

Emigrant's occupation: Slave Origin: Missouri

Age: 26 M/F: M With family? (Y/N) N No. in family:     

Departed from (code): J3 Arrived at (code): C2

Date of departure: 04/02/49 Date of arrival: 10/49 (use form mm/dd/yy)

Party: Dr. William Bassett

Mode of travel: W (one code only: W - wagons; P - packing; L - passenger lines; H - handcart; X - other)

Number of wagons at departure: 20

Number of people at departure:      total      men      women      children

Draft animals at departure: X oxen      mules      horses      other (use X or a number)

Other animals:      (H - horses; C - cattle; S - sheep; P - pigs; F - fowl; D - dogs; X - other)

Routes: I IH IJ IK IR                     (use codes from the trail maps)

Notes on back? ✓

The information stated the train turned west at present Plattsmouth, NE and followed the Platte River to Fort Laramie. I do not know if this is the north or south road.

Emigrant's last name: Coffey Surveyed by: 12/10/89  
first & middle names: Alvin Aaron Date surveyed: mem 69  
Title: A Black Pioneer's Trip to California

Year of journey: 1849 Year written (if different): \_\_\_\_\_ Page nos. surveyed: 58-62  
Type of document: O (D - diary; J - journal; R - reminiscence; L - letter; N - newspaper article; G - guide; A - autobiography; O - other)  
Items in document: X F K (use all applicable codes)  
M - daily mileages D - emigrant drawings P - emigrant maps Q - maps by editor K - biographical sketch  
I - Introduction B - bibliography N - index X - photos F - footnotes/commentaries

Published? (Y/N): Y Location of original document: \_\_\_\_\_

For PUBLISHED documents only:

Published in: Autobiographies and Reminiscences of California Pioneers

Publisher: Society of California Pioneers Year published: 1901

Place published: San Francisco

Editor's (or translator's) last name: Montesano  
first & middle names: Phil

Notes about publication history: \_\_\_\_\_

For UNPUBLISHED documents only:

Notes about format of document: \_\_\_\_\_



Location	Page	Date
St. Joseph's	58	04/02/49
Savanna Landing	58	05/05
Missouri River	58	
Platts mouth, Nebraska	59	
Platte River	59	
Fort Laramie, Wyoming	59	06/16
Sweetwater River	60	
South Pass	60	07/04
Fort Bridger	60	
Evanston	60	
Bear River	60	
Fort Hall, Idaho	60	07/23/49
Snake River	60	
Twin Falls County, Idaho	60	
Mary's River in Nevada	60	
Humboldt River	60	
Winnemucca, Nevada	60	
Lassen Trail	60	
Black Rock Desert	60	
Goose Lake	60	
Rabbit Hole Springs	60	
Black Rock Springs	60	
Salt Valley	61	
High Rock Canon	61	

Location

Page

Date

Warm Springs

61

Ke, Modoc County, California

61

09/04

Vina, Tehama County

61

Deer Creek in Sacramento Valley

61

Sacramento

61

Redding Springs

61

Clear Creek

61



# A Black Pioneer's Trip to California

by PHIL MONTESANO

"Here, you won't trust me with the flour, I won't trust you with the money," retorted Alvin Aaron Coffey to a friend of Dr. William Bassett,<sup>1</sup> his master.<sup>2</sup> Coffey later remarked that those were "the first saucy words I ever spoke to a white man."<sup>3</sup> The same type of defiance characterized the man when faced with adversity on his trip westward to California.

Born July 14, 1822, Coffey began his life as the slave of Margaret Cook of Mason County, Kentucky. He remained her property until 1834 when Henry H. Duval bought him. In 1846, Duval sold him to Dr. Bassett. Seduced by the thought of glittering gold, Dr. Bassett decided to travel to the California gold fields with his slave.<sup>4</sup>

Leaving St. Louis, Missouri on April 2, 1849, the Bassett party headed toward St. Joseph's where a number of wagons were assembling for the trip. On May 5th, the wagon train started for Savanna Landing, the crossing point on the Missouri River. Snapping the reins sharply, Coffey moved the lead wagon forward; Israel and Titus Hale<sup>5</sup> followed in the second wagon. The diary of Israel Hale and the reminiscences of Coffey provided the vivid accounts of the trip.<sup>6</sup>

Writing in his *Reminiscences*, Coffey described the departure, "There was quite a crowd of neighbors who drove through the mud and rain . . . There were twenty wagons in the number and from three to five men to each wagon."<sup>7</sup> With the gritting squeak of wooden wheels, the train lurched forward—oxen providing the sure but agonizingly slow locomotive power.

1 *Autobiographies and Reminiscences of California Pioneers*, Compiled by the Historical Committee of the Society of California Pioneers (San Francisco, 1901), I, 49.

2 Dr. William Bassett (18?-18?) was a plantation owner in Missouri and the leader of the wagon train. Little is known about his life before and after his California trip.

3 *Autobiographies and Reminiscences*, I, 49.

4 Alvin Aaron Coffey, Archives A to E, Society of California Pioneers; Shurtleff Scrap Book, X, 13.

5 Israel Hale (1804-1891), the father, and Titus Hale (1834-1925), the son, came in the second wagon. Israel wrote the diary, yet Titus became the member of the Society. In fact, Titus served as president of the Society from 1911-13.

6 *Autobiographies and Reminiscences*, I, 46; Israel F. Hale, *Diary: Missouri to California 1849*, MS, Society of California Pioneers, p. 106.

7 *Autobiography and Reminiscences*, I, 46.



Alvin Aaron Coffey,  
photo courtesy of the  
Society of California  
Pioneers.

The first week of May found the train crossing the Missouri River at Savanna Landing while following the River on its south bank. At the crossing, the wagon train encountered a cholera epidemic. Nathaniel Clark in wagon number six came down with the disease. Dr. Bassett "did all he could for him," but the man died. Dr. Bassett decided that for the safety of the train, he must push forward day and night. Coffey noted that this succeeded, for the train had no other wagons "ahead of us that we knew of."<sup>8</sup>

The train continued its course until it came to present-day Plattsmouth, Nebraska. The train then turned westward to follow the Platte River, the waterway leading into the Rockies.<sup>9</sup>

The group rumbled along the Platte River accompanied by the monotonous sounds of creaking wagons and haunted by the monotonous sights of Nebraska grassland. By June 16th, the party had reached Fort Laramie, Wyoming. Coffey remarked that "the ignorant ox driver broke down a good many oxen" as the trail be-

8 *Loc. cit.*; Hale, "Diary of Trip to California in 1849," *Quarterly of the Society of California Pioneers*, II (June, 1925), 61.

9 Ray Allen Billington, *The Far Western Frontier (1830-1860)* (New York, 1962), p. 97. The map on that page traces the journey quite well.



came more difficult. With the steepness of the mountains, several trains preceding the Bassett party had "doubled up" leaving "tons of bacon and other provisions strewn along the trail."<sup>10</sup>

Travelling from Fort Laramie, the Bassett train continued along the Platte River to its southward bend. The party crossed over to the Sweetwater River there. The difficulty of the journey gradually increased as the group inched toward the Rockies. Each day required more energy, but with only a few miles covered. On July 4th, the train crossed the South Pass. The Hale *Diary* and Coffey's *Reminiscences* noted the thickness of the ice, Coffey remarking that it was "as thick as a dinnerplate."<sup>11</sup>

From South Pass, the party ventured southeast until it reached Fort Bridger in southwestern Wyoming. Near Evanston, Bassett picked up the Bear River and turned northeast for Fort Hall, Idaho. Reaching it on July 23, 1849, the train turned southward to follow the Snake River into Twin Falls County, Idaho. Hooking into Mary's River in Nevada, the party plodded to the Humboldt River, the waterway through the territory.<sup>12</sup>

Near Winnemucca, Nevada, the group branched off the Humboldt River to the Lassen Trail.<sup>13</sup> This route cut across the desolate Black Rock Desert toward Goose Lake in Northeastern California. The extreme difficulty and unusual sights provoked the following account:

An ox had given out and was down, not able to get up, about 100 yards from the spring.

Awhile after it got dark . . . the ox commenced bawling pitifully. Some of the boys had gone to bed. I said—"let's go out and kill the ox for it is too bad to hear him bawl." The wolves were eating him up alive. None would go with me, so I got two double-barreled shot guns which were loaded. I went out where he was. The wolves were not in sight, although I could hear them. I put one of the guns about five or six inches from the ox's head and killed him the first shot. The wolves never tackled me. I had reserved three shots in case they should.

Coffey had described the events at Rabbit Hole Springs, but the menacing Black Rock Springs loomed ahead. He continued,

Starting to cross the desert to Black Rock at 4 o'clock in the evening we traveled all night. The next day it was hot and sandy . . . .

10 *Autobiographies and Reminiscences*, I, 46-47.

11 *Ibid.*, I, 47; Hale, *Op. cit.*, II, 88.

12 See Billington, *Loc. cit.* for a map of the route.

13 Peter Lassen (1800-1859) opened up his "cut-off" from the Oregon Emigrant Route in 1848. See Owen Cochran Coy, *The Great Trek* (Los Angeles, 1929), p. 193, for a map of the Lassen route which branches off from the Emigrant trail.

A great number of cattle perished before we got to Black Rock. When about 15 miles from Black Rock, a team of oxen was left on the road just where the oxen had died. Everything was left in the wagon. I drove our oxen all the time, and I knew about how much an ox could stand. Between 9 and 10 o'clock a breeze came up and the oxen threw up their heads and seemed to have new life. At noon we drove into Black Rock.

There were lots of springs around there and pretty good grass. We unyoked the oxen and were herding them around on the best grass. The hot springs were pretty plentiful, and some of the branches were cool enough for the oxen to drink. The greatest trouble was to keep them far enough from the springs from falling in. With all of our care, one dropped in with his hind feet. The notice was given and eight or ten men came around in a few minutes. They got him by the horns, ears, jaws and soon pulled him up on the bank. There were a few of us standing behind the ox and as soon as we got him high enough, some of us caught him by the tail. Every hair came out of his tail while we were pulling him up.<sup>14</sup>

While the party camped at the Springs, a small group of men performed the following experiment which Coffey recounted,

They tied several picks and ropes together and tied it on a large rock and put it in the spring, but could not even feel the bottom.

[They] put a piece of bacon on the string and let it down this spring, and it would cook as quick as the hottest fire you could make.<sup>15</sup>

Coffey's *Reminiscences* contain little information about the trip from Black Rock Springs until the party reached Deer Creek in California. The Hale *Diary* does provide some material about that part of the trip. According to it, the Bassett party left Black Rock Springs for Salt Valley, High Rock Canon, and Warm Springs. By September 4th, the train reached the timber region near Goose Lake in Modoc County, California where it turned southwestward toward Vina, California in Tehama County and Deer Creek. Coffey's narrative then resumed:

When we got to Deer Creek in Sacramento Valley, we divided up the wagons. Some went to Sacramento to get provisions for the winter and came up to Redding Springs later.

Resting only momentarily, the Bassett party moved to Clear Creek. Coffey reported,

. . . the cattle had nothing to eat but poison oak brush. We cut down black oak for them to browse on . . . . We watered the oxen out of buckets that night and morning. The next day we gathered them up, drove them down to Clear Creek where they had plenty of poison oak to eat.<sup>16</sup>

14 *Autobiographies and Reminiscences*, I, 47-48 & 51; see map in Coy, *Loc. cit.*, for locations of the various springs and Black Rock.

15 *Ibid.*, I, 51-52.

16 *Ibid.*, I, 48.

Within a few days after this last move, Dr. Bassett started his dry-diggings. The waning of October brought the November rain and snow causing the new miners great problems,

We dug and dug till the first of November, at night, it commenced raining, and rained and snowed pretty much all the winter. We had a tent but it barely kept us all dry. There were from eight to twelve in our camp. We cut down pine trees for shakes to make a cabin. It was a whole week before we had a cabin to keep us dry.<sup>17</sup>

With the advent of the rainy season, the first part of the Coffey story ended. For Coffey, the California trip left its lasting mark. Along with the problems of a slave in a Free State, the struggle to free himself, his wife and his family, the California trip eventually brought him freedom and success as a prosperous farmer in Tehama County. Equally important, it brought him ever-lasting fame as a Black Pioneer to California; in fact, the only Black Pioneer enrolled as a member of the Society of California Pioneers.<sup>18</sup>

17 Loc. cit.

18 See Walter C. Allen, ed., *Society of California Pioneers Centennial Roster*, Commemorative Edition (San Francisco, 1948), 75.



Alvin A. Coffey



Mahala Tindall Coffey  
(his wife)

*photo courtesy of the Society of California Pioneers.*

## LOOKS AT WESTERN BOOKS

### FOUR BOOKS ABOUT ALASKA

One of the disturbing aspects that can be discovered in reading books about Alaska is the fact that the majority of authors seem so little disposed to expose emotional reactions to this land of enormous contrasts. Describe it they will do. Specify particulars they faithfully do. But no one can approach Alaska from land, sea, or air without experiencing subjective moods of a variety of kinds, and scholarly writers shy away from such expression. To fly into this vast expanse of rugged mountains, over irregular, jagged coastline, and glide down for a landing on a frozen airfield in the middle of January, is to know another world of such rugged grandeur that one is lifted out of oneself while at the same time becoming even more aware of his relative insignificance in the scheme of nature's complicated structure.

It is little wonder that scholars and other experienced writers feel compelled to restrict themselves to isolated areas of inspection, for the scale of things in Alaska is so monumental that anyone begins to limit himself to the possible. Imagine, before Alaska became a state, one could read a list of the highest mountains in the United States, visit, and marvel at the sights. Once Alaska became incorporated into the union, the whole list had to be revised, for in that one area at least nine peaks are taller than the tallest in the "lower 48,"—the phrase used by Alaskans prior to Hawaii's statehood.

Being in the physical presence of a glacier, traveling along the Seward highway and observing the floating miniature icebergs in Cooks inlet; these are exhilarating beyond description. Seeing a full moon over the snow-covered roof of a modern house surrounded by ice-encrusted willows and spruce only serves to remind one that those strange winter scenes in Burchfield watercolors are not stretching the truth at all. Having said all this, we turn to the following four new titles on different Alaskan topics:

*ALASKA FOR THE CURIOUS* (Alaska Centennial Edition 1867-1967), by Edward L. Keithahn. (Seattle: Superior Publishing Company, 1966) 160 pp., illus., bibliography; \$1.95 (paperback). *Reviewer:* RICHARD REYNOLDS, *Professor of Art and Chairman, Dept. of Art, University of the Pacific, Stockton California.*

For the cheechako or the uninitiated, this little book of encyclo-

# A Black Pioneer's Trip to California

## Summary

Alvin Aaron Coffey traveled to California in 1849 as the slave of Dr. William Bassett. The party left St. Louis on April 2, 1849, headed for St. Joseph. The group crossed the Missouri at Savannah Landing, while following the river on its south bank.

Coffey must have been well educated. He keeps a well-written and interesting diary of his journey. California meant a new beginning for Coffey and his family. He eventually gained freedom for all of them and became a prosperous farmer in Tehama County. He is the only Black pioneer enrolled as a member of the Society of California Pioneers.