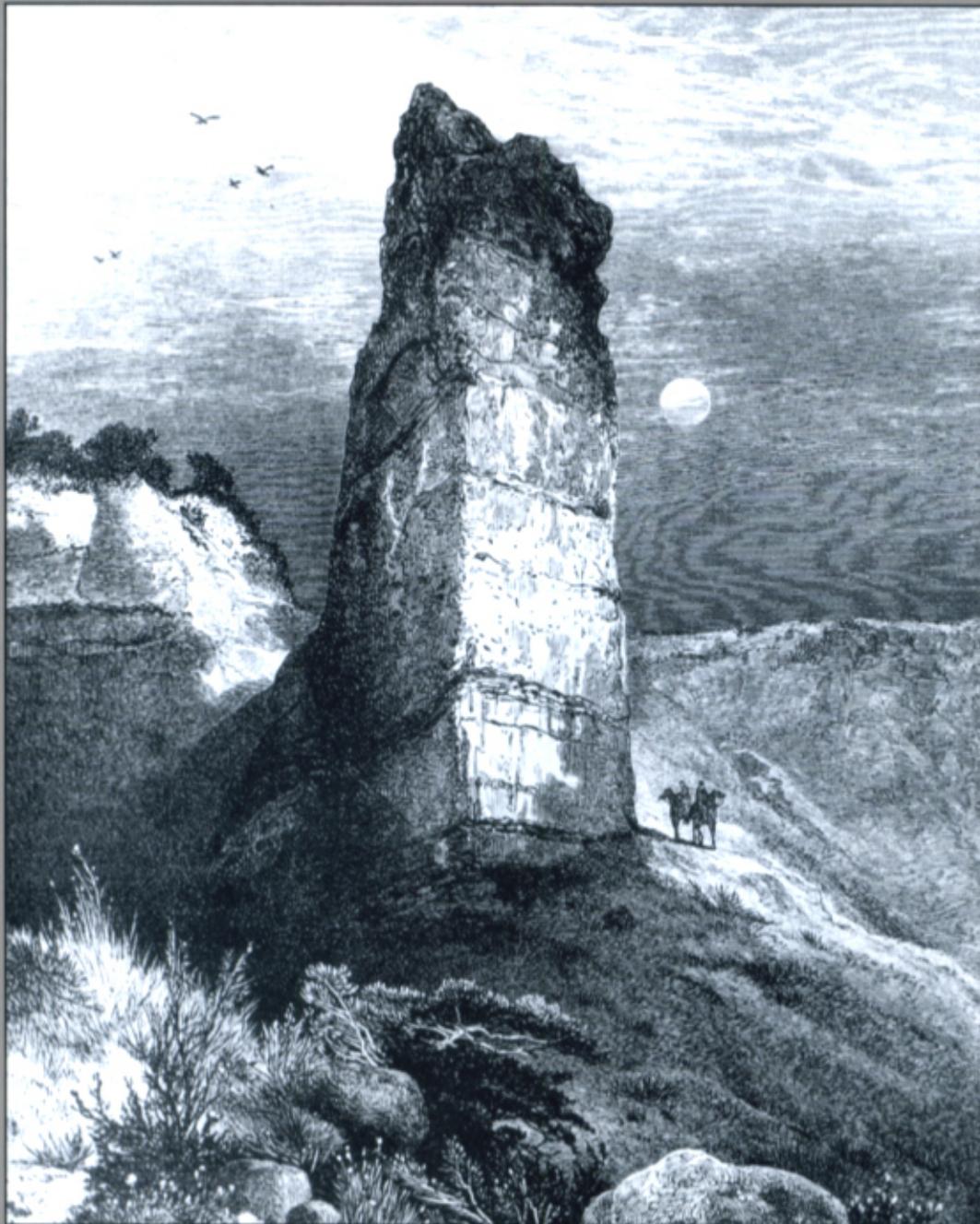


# OVERLAND JOURNAL

Volume 14, Number 3, Autumn 1996



# OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ASSOCIATION

P.O. Box 1019 / Independence, MO 64051-0519

Address Correction Requested

Nonprofit Org.  
U.S. Postage  
**PAID**  
Indep. MO  
Permit No. 244

Here is your

# OVERLAND JOURNAL

## ADDRESS CHANGE

If you are moving to a new address or if your address is incorrect on our mailing label, please let us know.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Mail to:

OCTA  
PO Box 1019  
Independence, MO 64051-0519

## 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 other—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.



*On the cover ...*

Nineteenth-century publications often offered romantic, idealized scenes of western landmarks, as with this presentation of Monument Rock glistening under a full moon. (Kansas State Historical Society)

# OVERLAND JOURNAL

Quarterly Journal of the Oregon-California Trails Association



Volume 14, Number 3, Autumn 1996

ISSN: 0738-1093

*Editor*  
Marilyn Holt

*Book Review Editor*  
Harold Smith

*Editorial Advisory Board*  
Ruth Anderson  
Karen Bassett  
David Bigler  
Donald J. Blakeslee  
Donald Buck  
Peter H. DeLafosse  
Susan Badger Doyle  
Patricia A. Etter  
Aubrey Haines  
Thomas H. Hunt  
Larry Jones  
Betty Graham Lee  
Charles W. Martin, Sr.  
Charles W. Martin, Jr.  
Robert L. Munkres  
Jeanne Watson

*Copyright 1996 by the  
Oregon-California Trails Association*

## CONTENTS

- "Dead of the Bloody Flux"  
Cholera Stalks The Emigrant Trail** 4  
*by Herbert C. Milikien*
- Jedediah Strong Smith: Trails West** 12  
*by Richard L. Dyer*
- Guest Essay*  
**The Oregon Trail—Revisited** 23  
*by Louis Kirkaldie*
- Book Reviews** 31
- Adventures in the Santa Fe Trade, 1844-47**
- Two Generations of Oregon Pioneers: A  
Reconstructed History of the Overland Journey  
to the Oregon Country and Oregon Settlement  
Life of the David D. and Hannah Davis Family**
- Independence Rock, The Great Record of the  
Desert**
- California Wagon Train Lists: Vol. 1, April 5,  
1849 to October 20, 1852**
- Along Ancient Trails: The Mallet Expedition of  
1739**

*Overland Journal* is published quarterly by the Oregon-California Trails Association, P.O. Box 1019, Independence, MO 64051-0519. Members of the Association receive each *Overland Journal* issue as part of their membership privileges. The entire contents are protected by copyright and may not be reproduced without permission. The Association disclaims responsibility for statements of facts or opinions expressed in signed contributions to the *Overland Journal*. Neither the editor nor the Association is responsible for unsolicited manuscripts, photographs, artwork, or other material sent for editorial consideration. *Overland Journal* articles are abstracted and indexed in *Historical Abstracts*, *America: History and Life*, and online in *Uncover*. Prospective authors should send their articles to Editor, 902 N. Buckeye, Abilene, KS 67410. Manuscripts should be typed, double-spaced, endnotes on separate sheets, numbered consecutively, and, when at all possible, accompanied by IBM-compatible electronic manuscript. Inquiries concerning suitable topics and author guidelines are welcome and should be addressed to the editor.

## “DEAD OF THE BLOODY FLUX” CHOLERA STALKS THE EMIGRANT TRAIL

by Herbert C. Milikien

**W**ITH THOSE WHO SET OUT FROM Independence, Westport, and St. Joseph in the spring of 1849, there traveled an unseen and unwelcome companion that would kill more emigrants along the trail than the dreaded Indians. This unknown agent was the deadly cholera that swept through the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. Alonzo Delano, the noted diarist, recorded the alarmed reactions of his fellow passengers en route to St. Joseph:

About this time the astonishing accounts of the vast deposits of gold in California reached us, and besides the fever of the body, I was suddenly seized with the fever of the mind for gold; and in hopes of receiving a speedy cure for the ills both of body and mind, I turned my attention “westward ho!” and immediately commenced making arrangements for my departure.

All things being in readiness, and on the day first named, I bid adieu to my family, and to Ottawa and proceeded to St. Louis on the steamer *Revolution*, and there to take passage for St. Joseph on the *Embassy*. There was a great crowd of adventurers on the *Embassy*. Nearly every State in the Union was represented. Every berth was full, and not only every settee and table occupied at night, but the cabin floor was covered with sleeping emigrants. The decks were covered with wagons, mules, oxen, and mining implements, and the hold was filled with supplies. But this was not the condition of every boat—for not since the invasion of Rome by the Goths, such a deluge of mortals had not been witnessed, as was now pouring from the States to the various points of departure for the golden shores of California. Visions of sudden and immense wealth were dancing in the imaginations of these anxious seekers of fortunes, and I must confess that I was not entirely free of such dreams; and like our sage statesmen, cogitating upon the condition of the National Debt, under the administration of General Jackson, I wondered what I should do with all the money which must necessarily come into my pocket! Our first day out was spent in these pleasing reflections, and the song and the jest went round with glee—while the toil, the dangers, and the hardships, yet to come, were not thought of, for they were not yet

understood. But they were understood soon enough, *nous verrons*. On the second day, amid the gaities of our motley crowd, a voice was heard, which at once checked the sound of mirth, and struck with alarm the stoutest heart “the cholera is on board!” For a moment all the voices were hushed—each looked in another’s face in mute inquiry, expecting perhaps to see a victim in his neighbor. “The cholera? Gracious Heaven! How? Where? Who has got it?”—and from that moment anxiety prevailed—for who could tell that he might not become victim?<sup>1</sup>

Cholera is a disease that is produced by bacterium, *Vibrio cholera*. The symptoms of the disease include severe stomach cramps followed by diarrhea and vomiting (at that time it was often mistaken for common diarrhea and both became known as the “bloody flux”). As the disease progresses the bacteria produce a toxin that attacks the small intestine. The resulting loss of water drains the body of minerals and salts needed for blood circulation. Dehydration follows and then the face often turns blue. The arms and legs become rigid. The pancreas and kidneys fail and death may follow in only a matter of hours.<sup>2</sup>

If the disease is treated, the victim may recover; but if untreated, as many as 50 percent die.<sup>3</sup> Most of the cases that are reported in the United States today involve persons who have acquired the disease during international travel. In one case a woman and her daughters traveled to Ecuador for the Christmas holidays. While there she ate raw clams, cooked crab, and lobster. As she was returning to this country by plane, she developed the tell-tale symptoms of vomiting, cramping, and diarrhea half a day after eating the suspected seafood. This case was very similar to an incident in which seventy-five cases occurred on a plane bound from South America. The passengers were served a seafood salad which was contaminated with cholera bacteria. All developed the disease and one passenger died. For such international travelers it is important to remember that cholera is usually passed on in food or water that is untreated (including ice for drinks). Avoid eating uncooked vegetables and seafood that is raw or only partially cooked, and avoid food or water sold by street vendors.

All of these precautions may not prevent travelers to underdeveloped countries from acquiring cholera. It is in these countries

## Cholera

that cholera is thriving. These countries resemble the cities and towns of America in the 1850s. Water treatment plants were inadequate or non-existent, and sewage often flowed untreated into rivers, bays, and oceans. Over time, the result has been a chain of cholera epidemics around the globe. Today, in a recent year, West Africa had 150,000 cases and 30,000 deaths. Peru had 420,000 cases and 3, 300 deaths. Turning closer to home, Mexico reported 7,800 cases and 99 deaths.<sup>4</sup> These statistics might not reflect the severity of the disease:

Officially reported numbers of cholera deaths were so grossly understated that, by 1994, the only accurate statement one could make was this: Between January, 1991 and January, 1994 millions of Latin Americans fell ill with cholera, thousands died, and the epidemic continues.<sup>5</sup>

In 1873, Isabella Bird encountered cholera on her trip to the Rocky Mountains. She described the following case in Cheyenne. Her description mentions the typical symptoms of the suffering victim:

Last night I made the acquaintance of a shadowy gentleman from Wisconsin, far gone in consumption, with a spirited wife and young baby. He had been ordered to the Plains as a last recourse, but was much worse. Early this morning he crawled to my door scarcely able to speak from debility and bleeding from the lungs, begging me to go to his wife, who, the doctor said was ill of cholera. The child had been ill all night, and not for love or money could he get anyone to do anything for them, not even to go for the medicine. The lady was blue, and in great pain from cramp, and the poor unweaned infant was roaring for the nourishment which had failed.<sup>6</sup>

From the earliest records of ancient times, it is possible to decipher a chain of cholera epidemics. There were outbreaks of the disease even in Greece and Rome. Many of the great plagues of the Middle Ages that swept through Europe were undoubtedly related to cholera, and it was described in Britain by A.D. 1700. The great pandemics (a worldwide epidemic) almost always originated in India.

The first recognizable mention of cholera occurs in the writings of Hindu physicians in about 400 B.C. Almost 2,000 years later, in 1498, the expedition of Vasco da Gama was stricken by a virulent epidemic thought to have been cholera, although there is no good evidence as to its nature. It is certain that British garrisons of the East India Company had lost thousands of men from cholera by the end of the Eighteenth Century, the most deadly area being the Ganges delta. The holy city of Benares, a place of pilgrimage, stands on the Ganges; it is probable that the vast concourse of the pilgrims, who themselves suffered heavily, contaminated the water upstream and so infected the whole of the river complex which drains into the Bay of Bengal.<sup>7</sup>

The disease has caused seven great worldwide epidemics (pandemics) since the early nineteenth century, and we are now seeing the eighth with the rise of a new strain known as Bengal cholera. One hundred fifty years ago, when transportation was slow and ocean journeys took weeks and months, the disease took twenty or thirty years to spread. Today, with air travel shrinking the travel time to hours and weeks, cholera may spread much more swiftly, but how did cholera arrive in America? When did it move west?

From India the microbe was carried along trade routes across the desert to Arabia, where it infected thousands who had gathered at the holy mosque of Mecca. Pilgrims returning from the holy city then spread the disease to Suez and Cairo where it infected traders from the Mediterranean. They, in turn, carried it to Russia and Scandinavia, as well as Europe where it found its way on board immigrant ships bound for America.

During gales hatches were battened down and men, women, and children, sea-sick and vermin infested, were tossed and thrown about with their personal effects, often for three or four days, in this pitch dark, stinking hole. When released they were crazed by the terror of their experience. It was in such ships as these, smacking of primeval filth, that an unprecedented wave of emigration from cholera infected ports came to America.<sup>8</sup>

At first, the disease was confined to ports and cities along the Eastern Seaboard and Gulf Coast, but it eventually made its way by stagecoach, canal boat, rail, packetboat, and steamboat up and down the settled valleys of the Ohio, the Tennessee, the Mississippi, and the Missouri. Crews and laborers on the boats were often the first to be infected by their passengers, and steamboats were forced to stop and bury passengers or crew while they waited to recruit new crew members to replace those who had died or deserted.

During the night a man was taken ill with cholera and he died about 7 o'clock this morning. He was German, had been taken from the ship near New Orleans—was entirely without friends. A box was made and at 4 p.m., while taking wood, we buried him beneath a large cottonwood tree without any religious ceremony. Although the deck passengers were nearly all German and had all gathered to see him buried, not one would touch the corpse. The firemen were willing to dig the grave but they would not touch the dead man's box.<sup>9</sup>

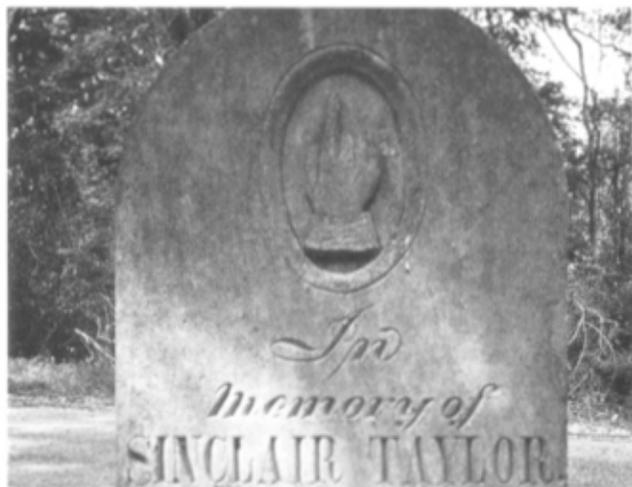
The disease is spread by human contamination, that is to say, it does not require, like malaria, a certain host to convey blood into a new victim. Nor is it usually carried by rats or fleas, like typhus. Instead, cholera is acquired by drinking water or eating food that has been contaminated with human waste. Therefore, most cholera epidemics today are found in underdeveloped countries with poor or non-existent sanitary facilities and impure drinking water. These were the same conditions that existed in

"The cholera is prevailing with a good deal of fatality in some of the western cities."

*Harper's New Monthly Magazine, August 1850*

"A fine case of cholera [in St. Louis]."

*Hugh Campbell, 1850*



*Headstone of a cholera victim aboard the Saranak; probably the man taken ashore and buried while other passengers looked on. (The author)*

It was in one of these camps on the banks of the Missouri River that William Swain recorded "the cholera was very bad" on 6 May 1849. Eight days later, he related how one of the physicians accompanying the camp had died:

This morning Dr. Palmer is dead. Died at three o'clock. Dr. Wells and E. S. Camp stayed with him until midnight and worked faithfully. At that time Dr. Carr was called and several others who stayed with him until he was dead. He had the best care and attention and the best wishes of all the brethren in this expedition. No man stood higher in the affections of all the company than Dr. Palmer. There is a solemnity, or rather a gloom, on all the countenances in the camp. Dr. Palmer was buried at ten o'clock in the burying ground on the top of the hill. It was a solemn sight to see one of our number carried to his resting place far from home and relations. Only thirty-six hours ago he was joyful and mirthful with bright hopes, glowing in his prospects. His relatives little think he is no more. What sad hearts will be at his home when the news reaches them.<sup>11</sup>

Although the disease was concentrated in those jump-off cities along the Missouri River, it continued to attack the emigrants as they moved west along the trail. J. Goldsborough Bruff, that inveterate Gold Rush diarist, carefully recorded the grave markers and their sad messages in July of 1849. He described the graves of cholera victims in the vicinity of Chimney Rock, but he finally recorded the first attack of the disease on his own train about twenty-two miles west of Scott's Bluff:

July 8—Commences clear, strong breeze from the W. S. W. temperature is 72° at 7 a.m.—we moved on and the train had only gone its length, when I was called, and informed that a member, who had last night complained of indisposition was now dangerously ill: This was strange, as no report had been made to me of his illness, and the mules were called in, hitched up, and the train put in motion before I was told of a disaster. I immediately wheeled the train to the right, moved down a few hundred yards, and corralled, on the banks of the river. On walking back to the tent of the unfortunate man, I found the

America in the nineteenth century. Immigrants from other countries and emigrants traveling the Overland Trail were overcrowded as they huddled together in cramped quarters of boarding houses, steamboats, and wagons. Drinking water usually came from shallow wells, creeks, or streams that became polluted by the combination of heavy rains, pit privies, and ground water seepage. Rivers, streams, sloughs, and ponds were also the sources of drinking water that became contaminated from the thousands of wagon trains that might already have ingested the dangerous bacteria.

Not all who reached the jumping off points shared the excitement of breaking camp and rolling onto the prairies. In scores of camps men lay in tents and wagons suffering the agonies of cholera while their companions waited helplessly for the inevitable task of digging their graves. Rumors multiplied the deaths, intensifying fear of the pestilence and impatience to move west. Every man who kept a diary during the weeks of preparation and delay at the frontier told of companions dying or burial ceremonies at nearby camps.<sup>10</sup>

## Cholera

wagon of his messmates standing there, and the surgeon attending him. The doctor told me he had all the symptoms of Asiatic cholera. His messmates said that for several days he had complained of indisposition, and had also drank of *slew* water, which I had cautioned the men against using. At 11 a.m. he was deranged, saying he was not afraid to die, and requesting his friends to shoot him.

Merd. clear, strong breeze from the W.S.W., temperature 82°, at 1 p.m. poor Bishop died of cholera, the first casualty of the Company, sudden and astounding, was this very mysterious and fatal visitation. Yesterday in presence of the deceased, I remarked how fortunate we had been, in all respects and trusted we might continue so. The messmates of the deceased laid him out, sewed him up in his blue blanket, and prepared a bier, formed of his tent poles. I had a grave dug in a neighboring ridge, on left of the trail, about 400 yards from it. Dry clay and gravel and coarse white sandstone on the next hill, afforded slabs to line it with, making a perfect vault. I sat 3 hours in the hot sun and sculpted a head and foot stone; and filled the letters with blacking from the hub of a wheel. I then organized a funeral procession, men all in clean clothes and uniforms, with music (a key-bugle, flute, violin, and accordion) and two and two, with the Stars and Stripes over the body, we marched to the measured time of the dirge, deposited the body of our comrade in the grave, and an elderly gentleman read the burial service, and we filled up the grave, erected the stones, and returned to camp.<sup>12</sup>

When they were stricken with the disease there were innumerable theories of its cause and long lists of prohibitions and remedies for its treatment. One should avoid eating watermelons, cucumbers, green corn, cherries, cabbage, sauerkraut, rotten potatoes, too many fruits or vegetables, or just plain "bad food." Treatment consisted of bleeding patients, prescribing calomel or laudanum, rubbing the patient with whiskey, swallowing brandy to aid the digestion and keeping the patient's feet warm. From Independence, William Swain wrote on 3 May 1849:

We find the cholera prevalent here in a virulent form. A doctor with a company from Chicago recommends a dose of laudanum with pepper, camphor, musk, ammonia, peppermint, or other stimulant. ... The medicine is aided by friction, mustard plasters, and other external applications.

Today I have felt unwell, have had some dysentery, and some disagreeable feelings and slight griping. This afternoon I took two doses of Mr. Bailey's dysentery medicine, at evening took a dose of peppermint and laudanum. Tonight I feel better; my dysentery has stopped.<sup>13</sup>

On 12 May, he wrote:

Our company doctor [Dr. Joseph H. Palmer] has got the cholera very bad. He is out of his head this evening and will probably die before morning. He is being rubbed constantly with brandy, hot drops and tincture of lobelia; but his pulse is down, and he cannot be brought up.<sup>14</sup>

For at least two centuries, it was believed that bad air or "miasma" produced illnesses; hence, the name malaria (mal ... bad, aria ... air) was so named because of the fear that bad air and especially bad, damp, night air led to the disease and not only malaria but cholera as well.

There are two facts of the highest importance. The first is that peculiar poison of miasmatic epidemics, and we believe of plagues, generally, is found to reside almost entirely in night air. If it be not entirely so, it is in a very great degree. The night air is more or less damp. The air is composed of the two elements of oxygen and nitrogen. The latter is a poison. It cannot be breathed and life maintained. The vitality of the air, then, appears to depend on its oxygen, hence a very slight change in its proportions might prove death to thousands.<sup>15</sup>

So fearful of the bad air were these early citizens that in many cities and adjoining fields, they inaugurated projects to drain ponds, swamps, and marshes. Homeowners sometimes boarded up the windows or even bricked up the windows facing the prevailing night winds. At the height of the epidemics drastic measures were taken to keep the air cleansed of the foul miasma:

Outwardly the city (New Orleans) presented a battle scene in keeping with the death struggles that were taking place within. Fires of tar and pitch in every block sent up spirals of black smoke which hung over the city like a funeral shroud! Cannons were being fired continuously along the streets—all in the hope that the poison-filled air would be purified. By day the city was an inferno of smoke, fire, and noise. By night the flickering light of the fires and the flash of the cannon revealed, through partially shaded windows, the struggle of death going on within.<sup>16</sup>

The Indians too contracted the disease as their contacts with the travelers increased along the Platte:

The first Indians the emigrants encountered were the "civilized" Shawnee and Potawatomi—peaceful, poor, altogether a contrast to expectations. But farther west, to the north of the Kansas River, the trail entered the country of the Pawnee, a tribe much feared by travelers on the plains. By Spring 1849, the once powerful Pawnees had been sadly weakened by frequent attacks by their old enemy, the Sioux. As well, during the Spring and Summer of 1849 they suffered over 1,200 deaths from cholera brought to them by the invading gold seekers.

Having so long anticipated the danger of Indians and consequently equipped themselves as if an army, most



*Left: The grave of Rebecca Winters near Gering, Nebraska. A member of a caravan on its way to Utah in 1852, she contracted cholera on the trail and died near the Platte River. A tire iron was used to inscribe the stone "Rebecca Winters, age 50." Right: Sacramento's memorial to the cholera victims marks the site where hundreds were buried in mass graves; the marker stands at the rear of the old city cemetery. (The author)*

gold seekers experienced the ironic disappointment of not seeing any "wild" Indians. Where were the Pawnees? One of the rangers explained: "We are armed to the teeth but on account of the consternation among the Indians because of the cholera, we could hardly get a sight of them. . . . Our arms are useless, for we carry with us in their imagination, a protection more formidable, the dread scourge which has spread among them."<sup>17</sup>

As the migrants traveled west the incidence of cholera decreased beyond Chimney Rock and Scott's Bluff. To be sure, the disease would continue as the wagons rolled westward beyond Fort Laramie, but it would never strike as many as it did from Westport to that point. The reason for this is unclear, but since the cholera bacteria thrive in warm conditions, the cooler weather found at higher elevations may have helped to reduce the number of victims. Some believed that there was little cholera after the first killing frost; others believed it decreased after a good rainfall.

Emigrants were also reducing the number of human contacts compared to those in the cities of the heartland and in the overcrowded staging areas where they formed companies prior to starting out. Even though the disease decreased after the first one

thousand miles and even though its cause might be attributed to "bad air," there are clues to its origin in the letters and diaries of the emigrants. One traveler wrote to his sister in Kentucky: "You would be amused to see us in our operations, cooking, and washing, but never our hands."<sup>18</sup> And, when they drank from brackish ponds or sloughs or hastily dug wells:

Most of the way up the Platte the trail ran some distance back from the river, and since water quickly filtered into holes dug two or three feet deep, the emigrants found this source preferable to packing water from the muddy river. However, thousands of animals and men traveling and camping along the route contaminated this water source with resulting sickness in almost every train.<sup>19</sup>

In the last two decades scientific research conducted by Professor Rita Colwell at the University of Maryland discovered that cholera bacteria could lie dormant in water and then rapidly multiply. The bacteria would attach itself to phytoplankton (microscopic plants) and would, in turn, be eaten by zooplankton (microscopic animals) until the water in the ponds and sloughs would be alive with billions of colonies of cholera bacteria. Could the large number of cholera cases be related to

## Cholera

this water? Of course, many travelers had contracted the disease in the jumping-off towns that lacked any pure or sanitary facilities, but since the diaries mention that the people drank water from the ponds, could this have been a primary source of cholera on the Plains? According to Professor Colwell, the answer is affirmative:

*Vibrio cholera* 01 is associated with zooplankton and its natural host may very well be zooplankton, which is the hypothesis we have developed in our research. Rather than cholera being carried to the ponds, where the emigrants would obtain their drinking water, these ponds contain plankton, which would be a source of *vibrio cholerae*. Thus, *vibrio cholerae* would be in the water which the emigrants drank and "index cases" would result in spreading cholera rapidly amongst the community.<sup>20</sup>

All across the plains cholera stalked its victims. There were fewer cases as emigrants crossed the mountains, but then as they descended the western slopes of the Sierra and entered the great valley of California, the migrants of 1850 found that cholera had preceded them.

As for health, it seems that everyone must be sick here. The sickness of the year far exceeds that of the last. Without reference to the cholera in Sacramento, Missouri has lost about one eighth or a tenth of an emigration of young able men. We have no certain knowledge regarding the balance of the emigration, but have not reason to disbelieve that an equal fatality has attended it.<sup>21</sup>

The disease had arrived in San Francisco aboard the steamer *New World* on her journey north from Panama. By the time the steamer docked there were twenty-two known cases on board and fourteen people had died.<sup>22</sup> Undoubtedly, there were others infected with the bacteria who would carry it into the city, for the ship was never quarantined after her arrival and continued up the Sacramento River bringing the disease to that city as well.<sup>23</sup> The epidemic that followed was devastating. Sacramento at that time had a population of approximately ten thousand persons who had swarmed into the city en route to the gold fields. The swift attack of the disease left forty dying each day at the height of the epidemic. In her diary, Margaret Frink recalled the terrible scene:

One day while Mr. Frink was at the cemetery, there were six men digging graves. They pointed to a box, saying the man in the coffin was working with them the day before. The epidemic raged about one month in which time it carried off at least one thousand persons.<sup>24</sup>

In Sacramento, trying to halt the spread of the disease, the authorities started large fires and threw the contaminated possessions of the inhabitants on the flames. A general cleaning of the filthy city ensued and another diarist, Isaac Lord, reported a scene straight from Dante's *Inferno*.

The lurid fires, shining in the murky air, burn old shoes and boots, and clothes by the ton and cartloads of bones and raw hides and putrid meat and spoiled bacon—so that the end of the matter is worse than the beginning.<sup>25</sup>

Business closed in Sacramento and streets were deserted. Coffins and graves could not be prepared fast enough for the rapidly dying. The dead were simply wrapped in blankets and quickly buried in mass graves that often contained hundreds of bodies. So quickly did a mass exodus occur that few workers remained to help care for the sick much less bury the dead. Doctors who answered the calls of victims fell prey to the disease themselves and a third of the doctors perished before the epidemic ended.<sup>26</sup> Not all of the consequences of the epidemic were negative, however. A clean-up campaign was organized to clean the city, and stagnant water lying in low places was targeted as a possible contributing factor to the epidemic disease. The remaining doctors, who organized the clean-up campaign, felt that sanitation was the key to saving, "one-half of the lives now daily sacrificed."<sup>27</sup>

Disease and death stalked the emigrants from the Missouri River westward across the Plains, down the Sacramento, and into the gold fields and would linger through the decade of the 1850s. But its virulence would never be as great as it had been from 1849 to 1852. Merrill Mattes gives us an estimate of cholera deaths in the year 1850: "Accepting a figure of 2,500 an average of four graves to a mile between St. Joe and Fort Laramie gives credence to the assertion of Abraham Sortore that along the Platte 'He was scarcely out of sight of grave diggers'."<sup>28</sup> If to this figure, we add another 2,000 that perished from the disease in 1849, and also in the cholera in the gold fields and Sacramento, it is probably safe to assume that at least 6,000 died of cholera during the gold rush years. Perhaps that figure could be doubled if we include the westward migrants through the 1850s. These figures may be conservative when we consider:

Some large trains lost two-thirds of their number (Foster) and several instances are found of children orphaned or entire families wiped out, their wagons abandoned like ships without rudders (Goldsmith).<sup>29</sup>

So destructive was the disease on some trains that it became a prime reason for emigrants to turn around and head for home. The inability of many to continue was a result of a lack of manpower to handle the teams, to float the wagons at stream crossings, to hoist the wagons uphill or to handle the myriad ordeals of oxen and wagons, but it was also a result of a loss of loved ones and consequent discouragement:

Then there was the cholera. One 1850 turn around, the only surviving member of his entire company, prudently decided to tempt fate no further. The three survivors of a cholera-ravaged seventeen-man group who retraced their steps in 1852 concurred. Ezra Meeker later recalled meet-

ing a train of eleven returning wagons in 1852, all driven by women. Not a single male remained alive in the entire train. Another 1852 company, initially numbering seventy-two men, began to back track after more than a third of their number died, but barely had enough men physically capable of handling their teams. The same year a woman—who had probably gone as far west as any turn-around ever did—decided to return after burying her husband beyond Salt Lake City. She had previously watched one of her children die along the Platte River.<sup>30</sup>

It is a tribute to their perseverance and courage that most of the emigrants continued their arduous journey across the Plains despite the hardships so often mentioned in the journals—thunderstorms, snakebites, shootings, Indian attacks, sickness, and finally disease. What made cholera stand out from all the others was the dread and terror accompanying its discovery.

From its early occurrence on steamboats to the hundreds killed in Sacramento, the disease was a “dreaded scourge” or a “terrifying pestilence.” No doubt this was because of its unknown cause, its swift advancement, and the large number of fatalities. Far from the comforts of home, emigrants were on a journey into unknown territory where almost each new day brought the sight of more graves and more cholera victims. Then, as the disease attacked, they watched helplessly the agonies of their sick and dying companions. When a member of his own wagon train died of cholera, J. Goldsborough Bruff summarized the anguish and sorrow of the westward emigrants in this moving poem written in 1849:

The adventurer's train, -  
On the Platte river plain, -  
Was halted at early hour; -  
For a comrade was ill,  
Whom no medical skill,  
Could save from a Higher power! -

On the banks of the Platte, -  
With it's flowery mat, -  
A corral and Camp were made: -  
And the sick was borne,  
To his tent that morn, -  
To die on that distant glade! -

The surgeon's Skill -  
And his messmates will -  
Were exerted, alas! in vain! -  
For the hour of noon,  
Came Sorrowing Soon  
When the faded Corse was lain!

With a mournful look, -  
For a Shroud they took, -  
His blanket, - and sew'd him round; -

And that banner bright, -  
Once his soul's delight, -  
O'er his breathless form was bound!

The manly tear,  
Fell on the bier, -  
Of the poles of his vacant tent;  
And they breath'd a sigh, -  
When they saw him lie,  
In death's embraces pent! -

And the bugl's wail  
Was borne on the gail, -  
Far, over plain and hill: -  
And the wolf did howl,  
And seek his hole,  
At a sound so mournful & shrill!

They devled a tomb,  
In a rocky womb,  
Of a hillock, - near the trail; -

And a tear did trace,  
Each sun-burnt face,  
As they closed his earthly goal!<sup>31</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Alonzo Delano, *Life on the Plains and Among the Diggings* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1966), 14-15.
2. Richard E. Besser, et. al., “Diagnosis and Treatment of Cholera in the United States: Are We Prepared?” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 272 (October 19, 1994): 1203.
3. Robert Berkow, M.D., ed., *The Merck Manual* (Rahway, N.J.: Merck, Sharp & Dohme Research Laboratories, 1987), 92.
4. David L. Swerdlow and Allen A. Ries, “Vibrio Cholerae non-01—The Eighth Pandemic?” *The Lancet* (August 14, 1993): 382.
5. Laurie Garrett, *The Coming Plague* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Girous, 1994), 565.
6. Isabella L. Bird, *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960), 28.
7. Frederick F. Cartwright, *Disease and History* (New York: Dorset Press, 1972), 157.
8. John S. Chambers, *The Conquest of Cholera* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 26.
9. James Mason Hutchings, *Seeking the Elephant, 1849* (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark, 1980), 81-82.

## Cholera

10. J. S. Holliday, *The World Rushed In* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981), 94.
11. *Ibid.*, 108.
12. J. Goldsborough Bruff, *Gold Rush: The Journals, Drawings, and Other Papers of J. Goldsborough Bruff, Captain, Washington City and California Mining Association, April 2, 1849-July 20, 1851*, ed. Georgia Willis Reed and Ruth Gaines (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), 32-33.
13. Holliday, *The World Rushed In*, 96.
14. *Ibid.*, 106.
15. Chambers, *Conquest of Cholera*, 220.
16. *Ibid.*, 112.
17. Holliday, *The World Rushed In*, 114.
18. *Ibid.*, 98.
19. *Ibid.*, 161.
20. Personal correspondence with Professor Rita Colwell, president, University of Maryland Biotechnology Institute and professor of microbiology, College Park, MD.
21. Elisha Douglass Perkins, *Gold Rush Diary, Being (His) Journal on the Overland Trail in the Spring and Summer of 1849* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1967), 195.
22. William M. Holden, *Sacramento: Excursions Into Its History and Natural World* (Fair Oaks, Calif.: Two Rivers Publishing Co., 1987), 172.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Margaret A. Frink, *Journal of a Party of California Gold Seekers* (Fairfield, Wash.: Ye Galleon Press, 1987), 111.
25. Holden, *Sacramento*, 172.
26. J. Roy James, M.D. *Memories, Men and Medicine* (Sacramento: Sacramento Society for Medical Improvement, 1950), 34.
27. *Ibid.*, 37.
28. Merrill J. Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road: The Covered Wagon Mainline Via Fort Kearny to Fort Laramie* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969), 84.
29. *Ibid.*
30. John D. Unruh, Jr., *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 88.
31. Bruff, *Gold Rush Journal*, 33

---

**Herbert C. Milikien**, a member of the California-Nevada Chapter of OCTA since 1992, is a retired member of the Economics faculty of American River College, Sacramento, California.

“As we were ascending Scott’s Bluff we saw a funeral. A Mr. Dunn of Illinois died of cholera after ten hours’ illness.”

*Edwin Banks, June 1849*

“The emigration is pretty well over—900 wagons have passed ... 218 deaths in all reported here.”

*Report from Fort Laramie, July 1850*

## JEDEDIAH STRONG SMITH: TRAILS WEST

by Richard L. Dyer

### INTRODUCTION

**J**EDEDIAH STRONG SMITH WAS AMONG America's premiere trailblazers. His explorations contributed to overland routes used by over 400,000 emigrants following the Platte River-South Pass Trail.<sup>1</sup> Included in these pioneers were an estimated 40,000 children and over 1 million animals en route to Oregon and California on what would become America's famous Oregon-California Trail. This article focuses on Jedediah Strong Smith, his extraordinary skills as a mountain man, trail explorer, and man of moral principles.

Great Britain's Atlantic colonists were instilled with a "sea to sea" mentality, an early "manifest destiny," which encouraged them to acquire as much hemispheric land as possible to assist in the expansion of an increasingly more expensive imperial system. Anglo-American pioneers initially were encouraged to extend their presence into regions with an abundance of resources through trade with the Indians and, eventually, to establish frontier settlements and businesses. The policy seemed to be a profitable and noble undertaking to promoters in London. However, long before they realized that this was tantamount to an assured loss of their American empire, autonomous colonists had relocated in the virgin wilderness during a century of "salutary neglect" by Parliament. Colonists chose to emigrate from the security of their coastal Anglo-American communities to the log cabin outposts of a rapidly emerging "America" from which they created and introduced new institutions and personal values. The westward movement of these hardy pioneers—the "continuous rebirth of society" in increasingly more distant frontier zones, as described by historian Frederick Jackson Turner—contributed to the birth of a new nation decades before the Revolution of 1776.

The frontier from the 1600s to 1750s extended about two hundred miles from the Atlantic seaboard to the Appalachian Mountains; from the 1750s to early 1800s, it increased by over

five hundred miles to the Mississippi River; and from the early 1800s to 1850s, Anglo-Americans expanded the land claimed by 1,800 miles to the Pacific Ocean. Additionally, this last move by the pioneers was an "all or nothing" trek since there were few places to stop for help along the way (frequently the situation in early migrations): for these emigrants, it was "a greater distance to be covered in one season than their ancestors had accomplished in more than two centuries."<sup>2</sup>

How did one get to the Pacific? In the early 1800s, few had tried. There were the three American expeditions—Lewis and Clark, Jedediah Smith, and Joseph Walker. During the 1840s, mountain men spoke of the "great, unmeasured distance" to the coast and the "inhospitable" wilderness inhabited by "savage" Indians. The entire distance west of Missouri had been untraversed by a single wagon before 1830. The route that would become the popular Oregon-California Trail was largely trackless prairie and uncharted wilderness, waiting to be reconnoitered by trailblazers. Before 1840, the route to the Rocky Mountains was virtually the same as that explored by Smith and his party of trappers during the 1820s. When these men ascended the Platte River and its tributaries, they knew:

They were approaching the Black Hills [also known as the Laramie Hills], which rose at first only slightly above the rolling plains, but presently became a pleasant, undulating region of pointed dark pines, refreshingly different from the hot and dusty land they had thus far seen. The hills grew higher and near the dividing ridge were more bushy, with scrubby pine and juniper. Beyond the divide the ravines were steeper, rugged and rocky. The western slope of the Black Hills was undiscovered country. . . .<sup>3</sup>

The expedition rediscovered South Pass<sup>4</sup> by way of the Sweetwater branch of the north fork of the Platte River. During the spring of 1824, the Smith party made the first effective discovery of what would become the most important wagon route across the Rocky Mountains. It was Smith's crossing which for the first time announced to the entire country that a passage for loaded wagons destined for the Columbia River had been found.

---

*Author's note: In 1999, the bicentennial of Jedediah Strong Smith's birth will be celebrated. This manuscript has been written as an invitation for OCTA members to assist in the transformation of Jedediah Strong Smith from an often unappreciated mountain man into an exemplary western hero.*

South Pass—the gateway to the Rocky Mountains and as important as was the Cumberland Gap for eastern travelers crossing the Appalachian Mountains—commanded the various routes to the Great Salt Lake Basin and entire Pacific Coast. Although Astorian trappers had crossed the pass from west to east in 1812, the Smith party was the first to publicize that American pioneers with their wagons could not only overcome the mountainous barrier but go forth and transform the rich coastal regions of the continent into thriving American outposts. The route beckoned farmers, gold seekers, missionaries, mountain men, and entrepreneurs.

Thus, began the final chapter of America's occupation and annexation of the Far West. This period actually began with the Smith party's Southwest Expedition in 1826.

The first of the historic expeditions to reach the Pacific Ocean from the central Rocky Mountains in trapping-grounds started from the recently discovered Salt Lake basin in the summer of 1826. Its leader was Jedediah Strong Smith, a pathfinder beyond the Rocky Mountains who deserves a place in national tradition equal in every respect to that accorded Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, Daniel Boone, Kit Carson, or any other American explorer.<sup>5</sup>

## BIOGRAPHY

**J**EDEDIAH STRONG SMITH was born 6 January 1799 in the fertile Susquehanna Valley of western New York. He was raised on a diet of Indians, wild animals, pioneer hardships, and God-fearing sermons. His career began when he joined William H. Ashley and Andrew Henry's fur company in 1822 as a hunter and trapper searching for beaver along the upper Missouri River. Although scarcely in his twenties, this skilled plainsman indicated that he "was destined to become America's greatest explorer."<sup>6</sup> After leading several profitable trapping expeditions to the eastern Rocky Mountain foothills, Smith was invited to become a partner in the fur company. In 1826, not committed to a life of hardship, Ashley decided to leave the mountains to concentrate on his business interests and political aspirations in St. Louis. Consequently, he sold his share in the fur company to Smith and his new partners, David Jackson and William Sublette. Despite Ashley's preoccupation with his personal affairs, he continued to supply the new partners with provisions in exchange for furs.

On 17 or 18 August 1826, Smith and seventeen trappers left Jackson and Sublette camped at their Cash Valley rendezvous site in northeastern Utah. Smith hoped to "find parts of [the southwest] country as well stocked with Beaver as the water of the Missouri. . . ." Smith assured his partners that he would return with a complete report about his journey at their next summer rendezvous, scheduled for Bear Lake near the juncture of present-day Utah, Idaho, and Wyoming.

The expedition traveled south along the eastern side of the Great Salt Lake, following the Sevier and Virgin rivers, then to the Colorado River where the group met the hospitable Mohave Indians. After resting and trading for food and fresh horses, the expedition crossed the Colorado River. With assistance from two Indians, the travelers followed an ancient Indian trading route (Old Spanish Trail) through the "complete barrens" of the Mohave Desert. The exhausted mountain men proceeded across the San Bernardino Mountains into the increasingly more fertile valleys of the great southern California basin. Their unannounced arrival at Mission San Gabriel startled the resident padre, Father Jose Sanchez. Nevertheless, his greeting and hospitality were genuine.

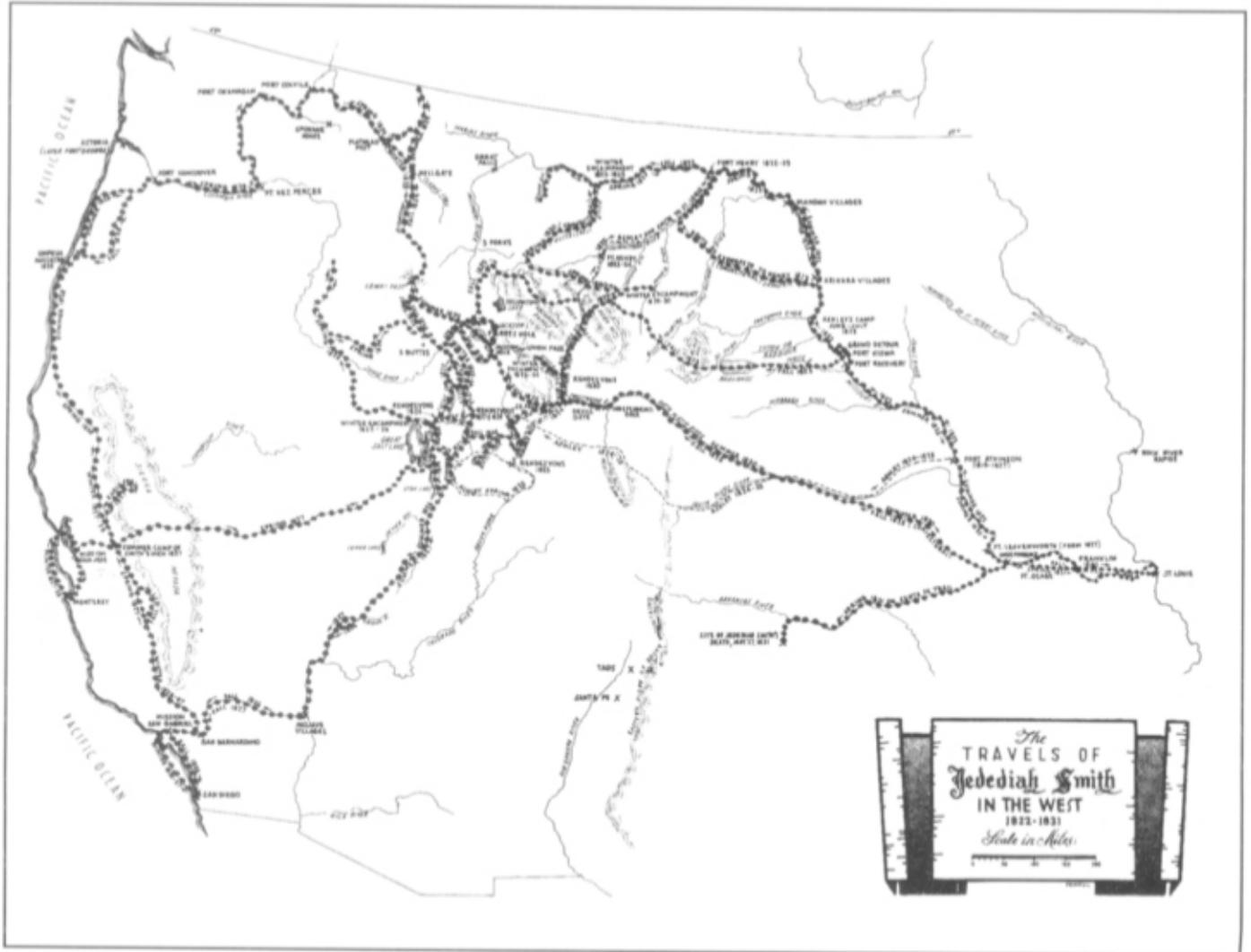
The padre, although "a very fine man and very much of a gentleman," warned the Americans about his government's opposition to the intrusion of borderlands by armed explorers; he convinced Smith to communicate with the governor in San Diego and explain his intentions while in the Mexican province. After receiving Smith's letter, the governor demanded the American's presence in San Diego to personally explain the expedition's nature. While some of the trappers enjoyed the hospitality of the mission, Smith and several companions rode to San Diego. They expected to secure from Governor Jose Echeandia official permission to continue their expedition north through coastal California. After several weeks of vacillating during the detainment of the Americans, Echeandia denied the request. The suspicious governor feared both the armed American trappers and his own fickle superiors in Mexico City. Indecision seemed to be his most prudent action. Eventually, Smith and his men were ordered to leave Mexican California by the way they had come.

On 18 January 1827, Smith and his men retraced their route through the valleys of southern California and across the mountains near Cajon Pass. Once they left coastal California, author David Weber maintains that Smith had no intention of another waterless desert crossing. Weber wrote:

Two of Smith's newly discovered letters make it clear that he thought of no such thing. Fully aware that he had disobeyed the governor's orders, Smith invented an excuse. He told Echeandia that he could not follow orders because "the Mountains hung covered with snow, were impassable and I was obliged to go northwardly."<sup>7</sup>

The small brigade headed north by a circuitous route through the Tehachapi Mountains and into the southern grassland of the great central valley of California.

On 20 May 1827, east of the confluence of the Stanislaus and San Joaquin rivers, Smith and two companions left eleven trappers at an established camp and commenced a remarkable crossing of the Sierra Nevada Mountains near Ebbetts Pass; thus, these men became the first non-Indians to cross this formidable mountain range. After this hazardous mountain journey, the exhausted men traveled across the equally hostile Great Basin of Nevada and



*The travels of Jedediah Smith between 1822 and 1831 are highlighted on this map; as well as noting routes through the Northwest and Great Basin, the map also notes Smith's travels into Mexican California and up the Pacific Coast. (The Jedediah Smith Society)*



*Monument located ten miles east of Sacramento, California, at Folsom City Park near the historic American River. The monument was erected by the Sacramento County Historical Society and is dedicated to Smith who was the "First of American Trappers on This River, April 30, 1827. . . ." (Photograph by Raymund F. Wood, The Jedediah Smith Society)*

Utah and to the rendezvous site at Bear Lake. It was 3 July 1827. Since leaving their comrades in central California, the three resolute mountain men had been en route for over six weeks. Smith wrote, "My arrival caused a considerable bustle in camp, for myself and party had been given up as lost" by the original party of trappers. A cannon salute highlighted the rendezvous merry-making on behalf of the "lost" trappers' return.

In less than two weeks, the partners—Smith, Jackson, and Sublette—organized and reoutfitted Smith, eighteen trappers, and two Indian women for the return trip to California. Later, ten members of the expedition were killed while crossing the Colorado River. The Mohave Indians had become treacherous after a bloody encounter with another group of American trappers since Smith's last visit to their village. Smith and the survivors retraced portions of their route of the previous year and in several weeks rejoined their comrades along the Stanislaus River.

During Smith's intervening absence, the American trappers' encroachment and "bad manners" had been reported to Mexican authorities and Governor Echeandia by Indians and John Wilson, one of several disgruntled men who had been discharged by Smith. This time, Governor Echeandia was convinced that Smith was spying and inciting the once peaceful valley Indians into protesting the government's decision to secularize the California missions. Once again, Smith was detained; this time he was locked in the *calabozo* in Monterey while an investigation was in progress.

Eventually, Smith was released but only after his old nemesis, Echeandia, received Capt. John Cooper's bond guaranteeing "good conduct and behavior" during a "safe passport" out of California; Cooper was a respected Bostonian shipmaster who had married and settled in Monterey. Smith and his men, now numbering nineteen, gathered their equipment, supplies, and recently purchased horses which they planned to sell once the party returned to the Rocky Mountains. They resumed their journey through the upper central valley of California. Despite initial success in trapping the valuable beaver, their hardships and conflicts with Indians increased as they broke trail through rugged northeastern California.

On 23 June 1828, the Americans crossed into Oregon Country. While camped along the Umpqua River, the Kelawatset Indians unexpectedly attacked the trappers; only Smith and three of his men survived. The survivors made their way to the Hudson's Bay Company post at Fort Vancouver along the Columbia River. The Americans were welcomed hospitably by their competitors and, in a few weeks, a company expedition was dispatched to coastal Oregon to recover from the Indians some of the Smith party's furs, horses, and personal possessions.

On 12 March 1829, after selling their recovered horses and furs for almost \$2,400 to the Hudson's Bay Company, Smith and Arthur Black, one of the original members of the 1826 expedition, ascended the Columbia River and traversed the northern Rocky

Mountains into territory occupied by American trappers. Smith's sketchy record of the journey indicates that he was reunited with his partners, Jackson and Sublette, in the Teton Mountains of western Wyoming during the summer of 1829.

Smith's life came to a tragic end while scouting for a Santa Fe trading expedition which he and his partners had financed. He fell to a Comanche war party along the Cimarron River on 27 May 1831. He was thirty-two years of age.

As a result of this remarkable record, what was the public's reaction? Initially, the Smith story almost was consigned to oblivion, lost in various repositories and private storerooms. His original notes and invaluable maps were overlooked or destroyed by fire. Some official correspondence and one of his journals from the California sojourn have yet to be found in the national archives in Mexico City. Smith's extraordinary role in opening the West was "rediscovered" in 1918 by Harrison C. Dale who published a monograph on the Ashley-Smith explorations. During the 1920s, on the one hundredth anniversary of Smith's southwest exploration to California, several noteworthy articles were published, including John G. Neihardt's epic story of the mountain man, the first Smith biography. Subsequently, the discovery of portions of a copy of Smith's journal enabled Maurice S. Sullivan to publish in 1934 the first substantive description of the Southwest Expedition. Today, scholars are especially indebted to Dale L. Morgan for his precise research and incomparable biography of Smith, first published in 1953. Also, in 1967, a student of history donated to George R. Brooks yet another copy of Smith's "Southwest journal" which enabled him to publish in 1977 the most definitive account of that remarkable journey.<sup>8</sup> Finally, Smith himself had sought a place in the annals of western history by planning to publish his journals and maps; however, the loss of these precious documents before publication lessened his reputation as a premiere trailblazer.

With time, chance, and diligence, however, historians have located sources that have enabled them to reconstruct Smith's astounding achievements. The newly opened cache of documents described here represents another step in the ongoing process of reconstructing Smith's life and times. These records enrich our understanding of the motives and movements of Smith and his companions, and they shed new light on Indian-white relations in California.<sup>9</sup>

In recent years, Smith scholars of the Jedediah Smith Society have continued to research and publish valuable monographs. Most notable have been Raymund F. Wood's pamphlet of monuments to Smith and Virginia L. Struhsaker's bibliography recording over 450 publications about Smith.<sup>10</sup>

The Smith story is incomplete, however. Western historians are challenged to begin anew in publicizing the remarkable account of his efforts in opening the American West.

## MANIFEST DESTINY

**J**EDEDIAH STRONG SMITH'S HERITAGE evolved from pioneer American stock. The Smiths (his father's family) and Strongs (his mother's family) immigrated from England and settled in Massachusetts shortly after the arrival of the Pilgrims in 1620. They were statuesque, brown-haired, blue-eyed farmers who led sober, God-fearing lives; they were representative of a strain which has flowed steadily in all the tides of western migration.<sup>11</sup> Their adopted wilderness home was an American Eden, a place of new beginnings for them and their progeny. Smith never doubted that his Creator was involved in his enterprises, directing him to be nobler than his human self. Not surprisingly, he was among the proponents of a "manifest destiny" mentality before such an attitude would alter the course of events in the American West, and certainly before such rapid expansion became corrupted by the blind chauvinism, greed, and arrogance of subsequent exploiters.

Most modern Americans—and historians, too, for that matter—have generally accepted the view of contemporaries that the continental expansion of the American people was "natural" and part of Manifest Destiny. To reach from ocean to ocean and from Great Lake to Gulf seemed too geographically neat not to be a part of the Divine intention.<sup>12</sup>

The conquerors of the West were not the mountain men.<sup>13</sup> Credit for that goes to many of the pioneer exploiters who received encouragement to use, abuse, and move to additional virgin resources to satiate an increasingly ravenous public appetite. Perhaps this was illustrated by a venerable oldtimer who remarked after being introduced, "Don't call me a pioneer! They destroyed the land."

Smith never deviated from the influence of his fundamentalist upbringing. He was Bible-preaching and Bible-quoting, inspired to spread the Word and culture to the spiritually deprived. His personal characteristics included unmistakable faith in his Creator and fastidious attention to personal cleanliness—qualities frequently neglected by mountain men west of St. Louis. His letters contain many references about his faith and appeals to family members for prayers to sustain him during arduous expeditions. Smith's sanctuary was the vernal wilderness where he could meditate and commune with his Creator, receiving from Him the sustenance needed to withstand yet another ordeal. Religion governed his every action; and there was no compromise of the Divine principles.

Smith remained committed to his humble ancestry. In a letter to a brother, Ralph, he disclosed his intention to provide financial assistance for kindly Dr. Titus Simons who had befriended and tutored young Diah (his name as a youngster) while his parents endeavored to raise their growing family in frontier New York and Pennsylvania. Also, he sent money and advice to help in the edu-

cation of his younger brother. "Jed did all the right things with his money. He bought a farm for his brother Ralph. He bought a city lot with a house on it large enough for his father and for his younger brothers, whom he invited to come to Missouri to join him."<sup>14</sup> While enduring the rigors of the frontier, his letters included frequent references to personal hardships and the need to rejoin "civilized society," his family, and friends. In another letter to Ralph, he wrote:

It is that I may be able to help those who stand in need, that I face every danger. It is for this, that I traverse the mountains covered with eternal snow. It is for this, that I pass over the sandy plains, in the heat of summer, thirsting for water where I may cool my overheated body. It is for this, that I go for days without eating. . . it is for this, that I deprive myself of the privilege of society and the satisfaction of the converse of my friends!<sup>15</sup>

## CAPTAIN

**S**MITH WAS AN ADMIRER AND VALUED LEADER of the mountain men. As with the unsurpassed Roman legions while participating in military campaigns, Smith and Ashley were the first in America to master a procedure of organizing, moving, and sustaining sizable brigades of trappers to and from the mountains. Ashley's description of his partner's success includes the following passage:

In the organization of a party. . . four of the most confidential and experienced of number are selected to aid in the command; the rest are divided in messes of eight or ten. A suitable man is also appointed at the head of each mess, whose duty it is to make known the wants of his mess, receiving supplies for them, make distribution, watch over their conduct, enforce orders, & c. & c.<sup>16</sup>

Such planning ensured order, efficiency, and safety—"instances are almost unknown of men in such parties being cut down by Indians."<sup>17</sup> The exceptions occurred when the camp rules were ignored. Jedediah Strong Smith—"Ol' Jed," "Capt'n," or "Mister Smith"—although not twenty-five, was the watchful "booshway," the leader of choice by sagacious mountain men old enough to be his father. Their livelihood depended on his perceptive judgment.

Smith's camp rules kept the trappers and Indians in separate camps while permitting the safe exchange of information and trade goods. The rules were for everyone's safety while traversing unfamiliar terrain to avoid life-threatening incidents, especially when encountering unpredictable Indians. The last thing Smith wanted was an Indian fight. Eternal vigilance and individual assignments were stressed.

Smith engaged in talk and trade with Native Americans which, for his time, were usually honorable and fair. It was his intention to be exemplary in dealing with all people. Smith's camp rules

were reasonable and essential; they contributed to the brigade's success while removed from its base of support and supplies. Tragically, rules were not always followed by the men during Smith's scouting absences from camp. It was not his lack of diligence that led to the Mohave and Kelawatset Indian uprisings that resulted in the death of many of his comrades. His primary concern was the welfare of his companions, even to the extent of depriving himself of the necessities of life. However, when challenged, he could be stern if a man's behavior was not acceptable, as was illustrated by the flogging of cantankerous James Reed for his "impertinence" while at the Mission San Gabriel.

### EXPLORER

**A**S SMITH AND HIS MEN TRAPPED AND EXPLORED the northern and central Rocky Mountains, they encountered Indians who disclosed tales of a mountain pass leading to streams that teemed with beaver. His decision to investigate led to the "discovery" of South Pass in early 1824.

One of the more popular sports among western historians is arguing about who first discovered South Pass. . . . The effective "discovery" of the pass, meaning that crossing which brought it to public notice, was probably this one of the Smith-Fitzpatrick party, regardless of who was the first individual to set his moccasins on it.<sup>18</sup>

This easily traveled route led the trappers across the Continental Divide and to historic Sandy Creek, the very route destined to become famous when a generation of restless and courageous pioneers passed through South Pass on the historic Oregon-California Trail. Tom Fitzpatrick prophetically remarked, ". . . ox-drawn wagons would one day be seen trundling up the valleys of the Platte and the Sweetwater to this Place [South Pass]."<sup>19</sup>

Smith must have sensed that he was making history. The dangers were evident. The men were eager. The opportunities were endless. There would be no turning back until a route had been opened to the Pacific Coast. He and his men descended the western slope of the Continental Divide. In doing so, they were striding into the future.

American and English explorers who referred to the Rocky Mountains as a "rugged and frightful barrier" to westward expansion were obviously unaware that an almost effortless route across the mountains had been found. Indeed, in 1830, Smith, Jackson, and Sublette took wagons from St. Louis to the rendezvous site at Wind River, in the periphery of South Pass. If there had been a reason, the Americans could have taken their wagons across the Divide at South Pass. On the eastern slope, they traveled fifteen to twenty-five miles a day with almost no terrain delays. In all probability, the first wheel ruts marking the Overland Trail in the area were etched in the mountain sod by Smith's trappers. These pathfinders provided the knowledge that introduced the

Oregon-California Trail to a generation of pioneers searching for their promised land in the Far West. Today, westerners acknowledge that the Mosaic epic and mythos of the Oregon-California Trail began with these emigrating pioneers.

The partners sensed the significance of their find. Now, for the first time, Jefferson's vision of a continent-wide empire for the United States was possible. Too, the Missouri-Platte waterway would be the link uniting Atlantic and Pacific coasts. It was an incomparable opportunity! A letter sent to the U.S. Secretary of War John H. Eaton described the ease with which they had gone across the Rocky Mountains, thus augmenting the national claim to the Oregon Country by right of discovery, exploration, and now occupation. All that was required to officially secure the regions was a U.S. Army safeguard to the claim. Subsequently, this letter was published by the U.S. Congress; it was an example of one of the earliest stimuli for land-hungry American emigrants to embark for the Oregon Country. Thus, Smith has been described as America's original pathfinder.<sup>20</sup>

He was the first man to reach California overland from the American frontier, the first to cross the Sierra Nevada, the first to travel the length and width of the Great Basin, the first to reach Oregon by a journey up the California coast. He saw more of the West than any man of this time, and was familiar with it from the Missouri River to the Pacific, from Mexico to Canada. . . . Jedediah Smith is an authentic American hero, a man who packed a staggering amount of achievement into the time between his twenty-third and thirty-third [*sic*] years.<sup>21</sup>

He, rather than others who have received in some instances their rightful publicity, should be distinguished as a remarkable mountain man. "Not even Kit Carson at the close of a much longer career, knew the Far West better than Jedediah Smith knew it."<sup>22</sup> In a tribute to companion James Clyman, Charles L. Camp wrote an appropriate description of all the influential mountain men, including Smith:

Trails that he found across the mountains were now traversed by highways and steel rails. Cities had grown up on his camp grounds, farms had invaded the old cattle ranges of the California valleys, and the beaver and the buffalo had gone from the land that knew them, forever.<sup>23</sup>

Certainly Camp's eulogy could have described Smith's Southwest Expedition which followed portions of the Old Spanish Trail and blazed a route for Mormon pioneers over twenty years later as they sought a corridor to the fertile southern California basin and coast. Smith was the first American to reach that coast by a route other than one followed by Lewis and Clark. One of his supporters wrote:

History now recognizes that it was the fearless enterprise of just such men as Smith, of pioneers of iron breed and

indomitable manhood, that first opened the hitherto hidden ways of the great West and explored its main route, knowledge of which later made possible the great overland emigration of our race to California and Oregon. These were the actual pathfinders, the genuine trail-breakers that found and traversed the immense territory west of the Rockies. . . .<sup>24</sup>

Smith, during his abbreviated lifetime, saw more natural and human resources in the American West than any of his contemporaries. He traveled twice the distance of Lewis and Clark while methodically describing the flora, fauna, topography, and Native Americans. Students of ethnohistory have expressed amazement at the scope of Smith's recorded observations about Native Americans, their religions, social structures, and political life. Indeed, recent ethnohistorians have verified most of his observations. "He had visited whole tribes of Indians that had never before seen a white man or horse. . . . There is no written notice of these people anywhere except in the notes of Mr. Smith. He was a close and accurate observer and a student of nature."<sup>25</sup> Additionally, his descriptions unmistakably indicate that he was not misled into stereotypes. Indians, he observed, displayed a full range of human traits. Despite hostile encounters, he understood Native Americans and, to some extent, respected their culture. During his central California journey, his trappers shot two Indians who were inspecting their traps. Smith "reprimanded them severely for their impolitic conduct." Smith's Southwest Expedition journal attests to his perceptive observations of the great undeveloped resources which would be sought eagerly for Yankee enterprises by tens of thousands of pioneers in subsequent decades.

. . . Yes, Smith greatly respected the wilderness, even though the popular philosophy, at the time, was to conquer it. Jedediah Smith in the 1820's had already come to understand the unique relationship between humans and the natural environment that Americans are beginning to fully appreciate today.<sup>26</sup>

Was Smith deserving of such adulation? An increasing number of history students are reexamining his activities and, consequently, improving his standing among his contemporaries. To Smith, he merely was being directed by the "great invisible hand" of his faith and heritage.

### GEOGRAPHER

**T**HE FIRST SENTENCE of Dale L. Morgan's highly acclaimed biography of Smith is, "In exploration of the American West, Jedediah Strong Smith is overshadowed only by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark."<sup>27</sup> As a keen observer, he was committed to improving the maps and journals of contemporaries whose reckoning and oversights were too often a source of misguidance for the early travelers as they tried to

separate fact from fantasy. Understandably, competing fur companies were reluctant to share firsthand discoveries as they filled in the areas labeled "unexplored" on their personal maps. Also, it is apparent that precise recording of topography was virtually unknown during the 1820s; hearsay and mistakes abounded about imaginary rivers, mountain passes, lakes, and deserts. However, some seasoned mountain men had surprisingly accurate mental maps to guide them—although these were fragmentary. Geography and physiography were vital to trailblazers: "they were, without exaggeration, matters of life and death."<sup>28</sup> The mental maps contained more accurate geography of the American West than all of the university geographers in the world. Smith and other explorers knew the American West as no cartographer did until the end of the century. This knowledge, as with any hard-earned possession, was entrusted selectively to only a few.

Smith, however, planned to enhance these first efforts. Accurate mapping was vital to sustain discovery and development. Smith's information about western Indian geopolitics and encampments was sent to Albert Gallatin for inclusion in his "Map of the Indian Tribes of North America," which was published by the *American Antiquarian Society* in 1836. Gallatin's ethnographic map, containing Smith's valuable contributions, became the most respected Indian map for almost thirty years.<sup>29</sup> Smith also sent accurate geographic information for the Rev. Samuel Parker's 1839 publication, *Journal of an Exploring Tour Beyond the Rocky Mountains*. Additionally, it is known that he contributed to the 1839 map of David H. Burr, geographer to the U.S. House of Representatives. It is suspected that Burr was given access to Smith's map by Ashley before it disappeared. Finally, Charles Wilkes' 1841 map of California seems to have been influenced by Smith's geographic reconnoiters during his brigade's northward movement through the region in 1826-1827.

As a result of the South Pass and Great Salt Lake exploration, Smith put aside once and forever the myth that there was a Buenaventura River that flowed from the interior to the sea.

If there is any merit in untiring perseverance and terrible suffering in the prosecution of trade, in searching out new channels of commerce, in tracing out the course of unknown rivers, in discovering the resources of unknown regions, in delineating the characters, situations, numbers, and habits of unknown nations, Smith's name must be enrolled with those of [worldwide explorers] Franklin and Parry, of Clapperton and Park.<sup>30</sup>

After returning to St. Louis, Smith, with collaboration of Jackson and Sublette, planned to publish "a new, large and beautiful map, in which are embodied all that is correct of preceding maps. . . ." Author Winfred Blevins declared that Smith "had both qualities crucial to an explorer: The daring of a trailblazer who discovers places and routes, and the integrative understanding of a geographer."<sup>31</sup> Many westerners, including Native Americans,

had intimate exposure to rivers, lakes, mountains, deserts, and trails. However, they lacked the specific knowledge and comprehension of physiography to transpose such vital information into a map. Indeed, Smith was "a genius geographer" decades ahead of contemporaries.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, even while traveling in inhospitable and uncharted country, Smith's route and survival instincts were unsurpassed. He was never "lost." This is illustrated by his successful five-week trek across the Sierra Nevada Mountains and Great Basin in the winter of 1827 with two others as they endured almost insurmountable hardships.

The feat of crossing this great unknown country. . . has never been fully appreciated by historians, partly because Smith himself makes such brief mention of it, but principally because of the historians' lack of knowledge concerning that section of the west. . . Jedediah S. Smith, crossing this desert for the first time, with no knowledge of what lay before him, achieved one of the greatest single exploits in the whole history of western exploration.<sup>33</sup>

#### ENTREPRENEUR

**S**MITH WAS AN HEIR TO HIS ANCESTORS' HARD work ethics. He was infrequently a man of leisure or pleasure. To the contrary, he did not indicate an interest in the usual luxuries of fine foods, liquor, tobacco, or women. His behavior and transactions were almost overmodest. To some extent, his orthodox background and frugal nature contributed to a proverbial "rags to riches" adventure story decades before the books of Horatio Alger, Jr., became such a popular formula in portraying poor American boys who ultimately succeeded. In recent years, Alger's portrayals have achieved a degree of respectability as historians, economists, and parents advocate "perseverance, honesty, oversaving and underconsumption, ability to get along with anyone and trickle-down economic theories."<sup>34</sup> Actually, much of this was Smith's Golden Rule; these ideals were his personal success formula half a century before Alger's message.

Before Smith joined Ashley and his brigade of trappers, he "could look back to the days of his green youth, when he had come to St. Louis owning the clothes on his back, a rifle, a Bible and very little else."<sup>35</sup> By 1830, when he returned to St. Louis after eight years in the wilderness, he was a young man of public acclaim and substance; the profits for the Smith, Jackson, and Sublette partnership amounted to almost \$54,000, a modest fortune for the time. So, following the example of his ancestors, Smith's share of hard-earned capital was put to work as investments in promising western enterprises. During his expeditions to the Pacific Coast, he noted in his journal the business potential of the regions traversed. In a letter in 1827 to Joel Poinsett, U.S. Minister in Mexico City, he recommended that an enterprising consul be appointed to Monterey, California, to further American

commercial interests. This must have contributed to the selection of Thomas O. Larkin as American consul in Mexican California by President John Tyler in 1843. Apparently, Smith anticipated a growing overland trade with the Mexicans; he used his brigade's furs to purchase horses in California to sell in the mountains where the animals were scarce and expensive. Ashley and Smith also considered shipping furs acquired in the Far West through California ports to East Coast merchants. Nevertheless, before pursuing this enterprise, he decided to invest some of his capital in the Santa Fe trade, using American manufactured goods in exchange for Mexican mules, hides, and furs.

This was Smith's last enterprise.

#### HERO

**S**MITH IS THE PROTOTYPE OF THE NATIONAL hero, an essential element in the evolution of a young country and its citizens because he exemplifies the morality and aspiration of the national heritage and conveys these virtues to following generations. "[T]he major idols of America have been men of good will." Too, it is apparent that the hero "sees what others do not. His will to action is stronger. His knowledge of what must be done to realize what he sees is surer."<sup>36</sup> He intuitively reacts to challenges while other vacillate. The hero, genuine or contrived, is a vital component of the national ethos.

To satisfy the public's yearning for adventure, historians acknowledge that Smith fearlessly experienced more ordeals and displayed more raw courage during his eight years in the American West than did most mountain men of a longer duration. "Danger and hardship became a part of the normal routine of his daily life. He escaped death at the hands of the Indians and eluded other perils of the wilderness by the narrowest of margins."<sup>37</sup>

In Morgan's biography, readers witness Smith surviving an attack by a grizzly bear in 1823 after a chance encounter near the Powder River in Wyoming. Jim Clyman described this almost fatal event:

Upon examination I [found] the bear had taken nearly all of his head in his capacious [*sic*] mouth close to his left eye on one side and close to his right ear on the other and laid the skull bare to near the crown of the head leaving a white streak where [*sic*] the teeth passed. . . one his ears was torn from his head out to the outer rim. . . .<sup>38</sup>

The tough partisan, rescued virtually seconds before his demise, directed his men in an unruffled voice to sew the pieces together to the best of their ability while he endured the pain without benefit of anesthetics. His facial scars were a reminder of this chance encounter for the remainder of his life.

For a hero to retain his prominence through the years requires a great adventure while enduring hardships. Such an ordeal for Smith was the Southwest Expedition to Mexican California.

This overland trek to the coast portrays Smith as a most deserving adventurer, possessing the mettle to endure innumerable adversities.

Twice he was threatened with imprisonment by Governor Echeandia who suspected him of being an American spy. Only intervention by American sea captains who vouched for his "good conduct" released him. Too, after his hairbreadth escape from the Kelawatset Indians in Oregon, the Hudson's Bay Company trappers assisted in the recovery of stolen furs and horses, but only after a forced march in inclement weather over almost two hundred miles from Fort Vancouver to southwest Oregon. This resourceful mountain man fervently believed Divine Providence guided and protected him. He felt nothing could detract him from perilous pursuits as he experienced one of the most amazing "chronicles of physical endurance, unflinching courage and granitic purpose" in American History.<sup>39</sup>

Even in death, along the Cimarron River in 1831, Smith's heroic character is revealed. Once again he was on the trail, leading a trade caravan to Santa Fe; while searching for water, he was surrounded unexpectedly by a Comanche hunting band. He tried to parley with the Indians. When that failed, he defended himself, killing several attacking warriors before being felled. "This is not how Jedediah Smith would have chosen to die. A man who feared God and loved peace, he never wanted to kill anyone. . . . Smith had no violence in him, for all his mighty frame and rough and rigorous life he had led."<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, in the remoteness of the Santa Fe Trail, Smith met death on 27 May 1831.

### CONCLUSION

**WHY JEDEDIAH STRONG SMITH?** More appropriately, the question is, "Why not?" For as long as there is a West that echoes with the power of myth and legend, a West that delights, there will be Jedediah Smith stepping forward, leading Americans over South Pass, crossing mountains and deserts, and facing down governors of California.<sup>41</sup>

Notwithstanding Smith's remarkable contribution to America's frontier heritage, he has critics. They direct attention to the deaths, animosity, beaver exploitation, and material losses experienced by trappers during his leadership. However, Smith is an example of courage, commitment, and perseverance. In a society that yearns for more honorable public figures, it is refreshing to review Smith's abbreviated life from which he emerged as one of America's foremost explorers, making an incomparable contribution to the knowledge of the American West. "About one thing, however, there is no question, and that is the remarkable character of Jedediah Smith which earned him the respect of his contemporaries."<sup>42</sup>

In conclusion, "Jedediah will continue to captivate, to inspire, to move, and reveal aspects of the human condition as new admir-

ers learn about this extraordinary man. As the dawn of a new century approaches, Jedediah Strong Smith will not be forgotten again."<sup>43</sup>

### NOTES

1. Merrill J. Mattes, "OCTA Revolution," *Overland Journal* 13 (Winter 1995-1996), 28.
2. George R. Stewart, *The California Trail: An Epic with Many Heroes* (New York: McGraw-Hill, paperback ed., 1971), 4.
3. Dale L. Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Bison Books, 1964), 83.
4. Robert Stuart and six companions crossed South Pass in 1812 after an incredible year-long journey from their fur trading post at Astoria to St. Louis.
5. Robert Glass Cleland, *This Reckless Breed of Men* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 55.
6. Ray Allen Billington and Martin Ridge, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier*, 5th ed. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1982), 401.
7. David J. Weber, *The Californios Versus Jedediah Smith, 1826-1827* (Spokane: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1990), 19.
8. Harrison C. Dale, *The Ashley-Smith Explorations and the Discovery of a Central Route to the Pacific, 1822-1829* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1918); John G. Neihardt, *The Splendid Wayfaring: The Story of the Exploits and Adventures of Jedediah Smith and His Comrades, the Ashley-Henry Men, Discoverers and Explorers of the Great Central Route from the Missouri River to the Pacific Coast, 1822-1831* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1920); Maurice S. Sullivan, *The Travels of Jedediah Smith: A Documentary Outline, Including the Journal of the Great American Pathfinder* (Santa Ana, Calif.: Fine Arts Press, 1934); Morgan, *Jedediah Smith*; George R. Brooks, ed., *The Southwest Expedition of Jedediah S. Smith: His Personal Account of the Journey to California, 1826-1827* (Glendale, Calif.: A. H. Clark Co., 1977; reprinted, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Bison Books, 1989).
9. Weber, *Californios Versus Jedediah Smith*, 66.
10. Raymund F. Wood, comp., *Monuments to Jedediah Smith* (Stockton, Calif.: The Jedediah Smith Society, 1984); Raymund F. Wood, comp., *Supplement to Monuments to Jedediah Smith* (Stockton, Calif.: The Jedediah Smith Society, 1991); Virginia Struhsaker, comp., *Jedediah Smith Bibliography* (Stockton, Calif.: The Jedediah Smith Society, 1991). The Jedediah Smith Society was organized in 1957 by a group of historians at the University of the Pacific, Stockton, Calif., to publicize the story of Smith and the fur



*Jedediah Smith was commemorated in "A Welcome Sight" by sculptor Victor Issa. Above, the larger-than-life sculpture stands at San Dimas City Hall, San Dimas, California. At right, is the maguette of "A Welcome Sight." (Courtesy Victor Issa, Loveland, Colorado; inquiries about availability of the maguette may be made at 800-720-4772).*



- trade. The Society is headquartered at the University of the Pacific in Stockton.
11. Morgan, *Jedediah Smith*, 23.
  12. Carl N. Degler, *Out of Our Past: The Forces that Shaped Modern America*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 424.
  13. Winfred Blevins, *Give Your Heart to the Hawks* (New York: Avon Books, 1976), 269.
  14. Wood, *Monuments to Jedediah Smith*, 9.
  15. Dale, *Ashley-Smith Explorations and Discovery of a Central Route to the Pacific*, 301.
  16. Morgan, *Jedediah Smith*, 177.
  17. *Ibid.*, 179.
  18. Don Berry, *A Majority of Scoundrels: An Informal History of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), 72.
  19. Neihardt, *The Splendid Wayfaring*, 145.
  20. Billington and Ridge, *Westward Expansion*, 496.
  21. Morgan, *Jedediah Smith*, 7.
  22. Francis P. Farquhar, "Jedediah Smith and the First Crossing of the Sierra Nevada," *Sierra Club Bulletin* 28 (June 1943): 2, reprinted in Frederic R. Gunsky, ed., *Fur Trade Series 1* (Stockton, Calif.: The Jedediah Smith Society, 1990).
  23. Charles L. Camp, ed., *James Clyman, American Frontiersman, 1792-1881: The Adventures of a Trapper and Covered-Wagon Emigrant as Told in His Own Reminiscences and Diaries* (San Francisco: The California Historical Society Special Publication # 3, 1928): 10.
  24. George Wycherley Kirkman, "Jedediah Smith, Pathfinder," *Los Angeles Times*, March 14, 1926, p. 22.
  25. Edwin L. Sabin, *Kit Carson Days, 1809-1868*, rev. ed., 2 vols. (New York: The Press of the Pioneers, Inc., 1935), quoting Appendix 1, "Captain Jedediah Strong Smith, A Eulogy" (June 1832) from *Illinois Magazine*, 822.
  26. Letter, Bruce S. Howard, Save-the-Redwoods League President, San Francisco, October 27, 1986.
  27. Morgan, *Jedediah Smith*, 7.
  28. Berry, *Majority of Scoundrels*, 86.
  29. Dale, *Ashley-Smith Exploration and Discovery of a Central Route*, 313.
  30. Sabin, *Kit Carson Days*, 823.
  31. Blevins, *Give Your Heart to the Hawks*, 229.
  32. Lee Davis, "Jedediah Smith in Northwest California," paper, The Jedediah Smith Society meeting, April 20, 1991, University of the Pacific, Stockton, Calif.
  33. Cleland, *Reckless Breed of Men*, 84, quoting Charles Kelly in vol. 3 of the *Utah Historical Quarterly*.
  34. Thomas V. DiBacco, "On Horatio Alger," *The Christian Science Monitor* (Sept. 4, 1985): 15.
  35. Morgan, *Jedediah Smith*, 323-24.
  36. Dixon Wecter, *The Hero in America: A Chronicle of Hero-Worship* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941; reprinted, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), 11; Sidney Hood, *The Hero in History: A Study in Limitation and Possibility* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 323.
  37. Cleland, *Reckless Breed of Men*, 58.
  38. Morgan, *Jedediah Smith*, 84.
  39. *Ibid.*, 309.
  40. Donald Culross Peattie, *Jedediah Smith* (Stockton, Calif.: Pacific Center for Western Studies, n.d.), 6.
  41. Joseph J. Wheeler, "Why Jedediah Smith?" *Castor Canadensis* (Winter 1994): 2.
  42. Brooks, *Southwest Expedition of Jedediah S. Smith* (Bison Book ed.), 27.
  43. Joseph J. Wheeler, "Jedediah Smith and the Power of Myth," unpublished manuscript, 24.

---

*Richard L. Dyer is instructor of American History (emeritus) at Columbia College in California. He has been a student and instructor of the American West for over thirty years. A version of this paper was presented at the 1991 OCTA convention.*

## The Oregon Trail—Revisited

by Louis Kirkaldie

**I T WAS 1864, ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-TWO SUMMERS** ago, that Franklin Luther Kirkaldie walked alongside his team of six oxen pulling a covered wagon from Des Moines, Iowa, to Virginia City, Idaho Territory (Montana). The wagon train that he joined spent about four months in the journey.

Kirkaldie was born in Rutland, Vermont, in 1828. He became a marble cutter and carver; however, the dust proved detrimental to his health. He moved to Illinois, and married Elizabeth Risley in 1850. He took up farming, but he was never very successful at it. He moved his wife and four children to Des Moines. There, he heard of the discovery of gold in what was to become the State of Montana. (In 1862 the great Montana gold boom began.) He apparently caught the “fever” and decided to fulfill a dream. Wife and children were sent to live with her mother back in Illinois.

By 1864, nearly three hundred thousand emigrants had followed the Oregon Trail west through Iowa, Nebraska, and Wyoming. They had followed the sediment-laden Platte River which the emigrants described as “Too thick to drink and too thin to plow.” The year 1864 was also of importance in the history of overland emigration. According to Merrill Mattes in *The Great Platte River Road*, this was the year of heaviest civilian migration west during the Civil War years.

Why did Kirkaldie go west rather than join troops fighting in the Civil War? Simply put—we do not know. Federal conscription covered all males between the ages of twenty and forty-five. Since Kirkaldie was thirty-six years of age in 1864, he certainly would have fit into the broad federal draft mandate. There may have been other circumstances, however. The man had a wife and four young children, and his lungs had been damaged from his earlier exposure to marble dust. Whatever the reason, Kirkaldie went west rather than to war. During the journey, he wrote letters to his wife. These did not state that anyone in the train died, or was seriously injured during the journey. Neither did they have to fight off any Indians—although there were Sioux uprisings along the Platte in 1864.

Kirkaldie spent the next five years in Montana farming and

mining part time. His family was reunited with him in Helena in 1869. Dorothy M. Johnson, in an article entitled “The Patience of Frank Kirkaldie,” published in *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* (Vol. 21, Winter 1971), gives an account of his life during the period of separation from his family. (Kirkaldie’s daughter, Nellie Gray, presented biographical material and Kirkaldie’s personal papers to the Montana Historical Society in Helena.)

At one time in the past, my daughter Naida, noted that her great-great-grandfather wrote many letters to his wife describing his trip along the Oregon Trail and Bridger Cutoff. She suggested, and I agreed wholeheartedly, that we make the same trip, by auto, of course, to compare what Kirkaldie had written to the present.

Following are Kirkaldie’s letters to his wife, some of which have been abridged. They described the trip in 1864. Paralleling these are letters from our trip in the summer of 1995.

*Camp 20 Miles West of Lewis and 30 Miles E. of Council Bluffs, Sunday, May 15, 1864* My Dear Wife: You will see that we have made some progress since I wrote you a week ago today from Adel [no letter was found from Adel]. We have come since Monday morning about 95 miles, or an average of 16 miles a day. We had a good deal of rain while at Adel. . . .

We left there on Monday morning and found some very bad mud-holes. Three of our five teams were stuck from one to three times during the day. . . . we only made 4 miles that day.

We had just left a little town called Redfield. . . . when in passing through some timber the track was very crooked and rough to avoid mud, etc. Burns in driving down a steep sidling place overturned his wagon down the hill. . . . His wagon was not as wide as ours and the load was piled up higher, which rendered it more liable to overturn. Fortunately Mrs. B. was on horse-back at the time or she might have been hurt. . . .

Yesterday we came about 22 miles from a beautiful camping ground a mile or two East of Lewis.

We are encamped for the Sabbath on the bank of a pretty little stream called "Silver Creek" [West Nishnabotna Creek]—water is clear as crystal and soft as rain water.

For the last 2 or 3 days we have come through a country very wild and broken and some of the way our road lay over a complete succession of hills. We would climb a long steep hill only to descend again to the bottom on the other side—cross perhaps a little stream and oftener not and then climb another hill at least equal to its illustrious predecessor and so on for miles. . . .

We expect to reach the Missouri River on Tuesday—it is only 30 miles from here and will be two easy drives.

We have probably fed the last grain to our cattle as the grass is at last getting quite good. . . . We have paid all the way from 50 cents to \$1.25 per bushel of corn. . . . and hay. . . . has sold for 75 cents to \$1.50 per cwt. . . .

We commenced receiving news of the great Army movement in Virginia about a week ago and since then there has been awful fighting and has resulted as far as we can learn favorable to the Union Armies. . . .

You must not forget to send the recipes for cooking. I would like very much to see you and the dear children. . . . Give them my love and write me all about them and how the twins are getting along. . . . Yours, F. L. Kirkaldie.

*Monday.* Dear Fanny [ten years of age] and Bub [four years of age], As we are having some nice smooth road this morning, I thought I would try to write you a little riding along in the wagon.

I am driving six oxen yoked up to a large covered wagon such as we saw on our way to Grinnell. I do not ride much but walk nearly all the way so as to see that the oxen all go right. When night comes I fix up my bed in the wagon and sleep there all night and in the morning we have to get up about as soon as it is light so as to feed our cattle and be ready to start again. . . .

Tomorrow [May 16, 1864] we expect to get to Council Bluffs. Mama will show it to you on the map.

I hope you will be kind and pleasant to each other and help Mama all you can. I look at your pictures often and wish I could see you. . . . Your Papa.

*Fremont, Nebraska, Monday, June 26, 1995—Dear Wife: Daughter Naida, and granddaughter Erin met me at the Des Moines, Iowa, Airport. Later during dinner we toasted to success of our coming adventure. Great-grandfather Kirkaldie could not have toasted the success of his journey, at least with wine. The manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages had been prohibited by law in Iowa since 1855. We began our journey at 7:30 A. M. today at Court Avenue*

*in Des Moines. It was exciting leaving from the same street as did F. L. Kirkaldie in 1864. Court Avenue was not filled with teams and wagons, but with automobiles during rush hour traffic. We had to be careful of the speeding vehicles while photographing the area.*



*The author's daughter, Naida, before the courthouse at Des Moines. (The author)*

*We followed the Oregon Trail (U.S. Route 6) just as F. L. Kirkaldie did one hundred thirty-one years ago. The hills and valleys have not changed. There are still small streams in every valley, but the wild prairie no longer exists. The hills and valleys are sown to corn and soybeans, which grow in*



*A valley on U.S. Route 6, west of Oakland, Iowa. (The author)*

profusion. The weather was much the same as described in 1864. We drove all day in the rain; however, we did not have to negotiate the mud since we traveled a paved highway. We arrived in Council Bluffs in the late afternoon. In 1864 the wagon train traveled this same distance in fifteen days. It seems nearly miraculous for us to travel in fifteen or twenty minutes the distance the wagon train traveled in a day.

Sixty years before the wagon train of my great-grandfather, Lewis and Clark had parlayed with the Otoe and Missouri Indians in August 1804 at Council Bluffs. We took a short detour from the Oregon Trail and visited the Lewis and Clark Monument. We were tired, but drove to Fremont, Nebraska, and found a motel instead of camping, as did great-grandfather. We did not have to find feed and water for oxen, or cook our food, because we were met by friends at Fremont who took us to a lovely place for dinner. Yours truly, L. Kirkaldie.

*Camp near Bridgeport, Neb. Terry.* [town is not shown on present maps] 22nd May, 1864—My dear Wife: Inasmuch as we are encamped near a P. O. and it is Sunday I will drop you a few lines. I finished my last letter to you in the wagon in the streets of Omaha. Were very much hurried there as our teams had not a mouthful to eat that day and we wanted to do what trading, etc. there was to be done and get out where we could turn out the cattle. . . .

We encamped that night about 3 miles out from Omaha (By the way—I like Omaha very much—it is decidedly a nice town.) . . .

Yesterday we came 20 miles to this place and are encamped on the bank of the Elkhorn River. . . .

Eastern Nebraska strongly resembles Western Iowa in its very rolling prairies—its frequent clear streams of water, and its many nice springs. The streams run through quite deep valleys many feet below the surface of the high prairies and the bed of the streams is usually from six to ten feet below the bottom of the valley with shelving, crumbling banks, so steep that we often times have found it difficult to find a place where we could drive our oxen down to drink. . . .

We caught our first glimpse yesterday afternoon of the valley of the Platte—or the 'plains' and the Platte river in the distance. We had been traveling up hill and down as usual nearly all day, when about 4 or 5 o'clock we came upon one of the finest views I have ever seen in the West. From the edge of the bluffs we could look down on the 'Elkhorn' winding its way in a southerly direction, skirted with timber and its banks sprinkled here and there with camps of emigrants and their cattle feeding on the adjacent plains—the little town (of a few houses) nestled at the foot of the hill by the bridge formed the foreground of the picture; well off to the West stretched the 'plains' as far as the eye could reach and at a distance of probably eight or ten miles we could catch

sight at different points along its course of the water of the Platte glistening in the sun, and looking like little lakes away on the prairie, apparently without banks and without timber. We could see it at different points for probably 15 miles or more. . . .

*Shoemaker's Point [near Grand Island], Neb. Terry. 29th May, 1864*—My dear Wife: I wrote you one week ago today. . . . Today we are 120 miles farther on our way. . . . We have had a tolerable warm and very dry and dusty week. Every night we have been covered with dust and dirt; but every night nearly we have been to some creek or to the Platte and washed from head to foot so that we have slept very clean and comfortable.

I have been disappointed in the country of the Platte Valley so far. . . . We found it a broad, rapid, and very muddy stream full of islands—nearly all of which are timbered. The greatest share of the timber along the Platte being on the islands. It is mostly cotton-wood and willow. There is however some cedar and some ash.

The road thus far has been quite well settled. . . .

The river is high and still rising. It seems odd to be traveling through such a dry and dusty land and see a river flowing along by us and its water growing higher and more turbid every day. But occasion of the high water is the melting of the snow some hundreds of miles above us in the mountains.

We expect to be opposite Ft. Kearney [*sic*] on Wed., June 1st. when we expect to receive a letter from you. . . . at Kearney we shall leave the regular Salt Lake road and I suppose there will be few if any chances to write you until we reach Laramie. We shall probably reach that point from the 20th to the 25th of June. . . . Good Bye, F. L. Kirkaldie [no letters written in June were found].



*In 1995, the Platte was seen flooded with snowmelt, as it also was described in 1864. This view shows the river near Gothenburg, Nebraska. (The author)*

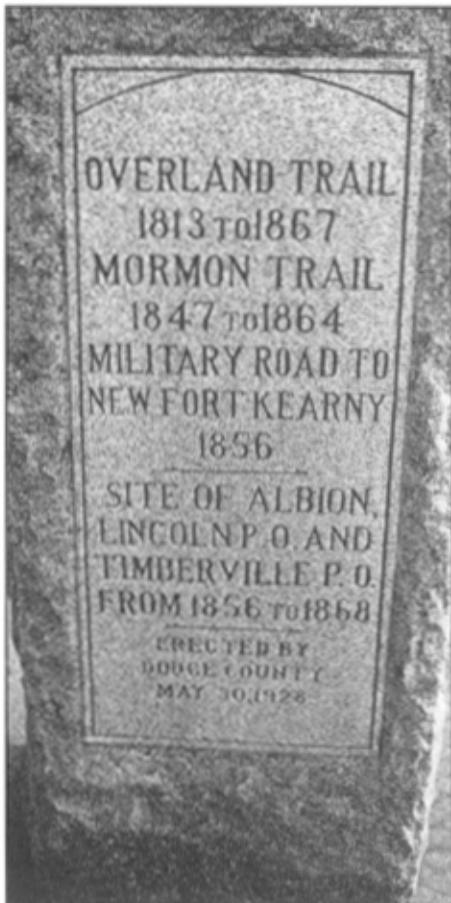
Ogallala, Nebraska, Tuesday, June 27, 1995—Dear Wife: We drove from Fremont to Ogallala today, a distance of about 320 miles, which must have taken the wagon train about twenty days.

We followed the Platte River. It was near flood stage and was filled with sediment and the same color brown as described by great-grandfather in 1864. He deduced that the high waters were caused by snowmelt in the mountains to the west. According to the newspapers, snowmelt in the mountains is causing near flooding today. The islands are still covered with trees. Undoubtedly there are more trees in the area today than in 1864. In 1864 most of the trees, except those on islands, probably had been cut down for firewood used by the emigrants. Besides the trees reported by great-grandfather, we saw maples, locusts, pines, russian olives in the towns, and as shelter belts around farm buildings around farm buildings. Most of the area is planted to corn and soybeans. It is significant to note that many years before the coming of the white man the Pawnee Indians grew corn, beans, and squash in the area.

We saw several Oregon Trail and Mormon Trail monuments along the way. We also drove to Ft. Kearny. It was a military outpost for 23 years, beginning in 1848. It was to protect travelers from Indian attacks. It was also a stage station and Pony Express home station. The Pony Express operated from 1860 to 1861. We also stopped at Gothenburg another Pony Express Station closed three



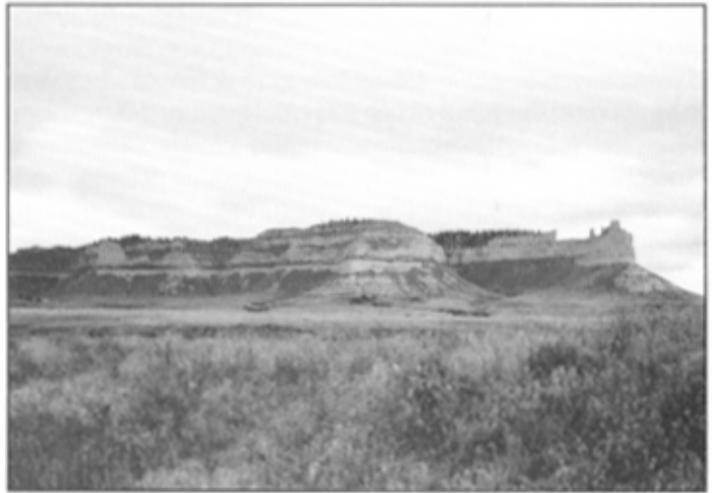
The author's daughter and granddaughter stand outside the Pony Express Station at Gothenburg, Nebraska. The Pony Express was no more by the time Franklin Kirkaldie came this way in 1864. (The author)



An Overland Trail and Mormon Trail marker, erected in Dodge County, Nebraska.. (The author)

years before great-grandfather K. passed through this area.

Unfortunately, it appears that great-grandfather did not write any letters in June of 1864, or they were lost. I would be very interested in his thoughts on the journey up the North Platte River to Casper, Wyoming. The Platte splits into the North and South Platte rivers at Ogallala. Very Truly yours, L. Kirkaldie.



What Franklin Kirkaldie may have written about Scott's Bluff has been lost since no letters have been found from the month of June when he probably passed this trail landmark. (The author)

Platte River—50 miles above Laramie Sun. Jul. 3, 1864—My Dear Wife: I did not expect to commence another letter to you so soon, but as it is Sunday and your birthday I thought I would write, although I shall not probably have

an opportunity to send it until we reach the end of our journey. . . .

We came past Ft. Laramie on last Tuesday the 28th, and on Wed. we entered the Black Hills [Laramie Range] and have been winding and climbing around among them ever since. There does not seem to be much regularity about them as far as ranges are concerned but seem to be a mass of hills and mountains thrown promiscuously together in some places rising into high ragged sharp peaks or rock and in other places they are only moderate hills and a great portion of them are sprinkled over with a scattering growth of pine and cedar. The highest peaks are on the South side of the river which flows through the midst of them, having in some places high perpendicular rocks for banks and in others there are quite wide bottoms between the bluffs on one of which we are camped today.

Laramie Peak—the highest point in the Black Hills is quite a high [10,274 feet] mountain. We have been in sight of it for the last sixty miles, . . . . For the last sixty or seventy miles. . . we have been obliged to 'shin' around a good deal to get feed for our cattle. The emigration is so large and the country so barren that what feed grows along the road is kept picked close to the ground. . . .

There is good feed here and I believe the intention is to remain here until Tuesday and celebrate the 4th with due ceremony. To be sure we have no artillery, but we have plenty of small arms which we can discharge if necessary. Dr. Hull. . . . is expected to deliver the oration and ladies are to furnish the refreshments. The chief beverage on the occasion will be water from the Platte River reduced with coffee. . . .

Since we entered the Black Hills wild sage has made its appearance in great abundance. . . . The leaf has considerable resemblance to the cultivated variety both in shape and flavor—is a whiter green—but here it grows into quite a bush two to three feet high, some of the stalks at the ground being as thick as your wrist. It is used on some parts of the journey as fuel. . . .

I wish I could spend the evening with you and the children. But a thousand miles is too far to go for that.

*About 80 miles above Laramie, 7th July, 1864 - We celebrated the 4th in very good style. . . . Our train was the principal mover in getting up the celebration, but the other trains that were encamped around us participated. . . . and there was a very respectable crowd.*

We were encamped near a grove of cotton-woods and we constructed a nice shade. . . . with boughs and green leaves. Burns had a nice little flag which was raised. . . . Then. . . we got up a very good table some 30 or 40 feet long.

The tall Vermonter (Aiken). . . . was Marshall. . . . and wore a nice red sash and carried a staff. . . . He formed us

into a procession about noon. . . . headed by a fife and drum. Next came the President. . . . [and] the Chaplain and the reader of the Declaration of Independence; then the ladies two and two, and. . . the rest of the crowd. We marched to the martial music a short distance into the grove where the usual exercises. . . the prayer, the reading of the Declaration. . . with music appropriate to the occasion from two violins and a flute. . . . and the singing of the 'The Red, White and Blue', after which we marched back. . . . partook of a very good dinner, . . . and then the table was all taken away and dancing was the order of the day until nearly sun-down. There could [be] two sets dance at once and some room to spare under our shade.

During the day. . . two more trains came in and camped just above us in the grove and in the evening the dancing . . . resumed under the branches of a wide spread cotton-wood tree upon the lower limbs of which were suspended seven or eight lanterns to light up the 'hall', . . . . There were a good many ladies about and some of them were very well dressed.

I suppose we have but a few miles more to travel on the Platte river as we leave the valley a short distance above here. . . . We have followed the Platte about six hundred miles and now that it has come down or rather we have followed it up to where it is a reasonable size and where the water is tolerably clear and cold with pebbly bottom we should regret to leave it only that the fact that we are leaving it indicates that we are at last making some progress in our journey.

How are the children? Do the babies talk any yet? It is rather rough to be separated so long from my family. . . .

We have just heard that. . . . Grant has captured Richmond [Louisiana]. . . . Very truly, F. L. K.

*Casper (Red Buttes), Wyoming, Wednesday, June 28, 1995 - Dear Wife: Today we drove from Ogallala, Nebraska, to Casper a distance the wagon train would have covered in about fifteen to twenty days. We stopped at an area called Windlass Hill on the trail. The hill was so steep that when my great-grandfather made the trip many of the wagons had to be lowered down a windlass. Today the ruts made by the wagons are huge gullies thirty to forty feet wide, and ten to twenty feet in depth.*

*A few miles west of Lewellan, Nebraska, we came across some modern pioneers. A group of about thirty riders, along with a chuck wagon, on Route 26, moving a herd of about one hundred head of cattle from Texas to Montana. In 1866, Texas cattleman Nelson Story drove a thousand longhorns through the area to Montana. Today's "cowpersons" had paid to make the drive in contrast to the olden days when the cowpokes were paid to drive cattle. The sheriff's deputies were directing traffic. We saw many campers and*

*RVs. Apparently most of the cowpersons did not sleep on the ground rolled in a saddle blanket as was done in olden days. It was certainly a contrasting scene compared to that of 1866, except that there were probably fewer riders during the original drive.*

*Later we passed Chimney Rock and Scott's Bluff. It would have been interesting to have read what my great-grandfather thought of these famous landmarks on the Oregon Trail, but he probably passed these in June; and as I wrote before, we have no letters from June.*

*About three miles before we reached the Wyoming border, we came to the site of "The Great Smoke." In September of 1851 an estimated eight to twelve thousand Plains Indians, representing ten tribes gathered to sign "The Horse Creek Treaty" (also known as the Fort Laramie Treaty) with the U.S. Government. "The Great Smoke" and treaty signing were to have taken place at Ft. Laramie, about thirty miles northwest. However, it was moved south where there was sufficient feed for the great number of horses. There is a high probability that my Assiniboine Indian ancestors were at the signing. In exchange for "goods" the Indians promised to allow free passage of emigrants. Thirteen years later, great-grandfather F. L. K. was one of the emigrants.*

*The State of Wyoming apparently was named after the Wyoming Valley in Pennsylvania, because the word comes from the Leni Lenape (Delaware Indian) language and means "upon the great plain."*

*We arrived at Casper and were met by my brother John and his wife Norma, of Laramie. We had a very good visit and great dinner together. Yours Truly, L. K.*

*Bridger's Cut-off among the Big Horn Mountains, July 21, 1864—My dear Wife: I have just returned from a twenty miles tramp with Capt. Stafford to look for feed and water for our stock and to take a look at our road ahead. You will see by the date of this that I am on a new route. . . . which has been opened. . . . Major Bridger having conducted the first train over the route and opened the road.*

*I have left Munger who has gone around the old road via South Pass and Ft. Hall which is at least 200 miles further than the route we are on and if he does not make better time than he did for 150 miles before we reached the cut-off. . . . he will be until the middle of Sept. or the 1st of Oct. in reaching Virginia City [Montana]. . . . I tried to persuade him to go the 'cut-off' but I suppose Mrs. M. was determined to go the other road and he was inflexible. . . .*

*We found on reaching the place that there had been two new routes opened called respectively Bozeman's and Bridger's Cut-off. And as near as we could ascertain a majority of the Idaho emigration were taking one or the*

*other of these two routes. Under these circumstances I did not feel under obligations. . . to please Mrs. M. . . . So I put my two yoke of cows with Burn's teams and put my freight in his wagons and am traveling with him. . . .*

*I will now proceed to tell you what I have been able to ascertain in regard to these two 'cut-offs.' The first that we came to, or Bozeman's, leaves the Platte at the lower bridge, about 140 miles above Laramie, . . .*

*The other, or Bridger's, is much more popular, probably from the fact that Bridger is an old and well known mountaineer, having spent his whole life among the mountains and the Indians. . . . He holds a commission of Major in the U.S. army.*

*His route leaves the old road. . . about 8 miles west of the 'Red Buttes' [Casper, Wyoming]. It takes a N.W. course through the western portion of the Big Horn Mts. and crosses in its course Wind river and some of its tributaries and the Yellowstone pretty well up toward its head waters and reaches Virginia City 350 miles. . . from the Red Buttes.*

*Bridger started with a large train in the latter part of May—he has been heard from at the Yellowstone river. . . . which they reached in safety and were. . . . prospecting for gold.*

*We left the Red Buttes. . . on Wed. morning, July 13th—just ten weeks after leaving Des Moines. . . .*

*We traveled about 12 miles on the new road the first day and just at dark reached a little creek where we found first rate feed for our stock and on Thursday we lay over to give them a chance to rest and recruit—to wait for some more wagons which were expected and to organize our train.*

*Our old Captain Stafford was unanimously elected Captain and the train comprises seventy wagons and about 125 men, and I will here observe that we think we have one of the best men for Captain that could be found. . . . He is always kind and considerate. . . . and is firm in carrying out any measures which his judgment tells him are for the interest of the train. . . . And there is not a man. . . . who would not fight for him at a moment's warning if necessary.*

*The first 60 or 70 miles of the new road passes over a country which is as near a desert as anything I ever wish to see. We had been passing over a very barren country ever since we left Ft. Laramie—a good share of the way nothing appeared. . . . but sage brush, prickly pear [cactus], and grease wood—but here even these were not visible. . . . There was absolutely no grass or water, except at a few points where we camped and we were obliged to make some long drives without feed or water, 20 and 25 miles. The road, however, was excellent and the grades easy and the water over this part of our road was all impregnated with some mineral substances, . . . it tasted as though there was salt, sulphur and iron all represented in it. The banks of the streams and the ground over which the water had passed was encrusted or covered with a white substance [mainly*

sodium salts] which in many places whitened the ground like snow. . . .

The next day we supposed we had a drive of only 12 miles before us and did not start very early, but on reaching the 12 mile station we found the water dried up and but little grass and so we drove on some 10 miles further—driving until nine or ten o'clock in the evening—there it was no better. We were obliged to dig holes in the bed of the stream to get some poor salty water for our cattle and tied them to the wagons without feed until daylight, when we hooked up and drove about 3 miles where we found feed and water.

The next drive of ten miles brought us to a creek of very good water and better feed and since these very essential articles have not been wanting.

*Monday, Aug. 1st*— . . . we expect to meet a train today—Bridger and a company with him on their way back East and I will send what I have written by them, . . . Love to yourself and the children. . . Yours as ever, F. L. K.

*August 1st, P.M. 1864*—We are still laying here and Bridger and train have come up and are laying here too. There are probably 15 to 20 men in it who are on their way back to the States from Virginia City. They talk very discouragingly in regard to the prospects there and say they will be perfectly satisfied to quit gold hunting if they can only get back to their homes.

They say that there is only that one gulch by Virginia City that pays anything, that there is twenty men to every day's work there is to do and more flocking in all the time and I have not the least doubt that people who are going there nearly destitute of money or provision will suffer the coming winter.

I cannot say where you will hear from me next—it is hard to tell what is best, but I cannot make up my mind to turn back yet. I have staked my all on this cast and I do not feel as though I could abandon the thing without a thorough trial, inasmuch as I am so far on the way. Still if I become entirely satisfied that I cannot succeed out this way I shall give it up at once—if I can, because my family have the first and more important claim upon me, . . .

I will again bid you Good-bye, expecting a long letter or more than one when we reach Virginia City, which is still 250 miles distant. F. L. K.

*Billings, Montana, Thursday, June 29, 1995*—Dear Wife: After bidding farewell to John and Norma we departed on the last leg of our journey. We followed, as near as possible, the Bridger Cutoff.

*The area we passed through after leaving Casper was*

*rolling prairie covered with grass, sagebrush, and greasewood in spots. Elevation increased gradually, but it would be easy going for wagons. By the time we reached Waltman [Wyoming], we had seen at least two hundred pronghorn antelope. F. L. K. never once mentioned antelope, buffalo, or any type of game animals. Apparently few, if any, existed near the trail where thousands of emigrants passed yearly.*

*F. L. K. mentioned the color of the surface soil in areas being completely white. The soils in some of this area are very high in sodium salts. Many of these areas drain into the stream system which would explain the salty taste of the water that he mentioned. Also we noticed that on the present-day map two streams near Lost Cabin are named "Alkali Creek" and "Badwater Creek." They probably were named by some of the emigrants.*

*We followed Route 20 down Big Horn River canyon which was avoided by the Bridger Cutoff. The "Cutoff" crossed the Bighorn River just south of Worland [Wyoming]. From there it continued over the Pryor Mountains into Montana where it followed the Clarke Fork Yellowstone to the Yellowstone River.*

*Montana is a Spanish word meaning mountainous. It is also called the Land of the Shining Mountains, and became a U.S. Territory in December 1864, only a few months after F. L. K. arrived in Virginia City. Because of the wealth of gold and silver, it is also known as the Treasure State. Most people today know it as the Big Sky Country which was the title of a book about the days of the mountain men.*

*It is unfortunate that no letters were found from F. L. K. describing the remainder of the trip to Virginia City. I would be very interested in his observations of the area which they traversed.*

*I thought that it was highly unusual that throughout the entire trip F. L. K. only once mentioned the word "Indian." It was in relation to Bridger. . . . "having spent his whole life among the mountains and the Indians." In many books and movies, wagon trains were always being "circled" to protect the "Pioneers" from attacking Indians.*

*In a way, because of the method of travel, I felt that we were cheated because we did not have the time to observe all aspects of the trail. We had to keep to a schedule. On the other hand, I am sure that great-grandfather would have preferred to have reached his destination much sooner than was possible at that time. Hope to be home soon. It is only four hours by plane. Yours Truly, L. K.*

**Louis Kirkaldie** grew up in Montana and graduated from San Jose State University, San Jose, California, with a degree in geology. Before retirement, he worked for more than thirty years for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. One of his hobbies includes writing.

# OVERLAND

The California Emigrant Trail  
of 1841-1870

Greg MacGregor

A vivid and intimate picture of what the journey over the emigrant trail was like, along with the ironies in the landscape of the late-twentieth-century West.

83 duotones, 4 maps

Cloth: \$75.00 Paper: \$37.50



Deep sandstone cuts, Gaerney, Wyoming,  
from *Overland*

UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO PRESS

At bookstores, or call 1 800-249-7737 FAX 1-800-622-8667



## THE ARTHUR H. CLARK COMPANY *Announces a Major New Series*



### NEWS OF THE PLAINS AND ROCKIES 1803-1865

EDITED BY DAVID A. WHITE

Original narratives of overland travel and adventure selected from the Wagner-Camp and Becker bibliography of Western Americana

*Volume I: Early Explorers 1803-1812, Fur Hunters 1813-1847 Now Available*

*Volume II: Santa Fe Adventurers, 1818-1843, Settlers, 1819-1865 Available Nov. 1*

A series in eight volumes, each volume approx. 400 pages, bound in cloth, 7 x 10 inches, foil stamped on cover and spine. \$45.00 per volume.

*The earliest and most important accounts of travel on the Great Plains and in the Rocky Mountains are gathered this new 8-volume series. Each of the 168 narratives has been selected by the editor from the premier bibliography on Western exploration and travel: *The Plains & the Rockies*.*

Many are reprinted for the first time. These rare and vital documents from 1803 to 1865 are transcribed with supporting text and maps to be cherished by the historian and collector. Call or write for further details and complete list of contents.

**Series Discount:** All customers subscribing to the full eight volumes will qualify for a 20% discount from the retail price.

*\*The Plains & the Rockies: A Critical Bibliography of Exploration, Adventure and Travel in the American West, 1800-1865, by Henry R. Wagner and Charles L. Camp, issued in several printings (1920, 1937, 1953) and revised and enlarged in a fourth edition by Robert H. Becker (1982).*

**The Arthur H. Clark Company 1-800-842-9286**

# REVIEWS

## **Adventures in the Santa Fe Trade, 1844-1847**

James Josiah Webb. Edited by Ralph P. Bieber (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995) 301 pages, photographs, maps, introduction by Mark L. Gardner; \$12.00, paperback.

*Reviewed by Gerald A. Motsinger, director of Johnson County Archives, Olathe, Kansas.*

The life of James Josiah Webb is a testimony to the lure and potential rewards of capitalism. He, like many of his contemporaries, turned from unexciting and less than successful earlier ventures to the promised rewards of the West. Even though his initial trip proved financially unsuccessful, the sense of adventure and promises of eventual prosperity held him firmly to his newly chosen career. Webb's activities during three turbulent years on the Santa Fe and Chihuahua trails are recounted in this reprint of the frequently quoted 1931 classic.

Written from the perspective of thirty years later, Webb recounts, with astonishing detail, the events and individuals he encountered during a time when boundaries were disputed and the shading between legal and illegal dealing disappeared. Although he continued in the trade until the Civil War, it is clear that his later success was built on the lessons learned in these formative years.

While the elapsed time between the actual events and the author's recording may make the accuracy of the accounts somewhat suspect, it does allow the author the luxury of accurately assessing his

actions without regard for personal vanity. This personal honesty is evident in his recollections of a failed first attempt to shoot a buffalo, fleeing for his life after being surrounded by converging herds. This ability to report his own fallibility lends credence to the dangers faced throughout his narrative.

Webb fills the account with details of business as it was conducted in this unstructured period. Financing, purchase of goods, selection of animals and wagons, and hiring of necessary labor are all covered, allowing the reader to sense the busy and uncertain nature of the trade on the frontier. It quickly becomes obvious that the Santa Fe trade was not a business for the fainthearted or conservative by nature. Nor did the risks end with outfitting but instead existed daily throughout the journey, often requiring drastic changes in route or business alliances.

The names of individuals with whom he dealt such as Samuel Owens and James Aull are particularly significant to historians in the Kansas City area since a sizable portion of these men's papers are among the collections of the Jackson County Historical Society.

An excellent introduction by Mark Gardner brings to this edition the added significance of current scholarship. He discusses the location and extent of Webb's archival legacy and provides information on the author's later life to create a context in which to assess his youthful enterprises. The inclusion of Ralph Bieber's 1930 preface and introduction is extremely helpful. The reprint of this narrative still rings with the authenticity of the original. The editing is sparse and informative yet never intrusive.

*Adventures in the Santa Fe Trade* is an excellent narration which not only is presented in an orderly manner but also achieves the ultimate goal of most diaries. It literally brings the character to life. Webb, throughout this entire work, comes forth as a warm, intelligent, and resourceful individual. He is the essence of a man of his time, fully capable of adapting to the everchanging circumstances of the frontier. Suffice it to say that again seeing this account in print is a joyous occasion that will delight confirmed trails enthusiasts and capture new advocates in the future.

## Two Generations of Oregon Pioneers: A Reconstructed History of the Overland Journey to the Oregon Country and Oregon Settlement Life of the David D. and Hannah Davis Family

Charles George Davis (Aloha, Ore.: n.p., 1993) 264 pages, photographs, maps, bibliography, picture index.

*Reviewed by Merle Wells*, a founding member of Oregon-California Trails Association and associated with the Idaho State Historical Society.

This extended account of how David D. Davis and his pioneer Oregon family reached their Willamette Valley destination in 1847 continues with a summary of their experience after they got there. Contributing a substantial amount of useful information concerning emigrant travel and achievement in Oregon, it has emerged in a tentative provisional edition prior to a projected release in an improved, completed form in 1996. When some necessary revisions are identified and more documentation is assembled, a definitive publication is projected. Circulation of advance copies is designed to clear out errors and provide a superior edition of a volume that has been in preparation for a long time.

An extended context of Oregon exploration and fur trade, coupled with an explanation of preparation for emigrant wagon travel, precedes a detailed account of an actual 1847 trip. All aspects of such a venture are illustrated with incidents typical of a small party that included David Davis

and his enterprising family. Fortunately, Lester Hulin, who had come west with John C. Fremont (but not to California or Oregon) and served as guide for Davis' group, kept a precise diary that identified his activity and precise route from St. Joseph west. (A 1959 Lane County Pioneer Historical Society reproduction of Hulin's thirty-page diary still is available for \$9.00.) Incorporating Hulin's information, Charles Davis provides a daily report of his ancestors' overland travel. Their Oregon Trail route took them from South Pass via Fort Bridger and Fort Hall to Raft River, after which they followed California pioneers across Nevada to utilize Jesse Applegate's 1846 connection to upper Willamette Valley. Since their Applegate route was only a year old when they came by, their experience along that segment provides particularly useful information.

Approximately half of this volume deals with emigrant life in Oregon after a long season of difficult travel—in this case from

1 June until early November. By that time, David and Hannah Davis had run entirely out of supplies, so they had to make a canoe to float some seventy miles down Willamette River to Salem. (Fall rain had made any more wagon travel impossible.) Then, they returned to set up a farm not far north of Corvallis and west of Albany. This account includes a log of information concerning Applegate Road location where they settled, along with important features of pioneer life there. All of it is illustrated with specific features of emigrant experience of a family that encountered hazards and problems typical of that time. This approach clearly is useful. Some substantial corrections (such as offering a California Trail map near City of Rocks, indicating quite a few miles of inaccurate route—for a text segment less injured by error) certainly are needed, as its author clearly has noted. But his approach and projected final product of an improved version have a good deal of merit.

## Independence Rock, The Great Record of the Desert

Robert Spurrier Ellison (City of Casper, Wyoming, and the Natrona County Historical Society) illustrations.

## California Wagon Train Lists: Vol. 1, April 5, 1849 to October 20, 1852

Louis Rassmussen. A volume of the Ship and Wagon Train Series. San Francisco Historical Records; \$29.95

*Reviewed by Merrill J. Mattes* for the *Overland Journal* a few months before his death in 1996.

This paperback history of famous Independence Rock on the Oregon-California Trail is welcome recognition of the landmark that Ellison describes as a "historic Shrine to which future generations will refer with veneration."

Nobody who is well informed about western trails will argue with the author about his assessment of the historical importance of Independence Rock, certainly among the most famous trail landmarks, and certainly in the same class with

other great trail landmarks such as Chimney Rock, Scott's Bluff, and South Pass.

While there is little that is new in this booklet, it is a most welcome contribution by the Natrona County Historical Society

to the popular understanding and appreciation of one of the greatest of all overland trail landmarks.

There are numerous illustrations here, most of which (if not all) have been taken from earliest publications about one of the best known of all Oregon-California Trail sites.

The amazing thing about *California Wagon Train Lists* is that it seems to give a whole new dimension of insightful knowledge about overland covered wagon emigrants traveling up the Platte Valley corridor via South Pass to Utah, Oregon, and California. For author Rassmussen, over-

land diaries are of less importance than compiling statistics of travel to California from 1850 to 1890, including those traveling by ship as well as overland. Thousands of names are identified, as well as who they traveled with and their dates of travel. For example, a name checklist is given of a group who left Kanessville, Iowa, on 5 April 1850. That seems to be the pattern throughout this book—mostly names of individuals, where they came from, and when they arrived at their destination. There is nothing, however, about the geography between departure and arrival.

After sampling a few of the entries, I

was hard put to find any connection between this book and my *Platte River Road Narratives*. Nevertheless, this book should be read by anyone interested in “the big picture.” Rassmussen’s data is most intriguing; it should be read by those interested in westward migration. Many will want a copy which, in a way, should be seen as an essential reference work. Anyone who would like to study or publish on the subject of the overland journey may want to acquire this volume to speed up the dive into the murky waters of overland trail research.

## Along Ancient Trails: The Mallet Expedition of 1739

Donald J. Blakeslee (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1995) 291 pages, photographs, maps, appendices, references, afterword, index; \$39.95, cloth.

Reviewed by Michael J. Brodhead, Professor Emeritus of History, University of Nevada, Reno.

The common American understanding of the history of travel and exploration in the Trans-Mississippi West usually has meant movement in a westerly direction by Anglo-Americans in the nineteenth century. Often ignored are the earlier travels of the French and Spanish. Their paths went north, south, and east, as well as west. A good case in point is the expedition of the Mallet brothers, Pierre and Paul, in 1739. They traveled from French Illinois southward to the capital of New Mexico, Santa Fe, an outpost of Spain’s North American empire. Unlike other European travelers, who tended to follow major streams such as the Missouri and Columbia, they crossed more waterways than they followed.

The brothers were fur traders who hoped to open up commercial relations between France’s possessions and New Mexico. Remote from New Spain’s economic and political centers, the inhabitants of the province were eager to buy French goods. Upon arriving in Santa Fe, the Mallets found that civil and ecclesiastical officials there were anxious also to establish trade. From there, the brothers journeyed to New Orleans. Encouraged by the results of

the Mallet Expedition, the leaders of Louisiana authorized another expedition to Santa Fe, but it failed to reach its destination. All subsequent efforts to establish trade with New Mexico collapsed, and Spain made it clear that commerce between its New Mexican colonists and outsiders was not to be.

Because of the hopes for intercolonial commerce did not materialize, historians have paid little attention to the Mallets’ efforts. The author of this fine work argues that the expedition was an important chapter in the history of southwestern exploration, and links it to the earlier Spanish expeditions, to later American southwestern reconnaissances, and to the beginnings of the Santa Fe trade.

The book is principally devoted to the author establishing the Mallet party’s precise route. Along with his two young sons, the author personally covered what he believes to be the course of the Frenchmen’s trek. His journey began on the Missouri River and took him through Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. Supplementing his on-the-spot observations was a thorough examination of the scanty manuscript record (the

Mallets’ journal has been lost); maps, both old and contemporary; other travel narratives; modern newspapers; recent scholarly works; and interviews with knowledgeable local residents. Connecting the place names of the Mallets with modern equivalents involved considerable linguistic analysis that demonstrates an impressive grasp of French, Spanish, and Indian usage.

Blakeslee, an anthropologist, argues convincingly that the Mallet Expedition followed a series of Indian trails. These routes long had been used for hunting and intertribal warfare, diplomacy, and trade. These considerations are not another exercise in the currently fashionable effort to give Native Americans credit for doing more than they did; rather, they are presented as further evidence that North American Indian societies were neither insular nor static.

Donald Blakeslee deserves the thanks and respect of those who study western American trails. He has provided not only a better understanding of the Mallet route but also an appreciation of the wider meaning of their journey.

# OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ASSOCIATION

## **Officers:**

### *President:*

Jacqueline Lewin  
P.O. Box 244  
St. Joseph, MO 64502  
(816) 232-8471

### *President-Elect:*

Roger P. Blair  
1658 S. Mountain View  
Sheridan, WY 82801-1725  
(307) 672-8090

### *Secretary:*

Helen E. Sundell  
939 S. 106th Plaza, #304  
Omaha, NE 68114  
(402) 397-9794

### *Treasurer:*

James E. Budde  
11712 Glen Arbor Ter.  
Kansas City, MO 64114  
(816) 941-0728

### *Preservation Officer:*

Thomas H. Hunt  
950 Old Trace Road  
Palo Alto, CA 94306  
(415) 941-0815

## **Executive Director:**

Jeanne Miller  
(816) 252-2276

## **Directors:**

Will Bagley  
Michael Bateman  
Roger Blair  
Levida Hileman  
Ross Marshall  
Walter Meyer  
Doyle Reed  
Kathleen A. Roubal  
William Rupp  
Lowell Tiller  
Jeanne H. Watson  
Norman Wilson

## **Committee Chairs:**

*Archaeology:*  
Frank Tortorich  
*Awards:*  
W. L. (Bud) Rusho  
*Chapters:*  
Ross Marshall  
*COED:*  
Kathleen Roubal  
*Collections:*  
Jeanne H. Watson  
*Conventions:*  
Mary Ann Tortorich

## *Convention Future Sites:*

Charles W. Martin, Jr.

## *Education:*

William E. Hill

## *Finance:*

James E. Budde

## *Friends of the Trails:*

Karen Buck Rennells

## *Fundraising:*

James E. Budde

## *Graves & Sites:*

Randy Brown

## *Headquarters:*

James E. Budde

## *Land Acquisitions:*

Vacant

## *Long-Range Planning:*

Charles W. Martin, Jr.

## *Membership:*

Vacant

## *National Trails Liaison:*

Jeanne and William Watson

## *Nominating & Leadership:*

Roger P. Blair

## *OCTA History & Archives:*

Ruth Anderson

## *Publications:*

Rose Ann Tompkins

## *Public Relations:*

Lesley Wischmann

## *Trail Mapping:*

David Johnson

## *Trail Marking:*

Randy Brown

## **Chapter Presidents:**

### *CA-NV:*

William Rupp

### *CO:*

Theresa Tiehen

### *Gateway—St. Joseph,*

### *MO/Northeast KS:*

Mary Knab

### *ID—MT:*

Afton Patrick

### *KANZA/North Central KS:*

Vern Osborne

### *NE:*

Russell A. Genung

### *Northwest—OR-WA-Wstm.*

### *Canada:*

David Welch

### *Southwest—AZ-NM:*

Marie Greene

### *Trails Head—Greater KC*

### *MO/KS:*

Mary Conrad

### *Utah Crossroads:*

George Ivory

### *WY:*

Tim Monroe

# Oregon-California Trails Association

## Preserving the Trails. . .

Purchasing Nebraska's "California Hill," with ruts cut by emigrant wagons as they climbed from the South Platte River.

Protecting emigrant graves.

Initiating legislation designating the California and Santa Fe trails as National Historic Trails.

Persuading government and industry to relocate roads and pipelines to preserve miles of pristine ruts.

Working with the Bureau of Land Management to protect the trail through Nevada's High Rock Canyon.

## Conventions and Field Trips. . .

Exploring nearby trails on field trips during each National Convention.

Exploring Wyoming's Sublette's Cutoff, Nevada's High Rock Canyon and Black Rock Desert, and Oregon's Barlow Road on post-convention field trips.

Exploring trails on field trips local chapters sponsor between Conventions.

## Publications. . .

*Overland Journal*—"Scott's Bluff, Giant Landmark of the Oregon-California Trail," "What the Covered Wagons Covered," "The California Trail—A Survey," "Women on the Overland Trail," "Geology and the Emigrant," "The Barlow Road," "Interaction Between Women and Indians," "The Trail of the First Wagons Over the Sierra."

*News From the Plains*—News about members and the organization, convention reports, legislative action, genealogy, trail preservation, and special activities.

## Research and Education. . .

Developing instructional materials to help students understand the western migration.

Marking the trails and maintaining weathered and damaged markers.

Developing a computer-based census of emigrant diaries, newspaper accounts, letters, and other documents.

## OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ASSOCIATION

P.O. Box 1019 / Independence, MO 64051 / (816) 252-2276

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_-\_\_\_\_



## New Membership Application

### Membership Categories (circle one)

Student*	\$15/year
Individual	\$30/year
Family	\$35/year
Supporting	\$60/year
Patron	\$100/year
Institutional	\$100/year
Life	\$750/year
Corporate	\$1,000/year
Benefactor	\$1,000 and up

Amount Enclosed \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Contributions to OCTA are tax deductible. OCTA has been declared exempt from Federal income tax under section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue Code, dated November 30, 1983.

\*Student memberships are available for full-time students in elementary schools, high schools, or accredited colleges and universities.