

CROSSING THE PLAINS

An account of the George Harter Family's trip from
Cass County, Michigan, to Marysville, California,
in 1864; taken from the diary of GEORGE HARTER.

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by

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REMARKS

I have written this journal to send to friends at home, hoping perhaps at some future time I may read it again myself to refresh my memory or perhaps some other one of our company may; therefore I have mentioned more particularly many incidents and referred to places that will make it monotonous and unimportant to those who have never traveled over the road. But to those of our company it will bring to mind those places and incidents of interest that in all probability will never again be seen or experienced by them.

Marysville, California, 1865
Revised in 1902

GEORGE HARTER
GEORGE HARTER

A DESCRIPTION OF A TRIP FROM CASS COUNTY, MICHIGAN, TO MARYSVILLE, CALIFORNIA IN 1864

In the spring of 1864, I rented my farm and had my sale on the 2nd day of April. The following week I with Isaac R. Banta of Preble County, Ohio, started south through Indiana for the purpose of purchasing mules for the overland trip. I purchased one span at Elkhart County, Indiana, and sent them back to Lewis Harter and Robert Wiley to work them to a wagon I had built for the trip and meet us at Omaha, Nebraska, together with my wife and two children: Jay P., five, and Ardelle, three years old.

My family went by railroad to Grinnell, Iowa, as far as the railroad was then built, then staged over 200 miles to Omaha and arrived there the first week in May.

Mr. Banta and I went to Louisville, Kentucky, and bought mules that we wanted and shipped them down the Ohio river to Cairo, then up the Mississippi and Missouri rivers to Glasgo as far as the boat could go in the low stage of water then in the river. We landed our stock and rode and drove 200 miles to Omaha.

We found our company all there camped 2 miles out in the country where there was plenty of fine feed for our stock. We had shipped one wagon and all our goods by railroad. They were delayed somewhere and we were detained here between five and six weeks and got most all except the wagon which belonged to Lewis Harter. It was getting late in the season so he bought a wagon and we loaded up and started on the 18th day of June with four mules to each wagon. Mr. Wiley had found suitable company and acquaintances from Cass County, Michigan, and had gone on so it left us four grown persons and two children in our mess, also a dog that had been lost and left at the ferry between Council Bluff and Omaha. He was a noble watch dog as we learned later as we traveled through the Indian countries. He was an exception among many dogs that started but most of them never got through on that long journey.

Our camp life here became rather monotonous so we found a few days work in the neighborhood helping plant corn. We then concluded to try building Central Pacific Railroad which had just commenced grading on the west bank of the Missouri river. Each of us men shoveled a day and felt proud that we helped build a railroad but concluded to forgo any further honors but leave all that to more aspiring ones.

I had thirty bushels of wheat chopped to feed on the road where grass was

scarce. That with provisions for four months and clothing and bedding made up our load. The emigration that year was very heavy and nearly all had gone on before. We started along expecting to overtake some company. The weather was warm and dry and the roads very good. The second night we camped on the flats of Elkhorn Creek on very tall grass. Close around our wagons we picketed our animals with ropes forty feet long. These ropes are tied to iron steaks 15 inches long driven in the ground with rings in the top end. Here the mosquitoes were so plentiful and ferocious they covered the mules as with a blanket.

By midnight the mules got so excited they were likely to get loose and leave us, so we hitched up and started. As long as we were among these pests we made night drives, starting about sun down and drove all night and camped the first suitable place in the morning.

We traveled this way 150 miles to Loopfork river. This stream is near half a mile wide. We had to ferry a narrow channel then ford the rest of the way through dangerous quicksand. We got through all right but heavy loaded wagons generally had trouble.

Here we saw the first Pawnee Indians. They came in to the emigrant camps begging bread. My wife bought a pair of moccasins from a squaw for 25 ct. They were dressed in usual Indian style, which is a breech-cloth and a tanned Buffalo skin over the shoulders.

Here we overtook two families by the name of Buell and Daniels. They had horse teams and we concluded to travel together and try and overtake a horse train that was several days ahead. We still made some night drives.

Our road lay on the north side of Plat river and up this valley in many places is very rich and fine country but lacks entirely for timber.

There is a little cottonwood of an inferior growth on the immediate banks of the river which is all the timber in sight for hundreds of miles.

Two hundred and sixty-three miles brought us opposite Fort Kerney which is on the opposite side of the river. Here we saw the grave of Mrs. Linsey from Kiles, Michigan. She was in a wagon and the horse got frightened and ran away throwing her out, hurting her so she died in a few days.

She was owner of a train of five wagons and outfit, which was all sold out here and the train broken up.

Along here were the most beautiful wild flowers I ever saw.

This P.M. it rained hard which softened the road very much. To here the roads were very fine, smooth, hard and level. Next day we traveled and overtook a train and traveled one day with them. Passed a grave inscribed on headboard "Killed by accidental discharge of his own gun". Next morning it began to rain and continued so we lay by two days.

During this time we called a meeting and elected John Scaulding Captain of the train. This was necessary to manage stopping and starting and various matters to expediate travel.

Third day part of us pulled out and drove twelve miles and passed the first grave inscribed on headboard "Killed by Indians". Date of this was six weeks pre-

vicious. Along here we improved the opportunity of securing some wood for fuel and swinging it under our wagons or cutting it all into chips and putting it inside.

Our guide book said no more wood for a number of days. We had an émigrant stove which is a great saving of wood over camp fire. It is made of sheet iron 12 by 12 inches square and 2 feet long with two holes on top for cooking and an oven below. This stove with one joint of pipe answers every purpose for cooking and baking with an incredible small amount of wood. We could set it in the wagon and bake bread as we were going on. Tonight we camped on a beautiful plain on the bank of Plat river. Here we lay over Sunday and the remainder of our train came up Monday morning. This is the 4th of July but we had to pursue our journey. In a few miles we came to the first hills which were sandy and hard pulling for several miles. We stopped at noon as usual. As we were hitched and ready to start there came a severe storm of wind and rain and soon followed a pelting hail storm straight in our face so we had to jump out and catch our teams to keep them from upsetting the wagons. We kept circling around with the wind and when it quit raining we were headed right to continue our journey.

This we called our 4th of July celebration.

This P.M. we had a great deal of water and mud and at night camped at Pawne springs. Here were a number of beautiful springs of cool water. The second time we found good water since we left Omaha. This was the greatest hardship for me on the whole trip and the only time in my life that I craved for whiskey. The Plat river water is so much alkali the more you drink the thirstier you are. Next day had fine roads. Camped on the banks of the river.

Here we first discovered alkali on the ground forming quite a crust in spots. Nights were cool with heavy dews. Here is the junction of North and South Plat rivers.

The Plat is a very swift but wide and shallow running stream. It is always muddy but lately more so because of the melting snow in the mountains. The river bottoms here extending far back on both sides to the mountains.

Next day drove fourteen miles. Three miles heavy sand hill roads. On these hills were a band of thirty or forty Sioux Indians. They came to the road to trade dressed skins and moccasins for something to eat. They were of both sexes and all ages. All the men and boys had their bow and a quiver full of arrows strapped on their backs. Some on horse back followed us into camp but left as soon as supper was over. Next night camped on Buffalo creek. Next night camped near the river and had a heavy rain in the evening. Next day in some places for miles along side of the road for a few feet wide there stood a thick growth of flower about two feet high bearing full of variegated purple flowers about the size of half a dollar. It looked as though they had been placed there to break the monotony and cheer the weary traveler on his way. Camped again on the bank of the Plat on a fine plain. Next day Sunday lay by. After dinner Lewis Harter and myself took our guns waded the river two feet deep and half a mile wide and started into the bluffs for a hunt.

The hills here are high and rugged.

On reaching the top we found a level table-land as far as the eye could see with but little growth except cactur or prickley pears which covers the ground in places.

We had not gone far when we saw an Antelope. In following him we started an Elk but he was soon out of sight. There were plenty of Antelopes and we could hardly decide which to follow. In rambling we came on a slight raise and saw three Antelopes grazing quite a distance away. Soon two started towards us. We chose a spot and lay down flat; Lew rested his gun on me. Presently one ran off the other came on quietly grazing until within fifty yards and lay down broadside to us. Lew fired and hit him in the hind quarter, he jumped and ran quite lame, but soon lay down again. He gave him another shot which killed him. I cut his head off and we picked the long old hair off which came out in large handfuls. After taking out the entrails and cutting off the legs we swung it on a gun between us and started for our camp and were in sight of it at sundown.

We struck the head of a ravine which we thought would lead us to the river opposite our camp and we could reach there soon after dark. We wound around and over rocks and steep descents and at dusk came where the water, when there was any, passed through the mountains. It is a narrow passage through a soft rock apparently worn by the water to the depths of some fifty to eighty feet. By looking up we could see a few stars and the moonlight. At some places it appeared not more than fifteen or twenty feet across the top and so narrow where we were for rods that two persons cannot pass conveniently.

We traveled on and on expecting soon to come to the river. The moon went down and the Antelope grew very heavy. We rested and traveled again and after a long time came to the river.

Here we were fighting a swarm of mosquitoes not knowing whether to go up or down the river to come to our camp. After a while we discovered what we thought was a camp-fire probably on our side of the river. We started and discussed and doubted whether it is a star or a light. After a long walk we came opposite what we thought might be our camp. After taking a good rest and planning that Lew should take the lead, as he was a good swimmer and if he fell in deep water I could pull him back with the gun. We started straight for the light sometimes midwaist deep in water but kept on slowly. After becoming satisfied it was our camp we fired two pistol shots which brought an answer from the guards. They had raised a lantern high as they could above a wagon to signal us. When we reached shore we were met by many people of the train who alarmed fearing we had been captured or lost as we learned afterwards others had been in that region of the country. The Capt. had arranged that next morning all the men should start out with one days rations in search of us, but we disappointed them when we brought them an Antelope which was the first game brought in by any hunters, except sage hens and jack-rabbits.

It was now after twelve o'clock.

There were two butchers in the train and next morning they soon skinned and divided among the different companys and after breakfast all agreed it was delicious, but well earned. Monday we again struck sand hills and came in sight of chimney rock which is forty miles away, but apparently not over five miles. Distance is very deceiving here to the eye.

We passed today ancient castles. They are high perpendicular soft rocks forming columns and spires and presenting the general appearance of ancient ruins. To-night we camped near a large cattle train going to Idaho. We got all the milk we wanted by milking it ourselves which we did very willingly. We had a delicious supper of milk and mush, and for breakfast mush and milk. We carried a can of milk and in the evening it had churned some butter. This eve a man in the train

was thrown from his mule knocking out some teeth and bruising him considerable. Next day passed Chimney rock, Court-house and Scots Bluff. These are all on the opposite side of the river. Chimney rock is circular shaped of perhaps sixty feet in diameter at base and tapering a ways then carrying its size to the top which is said to have been two hundred feet high but of late part of the top fell off. Court-house rock is a large square perpendicular rock flat on top with a cupola on top in the center. Scots Bluff is a small mountain in a level plain as are the other two just described. Camped at Spring creek. Good water but little grass. Here we crossed the line between Nebraska and Idaho.

Next day noon stopped near the river and drove our stock on an island to graze. Suddenly we saw an Indian coming full run on a pony holding out a letter which was a signal of a message to us. It was a letter from U.S. Upper Plat Indian Agent warning all emigrants to be on their guard as there are hostile Indians in the vicinity.

We gave the Indian some bread and he went on to the next train behind.

We drove up to the agency and stopped for the night. We were told by the U.S. Agent, Mr. Lores (who was formerly from Eaton, Ohio, and well acquainted about there) that all we had heard was true and much more. He strongly advised us to remain here for safety until matters became more settled and until trains came up in sufficient strength to defend themselves. Next morning our train sent a letter of warning by an Indian to a train still farther back but alas too late. The night before the villains had come upon them and killed one man wounding another and running off with their mules.

This was nearly on the same ground where we had camped the night before. There were at this time at this agency over one hundred wigwams built of tanned Buffalo skin varying from ten to twenty feet in diameter and tapering to a point at the top. There were here about five hundred Indians of all ages among them near two hundred warriors. These Indians were friendly and had collected here for two causes. First - for safety from the Minnesota Sioux who are a part of their own tribe but had broken out in hostility against the whites. Second - to attend a sun dance they were about to hold. The agent told us that as long as we stayed here we need fear nothing from the Minnesotas. He had Indians as spies out all day and all night watching the enemy and if they should come upon us every warrior would turn out and defend us and themselves.

Their wigwams were arranged in a large half circle on a large level open plain of land and in this circle they trained and maneuvered for two days. All warriors and good horsemen mounted on ponies paraded and loped and ran most furiously around. Men and ponies painted ear style and wound up with a sham battle with bow and arrow and rifles.

They had arranged some of their own party out in the low hills and as far as they were seen coming in, the war whoop was given and a furious dash was made to meet them, and they were followed into the hills out of sight. Next day they raised a pole in the center of the ground with many ceremonies, where they erected a shade or tent made of branches of trees, under which the sun dance commenced on Sunday evening and to continue for two days and nights without cessation under this tend. They had a large skin half tanned and dried stretched and placed on sticks driven in the ground standing about a foot high around which old men with a stick in each hand as many as could sit on the ground in reach were pounding on this skin and singing in utter confusion and hooping and hollowing. The squaws standing around singing and screeching all together making the most hideous noise I ever

heard. All this was done in as solemn a manner as you ever saw a funeral service performed.

To us emigrants it was as amusing as it was strange, but I don't think anyone attempted any disrespect to their worship. Another ceremony under this tent was big vigorous and athletic bucks who were competing for the chieftainship of the tribe and to test their grit and endurance, on each shoulder blade there was a pinch of skin taken up and a knife pierced thru it, through which a thong of Buffalo skin was passed, by which a dried Buffalo head was suspended reaching nearly to the ground. With this they danced and jumped and raced around and the one who held out longest was the victor and chosen Chief.

These Sioux are a very large and robust tribe of Indians.

There is a white man here who is married to a squaw and has several children. He is employed by the agent as an interpreter and bookkeeper and he is a good scholar.

The Indians will all beg and some will steal. They stand around at meal time watching and looking very wishful and ready to take anything that may be offered to them.

This is on a large bottom land on Plat river with plenty of grass and fine water. We got plenty of milk by milking cows in the cattle trains, also butter-milk which was a real treat. We lay here from Thursday P.M. until Tuesday morning. We started out in a train of over a hundred wagons and some loose stock. We traveled and camped together two days and nights. It is very tedious and difficult getting along where there are so many together. The second day we passed a dead Indian disposed of in their usual way. The body is wrapped in a blanket. A scaffold is built of forked poles in the ground six or eight feet high, and poles and branches placed across on which the "good" Indian is placed, or sometimes this is arranged in a low tree. By his side is placed a bow and arrow and underneath a pony is killed for him to ride in the happy land. All this the squaws do and all the ordinary drudgery of life is here. After the game is killed and brought in she takes charge of it. Finds her wood which is carried on her back frequently a long distance. She dresses all the skins and makes all the moccasins and does all the moving which they do so much of.

Third day we came opposite Fort Larime. The train as we had formerly traveled together which was all horses and mules crossed over and the cattle continued on the north side of the river. I expected to have some blacksmithing done here but could get along without as everything was so dear.

Horse shoeing \$16.00 per span. Horse shoe nails \$4.00 per lbb. and everything else in proportion. This is a military station and quite a village besides. Here I saw Mr. Ezra Chambers from Eaton, Ohio, in the military service. We lay here until next day noon when our Indian fears had partly subsided. In talking with Col. Colins, commander of the post, he assured us there was good grounds for apprehending danger. We had then concluded to leave the cattle train and go up on the south side of the river. We told him our strength which was thirty men. He said we might possibly go through safely, but cautioned us to be closely on our guard and carry our guns constantly in sight, as much depended on us showing ourselves. He said Indians would not attack a train without first following a day or two, skulking in the hills and watching how everything was managed. There were three more guns procured and we started out into the black hills which are rightly

named. Here we had our first rough roads and there was not another day on the whole trip that we did cross over or near by some hills or mountains. There is but little more trouble for wood as there are some scrubby cedars in the mountains and sage brush in the valleys. The women are no longer seen gathering Buffalo chips in their apron to cook their meals with. They were a poor substitute in our stove. We had hauled wood to here over three hundred miles. The second day from Larime we overtook a train from Kentucky having thirty-five fine horses and three wagons.

Mr. John Welsh the owner of the train was left sick at the Fort. His father with his two sons and two daughters and some hired help were going on with the train. The father had been sick and one of the daughters was then quite sick. Today we passed another dead Indian disposed of in the usual way.

The boys were carrying guns to shoot Indians so one tried his hand on this one, but I think he did not hurt him. Camped on the bank of the Flat river, grass scarce. Lew Harter lost his revolver in the river crossing in search for grass. Next day traveled twenty-five miles. I counted forty-five head of cattle that had died, mostly within a few days. They had eaten something poisonous at Bitter Cottonwood creek where we had passed the day before. Today Welshes received a telegram informing them of the son and brother at Larime. Camped at Elkhorn creek. Good grass. We lay over Sunday. About three o'clock P.M. old Mr. Welsh died from the effects of his former sickness. He was 62 years of age and had been a sea-captain, but at last had to die and be buried on the lonely plains. It was a sad scene, but his children bore it well. We went about a mile where there had been a wagon left and the bed made a rough box and put him in and buried him next morning.

Since the Indian excitement we always at night formed a corral with our wagons by forming a circle and running the near front wheel on the inside of the off hind wheel of the wagon in front. The last wagon was left out and after all the stock was in and the last wagon drawn in its place we had them quite secure, most of the animals were tied to the wagons wheels. This formed a fort of defense and secured our stock. Horses and mules was mainly what the Indians wanted. There was always an armed guard sent with the stock to graze and they were always brought in before dark, also a guard around the corral at night. About half a mile and on the opposite side of the creek from us was a camp of returning Californians and Idahoers. Just at dark as we were putting the corpse of the old man into the box we heard the report of a gun and horrid screams of a man saying, "I am shot. I am shot." Great excitement in their camp. We supposed it to be Indians and expected them among us in a few minutes. We were soon ready to give them a warm reception. In half an hour two of our men went and called as there was thick willow brush between us. They answered saying one man shot, think it was by an Indian. Before midnight we heard them drive out and leave.

Next morning we found the shirts they had taken off of him. He was shot in the back through the breast with a number of buck shot; He must have died before they left. We heard afterwards they stopped about sunrise and buried him. Circumstances went strong to show his own company had murdered him for his money. Today noon overtook a cattle train that had lost so much stock they could no no further with their loads. Traveled until after dark and found no feed. Camped and agreed to start at two in the morning. In the morning when all were about ready to start the Capt. raised a fuss for wanting to drive before daylight. There was a meeting called and election held which resulted in myself being chosen Capt. Before sun-up we were started. In ten miles found good grass. This P.M. we passed where three weeks before there had been a train captured and robbed.

Flour sacks and featherbeds were emptied and wagons burned and by the Indians. A few miles farther came where four men were buried in one grave. They had been killed by Indians.

Here there were two women and three children taken prisoners. Camped near river but little grass. In three miles next morning came to Deer Creek crossing. This is a military post. I saw here two Preble County boys in the service.

Here my wife talked with one of the ladies that had been taken by the Indians. After being with them three nights she stole away with her seven year old boy and made her way back by traveling after night and laying by in daytime. Here was a man who had twenty-seven arrows shot into him and still lived. The man who lost his wife and two children was here. One of these children had its head split open by these savages before these mothers eyes soon after they had been taken. This mother with her remaining child had intended to escape with these that came back but failed from some cause to reach the appointed place of starting and had not been heard from. Our roads here were very good with some hills. The mountains on both sides coming near the river. Next day noon crossed Plat bridge. Here is a military station and five days before the soldiers had a fight with the Indians. They had taken one chief and his family prisoners and had killed others but could not tell how many. These Indians when they expect to fight tie themselves onto their ponies so that if the rider is killed the pony follows the band and carries the rider away from the enemy. They believe if the body is taken the spirit is lost forever. This chief was told if he would bring back the woman and child he and his family should have their liberty. If not they would all be put to death. We heard afterwards he had gone twice and returned saying he could not find them. We never heard what was done with them.

Camped with a large cattle train and traveled next day over very rough roads. Camped at red Buttes and lay here over Sunday. Good grass. In the morning there was some shooting at a beaver in the river which frightened twelve horses where they were feeding causing them to stampede into the mountains some five or six miles.

Here we left Plat river after traveling up its valley seven hundred and sixty-two miles.

Next day we had good roads. Passed some strong alkali springs. This A.M. Welshes left behind three fine horses that had got so poor they could get them no farther. At noon they unloaded three wagons and were going to leave one and part of their goods and provisions because their stock was becoming too weak to haul so much. The wagon and most of the goods was taken by different parties in the train. Drove two miles and camped. After turning out saw a notice stuck up saying "Poison grass on this slough" we took our stock in. Next morning there was one sick horse. He traveled until P.M. and gave out and died that night. This P.M. we met a large number of snake Indians on their way to Fort Laramie to receive their government supplies. One of their number was sent ahead holding up a letter written by a United States officer directed to emigrants stating these Indians are peaceable and inoffensive and asking emigrants to let them pass as such.

Camped on banks of Sweetwater river.

Next day lay by until P.M. on the first bunch grass on the trip. After dinner drove two miles to Independence took where there is another small military post.

Here is another family that had been robbed of their stock by Indians and could go no farther. Here left two companys out of our train. Welshes stopped mainly on account of their sick sister who was very sick and gradually growing worse. We afterwards heard she died soon after we left them. This was three deaths in that family in less than a month.

Mr. Hammel had lost two horses out of eleven and stopped to recruit what he had left.

Independence rock is said to be six hundred yards long, two hundred yards wide and three hundred feet high. It is shaped much like an apple cut in the middle and one half laid flat side down. In many places the surface is quite smooth where are hosts of names of travelers painted or carved. Five miles up the river is Devil's Gate, through which the river runs. It is four rods wide, half a mile long, and almost perpendicular rocks on each side of the river. Good grass but too much alkali. In some alkali beds it lays one and a half inches thick and looks nearly as white as salt.

Next day Mr. Buell had a spell of delirium caused by fever from severe cold and nervous excitement from fear of Indians. He was taken suddenly and continued ungovernable over an hour, then gradually recovered his reason.

Camped at Sweetwater. Here we left Buells with a cattle train. To-day crossed the river three times in one mile. Camped at fourth crossing. Here is a small military Fort. In the morning started on a twenty-two mile drive where there is no grass nor water only what we took along. Two of my mules gave out so we had to take them out of the team. Coming to the river found good grass. Here we caught a fine lot of fish by sewing some coarse sacks together for a sceine. Next day had fine road excepting a few miles which was very rough and rocky. There were flat stones set edgeway and very hard, looking as though they had been in fire. To-day passed ice springs. They are emphatically what they are called. It is said along here ice may be found all seasons of the year by digging a few feet deep. Along here the country is very barren. No timber in sight for days. Next camp had no grass. Started at daylight drove twelve miles and found grass. Here is the last soldiers camp on the east side of the Rocky mountains. All the Forts from Laramie here are occupied by the 11th Ohio cavalry. Here was another family that had lost their stock by Indians. This P.M. we crossed the summit of the Rocky Mountains. This is called the South Pass. The word pass conveys a very incorrect idea of its appearance. It is comparatively a level plain to the very summit with a very gentle ascent and the road is smooth and hard, composed mostly of gravel and sand. The altitude of this summit is seven thousand feet above the sea level. Here the Idaho road called Landers cut-off turns to the right.

Three miles down the Western slope which is much steeper than the eastern we came to Pacific springs and camped. There was great fires in the mountains causing dense smoke but we could see several snow clad mountain tops. Next evening at four o'clock started and drove all night over good roads, had no water only what we hauled. At daylight camped at Little Sandy river. One horse in the train gave out a few miles before getting into camp. He had been alkaliied and too weak to travel. After dinner drove twelve miles to Big Sandy and camped on poor feed. Next day traveled fourteen miles over barren country. Saw some Antelope. Camped at Big Timber river. Next day noon were at Green river. This is generally ferried but we had no difficulty in fording as the river was at low stage. Here part of our train camped.

The grass was green bottom grass.