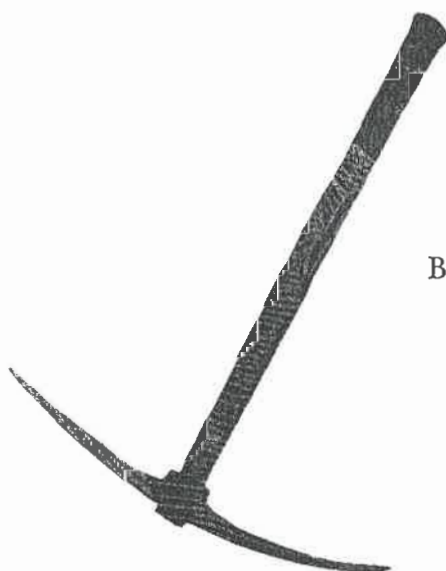


OVERLAND to *California*



By WM. G. JOHNSTON

*Big
Blue
River
area*
Kayogrove

A MEMBER OF THE WAGON TRAIN FIRST TO ENTER
CALIFORNIA . . . IN THE MEMORABLE YEAR OF 1849

FOREWORD BY
JOS. A. SULLIVAN

1 9 4 8

BIOBOOKS
OAKLAND, CALIF.

a package for Mr. Washington, containing letters of introduction from Judge Crawford, of Washington, D. C., to certain of the military authorities of California, and one from Senator Benton to Colonel Fremont.

The information reached us today that a small detachment of a company from Pittsburgh, commanded by Captain Wm. J. Ankrim *en route* for California, had made a landing at Wayne City, and strolled up to Independence after nightfall, where a "bust" of no small proportions was indulged in. Store signs were taken down, boxes piled in the middle of the streets, and sundry other depredations committed, when the marauders returned to their boat, greatly delighted, it may be, with their performances. This company, we learn, intends making St. Joseph its starting point.

SATURDAY, March 31st.—A young man, Lowry Adams, grandson of Mr. Rice, owner of the plantation on which we are encamped, is anxious to emigrate with us, in the capacity of teamster. He complains of ill-treatment on the part of his grandfather, and proposes to run off. To this we are unwilling to assent, but will accede to his proposition if he will first notify the old planter, and then make application to us. He has at length consented to do this, but with no small reluctance.

SUNDAY, April 1st.—Burning the fingers of my right hand as I attempted to lift a camp kettle from the fire during breakfast time, while it did not put me in a very thankful frame of mind, recalled the fact that this was April fool's day. Whilst taking a walk with Mr. McBride over the neighboring prairie, we visited the camp of Col. Russell, composed of a large party, among whom we had numerous acquaintances, with whom we spent some pleasant hours.

MONDAY, April 2d.—A cold rain fell upon us whilst we prepared breakfast; and excepting sitting down to eat it under such circumstances, scarce anything more disagreeable can be imagined in camp life. Mr. McBride and myself rode to town this morning, to exchange one of the mules recently purchased, it not having proved satisfactory. We dined at the Noland House, but would have preferred our camp fare. The little town was crowded with people,

COL. SAM W. BLACK'S LETTERS

erable pluck in accomplishing their journey thus far. They had traveled on foot from New York City to Brownsville, Pa., and from thence had worked their passage on steamboats. After dining with us they returned to Independence. As a result of their visit they obtained situations as desired, shortly afterward.

WEDNESDAY, April 4th.—Mr. Edwin Bryant and members of his company have just reached Independence, and intend camping near the town, while awaiting the growth of grass.

FRIDAY, April 6th—Rain fell during the night, and again quite heavily about noon today. Clearing up, I undertook to do some laundry work. When I saw the result of my labors fluttering in the breeze, I felt proud of my success, but nevertheless could not repress the wish, that wash day would not often occur.

I received today from Colonel Sam W. Black, some letters of introduction; one was to General Bennett Riley, Military Governor of California, and another to General Persifer F. Smith, commanding the Pacific Division.* Mr. Scully likewise received an introductory letter in Latin, addressed to the Catholic Bishop of Monterey. Rumors are prevalent of cholera having broken out among some emigrants encamped near Independence.

SATURDAY, April 7th.—A reporter for the St. Louis *Republican* paid us a visit, taking down our names for publication. From him we learned that Captain Ankrim's Pittsburgh company, encamped at St. Joseph, whither he had recently been, numbered two hundred and seventy-one men.

As a result of a day's hunt in the neighboring woods, Messrs. Washington and McBride brought in three squirrels and a wood-duck, being the only game they came in sight of. Again we had rain in the evening.

*As an opportunity for presenting these letters never occurred, they are still in my possession, and preserved as mementoes of the large-hearted, gallant soldier who penned them. The one to General Riley I copy here as a sample of both.

PITTSBURGH, March 5th, 1849.

Bt. Brig. Gen. Riley, Comm'g, &c.

MY DEAR SIR: Messrs. Wm. G. Johnston, Chas. Kincaid, Wm. Scully, Crawford Washington, Wm. B. McBride and Jos. L. Moody are going in a body to California. Jointly and severally they are gentlemen, all of whom I commend from my heart to yours. If you can serve them I am sure you will do it. Although I cannot recompense you for this and other kindnesses, I will acknowledge a deep debt of gratitude on my death bed.

Always truly, SAM'L W. BLACK.

DOCTORING—CONCERT—INDIANS

us a chest of medicines, we diagnosed his case, and as the doctors do, gave him a dose, which may make him better—or worse. Near the place where in the evening we took our second meal, were some conical sand hills. In a country so void of varying features, even a few sand hills seem worthy of note; and it can scarcely be conceived how greatly such objects, which under other circumstances would scarce attract observation, are here invested with so much interest.

After supper we pursued our way over some elevated ridges in darkness, for the sky was clouded, and we did not, as expected, have moonlight to aid and enliven our march. One portion of the company rode in advance, the remainder guarding the rear of the train. These last whiled away the tedium of the darkened hours by singing songs. Our program was as follows:

"Rockaway"	Old Smith
"Because 'tis in the papers"	Gilbert
"I cannot dance tonight"	Harper
"The Ould Irish Gentleman"	Scully
"Ben Bolt"	By the Journalist
"Dearest Mae"	By the same
Chorus	By the company

That "music hath charms" was manifest from the fact that before the concert was well under way, every man in the vanguard, including Jim Stewart, who also forsook his vigilance, came to the rear, leaving the forward wagons to the mercy of any Indians who might be prowling about. Possibly they thought there was no danger, if the poet in his estimate of the power of music was correct, as set forth in the continuance of the quotation alluded to—"to soothe the savage breast." Some Indians, indeed, were observed at a distance of a few miles, dancing about a fire kindled in the grass, which lighted up a broad expanse of the prairie. Great numbers of camps of emigrants were passed, where all in perfect quiet were resting for the night; and we rolled past unobserved, except by the guards on picket. Shortly after nine we encamped by a small stream, having a dense wood bordering it. Distance, twenty-five miles.

WEDNESDAY, May 9th.—A short way from camp this morn-

ing, we came to a wooden tombstone marking the grave of "Mrs. Sarah Keyes, aged 70, who died May 29th, 1846." Mr. Bryant mentions the death and burial of this lady in his work; and the little headstone served to determine our locality; for by it we knew we were nigh the Big Blue River. We found here also one of the kind of postoffices peculiar to the plains—a stick driven into the ground, in the upper end of which, in a notch, communications are placed, intended for parties following. A letter in this postoffice was found addressed to Captain Pye. It was from Captain Paul, giving information that at this place his driver, John Fuller, had accidentally shot and killed himself whilst removing a gun from a wagon. The mode was the usual one—never yet patented, and open to all—the muzzle was towards him, and went off of itself.

A short march from camp brought us to the Big Blue River, a stream about fifty yards wide and three feet in depth, having a rapid current, and belted with fine timber. Its banks at the crossing being low, we got over without difficulty, and soon again reached the open plains. At the edge of the woods I discovered the camp of our friends, Stewart and Maury, who would have detained me to breakfast with them; a luxury seldom enjoyed by us. I was, however, obliged to move on, as our train runs too fast for laggards; although appetite and good company conspired against my decision. Upon a board nailed to a tree, we had the information that Paul, in the lead of the emigration, left here April 30th, and that Colonel Russell was here May 5th. From this it will be seen that Paul, although starting fourteen days in advance of us, was when here but nine days ahead. We, too, have been traveling leisurely; only in the past two days having begun to strike out seriously.

Rising from the valley of the Big Blue, our line of march was over high table lands, across which there was an extensive range for the eye. Far to our left we could see timber, but not even a stick could be found near the road. We gathered some small dried-up bushes here and there for fuel; had we been more provident, we might have brought from the Big Blue a plentiful supply. At ten o'clock we halted for our morning meal and a rest of two hours. Again in motion, we soon reached a point where the road, leading

may 9

from St. Joseph, Missouri, joins the Oregon trail which we have been pursuing. From an elevation at the point of intersection we had an extensive view, and in looking behind over the road just traveled, or back over the St. Joseph road, or forward over that to be taken; for an indefinite number of miles, there seemed to be an unending stream of emigrant trains, whilst in the still farther distance along these lines could be seen great clouds of dust, indicating that yet others of these immense caravans were on the move. It was a sight which once seen can never be forgotten; it seemed as if the whole family of man had set its face westward. Our daily task for a time to come will be to get past those in advance of us, and to so travel that no trains shall overtake us; for in this way only can we hope properly to maintain our animals. The locusts of Egypt could scarce be a greater scourge than these great caravans, as grass and whatever else is green must disappear before them.

We passed some men digging a grave to bury a comrade who had died of a fever. We meet frequently evidences of such sad scenes. Graves, sometimes marked with boards, rudely inscribed; sometimes by the skull of a buffalo, on which with red chalk, or other transitory substance, is made a simple inscription; often a mere stick performs a similar service, but more frequently only the turf elevated slightly above the vast surrounding plain is the evidence that there, taking its final rest, is the body of one like ourselves, and painfully reminding us, too, that it may be our lot to be laid in a similar grave, and that some passerby may remark:

“No useless coffin encompassed his breast.”

Our driver being still unwell, Mr. Kincaid was in charge of the team. At dusk we made our night camp on a tributary of the Big Blue. Rain began falling soon after, continuing through the night. While on guard duty in the middle of the night I perceived great restlessness on the part of the mules. At times, suddenly starting or jumping, they loosened their picket pins which had to be staked again. A timid Yankee who thinks of nothing but Indians by day and dreams of them at night, became greatly excited, and at each disturbance made by the mules yelled loudly, “Ho! Guard,” Ho! Guard.” We ran each time without delay to save him from the