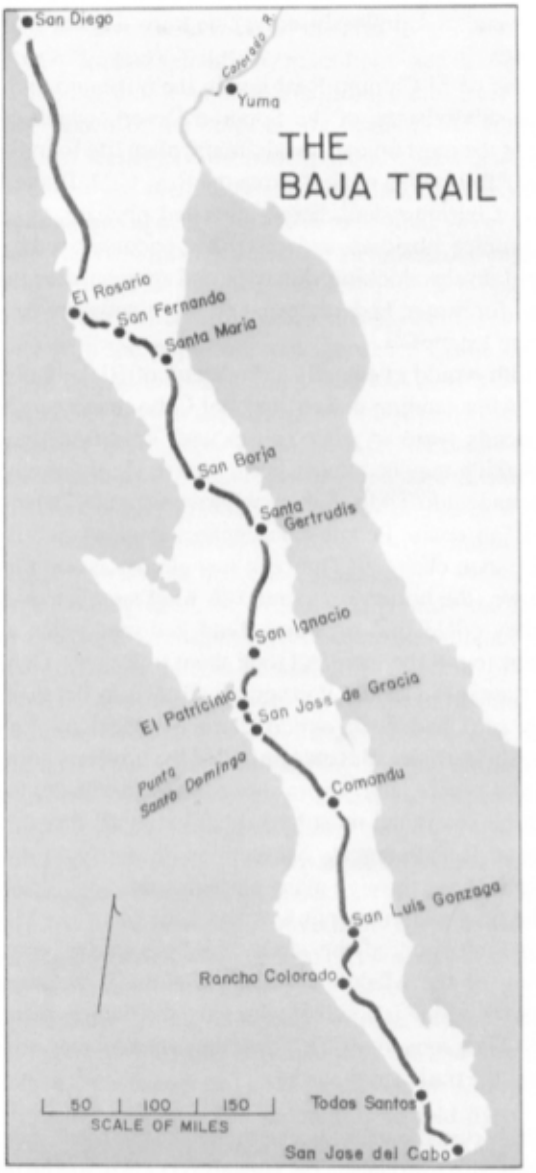
James D. Hawks was another who tired of shipboard life. He and twenty-three comrades purchased a small schooner, *San Juan*, in Panama. It took three months to reach Punta Santo Domingo on the Baja coast, where the vessel stopped to take on water. Hawks and five friends, Daniel T. Hulett, George H. Davis, John C. Gilsey, Henry M. Smith, and J.J. Ellis, apparently thought it prudent to proceed the rest of the way on foot.[25]

Then there was Lewis Bonestell aboard the schooner, *Dolphin*. He observed that the seedy old vessel was not only leaking but the rigging had rotted. Worse, the water supply was stored in two canvas-covered dugouts, and it sloshed into the sea when the schooner lurched through the first heavy swell; what was left soon became undrinkable.[26] We learn that the *Dolphin* cleared the port of Mazatlán on April 23. About May 21 it landed on an island (Cedros?) off the Baja coast so the passengers could search for water. None was found. They sailed on, landing whenever they could to continue a fruitless search for water. Finally, forty-eight thirsty men left the *Dolphin* for good. We do not know the exact spot but learn they were a seven-day hike from San Fernando Mission.[27]

JOURNEY ON EL CAMINO REAL

Thus, fewer than 100 men found themselves in Baja.[28] They appear to have had some vague knowledge of the area, probably from reports resulting from American occupation during 1847 and 1848. The travelers assumed they could easily locate and follow the 150-year-old trail linking some twenty-three missions, where they counted on replenishing supplies. In addition, they expected to secure food and fresh horses and mules at scattered ranchos along the way. Smith, for example, said he had a chart showing numerous towns and missions, so optimistically believed that "it would be but a pleasant horseback canter of some thirty or forty days to San Francisco."[29]

In truth, about 33,000 souls occupied this vast expanse, concentrated mainly in La Paz, Loreto, San Jose del Cabo,



and Rosario. The missions had declined since secularization in 1833, and the travelers found crumbling walls; expected orchards, gardens and fields lay neglected. The ranchos were isolated and mainly supported small farming families who shared what little they had, proffered money being of little value. Each day began with a seemingly endless and often fruitless search for water and/or the trail.

El Camino Real traversed the length of the peninsula and was the main link between population centers and missions. Padres had designed the single-track path to pass close to water sources and feed for pack animals. However, the meager water supply in this arid land came mainly from springs or *tinajas*, which were often hidden from view; only the natives, familiar with the terrain, knew where to find them.[30] We can also understand why the forty-niners had a hard time finding the trail then staying on course. Though it was quite evident in some areas, it was lost to view in others because of erosion or the rocky terrain; no deep wagon ruts had carved out a discernable road. As a result, the sojourners

often wandered aimlessly along side trails that seemed to go nowhere.

Much of El Camino Real lies in the Vizcaino and Magdalena subdivisions of the Sonoran Desert, which contain some of the most unique and dramatic plant life found on this planet. "But such a route," wrote the Rev. C.M. Blake, "over fields of burning sand, across elevated plateaus of ancient lave, pumice, obsidian, and trap-dikes, encompassed by thorny rigid shrubs...looking with hope and apprehension in every ravine for water and rattlesnakes, for many a weary and desolate league!"[31]

Smith would eventually echo many of Blake's observations. After landing at San Jose del Cabo, however, he and his friends were in high spirits, and he wrote that "this undertaking may be unwise but it has the charm of novelty." They made it to Todos Santos without difficulty, where they found "an oasis. People intelligent and pleasant." But attitudes soon changed. They got lost almost as soon as they left town, the horses wandered off, food supplies dwindled and they could find no water. Luck returned when a local resident found the men and took them to Rancho Colorado. Here they met a kindly Portuguese, Francisco Betanca (who Smith said had been exiled there by Mexican Emperor Augustín Iturbide). Betanca provided the travelers with dried beef and *pinole*, and several *botas* or leather water bottles, which he cautioned must be kept filled at all times.[32] As a matter of fact, Betanca's instructions on survival may have helped the men through many a rough spot.

The next watering spot was San Luis Gonzaga Mission, where Smith toured the stone building, taking note of a painting of the Madonna and the Saints. It was deserted except for a lone individual who gave the hungry men some food.[33] They moved on. This day, they found water and grass but lost the trail. Smith wrote,

> What a cursed country! Rocks, thorns and this horrid cactus! The devil's own plant....The ground everywhere was literally covered with thorny plants. Indeed, the region seemed to have been gotten up in a spirit of malediction.

On April 23 they faced

> ...another day of toil and vexation....stones upon stones. These stones in the trail look like pieces of broken blackjunk bottles. They are obsidian and cut like knives. The poor unshod horses leave blood at every track.[34]

C.M. Blake and his companions were lost in the same area. They had some rice, sugar, coffee, and dried meat. There was game about, but the men had no hunting skills. They chewed cactus for a tiny bit of moisture, considered killing a horse for its blood and, later, tried to estimate how much dried meat it would make. There was no going back; the best they could do was to push on and try to reach Comondú.[35] Travelers on the road to Comondú had to toil over an area that had seen a great deal of volcanic activity, which had caused numerous craters and covered large areas with lava beds and shattered

Well-preserved section of El Camino Real. The area is south of Santa Gertrudis and close to El Rosarito. (Photograph courtesy Harry W. Crosby)

fragments of obsidian.[36]

It took Smith and his companions seven tortuous days to reach that oasis. They managed to find a guide for this portion of the trip, and he led them

> ...over a table mountain, the most barren region imaginable. The earth, or rather the rocks, have been convulsed in a singular manner, and piled fantastically one on another....Unexpectedly we came to the margin of a great chasm. Someone said, "See there is Comondu." Looking down, there lay some 2000 feet below us a perfect picture. A beautiful little valley, green as an emerald, while the sunlight glancing from water fairly made the very horses laugh.[37]

The *alcalde*, Guerra, entertained the Reverend Blake at Comondú, where he dined sumptuously on green corn, peas, beans and figs but could not obtain fresh supplies to take with him.[38] We hear little from the Reverend Blake after Comondú but learn that Smith and friends rode on to the Pacific Coast, where they cooled off a bit and watched the seals and sea lions lying on the rocks. Reluctantly, they turned inland again toward San José de Gracia, and after a hasty feast of figs, oranges, and bananas, set out for El Patrocinio. They limped over "..Stones! Stones! Stones! Up and down steep hills and

deep barrancas. Miserable country." Smith found an Indian family in a corner room of the old mission building at Patrocinio along with "water and palm trees, a diamond in the rough," he said.[39]

As mentioned earlier, J.D. Hawks left his vessel near Punta Santo Domingo on August 10, 1849. His first destination would have been the oasis, San José de Gracia, and, like Smith, he heartily enjoyed a variety of fresh fruit. Hawks noted, however, that the natives were quite suspicious of the travelers; in their isolation, they had not yet heard of the end of the Mexican War. Moving on to Rancho el Patrocinio, Hawks met the owner, Señor Ramon Aguilar. (One wonders if the "Indian" Smith wrote about might have been Aguilar.) It was here he bumped into another American, Joseph Adams from Baltimore. If a prize were offered for the most dramatic reason for being on the peninsula, Adams is a likely candidate. He told Hawks that he had left the schooner, *José Caracas*, on a small boat to search the Baja coast for water. The boat was smashed to pieces in the surf, and he could not return to the schooner. We learn that the captain supplied him with food by packing it in barrels and letting the surf deliver them on shore. Ultimately, he sent Adams a note saying he could wait no longer and sailed off.[40]

The next major destination would be San Ignacio Mission. The road seemed to present no difficulties since neither Hawks nor Smith wrote of any. But they were impressed with the structure, which was built by the Jesuits in 1728 and continues to serve the citizens of the area to this day. Smith noted that it "looked splendid by moonlight" and the next day, spent a good deal of time rambling through the structure. He said that "much of the color on the walls is yet fresh and bright, and it seems as if the padres had just left....and on the plastered wall was plain to be seen the mark of greasy heads made many years ago." He also took note of the silver vessels on the altar and a number of paintings including one depicting the naval battle of Lepanto. It was here that their best mule was stolen. Their increasing desperation, inability to communicate with the populace, and ignorance of the culture, almost put an end to their journey then and there since they threatened everyone in the village and helped themselves to the *alcalde's* best mule. A posse later surrounded and threatened them so Smith and company released the mule and struggled on.[41] James Hawks also had his problems with the *alcalde*, Buenaventura Arce, over some jewelry but managed to settle them in a more peaceable manner.[42]

Leaving San Ignacio, the overlanders would enter an area known as *El Infierno*. Smith and company had another struggle over difficult terrain toward the mission of Santa Gertrudis. By this time, they were in sandals of rawhide. The water bottles were again empty. Finally, after a long day of tracking over a hot, sandy plain, they tied the animals to a cactus and laid down to rest. Two of the horses expired in the morning as they went toward a distant range of hills, where they hoped to find water. Smith writes about intense heat and tongues swollen from thirst. Friends Nye and Miller laid down by a rock and refused to move. They wanted to die. But Providence stepped in when their mules sensed water and led the men to a small running brook.[43]

Approaching Santa Gertrudis, Hawks wrote that the "country presents the same barren, unfruitful, and forbidding appearance....the cactus and a few thorny shrubs...are all that is to be seen." Coming to a mountain, he said they "were obliged to crawl on our hands and feet. It was a very great task to get our animals over." Having settled for the night, the men found water lying in holes in the rocks and ate a few prickly pears. There was nothing for the horses. They plodded along for two days, and, when they reached Santa Gertrudis, the residents, noting their condition, shared what they were about to eat.[44]

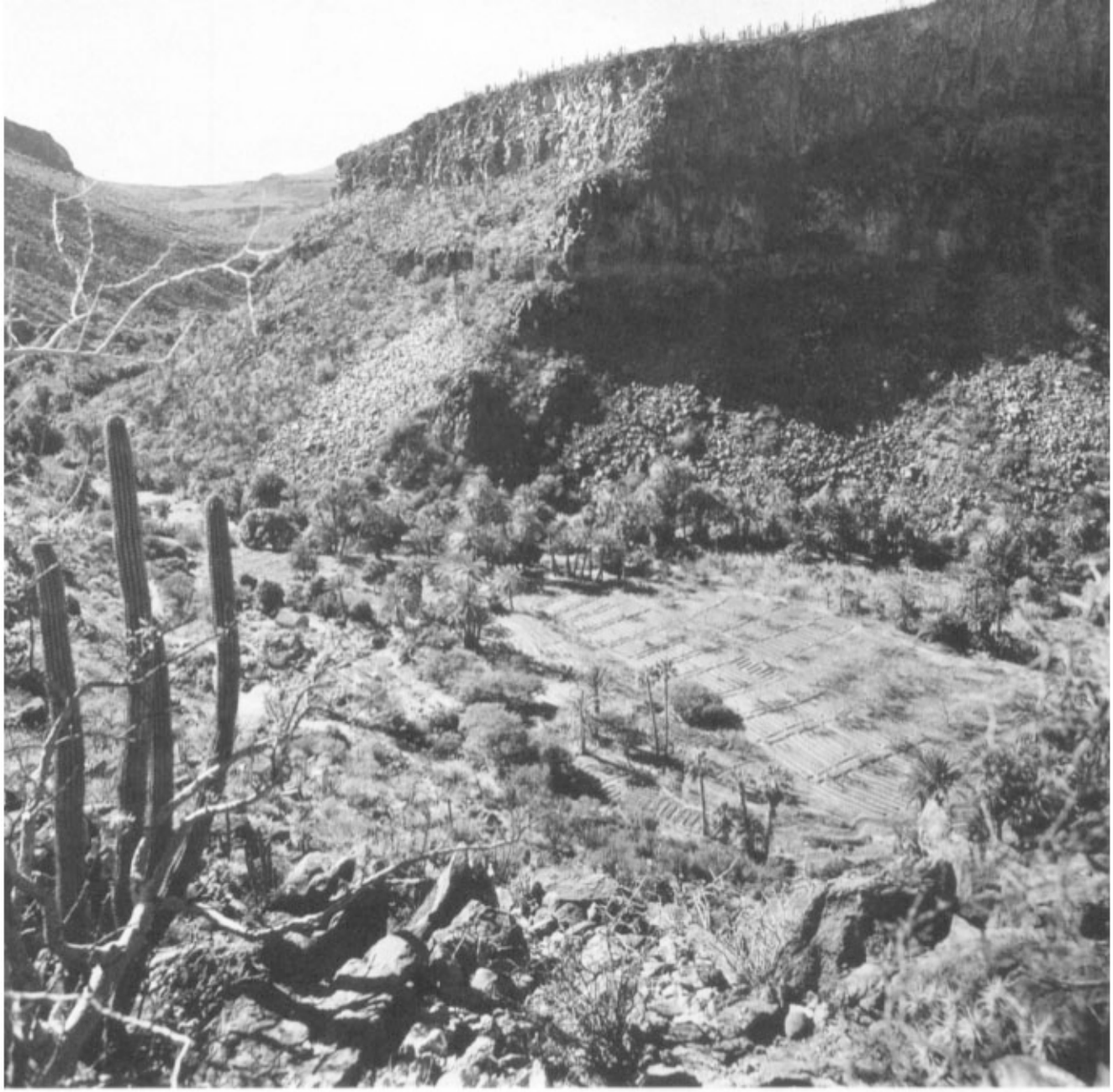
Smith and friends had barely started for San Borja when another horse dropped dead. But they kept going, "apprehensions kept alive by frequently seeing skeletons of horses." As soon as they arrived, they took over a room in the mission and built their fire on the paved floor, feeding it with pieces of the church's finely-carved doors and window shutters. Smith tended the soup—pieces of rawhide—while Nye and Miller tried to shoot some rabbits for better flavor.[45] A few months later, Hawks and his friends also took possession of a room in the mission. These men had to "induce" the residents to share food and were finally allowed some green corn, figs and pomegranates.[46]

Next, the travelers had to cover the miles to San Fernando Mission. John W. Griffith and the group of men who had left

the *Dolphin* on the coast some miles south of the mission consumed their meager provisions in the first few days. Progress toward San Fernando was slow over a terrain covered with sharp, loose rocks that "had the appearance of having been burned, and either red or black." They found water with difficulty, and each began to know real hunger. Griffith said that he purposely lagged behind the group so he could cook and eat the last of his rice alone. But one of the men would not leave him and he was forced to share: "you never saw a poor fellow's face light up as his did," he admitted. Later, he resorted to the fruit of the prickly pear in spite of the thorns that lacerated mouths.[47] The men also learned to relish rattlesnake meat, and when they came upon an abandoned horse they killed and ate it. (Years later, Bonestell said he met a Mr. Gleason in Marysville, who told him he was the one who abandoned the horse.) Bonestell wrote that he heard ringing bells one night so ran forward. It was not his imagination but the ruins of San Fernando Mission, where "its only residents were an aged Indian and his wife who still rang the bell at eventide. Never were hearts more gladdened than when its dulcet notes allured us to this spot. We made it ring as it had not been heard in years...."[48]

Smith and his friends struggled between San Borja and San Fernando for eight days over "hot, sandy plains, stony moun-

(Left) Rancho Colorado, Baja. J. Ross Browne, "Explorations," p. 21. (Reproduction from the Arizona Historical Society Library.) (Below) Luis Aguilar Family of the Santo Tomas Valley, Baja, C. 1886. The family is standing in front of their ranch house, which shows construction typical of the time. Charles Nordhoff, Peninsular California *(New York: Harper, 1888), p. 63. (Reproduction from the Arizona Collection, Arizona State University, Tempe)*



Harry Crosby photographed the Comondú Valley from the point on the trail where forty-niners would have their first glimpse of the oasis below. Two villages, San José de Comondú and San Miguel de Comondú, share the seven-mile valley floor, which is nourished and kept green by several nearby springs. Population in 1993 is close to 600.

tains, scarcity of water and food." He added that "Barefooted men and sore-footed horses make up a catalogue of trouble." They subsisted on *pinole* and a little tallow and tried making eagle soup but found the bird too tough to eat.[49]

Hawks managed to find a guide at San Borja and concluded to take a trail by way of the coast rather than the inland route to San Fernando. He had good reason to regret the decision since the guide stole a horse and vamoosed, and the men, now lost, had to retrace steps to San Fernando. They had fifty figs among them and, of course, suffered from constant thirst. When the animals gave out, the men abandoned all unnecessary articles and walked to San Fernando, consumed with fatigue and hunger.[50] After a short rest, they were on their way once more. Three more days of travel brought them to El Rosario.

The travelers knew their troubles would be over when they reached El Rosario on the west coast. The road to San Diego from that point traversed fertile valleys and passed through many towns and ranchos. Some of the locals took pity on the travelers and offered aid, while others shooed them away. This happened to Smith when he tried to buy some corn, beans and beef. But he and his friends were hungry. They took what they needed anyway, left money in payment, then went on their way.[51] Ultimately, the weary forty-niners made it safely to San Diego, looking very much like Samuel Crane, who said he reached the town in

> ...a truly California suit....As to boots and shoes, I was the fortunate possessor of one of each...my pantaloons excelled Joseph's coat in variety of hue...being patched and stayed with

Section of El Infierno some miles north of San Ignacio (between Carrizito and Santa Marta). The Elephant Tree (Bursurea microphylla) *and the giant Cardon* (Cereus upringeli) *are typical of the area. (Photograph courtesy Harry W. Crosby)*

pieces of old shirt, blanket, old soldier's clothes. I had but one shirt, a flannel one, minus a sleeve, nearly half a hat, sundry parts of the brim and crown having parted company on different occasions in the immediate vicinity of a cactus prickly pear. As to coat, I had none, and altogether cut a woeful figure.[52]

And so ends one more saga of forty-nine. It is hard to believe that these men survived the Baja ordeal since they had made no plans and were ill-equipped for travel and survival in such a country. In addition, language was a barrier, and they had little understanding of the Mexican culture. The missions they visited were already in a state of decay; even the trail was deteriorating. Was it all worth it? These men have left us with some significant ethnographic and descriptive material of a time long past, and their stories of travel over the Baja terrain during the greatest mass movement in history should become part of the permanent record. More importantly, perhaps, the Baja sojourn is a tribute to the courage and tenacity of men who dared such a journey.

NOTES

1. This is a tough figure to estimate because gold-seekers arrived in Mexico at a number of points and records were not kept as avidly as they are today. Ferol Egan wrote that 4000 might have crossed central Mexico in 1849. Ferol Egan, *El Dorado Trail* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), p. 280. I have revised the figure upward since a number of new diaries/reminiscences have come to light.

2. Egan's *El Dorado Trail* is the only study of forty-niner travel in Mexico. It is well researched and thoroughly readable. He does not mention the trek up the Baja Peninsula.

   Harry W. Crosby briefly discusses the adventures of two forty-niners in his finely-researched *Last of the Californios* (La Jolla, CA: Copley Books, 1981). In addition, Crosby was the first to search for and follow the historic mission trail, and an excellent account appears in his "El Camino Real in Baja California: Loreto to San Diego," *Journal of San Diego History* 23, Winter 1977, p. 1-45.

   For a list of diaries, journals and letters that describe the Mexican crossing, the reader should consult my annotated bibliography, "Through Mexico in '49," *Bulletin of Bibliography* 46, September 1989, p. 147-159. The bibliography gives nearly forty sources that describe the Mexican crossing. Eight of this number recall experiences in Baja.

3. Lewis C. Gunn, *Records of a California Family*, Anna Lee Marston, ed. (San Diego, CA: n.p., 1928), p. 25. Gunn sailed to Brazos, Texas, from New Orleans. He crossed the Rio Grande to Matamoros, Mexico, then moved on to Mazatlán. He safely sailed to San Francisco on the brig, *Copiano*, arriving on August 7, 1849. Gunn practiced in the southern mining town of Sonora before locating permanently in San Francisco, where he became supervising editor of the *San Francisco Times*. Etter, "Through Mexico," p. 153.

4. John Woodhouse Audubon, *Audubon's Western Journal 1849-1850*, Frank Heywood Hodder, ed. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1984), p. 58-83. That was only the beginning for Audubon. A significant part of a $27,000 bankroll was stolen, there were problems with supplies and, finally, half the

men turned tail and went home. The remainder pushed on with little food and minimal survival skills on a rarely-used route. They made it to California but barely.

5. Joseph Wyatt McGaffey, "Across Mexico in the Days of '49," *Touring Topics* May, 1929, p. 49. McGaffey, a Dartmouth graduate and classmate of Daniel Webster, died soon after reaching California. Etter, "Through Mexico," p. 155.
6. George Baker, "Record of a California Journey," *Quarterly, Society of California Pioneers*, Vol. 7, 1930, p. 219. Baker was twenty-two years old when he quit art school to join the gold rush. He did a little mining on arrival in California, then went into the merchandising business. He became publisher of Sacramento's *Granite Journal* by 1856. He is best noted for his early California lithographs. See Harry T. Peters, *California on Stone* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1935), p. 47-54.
7. W. Augustus Knapp, "An Old Californian's Pioneer Story," *Overland Monthly*, Vol. 10, October, 1887, p. 397. Knapp ultimately found space on the *Abeille* and arrived in San Francisco on December 27, 1849. He continued his memoirs with descriptions of San Francisco and Sacramento during the gold rush days.
8. Ralph A. Smith, "The Scalp Hunter in the Borderlands, 1835-1850," *Arizona and the West*, Vol. 6, Spring 1964, p. 17.
9. William Dunphy, "Statement," n.d., manuscript in the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

   After serving in the Mexican War, Dunphy went into the cattle business near Brownsville, Texas. Following the foolishness in Mexico, he did some mining on the Tuolumne River, then opened a general store in Jamestown. He ultimately settled down and later became known as a prominent California rancher. Etter, "Through Mexico," p. 151-152.
10. Daniel B. Woods, *Sixteen Months at the Gold Diggings* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1852), p. 26. The major portion of Woods's book serves as a miner's manual, where he recounts tales of success and failure in the California mining camps.
11. Louis Bonestell, "Louis H. Bonestell: An Autobiography," *Quarterly, Society of California Pioneers*, Vol. 4, 1927, p. 122, 133-135. Bonestell was among those destined to follow the Baja trail. Once in California, he continued his trade of carpentry and published a short-lived paper, *Wide West*. He ultimately founded a merchandising business in San Francisco and Oakland, which he ran until his death at age ninety-two. Etter, "Through Mexico," p. 150-151.
12. *Corpus Christi (Texas) Star*, February 24, 1849.
13. A.C. Ferris, "To California in 1849 Through Mexico," *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 42, May-October, 1891, p. 669-671. Ferris arrived in California on May 14, 1849, and claimed that his was the first organized party to arrive overland and by sea.

    Apparently he had had enough by November, when he returned to Hackensack, New Jersey, recounting his "Hardships of the Isthmus in '49," in *The Century Illustrated*, Vol. 19, 1890-1891 p. 929-931.

    Ferris also wrote extensively for the *San Jose Pioneer* which published the story of his sojourn in California in a twelve-part series beginning February 24, 1883.
14. William Perkins, *Three Years in California. William Perkins's Journal of Life at Sonora, 1849-1852*, Dale L. Morgan and James R. Scobil, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), p. 78. Morgan and Scobil give an excellent account of Perkins' post gold rush accomplishments, noting that he ultimately moved to Rosario, Argentina, where he was active in business and political affairs until his death.
15. Ferris, "To California in 1849," p. 671.
16. Ibid., p. 666.
17. Bonestell, "Autobiography," p. 119-121.
18. W.C.S. Smith, *A Journey to California in 1849* (Fairfield, WA: Ye Galleon Press, 1984), p. 10-17. Smith ultimately went into the retail grocery business in Napa, California. He also served as Collector of Internal Revenue of the Fifth District of California for a number of years. It is worth noting that the signing of Smith's appointment papers the day before his assassination was Abraham Lincoln's last official act.
19. Ferris, "To California," p. 673-674.
20. Smith, *Journey*, p. 16.
21. Thomas B. Eastland, "To California Through Texas and Mexico," *California Historical Society Quarterly*, Vol. 17, 1939, p. 237.
22. Baker, "Records of a California Journey," p. 235-236.
23. Smith, *Journey*, p. 19.

San Borja Mission was built by Dominicans in 1801. Arthur Walbridge North, The Mother of California *(San Francisco: Paul Elder and Company, 1908), p. 41. (Reproduction from the Arizona Collection, Arizona State University, Tempe)*

(Left) James D. Hawks. Hawks, "Diary," *p. 82. (Reproduction from the Arizona Collection, Arizona State University, Tempe. Louis Bonestell), 1827-1919.* Bonestell, "An Autobiography," *p. 116. (Reproduction from the Arizona Historical Society Library)*

24. Ibid., p. 19-24. Smith said that Nye was about twenty-five, a graduate of Harvard Law School, had previously voyaged to China and was a generous, self-denying friend. Lt. Miller, he noted, was twenty-eight and had been the first to mount the walls of Chapultepec under Gen. Winfield Scott during the Mexican War. We learn of Van Buren's identity in a letter Nye wrote to *The Newark (New Jersey) Daily Advertiser* September 17, 1849. His first name was not mentioned.

25. James D. Hawks, "Journal of the Expedition of Mr. J.D. Hawks and Party, Through the Interior of the Peninsula of Lower California, from San Domingo to San Diego," in J. Ross Browne, *Resources of the Pacific Slope*, (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1869), p. 132.

    Two other versions of the diary appeared: "The Diary of James D. Hawks," *Quarterly, Society of California Pioneers*, Vol. 6, 1929, p. 83-98; and "A Forty-Niner in Baja, California," Walt Wheelock, ed, *Brand Book II, The San Diego Corral of Westerners* (San Diego, CA: The San Diego Corral of Westerners, 1971), p. 159-171.

26. Bonestell, "Autobiography," p. 123.

27. J.W. Griffith, "An Account of the Sufferings of a Party of Argonauts who were Compelled to Abandon their Vessel 'The Dolphin,' on the Peninsula of Lower California and seek their way on Foot to San Diego," in J.D.B. Stillman, *Seeking the Golden Fleece* (San Francisco, 1877), p. 327-352. Stillman said that Griffith later worked for Niles & Co. of San Francisco.

28. J.D.B. Stillman tells about a group who left the *San Blasena* at Cabo San Lucas in "Cruise of the San Blasena," *The Overland Monthly* September, 1875, p. 242-243.

29. Smith, *Journey*, p. 23.

30. Crosby, "El Camino Real," p. 9. In addition, Crosby tells how the padres, with the help of the army and the labor of Indians, built the trail in the late 1700s. Though the fathers planned a series of switchbacks in order to reach higher elevations, construction mainly involved clearing rock fragments to the side, leaving a two-to-three meter wide path. Today, preserved stretches are on the mesas and in the mountains where there is less erosion.

31. Stillman, "Cruise," p. 246. Stillman has quoted extensively from Blake's journal whose present location is unknown. This is the only other group of which we have record that hiked the length of Baja. Blake was accompanied by George and Edward Sickles and an Englishman by the name of Hartley.

32. Smith, *Journey*, p. 29-32.

33. Ibid., p. 32.

    J. Ross Browne found the small stone church, which had been abandoned in 1745, to be in a state of excellent preservation when he visited in 1869. He added that the door contained the only wood used in construction. *Resources on the Pacific Slope*, p. 92.

34. Smith, *Journey*, p. 33.

35. Stillman, "Cruise," p. 246.

36. There are numerous sources that can be consulted to learn something about the Baja terrain and its geology and ecology. Two are: James A. MacMahon, *Deserts* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985); and Edmund C. Jaeger, *The North American Deserts*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1967).

37. Smith, *Journey*, p. 35. Today's visitor will find two villages in the seven-mile long valley, San José de Comondú and San Miguel de Comondú.

38. Stillman, "Cruise," p. 247.
39. Smith, *Journey*, p. 36.
40. Hawks, "Journal," p. 132-133. Aguilar was probably a descendent of Luis Ignacio Aguilar, who had registered the Patrocinio brand in the Mulegé District in 1795, according to W. Michael Mathes, ed., *Cattle Brands of Baja California Sur, 1809-1885* (Los Angeles: Dawson's Book Shop, 1978), p. 43.

    Many of the individuals encountered by the forty-niners have descendants living on the peninsula today. The Aguilar family is known throughout Baja and in California, according to Harry W. Crosby, *Last of the Californios*, p. 106, 110.
41. Smith, *Journey*, p. 40-41.
42. Hawks, "Journal," p. 143.

    Buenaventura Arce (1790-c.1870) was Ignacio's "regional strongman" and patriarch of a family whose descendants still occupy the peninsula, according to Harry W. Crosby, *Californios*, p. 187.
43. Smith, *Journey*, p. 40-42.
44. Hawks, "Journal," p. 137.
45. Smith, *Journey*, p. 44. The mission, which had been built by the Dominicans in 1801, was abandoned seventeen years later. It has been restored by the Mexican government. However, it is in a remote location and access, even in a four-wheel drive vehicle, is difficult, according to the Automobile Club of Southern California, *Baja, California* (1991), p. 127.
46. Hawks, "Journal," p. 137.
47. Griffith, "An Account," p. 338-339.
48. Bonestell, "Autobiography," p. 125-127. Father Junipero Serra established San Fernando Velicatá mission in 1769.
49. Smith, *Journey*, p. 45.
50. Hawks, "Journal," p. 137-139.
51. Smith, *Journey*, p. 48.
52. Samuel P. Crane, "Diary of a Journey to California—Privations, &c," *Newark (New Jersey) Daily Advertiser*, September 26, 1849.

The author wishes to express her appreciation to Harry Crosby of La Jolla, California, who has allowed Overland Journal *to reproduce three of his superb photographs illustrating vestiges of the Baja Trail and the Comondú Valley. Crosby was the first to search for the historic mission trail, and readers who might wish to venture into Baja should consult his* Last of the Californios *(Copley Books, 1981) and "El Camino Real in Baja California: Loreto to San Diego,"* Journal of San Diego History *23 (Winter), 1977, p. 1-45.*

"You Will Commence a Pilgrimage..."

Instructions given to the 1838 W.E. Gray missionary party before it departed for the Oregon Country

Introduction by Norman L. Wilson

INTRODUCTION

A meeting was called for March 18, 1838, by the American Board of the Commissioners for Foreign Missions, a cooperative organization supported by the Presbyterian, Congregational and Dutch Reform Churches. The meeting, which was held at the Brick Church in New York City, was opened with appropriate devotional exercises and an address by the Reverend Dr. (first name not available) Spring. After the devotions, one of the secretaries of the Prudential Committee[1] gave instructions to four newlywed couples who were about to travel to the Oregon Country. All the couples had married especially for this trip. The party was to be led by New Yorker William H. Gray, who had recently married his wife, Mary, after knowing her for only four days. The other members of the group were Asa and Sarah Smith from Vermont, Cushing and Myra Eells from Massachusetts and Elkanah Walker and his pregnant wife, Mary, from Maine. A single man, Cornelius Rogers, joined the party in Cincinnati.

Gray, a craftsman and missionary, had gone to Oregon two years earlier with Dr. Marcus Whitman's 1836 party. He had returned east from the Whitman mission near Walla Walla in the fall of 1837 for the purpose of recruiting teachers, craftsmen and farmers to go to the Oregon Country to settle, work with the Indians and set up missions. Gray pleaded for fifty families, but because competition from other mission activities around the world created funding problems the board authorized only four. This was to be only the second recorded time that women had crossed the continent on the now recognizable Oregon Trail. Narcissa Whitman, wife of Dr. Marcus Whitman and Eliza Spalding, wife of the Reverend Henry Spalding, had made the trip in 1836.

Merrill J. Mattes states that the 1838 trip of the Gray party is one of the best recorded trips over the Oregon Trail as eight of the nine members of the party kept records.[2]

The instructions which the board issued to missionaries before sending them to their new assignments were often published in the annual volume, *The Missionary Herald*. This publication recorded the business and correspondence of the board and its missionaries and is rich with accounts from missionaries from all parts of the world.

The instructions given to the Gray party were published in *The Missionary Herald: For the Year 1838* Vol. XXXIV.[3] It would not have been difficult for the Prudential Committee to develop the information for this set of instructions. It was probably gathered in part from the reports of Rev. Samuel Parker who had been sent out in 1835 by the Board of Commissioners to survey the opportunities for developing missions in the Far West. The board had also received reports from Whitman, who accompanied Parker on this first trip to the Oregon Country. Whitman returned overland and reported to the board. He and Spalding, this time accompanied by their wives went back to the Oregon Country in the summer of 1836. By 1838 there were new letters to the board from Whitman and Spalding as well as Gray's most recent experiences, reported on his return in 1837. There had also been several published accounts of travel in the Far West by explorers, mountain men and traders. These instructions to the missionaries provide us with one of the first written directives and commentaries for travelers as to what to expect on the Oregon Trail. They contain optimism, reality and advice. There are interesting scientific notes, some in error, and there is also some wonderfully descriptive writing about the country and about conditions to expect. It is one of the earliest published guides to the Oregon Trail.

After an eventful trip full of disharmony and after traveling along with Capt. John Sutter for a while, they arrived at the Whitman Mission in late August, 1838. Their arrival was a

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Norman L. Wilson, who brought these instructions to our attention, recently retired as state archaeologist for the California State Park System. He is chairman of the Oregon-California Trails Association's archaeology committee.

surprise to the Whitmans, but they soon settled into mission work with the Indians. A good account of the overland trip may be found in David Lavender's *Westward Vision.*[4]

THE INSTRUCTIONS

The country to which you are going may be approached by two routes—the one being by water, around Cape Horn, and is nearly the same as that to the Sandwich Islands. Indeed vessels bound to the North West coast usually touch at those islands first, and then proceed on their way, about two thousand miles, to the mouth of the Columbia river or De Fuca's straits; making the whole voyage about seventeen thousand miles; and occupying, including the usual detention at the Sandwich Islands, eight or ten months. In addition to the time and expense required for so long a voyage, the mouth of the Columbia river is difficult of entrance during a large part of the year, on account of a heavy swell of the sea off that coast, and the intricate and changing character of the channel.

The other method of approaching the country is to cross the prairies and mountains which lie west of our frontier settlements. This is the route which you contemplate pursuing. In accomplishing this journey, you will make your way in the usual means of conveyance to Independence, one of the western villages on the Missouri river, where you will join the caravan of the traders going to the mountains, and make arrangements for passing the almost boundless wilderness which will then open before you. Furnished with horses to ride upon, and packhorses carrying tents to shelter you, food to subsist upon, utensils for cooking, and the bedding and clothing which are indispensable to your comfort, you will commence a pilgrimage, which, for three or four months, and through a distance of from 2,000 to 2,500 miles, will subject you to an untried, and in some respects, an unpleasant mode of life. The shelter, and the quiet apartments of a comfortable house, either by night or day, you must temporarily forego; you must look for no well furnished table, no permanent resting place, and none of the security and retirement of home. Christian intercourse, beyond your own circle, you cannot expect; nor can you summon, whenever you wish, many of the resources of civilized life to minister to your comfort, or to relieve the dreary and wearisome monotony of your way. Still, even this deprivation and exposure, these daily changes, this continual progress may teach a useful lesson, by impressing more vividly on your mind an image of the toils and changes and barren wastes of this fleeting life, and leading you to bear all its burdens with more composure, in view of the quiet and satisfying home towards which you are rapidly hastening.

Your course will be somewhat north of west, and for the first week or two of your progress, the monotony of the scene will occasionally be broken by meeting with bands of Indians, or traders; and you may be cheered by a hasty interview with christian brethren at the three or four missionary stations near which you pass before leaving Council Bluffs, the last point of civilization near our frontiers. Nor will your journey be wholly without interest when you shall have passed the abodes and the works of man. You will then have the works of God to gaze upon, if not in their grandest and most varied, yet perhaps in their loveliest aspect. The interminable prairies, clothed in beautiful green, and adorned with flowers of every form and hue, the surface every where so gracefully undulating, and occasionally rising gradually into eminences which seem to mingle with the sky, and the strips of woodland skirting the watercourses or crowning the hills, present a landscape on which the eye is never weary of gazing. Before reaching the mountains, however, the trees on the streams become more scattered and nearly disappear, the prairie grass wears a stinted appearance, and large tracts must sometimes be traversed which are sterile and bare. When you reach the mountains the whole scene changes, and nature assumes a most varied and magnificent aspect.

On the route commonly traveled by the trading caravans, which is along the northern branch of the Platte river, the main ridge of the Rocky Mountains, where the waters flowing into the Atlantic are separated from those flowing westward into the Pacific, is crossed between the 29th and 30th degree of longitude west from Washington, and about the 44th parallel of latitude. At this point, while passing through the grand defile, you are supposed to be about 10,000 feet above the ocean level, while you look up on either hand to snow-capped peaks rising 8,000 to 10,000 feet above you. Indeed some of the peaks near this pass are estimated by scientific men [Prof. Renwick of Columbia College] to be not less than 25,000 feet above the ocean level, and thus surpassing all other mountains on the globe, except the highest points of the Himalayah chain in Central Asia. The highest land in North American is probably to be found in this vicinity, as the head waters of the Missouri, the Colorado, the Columbia, and Nelson's rivers, flowing in opposite directions and to different oceans, are found here. This defile in the mountains is somewhat more than half the distance from the Mississippi river to the Pacific. Thus far you will have passed over a level or gently undulating country, rising to your great elevation so gradually as scarcely to perceive that you were not on a horizontal plane. You will indeed have passed along the base of the Black Hills and some other spurs from the principal ridge, on your right; but on the western side of the great ridge the whole aspect changes, and you will find yourself encompassed by steep and lofty mountains, through the deep cuts of which you will wind your way. On either side of the Snake river, the southern tributary of the Columbia, upon whose waters you now come, you find two mountain chains stretching away to the west, from each of which innumerable spurs strike off towards the river. Many of these are covered with perpetual snows; and with their white tops and the barren precipices which compose their bases, and the unbroken solitude and desolation which reigns around them, present a scene of gloomy grandeur, to which there is probably no parallel on this continent. This mountainous region continues, embosoming, however, many extensive and fertile valleys, till you arrive within about 150 miles of the ocean, when you cross the last ridge, stretch-

ing from the Columbia river, nearly parallel with the coast, southerly towards California, and northerly towards Nootka Sound. The passage of this mountain tract usually occupies about two months, during which the eye and the mind are feasted with objects of novelty and grandeur which do not permit curiosity to sleep for a moment. You still find, however, the same destitution of trees, and to a great extent, instead of the refreshing verdure and flowers which closed the face of the earth over most of the distance from our frontiers to the Black Hills, you will find the surface composed of sand or broken stones, bearing no kind of vegetation except a bitter sedge of a dead and dreary appearance, with here and there small grass plats, and a few willows on the banks of the stream, occurring, as if by a special arrangement of providence, about often enough to be resting places at noon and night for the weary traveler and his beast.

The general barrenness which prevails in the mountains is doubtless owing principally to the destitution of moisture. Through the country, from the eastern base of the mountains till you arrive at the Pacific, the earth is seldom refreshed by a shower from July to October, and through most of the mountainous region no dew falls, and no cloud obscures the rays of the sun.

The country which you enter as you cross the Rocky mountains, and which is to be the scene of your labors, may be regarded as extending from east to west through twelve or sixteen degrees of longitude, and from the Mexican possessions, in latitude forty-two, to an undetermined boundary separating it from the Russian colony on the north, about the fiftieth or fifty-fourth degree of latitude, and embracing nearly 300,000 square miles. Most of this territory, excepting a strip about two hundred miles in breadth along the coast, is destitute of forests, and much of it is so broken by mountain ridges, steep precipices, and deep ravines, and is withal so barren as to render it unfit for cultivation or the abode of civilized men. As you approach within four or five hundred miles of the Pacific, you will find on some of the rivers extensive valley of fertile soil, and well adapted, when subjected to human industry and skill, to be the abode of happiness and plenty.

The geological structure of the mountain region seems to be generally regarded as indicating volcanic action; and it is said that in some parts of it there are marks of craters which probably have not been many centuries extinguished. The vast piles of basaltic rock, extending, with occasional interruptions, many hundred miles along the Snake and Columbia rivers, the boiling springs which the traveller frequently meets with, the precipitous character of the mountains, the fractured stone which sometimes covers the surface from a great extent, and the many rivers and streams which lose themselves in the earth, indicate that the territory has been subjected to some violent commotions.

The soil, from the ocean as far back as the falls of the Columbia, and in most of the valleys and on the water courses, is of the most productive character, yielding in abundance of the grains, fruits, and every kind of vegetable common to temperate climates. As a grazing country, it is probably unequalled by any other in the same latitude, on the continent. The climate is far less severe and variable than on the latitude on the east of the mountain. Although the mouth of the Columbia is near the forty-seventh parallel of latitude, snow is seen there but in small quantities and for short periods; and so little power has the frost, that the ploughman is seldom incommoded by it during any part of the winter. Horses, multitudes of which are found in the country, and all kinds of cattle, find abundance of food through the year without care from man. The most marked variations of climate during the year are the dry season, embracing three or four months, from July to October, during which rain seldom falls, and the wet season of about as many winter months, during which rain falls abundantly.

The only rivers of considerable magnitude, which water this extensive tract, are the Columbia and its tributaries; the two principals of which are Lewis' river, often called Snake river, issuing from the mountains on the southeast, and Clark's river, proceeding down from the northeast. These two, having united their waters about 450 miles from the Pacific, constitute the Columbia river—a noble river which will admit ships of 300 tons to the junction of the Multnomah, 140 miles from the ocean, and smaller vessels about 180 miles, to the head of tide waters. Above this its current is broken by rapids and narrows, and often hemmed in for long distances by precipices of perpendicular rock, hundreds of feet in height, presenting the most picturesque appearance, and forming nearly an impassable barrier between those residing within call of each other on its opposite shores.

The history of the country west of the mountains, so far as it has been known to the civilized world, is brief. Previous to the year 1790, the coast adjacent to the Columbia river was an unknown land. During that year captain Gray of Boston, made a trading voyage along the shore and entered the river. Between the years 1803 and 1806, Lewis and Clark explored the country under the auspices of the United States government. In 1811 the first white settlement in the territory was made by Mr. Astor, the enterprising and successful pioneer in the fur trade, near the mouth of the Columbia. This establishment, after having cost an almost incredible amount of hardship and suffering, and much loss of life, was taken by the British in 1813; and the whole country, especially that portion lying near the ocean, has been in the almost exclusive possession of trading companies from that nation to the present time; though traders from the United States have, within the last few years, crossed the mountains and established a number of posts on the western slope. The two principal posts of the British Hudson's Bay Company which you will find, are Fort Wallawalla on the Columbia river, about 300 miles from its mouth, and Fort Vancouver, about 200 miles further down the same river. These, you will be happy to learn, are not only extensive trading and agricultural establishments, indicating in their whole appearance the presence of the arts and comforts which belong to civilization and refinement; but, owing to the excellent regulations ac-

cording to which they are conducted, and the exemplary character of most influential persons concerned in them, they have exerted a salutary moral influence on the Indian bands in their neighborhood.

Within the last few years a new interest seems to be awakened among our citizens in regard to this extensive and important country; and probably, if the political relations of it were settled definitely, colonies would be established there with little delay. But by a convention made in the year 1818, between the British government and that of the United States, and renewed in 1827, it was agreed that the territory west of the mountains should be left open to the citizens of both nations for the space of ten years. That period has now expired without a renewal of the stipulation, or any arrangements having been made by either government for taking a more formal possession, or exercising jurisdiction over the disputed territory. What the resolutions recently introduced into our own Congress may result in is uncertain. There can be little doubt, however, that at no distant day flourishing settlements, the germs of a great and powerful nation, will be seen scattered along the shores of the Pacific, and through the fertile valleys of the interior. The mildness of the climate, the fertility of the soil, and the abundance and variety of its productions, the forests of valuable timber which abound along the coast, the excellent fish which fill the rivers, and the openings for trade, especially for the productions of such a country, which abound in almost every part of the Pacific and Indian oceans, obviously mark out this territory as the seat of a nation of great commercial importance.

But it is the aboriginal population of this territory in which you are specially interested, and to whose benefit you are consecrating your lives. The Committee calls your attention to the natural features and capabilities of the country, to the attractions which it holds out to enterprising foreign settlers, to its political relations, and the prospect of its future importance as embracing a commercial and powerful nation, for the purpose of pressing on your minds the more deeply the critical situation of the present occupants of the soil, and leading you to make more prompt and strenuous exertions, and to offer more fervent prayers, that the gospel may have free course among them before the intercourse of unprincipled men shall corrupt them by their vices, or the grasping hand of averice (sic) shall despoil them of their lands, and either exterminate them at once, or by successive steps, perfidiously drive them, filled with prejudice against all who bear the name of white men, back to the mountain fastnesses, almost inaccessible to christian benevolence.

Respecting most of the tribes occupying the country to which you are destined, we possess little information worthy to be relied upon. When first visited, in 1790, the country, especially along the coast, was regarded as being populous for an Indian country; and though the numbers were undoubtedly diminished by the wars provoked by the traders, and by the diseases, the murderous weapons, and the more murderous liquors, which were introduced among them from this source, yet large tribes were then found along the shores. Lewis and Clarke (sic), however, suppose that at least fifteen years earlier than the date first named, the small-pox, that destroyer of every savage people which it visits, and which is even now said to be depopulating whole tribes east of the mountains, had swept over most of these western tribes. The old Indians, scarred by the disease, told the mournful tale, and pointed out the ruins of villages, then visible, which had been thus unpeopled. These explorers enumerate thirty-nine tribes, which they visited, or of which they received accounts, embracing in all about 80,000 souls. This estimate probably embraced but a part of the tribes occupying the country west of the mountains, which is usually regarded as belonging to the United States; and with respect to the numbers of these, can be considered but an approximation to the truth.

The Reverend Mr. Parker, who visited the country two years ago, under the direction of the Board, mentions nineteen tribes residing between the mountains and the falls of the Columbia, embracing about 20,000 souls; and between thirty and forty bands below the falls, and stretching along the coast between the forty-second and fifty-fifth parallels of latitude, numbering about 36,000; making the whole Indian population between those parallels, and west of the mountains, about 56,000. But in these estimates also, nothing more than an approximation to accuracy can be expected. All recent travelers agree that six or eight years ago another wasting disease swept along the coast, cutting down from one half to three quarters of many tribes, and leaving others almost extinct. The terrible disease now raging among the tribes on the head waters of the Missouri, and northerly towards lake Winnepeg, (sic) according to recent intelligence, which appears to be entitled to credit, has probably proved fatal to 25,000 of these neglected and injured men, sweeping them from their beautiful prairies by thousands at a stroke. The overflowing scourge is now passing through, and who can tell where it shall be stayed? What the Lord proposes to do with this unhappy race is known only to him (sic). He brought us to their shores, bearing in our hands the gospel, and all the other means requisite to secure to them intelligence and happiness in this life, and holiness and salvation in the life to come; he (sic) has kept them lying as it were at our doors for two centuries; given us access to them and influence over them, to see whether we would stretch forth our hand to befriend and save them; and after waiting long, and seeing that, excepting a few feeble and intermitted (sic) efforts, we have done nothing but defraud, and oppress, and waste them, he (sic) seems now to be taking from us the opportunity of performing this work of mercy, and is calling them to the judgment, not to testify to our beneficence and paternal care, but to our persevering indifference and wrongs. Never did another christian (sic) people have so noble a race of savage men placed so within their reach and control, to whom they might impart the blessings of civilization and Christianity, and whom they might preserve to all future ages, a monument of the elevating and improving tendency of their arts, and the purifying and saving efficacy of their religion. How have we executed this philanthropic trust? Go back and search for the

many tribes which covered New England and the Middle and Southern States two centuries ago, and which by contact with us have vanished from the earth like the morning dew, and there find a reply. Instead of remaining, honorable monuments of our good faith and guardian care, the story of their wrongs and extermination must go down to all future ages, a memorial of our perfidy and abuse. What true friend of his country but must weep at the thought, how great our honor might have been, and how great is our shame!

But, even at this late day, we must do what we can. A few remain. Let us, as far as possible, make amends for past neglect, by increased exertions in future. If they are all to be hurried from the earth, and after an age or two more, not a trace is to remain, let us offer Christ and salvation to as many as we can reach, hoping to prepare a remnant, at least, to enter a better land above, and thus mitigate the curse which impends over us for our past injustice and neglected duty.

But it is said daily, Do what you will for the Indian, he will be an Indian still. If it is meant that their habits and character cannot be changed in a year, or completely in a single generation, it may be true; and so it is true of every other race of men. But if it be meant that a perservering course of kindness and instruction will not effect this change, the implied charge is both unphilosophical and unchristian, and it is in opposition to historical facts. What band of savage men were ever more rapidly and thoroughly transformed in character and habits, than Elliot's colony at Natick? The Stockbridge Indians, a large portion of the Senecas and Tuscaroras, the Cherokees and the Choctaws, are living examples of this transformation. Men who bring this charge, expect too much, and expect it too soon; without reflecting how entire the change must be, in taste, estimates of things, habits, prejudices and prepossessions; and without reflecting how ill-adapted, inadequate, and intermitted (sic) have been the means used to effect the change. It is fairly questionable whether any race of men were ever more able to understand the disadvantages of their own habits and manner of life, or more ready to adopt a change which appeared to them practicable, than are the North American Indians.

NOTES

1. The Prudential Committee functioned much like a modern executive committee. It seems to have provided written reports and agenda for the board of the commissioners and also to have given financial direction and approval for the expenditures. Since the board was made up of representatives of various churches from many regions it was necessary to have a committee to carry on its work.
2. Merrill J. Mattes, *Platte River Road Narratives* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 32-36. One member of the party, Myra Eells, kept what Mattes calls "one of the great journals."
3. *The Missionary Herald: for the year 1838, Vol XXXIV (Boston, MA: Crocker and Brewster, n.d. [1839?], 488 pages.*
4. David Lavender, *Westward Vision* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), p. 316-325.

The First Overland Letter to California

William A. Barnett

The year 1841 was momentous in the history of the overland trails. The success of the Bidwell-Bartleson party resulted in several "firsts" for westward migration in the United States:

The first emigration party to arrive in California
The first emigration party to arrive in Oregon
The first woman to cross the Sierra Nevada range

To these often-mentioned firsts in overland travel must be added one first never mentioned. This was the year that the first letter was carried overland to California from the United States.[1] The earliest known "overland letter" was delivered by a member of the Bidwell-Bartleson party of 1841 to Dr. John Marsh, a former Missourian living in California, then a territory of Mexico.[2] The original letter is in excellent condition, exhibiting no significant wear and tear despite six harrowing months on the trail. Historians have totally overlooked the letter, and prior to this article, the document has never before been photographed and published in its entirety. Permission to photograph and reprint it was granted by the California State Library at Sacramento.

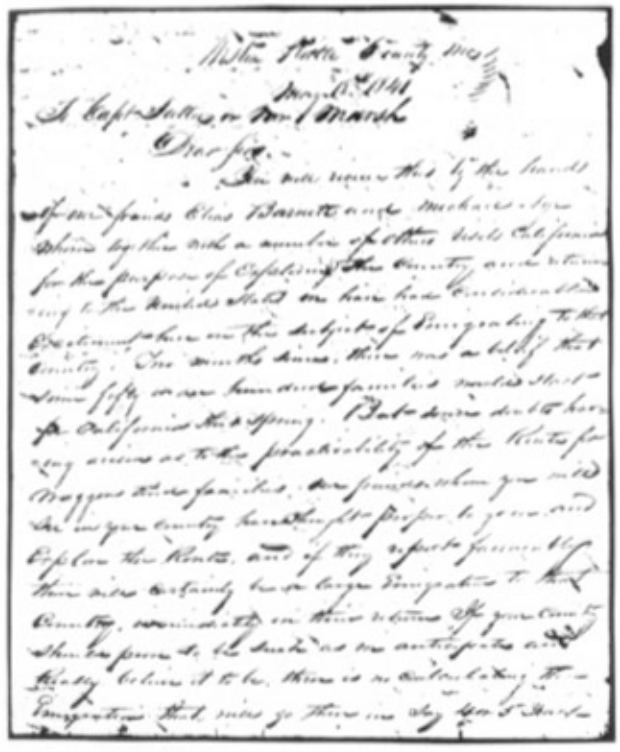
The letter was written by William B. Barnett in Missouri and was signed by Barnett and William Hague. Dated Weston, Missouri, May 18, 1841, it was addressed to "Capt. Sutter or Mr. Marsh" and states that Elias Barnett, a member of the Bidwell-Bartleson party, agreed to carry it. He delivered it to Marsh when the party arrived at his California rancho on November 4, 1841. The letter was among the Marsh papers donated to the California State Library years later. This article is about the overland letter, the individuals involved in writing and delivering it and includes a brief description of its journey from Missouri to California.

THE LETTER

Weston Platte County Mo
May 18th 1841
To Capt Sutter or Mr Marsh
Dear Sir

You will receive this by the hands of our friends Elias Barnett and Michael Nye whom together with a number of others visits California for the purpose of exploring the country and returning to the United States. We have had considerable excitement here on the subject of emigrating to that country. Two months since, there was a belief that some fifty or one hundred families would start for California this spring. But since doubts having arisen as to the practicability of the route for waggons and families. Our friends whom you will see in your country have thought proper to go on and Explore the Route and if they report favourably there will certainly be a large emigration to that Country immediately on their return. If your country should prove to be such as we anticipate and really believe it to be, there is no calculating the emigration that will go there in say 4 or 5 years. We have heard of you in that country and have taken the liberty to trouble you for such information as you must necessarily have acquired during your residence there. You can give them some information with regards to the government, if they would willingly admit Americans to the rights of citizenship and if there are any advantages offered to those who may be among the first to emigrate there and what would be the reception of an American population by the government of California. If you will have the goodness to write either of us a full description of the country, of soil, climate, timber, water, productions of the country etc etc commercial and mercantile and manufacturing advantages, of population, health, and government and any other information which may present itself to your mind as being useful to us, your kindness in so doing will be most fully and satisfactorily reciprocated should an opportunity occur. We expect confidently to emigrate to California on the return of one or more of our friends if the country and inducements are near our expectations. We have neglected another and important item viz how are the water privileges or water power of the country for propelling machinery of various kinds and the variety of growths of timber in California. And last though not least

William A. Barnett is a retired engineer living in Napa, California. He has a deep interest in early California history and genealogy and for more than thirty-five years has been researching the Bidwell-Bartleson party. His great-great grandfather, Elias Barnett, delivered the first letter to be carried overland from Missouri to California. He is currently writing a book about the Bidwell-Bartleson party.



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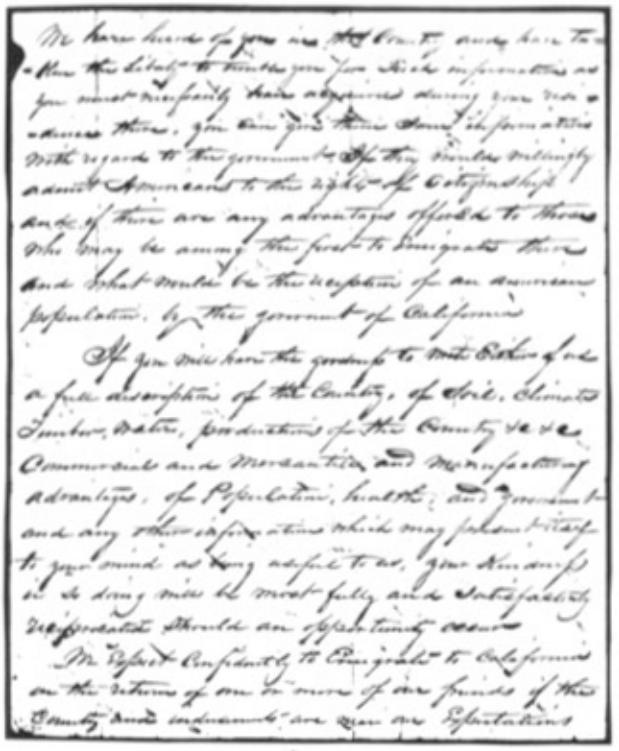

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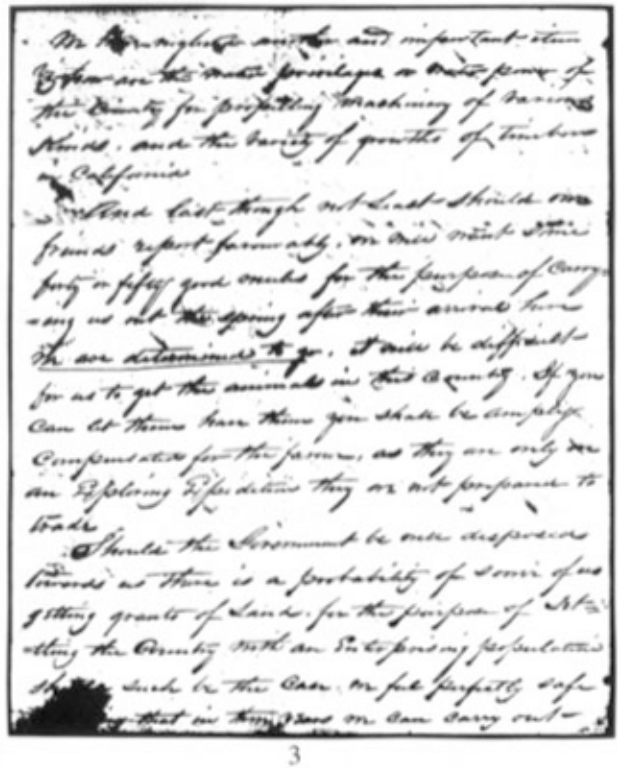

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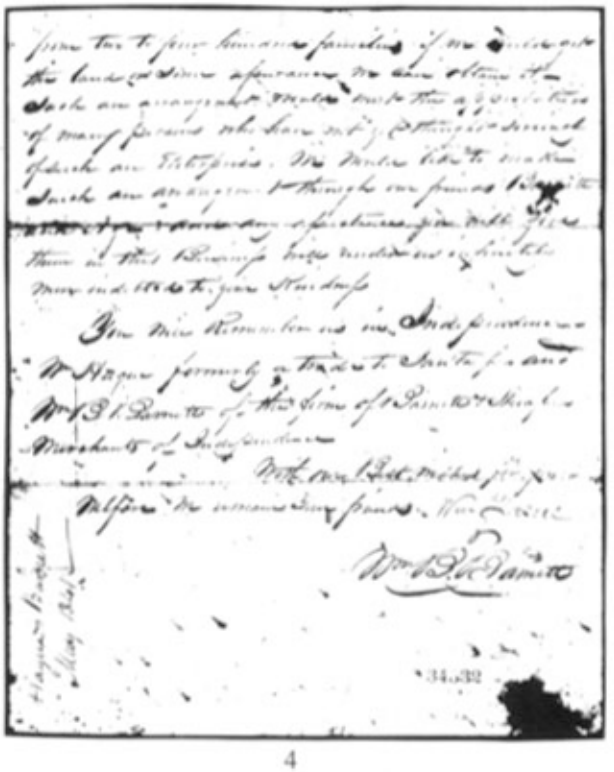

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A reduced photocopy of the four-page overland letter. The original was written on paper 8-1/4 by 9-3/4 inches.

should our friends report favourably, we will want some forty or fifty good mules for the purpose of carrying us out the spring after their arrival here. We are determined to go, it will be difficult for us to get the animals in this country. If you can let them have them you shall be amply compensated for the favour, as they are only on an exploring expedition they are not prepared to trade.

Should the Government be over disposed towards us there is a probability of some of us getting grants of land for the purpose of settling the country with an enterprising population. Should such be the case, we feel perfectly safe in saying that in three years we can carry out from two to four hundred families if we could get this land or some assurance we can obtain it. Such an arrangement would meet the approbation of many persons who have not yet thought seriously of such an enterprise. We would like to make such an arrangement through our friends Barnett and Nye and any assistance you will give them in this business will render us infinitely men indebted to your kindness.

You will remember us in Independence—Wm Hague formerly a trader to Santa Fe and Wm B. Barnett of the firm of Barnett and Shaefe(r?) merchants of Independence.

With our best wishes for your welfare we remain your friends

Wm Hague & Wm. B. Barnett

THE BIDWELL-BARTLESON PARTY

The Bidwell-Bartleson party, which carried the letter, was the first overland emigration party to go from the United States to the Pacific Coast.[3] They left Missouri in May, 1841, and thirty-four members of the party arrived at Marsh's rancho in California in early November. The party entered California on foot, having abandoned their wagons in Nevada; the first party to get wagons over the rugged mountains did not accomplish that major feat until three years later, in 1844. About twenty-two individuals left the California-bound party en route and traveled to Oregon.

Considerable interest in the party has arisen recently, primarily because 1991 was the 150th anniversary of the journey. (1991, not 1993, could have been celebrated as the 150th anniversary of the Oregon Trail, but because 1843 saw the first large scale emigration and with the first wagons to complete the journey, it is understandable why 1993 was selected for the anniversary.) Recent publication of the first comprehensive source book specifically on the party, *The Bidwell-Bartleson Party: 1841 California Emigrant Adventure*, edited by Dr. Doyce Nunis, Jr., has now made available most of the known documentation directly concerned with the party.[4] The highly significant overland letter has, however, been overlooked by historians.

In 1840, John Bidwell, a twenty-one year old school teacher in Platte County, Missouri, met a French trapper, Antoine Robidoux. Robidoux told Bidwell that he had been to California and described it as a virtual paradise; the weather was always perfect and illness was so rare that people would travel great distances just to see someone who was sick! The young, impressionable Bidwell was so taken by the glowing description that he asked Robidoux to speak at a Weston, Missouri, meeting. The trapper's exaggerated statements about California impressed the Missourians at that gathering and also at another in Independence in February, 1841. The result was that approximately 500 people formed the Western Emigration Society. They all agreed to meet at Sapling Grove (about twenty miles west of Independence on the Santa Fe Trail in present Johnson County, Kansas) on May 9, 1841, fully outfitted with wagons and animals for the overland journey to the Mexican Territory of California.[5]

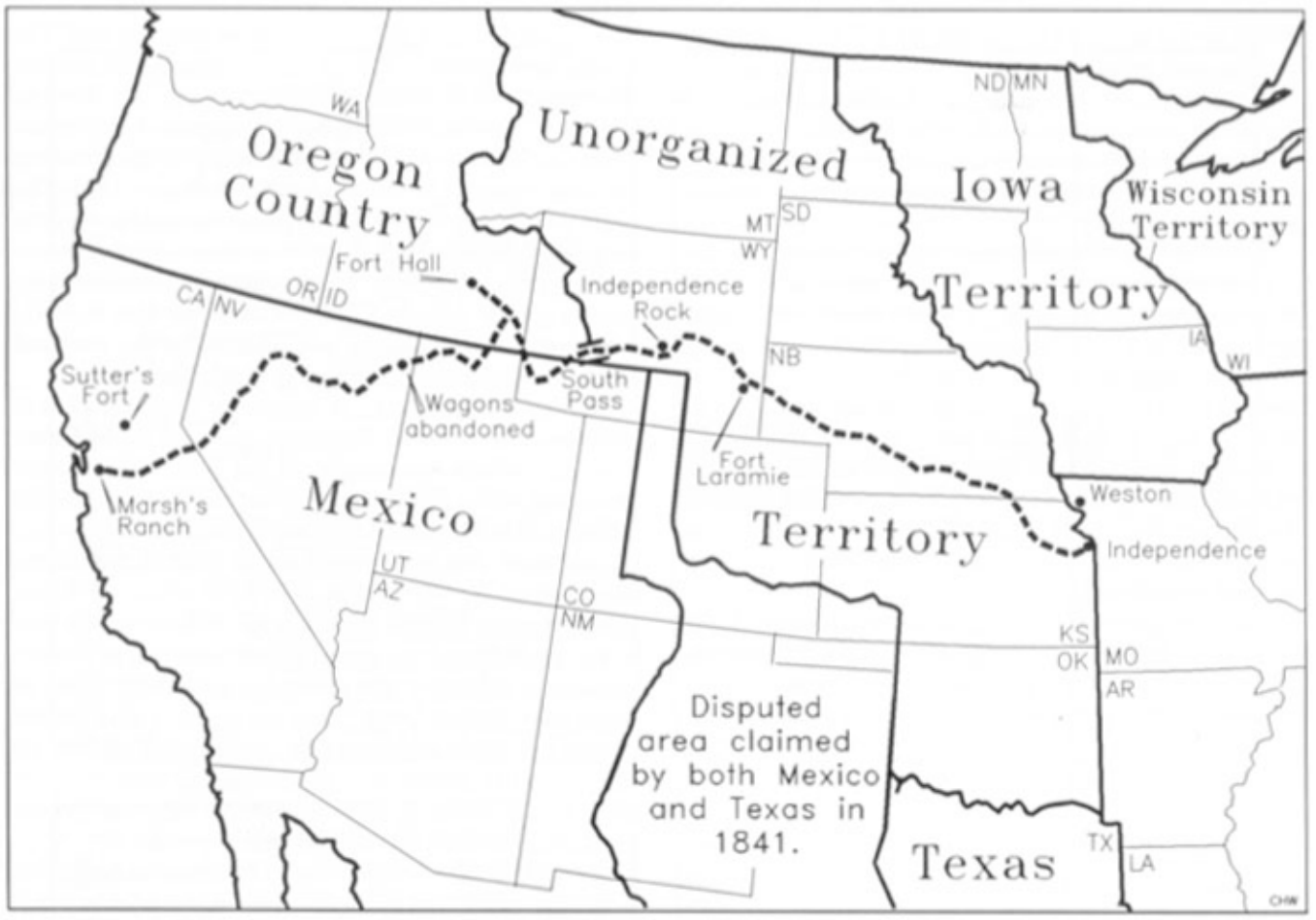
An exodus of so many of Missouri's men, women and children understandably frightened the local businessmen who successfully discouraged all but John Bidwell from attempting such a foolhardy adventure. He arrived at Sapling Grove on May 9 with his wagon and several men, only to find no one there, just some wagon tracks heading toward the Kansas River. About two miles from the river another wagon was waiting, so Bidwell made that the rendezvous site (see map of the Independence area). He later wrote that he was the only one of the people who pledged to go who was ready to depart from Sapling Grove.[6] Over the next few days several wagons did arrive, and more kept coming, until on May 18 about fifty-five people were assembled. All were ready to travel to California, without a guide or even one person experienced in such an undertaking.[7]

The Independence businessmen were correct in saying that to attempt such a bold adventure was dangerous, ill planned and downright foolhardy. Bidwell later said, "Our ignorance of the route was complete. We knew that California lay west, and that was the extent of our knowledge."[8] This was a slight exaggeration as the party did have some sketchy information, including a letter from Marsh published originally in the *Independence Chronicle* and republished in the St. Louis *Daily Argus*. In his letter dated July 3, 1840, Marsh provided what passed for an overland route to his California rancho. Following are his complete directions:

> The route I would recommend, is from Independence to the hunter's rendezvous on Green River, which is well known to many of your neighbors, thence to the Soda Spring on Bear River, above the Big Salt Lake, thence to Portneuf, thence to Mary's River, down Mary's river till you come in sight of the gap in the great mountain, through that gap by a good road of less than one day and you arrive in the plain of the Tulares & Joaquin, and down that river on a level plain through thousands of Elk and horses, three or four days journey and you come to my house...[9]

This brief description of the route was later incorporated into the pledge signed by the 500 persons who pledged to go to California in May, 1841.[10] For the entire text of the letter see page 33.

The party followed Marsh's route but discovered that the supposed "gap in the great mountain" and the "good road of less than a day" through the Sierras to the central valley of



The route of the Bidwell-Bartleson party, showing the areas and territories of North America as they were designated in 1841.

California was entirely illusionary. Marsh, himself, had never crossed the Sierras but probably knew about Jedediah Smith's pioneering crossing in 1827 and Joseph Walker's crossing in 1833. Neither crossing, of course, included wagons. In addition to Marsh's directions, the party also had several crude maps, but they were useless because they contained completely erroneous information. So Bidwell's statement about their ignorance of the route accurately reflects how foolish the undertaking was.

The group at the rendezvous site was organizing into a company when they learned a missionary party was coming, headed for what is now Montana. The Jesuit priest, Pierre-Jean DeSmet, and sixteen other men were going to a Flathead Indian mission. DeSmet had hired the renowned mountain man, Thomas "Broken Hand" Fitzpatrick, as a guide. Fitzpatrick, as co-discoverer of South Pass, had excellent knowledge about the route through the Rocky Mountains. He had never crossed the Sierras into California but was invaluable for the portion of the route he did know and for his experience in dealing with the plains Indians. The DeSmet party consented to allow the Bidwell-Bartleson party to travel with them. Including some late arrivals, the total train finally numbered approximately seventy-nine persons: sixty-seven men, five women and probably seven children.[11]

The two parties completed their organization, with the Bidwell-Bartleson party electing John Bartleson as captain and John Bidwell as secretary. The new captain was not a popular leader, and Bidwell later said Bartleson was chosen only after he threatened to leave with seven or eight men if he was not selected, a loss of manpower the party could not afford.[12] Several diarists in the party said it was understood that Fitzpatrick would really head the total group until the missionary contingent separated from the others in the Rocky Mountains.[13] Bidwell apparently assumed the leadership role during the most difficult part of the journey over the Sierras, especially after Bartleson behaved irresponsibly.[14]

On May 19, 1841, the combined parties left the rendezvous site near Sapling Grove.[15] They crossed the Kansas River and headed northwest toward the Platte River, which was to become the highway to the West for so many wagon parties. As Bidwell described it:

> This morning the wagons started off again in single file; first the four carts and the small wagon of the missionaries, next eight wagons drawn by mules and horses, and lastly five wagons drawn by seventeen yoke of oxen.[16]

The map of the party's route shows the designations for land areas in 1841. Much of the Louisiana Purchase was called Unorganized Territory, and note that Texas claimed land well into present Wyoming. The Oregon Country was

not yet a territory, and California and much of the West was a territory of Mexico.

The trip at first was uneventful, except for a hailstorm with goose-egg size hail and an encounter with thousands of stampeding buffalo. The party avoided being trampled by the buffalo by successfully diverting the herd with gunfire. Bidwell described the situation. "For a whole day, I think even for two days as we ascended the S. Fork after we crossed over, there was no time when there were not countless thousands of buffalo in sight." [17] In the same general area near Ash Hollow in present Nebraska, the only fatality of the trip occurred. A man, named ironically George Shotwell, accidentally shot himself while removing a shotgun from a wagon. He died within a few hours.

The party traveled along the Platte and then the North Platte rivers, passed the American Fur Company's old trading post at Fort William (later Fort Laramie). They stopped at Independence Rock in central Wyoming to carve their names into the landmark that was later to be covered with thousands of names of emigrants. Leaving Independence Rock, they traveled along the Sweetwater River and then followed the Big Sandy and Green rivers and crossed into Bear Valley.

Their encounters with Indians were at times frightening to the inexperienced group, but any difficulties were readily resolved under the expert leadership of Fitzpatrick. Referring to the Humboldt Sink area of Nevada, Elias Barnett later said, "We saw as many as ten thousand Indians if ever there was that many within twenty-five miles of each other."[18] Again, the Indians created some anxiety among members of the party but caused them no harm.

When the group reached Soda Springs on Bear River in southern Idaho, the company divided. The missionary party and almost half the Bidwell-Bartleson party, including all but one of the families, took the trail to Fort Hall (near present Pocatello, Idaho). These members of the party had decided to take the easier, and what was more important, the known route to Oregon instead of going on to California. Except for four men who decided to return to Missouri, the rest of the party, including Bartleson, Bidwell and Barnett, remained on their planned path to California. Of the original Bidwell-Bartleson company, thirty-four continued on to California while about twenty-two made the decision to go to Oregon instead. Only one woman, Nancy Kelsey, and her child were in the California group; the other six women and probably six children were in the Oregon-bound contingent.[19]

The missionary party went to their planned destination in what is now Montana, minus some of their party who accompanied the Oregon-bound part of the former Bidwell-Bartleson party. The group going to Oregon had an uneventful trip, after following the advice of the trappers at Fort Hall to leave their wagons and cattle there and travel with pack horses. They arrived safely at their various destinations in the Oregon Country, becoming the first emigration party to travel to Oregon.[20] Some of these individuals later traveled to California from Oregon.[21]

The California-bound party sent representatives to Fort Hall to try to get a guide but were unsuccessful because no one at the fort had ever crossed the Sierras. The party traveled by way of the north end of Salt Lake and the Humboldt and Walker rivers to the eastern foot of the Sierras. They now found themselves staring at the formidable and unmapped wall of the Sierra Nevada range. It was already mid-October and heavy snows could be expected any time. The party had no choice but to hurry through the unknown mountains, hoping for a late winter. To speed their travel, they already had abandoned their wagons in the desert about twenty-five miles west of the present eastern border of Nevada and packed their possessions on the remaining animals.[22]

After terrible agony, starving and lost, the party crossed the mountains, probably through a 10,000 foot pass about half way between Sonora Pass and Ebbetts Pass in the high Sierras of eastern California.[23] As they had hoped, winter came late. If it had not, the entire party might have perished. For contrast, the terrible suffering of the Donner party, in 1846 at about the same time of year, was at about 6,800 feet, where they had the misfortune of an early winter with one of the deepest snows on record.

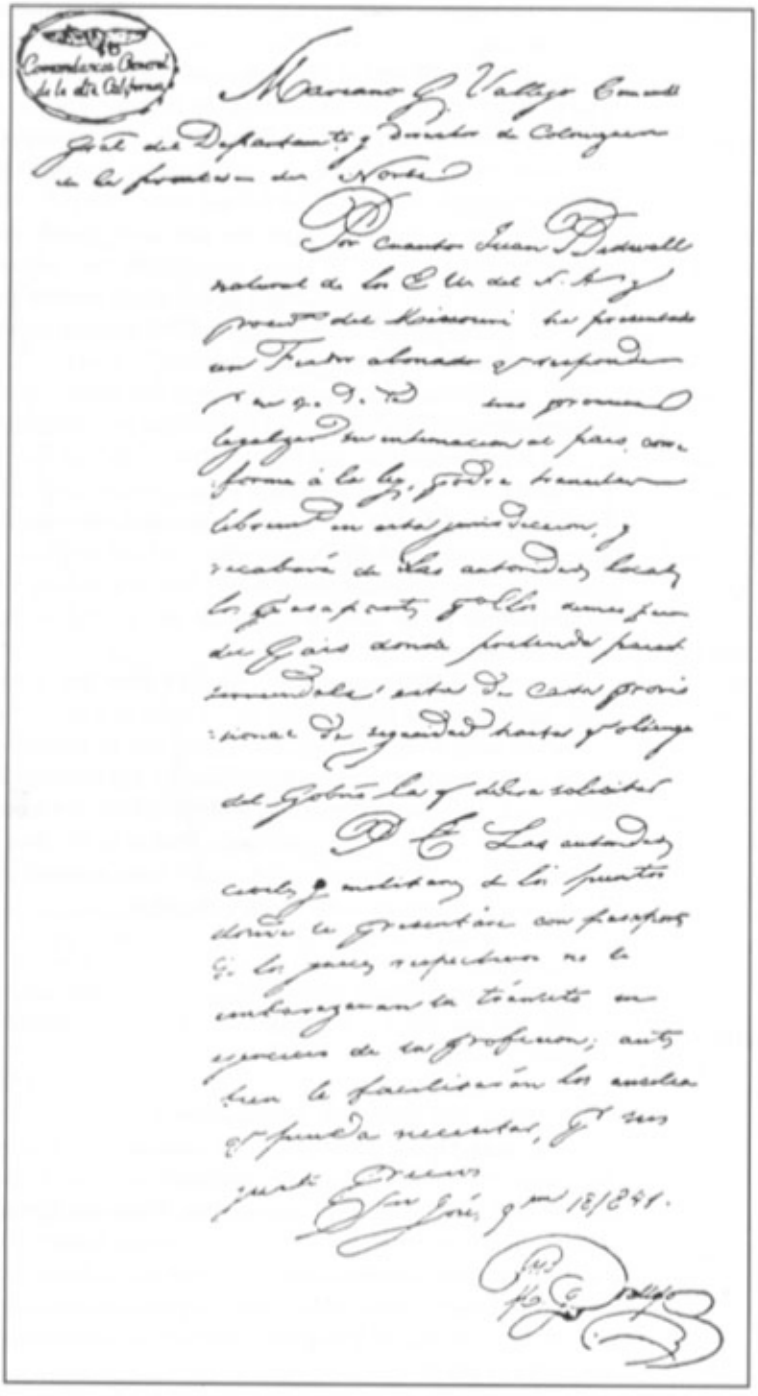
The Bidwell-Bartleson party struggled over the mountains, past snow that never melts, eating their few remaining animals to keep from starving. The going was so precarious that even the sure footed mules had difficulty. On October 28, Bidwell wrote, "several horses and mules fell from the mountain side, and rolling like huge stones, landed at the foot of the precipice."[24] The party finally ate all their animals and even killed a coyote for food. Barnett recalled,

> I was so near starved that the coyote did taste good, for there was a little grease about that; but hang me if I could make horse and mule taste well. Horse and mule meat was too bitter.[25]

The party was very near death, starved and exposed to freezing rains. Going down one blind canyon after another, they were repeatedly forced to backtrack and try to find another way down out of the mountains. Nicholas Dawson said he would never forget the sight of Nancy Kelsey, just eighteen years old, walking barefoot, high in the mountains, holding her baby in her arms. There were no horses left to ride, and her shoes had given out. She was an inspiration to the others in the party. [26]

On October 29, the party extricated themselves from the treacherous mountains and entered the San Joaquin valley of California, where, finally, they were able to satisfy their hunger, gorging on deer, antelope and wild geese. The following day an Indian found them and guided them to Marsh's rancho near the base of Mount Diablo, northeast of San Francisco.

After delivering the letter to Marsh, Barnett and Nye and thirteen other members of the party went to San Jose to obtain papers to allow them to settle in Mexican California. There they were arrested by the Mexican authorities, who rightfully demanded to know what these penniless, armed Americans



This passport was issued to John Bidwell by Mexico on November 18, 1841. Similar handwritten passports were issued to other members of the Bidwell-Bartleson party, but apparently this is the only one that survived. Today, we would call a document issued to a visitor by a host country a visa, but the documents issued by the Mexican government to Americans and other foreign visitors were always referred to as passports.

Translation: *Mariano G. Vallejo, General Ambassador of the Department and Director of Colonization of the Northern Frontier. For as much as Juan [John] Bidwell of the United States of North America and the State of Missouri, has presented a certificate of good conduct and seeks to obtain legal residence in this country as required by law: He shall be allowed to travel freely in this jurisdiction and he shall be accorded by the local authorities, passports for the various places where he may wish to stay. This will serve him as a provisional letter of security until he obtains from the Government a permanent one. Consequently the Civil and Military authorities of the Districts where he will present himself with passports of the representative judges, will not obstruct his transit nor the exercise of his profession. They will also render him the assistance he may need according to value. San Jose, November 18, 1841. M.G. Vallejo. (Passport courtesy the California State Library, Sacramento)*

were doing in Mexico without passports. The timing of their arrival was unfortunate because the Mexicans were upset, having recently received newspapers from the United States via Mexico in which an editor had boasted that "...the United States would have California, and if they could not get it on peaceable terms, they would take it by force." Nye was sent by horse to Marsh's place to obtain a bond certifying the good behavior of the party so they could be given passports. The jailed Americans threatened to break out, which Marsh apparently felt would be an embarrassment to him, so he reluctantly posted the bond. The Americans were released and given passports. Some of the party headed for Sutter's rancho, which was later to gain fame in the gold rush and which is now part of Sacramento. Bidwell worked for Sutter for several years as secretary and agent, and Elias Barnett worked for him for about five months, planting wheat.[27]

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LETTER

The letter is an important document for several reasons:

First, it was in fact, the first letter delivered from the United States to California via an overland route.

Second, it is interesting that the letter was not just a

personal letter between two persons but was written as if the writers represented many people of the Weston-Independence areas of Missouri.

Third, the letter states that the Bidwell-Bartleson party was an *exploring party*, not just an overland emigration party as historians have described it. Although there were obviously emigrants in the group, the letter makes it clear that some members of the party were going to California on a scouting mission. It indicates that the members intended to explore California and the route to it and then return to Missouri to provide information about the feasibility of relocating to California. Of the thirty-four who were in the California group, ten returned to Missouri shortly after arriving in California.[28] Col. Joseph B. Chiles returned to Missouri in 1842 with nine other members of the party and guided the Chiles party to California in 1843. He made the journey again in 1848 and 1854.[29]

There is no record that Marsh ever sent Barnett or Hague a reply to the letter. Not only does the letter request specific information about California, it also makes a strong appeal to have someone in the group who returns to Missouri bring "forty or fifty good mules for the purpose of carrying us out the spring after their arrival here." There is no record that Chiles took mules to Missouri for Barnett or Hague.

THE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BIDWELL-BARTLESON PARTY

George Stewart in his classic book, *The California Trail*, devotes chapter one to the Bidwell-Bartleson party. He says, however, that the expedition was a failure:

> The frightful experiences in the Sierra Nevada suggested that wagons could never be taken across those mountains. The journey, in fact, had ended in a rout that was close to demoralization. A little more, and they would all have left their bones to lie in the wilderness![30]

But Stewart goes on to say there were definitely positive results. They were the first emigrant party to make it to California, and with a woman and child along to boot. They did not succeed in getting their wagons through, but he points out that they did get further toward California with wagons than anyone else at that time in history.[31]

INDIVIDUALS DIRECTLY CONCERNED WITH THE LETTER

William B. Barnett, the Writer of the Letter

William Boyd Barnett was born in Pennsylvania on February 5, 1810.[32] He was a lawyer and was elected judge for Platte County, Missouri, in August, 1848.[33] Shortly after being elected, he disappeared for several months, then returned briefly, again to disappear, "...much to the embarrassment of his creditors." He finally returned in May, 1849, and took his seat as judge, only to resign shortly after and leave for California with the Estill wagon party, making good on his intent, stated in the overland letter, to go to California. Diarist for the party was James W. Denver who frequently mentioned "Judge Barnett." Denver later was prominent in the history of California and the West; the city of Denver, Colorado, was named for him.[34] The Estill party was classified as a "mail party" because they agreed to carry mail to California. It was an interesting party in that it was largely comprised of professional men, including several attorneys.

In the 1850 Federal Census Barnett was listed as Justice of the Peace, living in Weston, Missouri, with his wife, the former Mary Freeman from Virginia, and their three children: Albert, Edward and Josephine.[35] Denver's diary makes no mention of Barnett's family, so they may not have accompanied him in the wagon party.

Barnett later lived in San Francisco and during the year 1852 was keeper of the San Francisco jail under Sheriff John C. Hays, the illustrious former Texas Ranger hired by San Francisco to help clean up the terrible corruption in the city.[36] Barnett died in 1874, apparently in California.[37]

The coincidence of the name Barnett for both William, the writer of the letter and Elias, who carried it, seems to be just that—a coincidence. William was descended from a man who arrived in Pennsylvania from Ireland in about 1730. Although two of his ancestor's sons settled in Virginia and later in Kentucky, as did Elias's ancestors, William's immediate ancestors remained in the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, area.[38] Therefore, William and Elias could have been distant cousins, but even if they were related, it is highly unlikely the two would have known it. William's reference to Elias as "a friend" twice in the letter further substantiates that the two men probably were not related.

William Hague

Although William Hague signed the letter along with William Barnett, Barnett apparently wrote it as the handwriting matches his signature. Nothing is known of Hague other than that he may have been the William Hague living in Jackson County, Missouri, who is listed in the 1830 Federal Census as being between thirty and forty years old, with a wife in the same age range and with three daughters and one son, all under the age of ten. Note that Independence is in Jackson County, adjacent to Platte County where Weston is located. If this is the correct William Hague, then he would have been between forty-one and fifty-one years old when the letter was written. No William Hague is listed in Jackson County or in the nearby counties for 1840 or 1850. One is listed as living in Pike County in 1840, but that is on the Illinois border, north of St. Louis.[39]

Elias Barnett

Elias Barnett was born on May 28, 1805, in Floyd County, Kentucky, near where Paintsville, Johnson County, is now situated. His family came to eastern Kentucky from Virginia or North Carolina about 1800. In 1826, Elias married Nancy Blair and they had at least six children: Jesse, Abigail, Levisa Jane, William, John and Lucy Ann. In 1831, Elias and his family moved to Jackson County, Missouri, near Independence. In about 1840, Nancy and the children returned to

the Paintsville, Kentucky, area without Elias. It seems Elias had the wanderlust, foregoing his family for the trip to California.

Two of Elias's children, Jesse and Abigail, moved to Ohio, married and had families. In 1854, together with their spouses and children, they followed Elias to California by wagon party, arriving in Pope Valley, Napa County, California. They may have traveled with Joseph B. Chiles (of the Bidwell-Bartleson party) when he led the Chiles party to Napa County, California, in 1854.

After planting wheat for Sutter through the spring of 1842, Elias lived briefly with several former trappers in the area. In the fall of 1843 he returned to Napa Valley and worked and hunted for George Yount. Shortly thereafter he settled in Pope Valley, a small valley in Napa County.

In the spring of 1844, Elias married for a second time, to the recently widowed Juliana Salizar Pope. Elias assumed legal responsibility for her five minor children, also for three Indian children and six children he and Juliana parented.

Always one to get involved where there was action, in June, 1846, he joined the group of Americans that captured Sonoma and raised the "Bear Flag" declaring California was now the "California Republic." That flag is now the California state flag. In October, 1846, Elias joined Fremont's California Volunteers and marched to Los Angeles, arriving to find the city already taken by American General Stephen Kearny. Elias then returned to his family in Napa County and finally ceased his wandering ways. He continued to live in Pope Valley until his death, February 8, 1880.[40]

Unfortunately, no photograph of Elias has been located. His tombstone in the Pope Valley cemetery has an image of a bear at the top, under which the word "Pioneer" appears.

Michael Nye

Michael C. Nye was born in Ohio on April 10, 1821. If, as George D. Lyman states in *John Marsh, Pioneer*, Nye knew John Marsh in Independence, Missouri, before Marsh moved to Santa Fe in 1830, Nye would have been only nine years old. Marsh may have known Nye's father, however, as he was a merchant in Weston in 1841. Nye became a Mexican citizen in 1844 and on June 24, 1847, married Harriet Murphy Pike in Sacramento. She was one of seven survivors of the sixteen people who left the Donner cabin on snow shoes to come over the mountains to Sutter's fort for relief. The Nyes lived in what is now Marysville, California, a city having been named for Harriet's sister, Mary Murphy Covillaud, another survivor of the Donner party.

In 1847, Nye purchased a portion of the Sutter grant on the south bank of the Yuba River. The family later moved to Wasco County, Oregon, where Harriet died in 1870. Nye apparently remarried and died on July 14, 1906, in Prineville, Cook County, Oregon, the last survivor of the Bidwell-Bartleson party.[41]

INDIVIDUALS TO WHOM THE LETTER WAS ADDRESSED

The letter was addressed to "Capt. Sutter or Mr. Marsh". As the letter was delivered to Marsh, Captain Sutter probably never saw it.

John Augustus Sutter

John Augustus Sutter, the earliest settler in the Sacramento valley of northern California, was living in an adobe house on his rancho when the Bidwell-Bartleson party arrived. He had not yet built his fort, later to become the famous Sutter's Fort and center of gold rush activity. He was Swiss and came to California by a circuitous route after spending some time in the Independence, Missouri, area. His route was partially overland to Santa Fe, then to Oregon and then by sea to California. Sutter arrived in San Francisco in 1839 and obtained a land grant for his New Helvetia Rancho in 1840. He started construction of a fort in early 1842.[42]

As we have seen, Sutter employed at least some members of the Bidwell-Bartleson party, Bidwell having worked for him for several years as secretary and agent and Elias Barnett for several months on his farm.[43]

John Marsh

"Mr. Marsh," as he was addressed in the letter, normally went by the title Dr. Marsh, as he had had some medical training at Harvard Medical School and was accepted as a medical doctor in California. John Marsh was born in Mas-

sachusetts and lived in Wisconsin Territory and Independence, Missouri, where he apparently knew some members of the Bidwell-Bartleson party. He moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, in about 1830, and in 1836 he traveled overland to California. In about 1838 he acquired his rancho at the foot of Mt. Diablo, forty miles northeast of San Francisco, where he was living when the Bidwell-Bartleson party arrived. Marsh became a Mexican citizen in 1844 and continued to live at his rancho until he was murdered by a group of young Californians near Martinez, California, in 1856. Marsh was an excellent writer and wrote several important letters, detailing at some length historical events in early California. He had a mean disposition, according to Bidwell and others. For example, he tried to charge members of the Bidwell-Bartleson party five dollars for each of their passports, which he had obtained free from the Mexican government.[44]

The letter was addressed to Marsh for a good reason. Marsh had written many letters to former associates and friends in Missouri, encouraging them to relocate in California. As we have seen, some of his letters published in Missouri newspapers were intended to develop enthusiasm about the virtues of California. Marsh was a one-man chamber of commerce, extolling the many opportunities offered by the largely virgin territory. He stressed the virtues and downplayed the difficulties that would be encountered by anyone attempting to travel overland by an unknown route. So John Marsh was well known in western Missouri in 1840 and 1841. At least one member of the Bidwell-Bartleson party had a copy of one of Marsh's letters, which Bidwell mentions in his diary.[45] Probably the most important document written by Marsh was his November 25, 1842, letter to Commodore Thomas Ap Catesby Jones, Commander of the U.S. Pacific Squadron. It was written in compliance with a request from Commodore Jones that Marsh provide him "...with some of the most interesting facts relative to California." The letter is long (nineteen pages, typed double spaced in a thesis by Emily June Ulsh) and demonstrates that Marsh was an outstanding historical chronicler of the complex events that occurred in early California. Within his detailed description of these events, Marsh described the November, 1841, arrival of the Bidwell-Bartleson party:

> Letters from persons of the first respectability in the Western part, of the United States, assure us that if the exploring party give a favorable report the emigration to this region will be very great. We confidently expect a large number in the month of October, next year....[46]

Marsh's statements were based on the overland letter.

Lyman's *John Marsh, Pioneer*, published in 1930, contains the only specific reference to the letter that this author could find in published books about the Bidwell-Bartleson party. Lyman's book is a biography of John Marsh, with only a small portion devoted to the Bidwell-Bartleson party. After describing the trip to California, which he claimed resulted entirely from Marsh's letters to persons in Missouri encouraging them to come, Lyman states:

> The doctor [referring to Dr. John Marsh] was delighted to see them. Elias Barnett and Michael Nye brought him letters from his Missouri friends, William Hague, a Santa Fe' trader, and Barnett of the firm of Barnett and Shaefe, asking him to write a full description of the country, its soil, climate, timber, water, productions of the province, etc., commercial and mercantile and manufacturing advantages, its population, health and government—promised him that if they could get the assurance they desired, they could bring out 200 to 400 families within three years....[47]

Lyman's information came directly from the overland letter. Earlier in his book, he interprets statements in the letter to mean that John Marsh, when still in Missouri, knew William B. Barnett, William Hague, Michael Nye and Elias Barnett.[48] As Elias Barnett moved to Missouri shortly after Marsh moved to Santa Fe, he could not have known him.

Emily June Ulsh's thesis, written in 1923, was the first Marsh biography. She discussed his most important correspondence but seems to have overlooked the overland letter completely, even though it is referred to in several of Marsh's letters.[49] Perhaps later historians used her thesis when researching Marsh's correspondence rather than reviewing the original documents in Sacramento.

CONFUSION ABOUT DATES

The overland letter raises some questions about the whereabouts of some Bidwell-Bartleson party members at the start of their journey. The date on the letter is May 18, 1841, the same day that Bidwell reported that the party was organizing itself, selecting officers, making rules, etc. Weston, Missouri, where the letter apparently was written, is in Platte County, some fifty-five road miles northwest of Independence, plus another twelve miles west to the Kansas border and still another twelve miles southwest to the rendezvous site of Sapling Grove, Kansas. Thus, assuming he traveled by established roads, Elias Barnett had to travel by the route shown on the map of the Independence area or almost eighty miles to the starting point, and the wagon party started for California on the nineteenth, the day after the letter was signed. It is not known if Barnett had his own wagon, but even if he planned to join other wagons, several days would have been required to cover the distance by horse, even more by wagon.

A group of men who traveled with Joseph Chiles and his wagon had agreed to meet the Bidwell-Bartleson party on May 23, where they planned to cross the Kansas River, probably at the lower crossing about twelve miles east of what is now Topeka, Kansas.[50] None of the party diarists include Barnett among the late arrivals, but that could be an error.[51] If he was in the group with Chiles, then he would have had to travel an additional forty-five miles to the meeting place, or a total distance of about 125 miles in five days. Averaging twenty-seven miles per day would have been difficult but not

impossible if he did not have a wagon.

To add even more confusion, in Bidwell's dictation for historian H.H. Bancroft in 1877, he said that as he was preparing to leave Weston, Missouri, for Sapling Grove, he met a "...merchant by the name of Nye, [who in] seeing our determination to go to California, said if we could wait a week he would let his son Mike go with us. At the end of that time, we started."[52] This seems to say that Michael Nye left Weston with Bidwell before May 9 (the approximate date that Bidwell says he arrived at Sapling Grove). So Nye, even though his name is mentioned in the overland letter, was probably not in Weston on May 18. Elias Barnett probably accepted the letter by himself.

It is this author's opinion that William B. Barnett included Michael Nye's name in the letter because he knew Marsh knew him or his father, Marsh having corresponded with the Nye family on at least one occasion in the past.[53] Elias Barnett alone accepted the letter from William Barnett on May 18, then traveled by horse and overtook the Chiles wagon that was hurrying to join the Bidwell-Bartleson/DeSmet parties on May 23, near the Kansas River crossing. Since Elias Barnett carried the letter from Weston to where he joined the others, it is reasonable to assume he carried it all the way to California and, perhaps with Nye, gave it to Marsh.

NOTES

1. In November, 1968, I met the eminent western historian, Dale Morgan, at the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, and showed him the overland letter. I wrote him a note (Morgan was deaf and mute) and asked if he concurred that it was the first letter carried overland to California. Although he may have been unaware of the document, he gave me no such indication and wrote in response to my note, "I know of none earlier. Other such letters may have been carried at the same time, but this is the only one known to have survived."
2. William B. Barnett and William Hague, letter to "Capt Sutter or Mr Marsh," May 18, 1841, Weston, Missouri. California Room, California State Library, Sacramento. John Marsh Manuscript Collection.
3. Dr. Doyce B. Nunis, Jr., ed. *The Bidwell-Bartleson Party: 1841 California Emigrant Adventure* (Santa Cruz, CA: Western Tanager Press, 1991), p. 1.
4. Ibid.
5. John Bidwell, *In California Before the Gold Rush* (Los Angeles, CA: Ward Ritchie Press, 1948), p. 7-9. This book reprints articles that originally appeared in the *Century Magazine*, November and December, 1890 and February, 1891.
6. Ibid., p. 14.
7. Nunis, *The Bidwell-Bartleson Party*, p. 255. Nunis says seventy-nine were in the total group, including seventeen in the missionary party, six who joined the rest on May 23 and one who caught up with the party on May 26.
8. Bidwell, *In California*, p. 9.
9. John Marsh, Letter to (editor?) published in the *Daily Argus*, St. Louis, Missouri, October 31, 1840, p. 1, col. 4, under the byline "From the *Independence Chronicle*." No copies were found of the original article. As an introduction, the *Daily Argus* stated the following: "CALIFORNIA—For the information of our readers and of the enterprising public in general, we take great pleasure in laying the following letter, which was politely handed us a few days since, before them. The information it contains is certainly of the most interesting and useful character to those who have sufficient nerve to embark in so grand an enterprise as that of colonising the extreme west of our continent; and even those who are bound down to the home of their forefathers, can gather much interesting information from its details." Newspaper from the files of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. The reference to "Portneuf" in Marsh's directions refers to Portneuf Valley, southeast of Ft. Hall.
10. *Colonial Magazine and Commercial-Maritime Journal*, London, Fisher, Son and Co., Vol. 5, p. 229-236. This English magazine reported in an unsigned article titled "California and Oregon" about the February 1, 1841 meeting in Independence where the Western Emigration Society was formed and quotes the resolutions passed and signed by fifty-eight persons. Bidwell said that within the next month about 500 signed it. The final resolution stated: "Further Resolved, that Marsh's route is believed to be the best by which to cross the mountains." See Nunis, *The Bidwell-Bartleson Party*, p. 275-276 for the full text of the resolution.
11. Nunis, *The Bidwell-Bartleson Party*, p. 253-255.
12. Bidwell, *In California*, p. 14.
13. Nicholas Dawson, *Narrative of Nicholas "Cheyenne" Dawson, Overland to California in '41 & '49, and Texas in '51* (San Francisco, CA: The Grabhorn Press, 1933), p. 10. This book is a reprint of a privately published book printed in about 1901 by Dawson in Austin, TX.
14. The party's captain, Bartleson, left the group with some of his men on several occasions, leaving them to continue on their own. This irresponsibility greatly angered members of the party. On one occasion, he told Bidwell "... he was going to California and all who could keep up might go with him and the rest could go to H[ell]." Quote from Bidwell's 1877 dictation for H.H. Bancroft, p. 89, in Nunis, *The Bidwell-Bartleson Party*.
15. The exact location of Sapling Grove is in some doubt. Merrill Mattes, in *The Great Platte River Road* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969), p. 137, states "The second principal campsite, about 40 miles out [from Independence, Missouri], was at the head of Cedar Creek south of [present day] Olathe, a place called Sapling Grove, Round Elm, or Elm Grove in early days, but in 1849 called Lone Elm...."

    Craig Crease, in his article, "The Lone Elm and Elm Grove Case: A Study in Mistaken Identity", *Overland Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Spring, 1993, p. 24-31, states in endnote 2, "...there are probably several sites that also served as a campground for both Santa Fe Trail and Oregon-California Trail traffic, Sapling Grove being one that comes to mind. However, none of these locations has been firmly established. I would state unequivocally, however, that all known primary sources indicate that Sapling Grove and Lone Elm are different campgrounds."

    The contemporary article, "California and Oregon" in *Colonial*

The Weston/Independence area. Note Bidwell-Bartleson party rendezvous site in lower left quadrant of map.

Magazine and Commercial-Maritime Journal, Vol. 5, p. 229-236, reported on the February 1, 1841, meeting in Independence where the Western Emigration Society was formed and quoted the resolutions passed and signed by the individuals present. The second resolution states "...it is recommended that all companies and individuals intending to so emigrate, rendezvous at the Sappling [sic] Grove on the old Santa Fe' route, about nine miles west of the Missouri State line, against the 10th of May next,..." See Nunis, *The Bidwell-Bartleson Party*, p. 275, for the full text.

16. John Bidwell, *A Journey to California, 1841* (Berkeley, CA: Friends of the Bancroft Library, 1964), p. 10. This is a reissue of the single known copy of the original, published in about 1843 by an unknown publisher in western Missouri.
17. John Bidwell, "Early California Reminiscences," dictation for H.H. Bancroft, 1877. Manuscript in Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Published in Nunis, *The Bidwell-Bartleson Party*, p. 81.
18. Elias Barnett, interviewed by R.T. Montgomery ("The Rover") in "Tour to Pope Valley" series, *Napa County Reporter*, September 21, 1872.
19. Nunis, *The Bidwell-Bartleson Party*, p. 252-253.
20. Gregory M. Franzwa, *The Oregon Trail Revisited* (Gerald, MO: The Patrice Press, 1972), p. 233. "The first party of bona fide emigrants [to Oregon], under the leadership of John Bidwell and Joseph Williams, stopped here in 1841."
21. Leroy and Ann Hafen, eds., *To The Rockies and Oregon—1839-1842, With diaries and Accounts by..., Joseph Williams,...* (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1955), p. 237.
22. Harold Curran, *Fearful Crossing, The Central Overland Trail Through Nevada* (Las Vegas: Nevada Publications, 1982), p. 21.
23. William Guy Paden, "Bidwell's Route of the Sierras, a Field Study," thesis for M.A. in history, University of California, Berkeley, May, 1940, p. 21, and his accompanying maps. According to Paden, the location of the summit crossing is about twelve miles northwest of Sonora Pass.
24. Bidwell, *Journey to California*, p. 36.
25. Barnett, *Napa County Reporter*, interview, 1872.
26. Dawson, *Narrative*, p. 23-24.
27. Bidwell, *Journey to California*, p. 38.
28. Nunis, *The Bidwell-Bartleson Party*, p. 256.
29. Ibid, p. 141-142.
30. George R. Stewart, *The California Trail, An Epic With Many Heroes* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1962), p. 31.
31. Ibid, p. 32.

32. James Duff Barnett, *Descendants of William Barnett, 1679-1762* (Portland: Genealogical Forum of Portland, OR, 1969), p. 8.
33. W.M. Paxton, *Annals of Platte County, Missouri, from its exploration down to June 1, 1897; with genealogies of its noted families, and sketches of its pioneers and distinguished people* (Kansas City, MO: Hudson-Kimberly Publishing Co., 1897), p. 105-106, 126.
34. Richard E. Meyer, ed., "The Denver Diary, Overland to California in 1850", *Arizona and the West—A Quarterly Journal of History*, Vol. 17, No. 1, Spring 1975. Note: I became aware of the Denver diary as a result of screening the Census of Emigrant Documents (COED) database for William B. Barnett at the Oregon-California Trails Association convention in August, 1992.
35. 1850 Federal Census of Missouri, Platte County, Weston Twp, p. 299.
36. "William B. Barnett," John C. Hays Papers, in the manuscript files, California Historical Society Library, San Francisco, California. Several documents in the Hays Papers contain the signature of "Wm B. Barnett." In 1956 I showed copies of the signatures from both the overland letter and the Hays Papers to a handwriting expert at the Berkeley, California, Police Department who was confident that both were signed by the same individual. This is the basis for the statement that William B. Barnett moved to San Francisco after coming overland from Missouri in 1850.
37. James D. Barnett, *Descendants of William Barnett*, p. 8.
38. William H. Egle, *Pennsylvania Genealogies, Chiefly Scotch-Irish and German* (Philadelphia, PA: 1886), p. 62.
39. 1830 Federal Census for Missouri, Jackson County, p. 73; 1840 Federal Census for Pike County, Missouri, p. 114.
40. The biographical information on Elias Barnett is based primarily on the interview with him in 1872 by R.T. Montgomery for the *Napa County Reporter*. The historian H.H. Bancroft had staff interviewing most of the pioneers of California who were still alive in the 1870s. Unfortunately, Bancroft's Pioneer Index in his seven volume *History of California* erroneously states that Elias died in 1850, so no one interviewed him for the history. I found additional information in researching my as yet unpublished Barnett family genealogy. I received assistance in this research from an outstanding Pope Valley historian, Joe Callizo. Callizo's research was published as "The Barnett Family" in a series in the *Pope Valley News*, April/May and June/July, 1985.
41. The biographical information on Michael Nye is based primarily on information from the *History of Yuba County, California* (Oakland, CA: Thompson & West, 1879). Additional information came from Nunis, *The Bidwell-Bartleson Party*, p. 266.
42. Richard Dillon, *Fool's Gold, A Biography of John Sutter* (New York, NY: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1967).
43. C.A. Menefee, *Historical and Descriptive Sketch Book of Napa, Sonoma, Lake and Mendocino* (Napa City, CA: Reporter Publishing House, 1873), p. 171-172. The biography of Elias Barnett on the pages indicated apparently was based on an interview conducted by R.T. Montgomery. A slightly different version, referenced above, appeared in the *Napa County Reporter*, September 28, 1872. According to John Wichels, a past president and researcher-writer of the Napa County Historical Society, this book was compiled primarily by R.T. Montgomery, then edited and completed by Menefee.
44. George D. Lyman, *John Marsh, Pioneer* (Chautauqua, NY: The Chautauqua Press, 1931).
45. John Bidwell, "Early California Reminiscences", Bidwell's dictation to S.S. Boyton for historian H.H. Bancroft, 1877, p. 78 in Nunis, *The Bidwell-Bartleson Party*.
46. Emily June Ulsh, "Doctor John Marsh, California Pioneer, 1836-1856," unpublished thesis for M.A., University of California, Berkeley, 1923, Bancroft Library, Berkeley, CA. p. 37.
47. Lyman, *John Marsh, Pioneer*, p. 243.
48. Ibid, p. 192.
49. Ulsh, "Doctor John Marsh."
50. Bidwell, *Journey to California*, p. 10.
51. James Johns and Charles M. Weber were with Chiles when he and his wagon overtook the party on May 23, according to the diary of James Johns. (James Johns first diary, p. 162 in Nunis, *The Bidwell-Bartleson Party*.) Barnett is not shown as being with them, but this may be an error.
52. Nunis, *The Bidwell-Bartleson Party*, p. 79.
53. Lyman, *John Marsh, Pioneer*, p. 237.

The author thanks the Society of California Pioneers, the California Historical Society and the California State Library for research assistance and permission to publish photographs with this article.

The scenery has been beautiful & magnificant & with me the pleasure of beholding it has relieved in great measure the weariness of the way....Dear God, the mountains speak aloud thy powers, and every purling rill proclaims thy praise. I wish Mr. W. [the Reverend Elkanah Walker, her husband] would seem to feel as much interest in viewing the works of nature, as I do. I think the journey would be much less wearisome for him.

—Mary Walker, 15 June 1838, diary, in Clifford M. Drury, First White Women Over the Rockies, Vol. 2, p. 93.

(Submitted by Erwin N. Thompson; Golden, Colorado.)

Monterey, U.Cal
July 3, 1840

Dear Sir: Since my residence in this country I have frequently received letters from various parts of the United States, but have never received one letter, and seldom any intelligence, from Jackson county. Pray what has become of all the zeal for emigration to this country? I can hear nothing from my old friends and acquaintances. Captain Sutter came last year, who, as he says, formerly resided in Jackson county, and obtained an immense tract of country, and has collected a few people from the Sandwich Islands and elsewhere, and has begun a new settlement in the worst place he could find; but, notwithstanding goes on well. A ship from the United States went to the Oregon last month with fifty families of emigrants. I see by the papers that great preparations are making in the United States for settling the Oregon, and that population must eventually extend to this place, as this is beyond all comparison the finest country and the finest climate. The only thing we lack here is a good Government; but for my part I have but little cause to complain. I have got as much land as I want, and have no apprehension of being molested. What we want most here is more people. If we had fifty families here from Missouri, we could do exactly as we please without any fear of being troubled. I live near the mouth of the rivers Sacrament and St. Joaquin, and the whole country south and east is unoccupied. The nearest farm to mine belongs to R. Livermore, an Englishman. He has a large stock of cattle, and will soon have some thousands. My own affairs go on well. Here is certainly a fine field for enterprise. If you had come here at the time that I did, you might by this time have governed the country. I myself have very little or no ambition if you have I hesitate not to say you had better come here, though I doubt not you are doing very well where you are.

Public attention from without is being attracted to this country, and probably in a few years the most desirable places will be occupied. The difficulty of coming here is imaginary. The route I would recommend, is from Independence to the hunter's rendezvous on Green River, which is well known to many of your neighbors, thence to the Soda Spring on Bear River, above the Big Salt Lake, thence to Portneuf, thence to Mary's River, down Mary's River till you come in sight of the gap in the great mountain, through that gap by a good road of less than one day and you arrive in the plain of the Tulares & Joaquin, and down that river on a level plain through thousands of elk and horses, three or four days journey and you come to my house. An old man by the name of Yunt, whom you probably know, came from the rendezvous to Monterey in 30 days, with pack horses; any body else could not do it in much less time. In this route there is no danger to be apprehended, and plenty of water and grass. You will perceive that the difficulty by this route not great. Ten men or even five could pass with perfect safety, with a moderate degree of prudence and woodcraft. You will have heard by the newspapers of a disturbance here between the foreigners and the Government. That you may not attach an undue importance to the affair, I will give you a brief account of it.

When the former Mexican Governor and other officers were expelled by the present Governor, it was principally done by means of foreigners, under the command of Isaac Graham, of Kentucky. In process of time an animosity arose between the Governor and the military commandant, and the former apprehending that the foreigners were more in favor of the commandant than himself, pretended that the Americans intended to rise against him and forcibly sent them in a ship to St. Blas. An American and a French ship of war immediately came here to look into the business, and the Government is now more afraid of us than we are of them. One or more ships of war are to be constantly stationed here. The harbors of this place and St. Francisco, are full of Merchant ships principally from Boston, all kinds of produce bears a good price.

This I send you by the U.S. ship of war, St. Louis, which is on the eve of sailing or I would write you more fully.

Please let Mr. A. Overton and others of your neighbors know the contents of this, and tell them not to be asleep if they ever intend to come to this country.

Very sincerely, Your friend and servant,

JOHN MARSH

P.S. Nathan Daily, of Jackson co., was sent to St. Blas with the others, but he will probably return before long.

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REVIEWS

Oregon Trail: Last of the Pioneers

Rick Steber, illustrations by Don Gray (Bonanza Publishing Company, Box 204, Prineville, OR 97754, 1993) 167 pages, illustrations; $24.95 hardcover, $15.95 paperback.

Reviewed by Merrill J. Mattes, co-founder and Director Emeritus, Oregon-California Trails Association.

This is a most unusual book, consisting of sentimental words and charcoal drawings, giving a backward look at the old Oregon Trail by a man who has relatives and friends whose forbears arrived in Oregon in "a second wave" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The paperback edition instilled in this reviewer a respect for Steber's reverence toward the pioneers of 1843-1866 and a brand new awareness of the unheralded second wave of migration to Oregon by latecomers from the East, traveling by everything from bona fide covered wagons to farm wagons, clunky automobiles and primitive railroad trains. These later generations of emigrants to Oregon, having their share of relatively primitive travel and a still "promised land," had a deep veneration for the original pioneers and, in their old age, a misty sentiment for their own youthful adventures.

For starters, the author reports on his own long solitary hike over a portion of the original Oregon Trail, from Fort Boise to the Dalles of the Columbia River. He gained a perspective on what the pioneers endured, reveling in communion with the largely unspoiled wilderness of the Blue Mountains and sentimentalizing about a little girl who died somewhere on the Columbia Plateau, her little grave carefully preserved under rocks piled up by the present landowner's grandfather. Orientation is not the westward-ho mindset of popular writers and movie producers but one of understanding and admiration for all the "Oregonians," both those of the classic migration of the mid-nineteenth century and of the latecomers, uncelebrated but also deserving of our understanding and respect.

The author's brief recap of classic Oregon Trail facts is accurate. He points out that, though a railroad traversed the Pacific Northwest of 1883, later generation pioneers continued to travel mainly along the original old route for a variety of reasons: lack of money and "a chance to go where the steel wheels did not go." The latter day emigrants "no longer traveled in large wagon trains but in single wagons or small groups. They were able to travel lighter because provisions of hay and grain could be purchased at scattered ranches or new towns. If they ran low on money they could stop and work for a few weeks....Instead of using oxen these pioneers switched to mules...which were more durable."

A series of reminiscences by later period old-timers, while lacking the epic quality of "the old Oregon Trail," are fascinating nevertheless, crackling with firsthand accounts of joys and heartaches, hardships and small victories, ground-breaking and going broke and generally putting the lid on the whole epic of western Oregon invasion, occupation and settlement.

Frontiersman: Abner Blackburn's Narrative

Edited and introduced by Will Bagley (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992), 309 pages, bibliography, maps, index; $27.50 hardcover. (Volume 30 in the American West series, published by the University of Utah Press)

Reviewed by Niel M. Johnson, Ph.D., historian and archivist, Independence, MO.

Having prepared a memoir of his adventures as a frontiersman, Abner Blackburn wrote in 1897 (using his own frontier spelling of English) that he was "awaiting to find some suitable schollar to assist me with the preparing it in shape." Finally, almost a century later, Abner's wish has come true. Moreover, Will Bagley has done more than just edit the memoirs of Abner Blackburn; he has fleshed out the account with about 150 pages of his own explanatory notes, an introductory essay for each chapter, an afterword and a critical, annotated bibliography.

The core of the book is Abner Blackburn's story of his many adventures and trials on America's frontier

from 1837 to 1851. In those years he experienced steamboating on the Missouri and Mississippi rivers, persecution as a Mormon in Missouri and at Nauvoo, Illinois, the hazards of the Mormon migration to the Great Salt Lake Valley, the privations endured by the Mormon Battalion, conflicts with Indians of the Great Basin and California, gold mining in Nevada and California and the founding of the San Bernardino community in California.

There also are revealing glimpses of the treatment of former slaves, factionalism within the Mormon community and the geography and history of the trails westward from Salt Lake City, over which Blackburn made several trips from 1847 to 1851. According to Bagley, Blackburn's narrative provides one of only two source accounts of the founding of the first white settlement in modern Nevada (Mormon Station). He also was one of the first pioneers to discover gold on the Nevada side of the Sierras.

One of the chapters includes Blackburn's retelling of a tale about the Mandan Indians, which he heard from a French-Canadian guide, Lou Devon. Bagley calls this portion of the narrative the most problematic, because it purports to describe the tribe's joining up with the Shoshoni in the early 1840s when all other histories claim the surviving Mandans (from the smallpox epidemic of 1837) were absorbed by the neighboring Hidatsas.

Blackburn's narrative is not a journal, although he may have consulted contemporary notes for this memoir. He composed his essay of approximately 30,000 words in the 1890s. In 1894, in a letter to a relative, he described the work as a "byography of my Adventures in an early day...." After he died in 1904 the manuscript remained essentially a secret among surviving family members until the 1940s when several historians learned about it. Noted frontier historian Dale Morgan marveled at its "elan and humor" and its accuracy for a reminiscent account. Charles Kelly and Irene Paden also expressed interest in editing the memoir. Still, the only versions available were a photostatic copy of the original holograph and typescript copies.

Plans to publish the entire narrative were thwarted by Herbert Hamlin, editor of *The Pony Express*, who claimed publication rights. Over the years he serialized only a part of it and made mistakes in editing that portion, according to Bagley. Hamlin did manage to get custody of the original holograph manuscript, but it disappeared when he died in 1982. The later part of Hamlin's career, as Bagley notes, "careened into disaster." Part of that disaster was the destruction of many of his papers and the dispersal of what remained.

It comes as something of a surprise to note that Blackburn never became a wealthy man even though he was an early innkeeper and landowner in California. During the 1850s dissension arose among the colony of Mormons who had founded and settled San Bernardino. Blackburn joined the so-called "independents" who challenged the leadership of the orthodox Mormons. He remained behind when one-half of the Mormon residents of the community moved to Salt Lake City in 1857. In subsequent years Blackburn worked as a farmer, millhand, miner and cooper.

Inspired in part by his admiration for historian Dale Morgan who was fascinated with the narrative, Will Bagley took on the task of getting the Blackburn memoir into print and supplementing and corroborating it with information from numerous sources. Bagle researched a wide array of primary documents and has drawn from them to supplement and verify Blackburn's comments on personalities, events and movements in which he, Blackburn, was involved. This book is well worth the attention of readers interested in the early years of Mormonism, Indian-White relations in the West, the Mexican War, the trails into California and the early years of that territory's development.

Statement of Purpose of the Oregon-California Trails Association

The purposes for which the Association is organized are as follows:

1. To initiate and coordinate activities relating to the identification, preservation, interpretation and improved accessibility of extant rut segments, trail remains, graves and associated historic trail sites, landmarks, artifacts and objects along the overland western historic trails, roads, routes, branches and cutoffs of the trans-Mississippi region.

2. To prevent further deterioration of the foregoing and to take or pursue whatever measures are necessary or advisable to cause more of the same to become accessible or more so to the general public.

3. To implement these purposes by acquiring either alone or through or jointly with others—federal, state, local or private—title to the land or lands on which any of the same is located or a preservation or other easements with regard to the same—by purchase, gift, or otherwise—and by cooperating with or initiating, coordinating and assisting the efforts of such others to do so.

4. To publicize and seek public exposure of the goals and activities of the Association so as to create popular awareness of and concern for the necessity of preserving the foregoing.

5. To facilitate research projects about the aforesaid and to publish a journal as a forum for scholarly articles adding to the sum of knowledge about the same.

It shall be the further purpose of the Association to be exclusively charitable and educational within the meaning of Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.

OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ASSOCIATION