

DAILY JOURNAL
OF THE
TRIP BY
OX TEAM
FROM
ST. JOSEPH, MO.
TO
CALIFORNIA
BY
B. F. DOWELL

MAY 10 - SEPTEMBER 9,
1850

Sacramento City, California,
September 27th, 1850.

Dear Greenville:-

I was much disappointed, when I arrived here, to learn that there were no letters in the office for me. I wrote Alex a few lines several days ago, which probably you will see. There is no pleasure in crossing the Plains, but if a man has good luck he can come much cheaper than he can by the Isthmus.

I will send you a copy of my Journal from which you can form some idea of the country, roads, and the life of an Emigrant. Early in May I made arrangements with John McGirk, Isaac McGirk, and John McDowell to take an ox-team to California, with some horses to ride; and on the 8th day of May they started with the wagon & team from New Franklin, Howard Co., Mo. I

continued up the River by steam to St. Joseph, where I arrived on the 10th of the same month.

ST. JOSEPH, MAY 10th 1850

Having purchased two good mules for the sum of \$250, I crossed the Missouri River and set out after my wagon, but before I had traveled 5 miles, one of my mules commenced kicking. I jumped off the one I was riding and turned him loose; the other I tied fast with a rope to a tree and then I tried to catch the other which had on a bridle, saddle and four blankets which cost me \$27.50, but I found it an impossibility for one man to catch him, so I returned to the place where I had tied the other and found he had broken the rope and made his escape in the brush and bushes; so in this way I was left entirely alone,

and compelled to return on foot to St. Joseph to spend the night, and to get something to eat as the mule had taken off everything I had prepared to travel 150 miles.

MAY 21st

I spent the day with five other men who I employed to search for my mules. We found one and returned to St. Joseph, and bought the necessary outfit to travel until I could overtake my wagon at the Forks of the Independence & St. Joseph roads. I got in company with a gentleman from Hopkins County, Ky., by the name of David Cox, and having made R. Middleton, (a merchant of St. Joseph from whom I purchased the mules) my agent, to take possession of and sell the one which was lost, as soon as he could be found, we, at 4 o'clock in the

evening, again set out for California, and encamped at the edge of the Missouri bottom, 6 miles from St. Joseph in a hilly prairie.

MAY 22nd

Passed the Indian Mission at 3 o'clock; saw about 100 acres of land in wheat, which is a rare specimen of civilization in this savage land of God's creation. Camped at the first branch beyond. Good wood, water, and grass. † 25 = 32 miles.

MAY 23rd

Passed a new dug grave and a large prairie destitute of timber or water. The only living thing we saw was green, nutritious grasses. † 20 = 52 miles.

MAY 24th

We have often times read of the joys of the thirsty and wary traveller in a desert land when he arrived at a cool & gentle stream of pure water, but we never properly appreciated the sentiment until today. We had traveled all day through a barren prairie destitute of water. At 4 o'clock we reached a small creek of pure water having its bottom covered with good grass.

‡ 21 = 73 miles.

MAY 25th

Passed two new dug graves. It is said both died with cholera. Crossed several little creeks which supplied us with plenty of good water. There were also a few small trees on each creek. Having lost my saddle mule and the other being unbroke, I was compelled to walk the whole way from St.

Joseph. My feet became blistered and very sore, so I purchased a horse from a returning emigrant who had been on the plains for four weeks, and had travelled upwards of 700 miles from home. He said he had seen the Elephant and eaten his ears, and that he was now going home to Sally, his wife, and that he would stay with her in the States as long as he lived.

‡ 30. = 103 miles.

MAY 26th

Left camp at 6 o'clock and arrived at Blue River at 11, crossed at 2, and came to the forks of the Independence road at 5, and camped at the 1st branch beyond at a good spring, and good grass all around.

‡ 33 = 136 miles.

. 27th

~~Mr.~~ McGirk being behind on the Independence Road with our wagon, I rode back on that road to Blue River, where I found Dr. Hamin, Mr. McCauley, and several others from New Franklin, from whom I learned that our wagon was still behind 12 miles. I have travelled more than half the way from St. Joseph to this place alone. This is a deep, turbulent little stream. I had to swim my horse & mule across yesterday, and then pay two dollars for the exquisite pleasure of riding over with my baggage on a raft. Whole trains have been rafting their wagons across at both places for the last three days. This place is said to be 190 miles from Independence and 150 from St. Joseph.

BIG BLUE RIVER, MAY 28th

Mr. McGirk & Co. came up today with our wagon and all the company crossed the river before sundown & camped at the branch. We are now in the Pawnee Nation where good guard ought to be kept. Numerous herds of elk and buffalo are apparent, but as yet we have seen none. Dr. Hamin and Mr. McCauley are only one day ahead of us. They started five days before our wagon.

MAY 29th

Made a noon camp at the first branch west of the junction of the Independence and St. Joseph Roads. We are now altogether in good health and spirits and at the same place I arrived at on the 20th inst. Camped in a wild prairie destitute of wood or water. No branch between here and our

noon camp and none west of us under 8 miles. We packed a little brush on our horses 2 miles to make coffee. We all lived well and slept sound all night without any guard. We are now only 12 miles west of where I camped on the 26th and 148 miles from St. Joseph.

MAY 30th

Made a noon halt on a little branch & camped at 5 o'clock on good grass. The soil here is rich and level but void of timber. The grasses cover the earth like wheat in some vast and almost boundless field in the Eastern States. We met some Indian traders and trappers who had been in the mountains all winter. They had twelve wagons with five yoke of oxen to each, which were heavily laden with beaver, otter, buffalo, and various kinds of skins.

They left Fort Laramie on 20th April.
They said they met some California emigrants in 3 days after leaving the Fort and that the road is literally lined with Emigrants from here to the Fort, and that some of those they met, some are now in California. † 18 = 166 miles.

MAY 31st

The Emigrants have had fine sport all day in chasing the elk, antelope & buffalo, but they only killed one. We saw several buffalos following each other like Indians in single file with double quick time. They were the first wild ones I had ever seen. I have not seen an Indian since I left St. Joseph. The traders informed us that they were not allowed to go on the roads by orders from their chiefs for fear they would do something to cause the great

number of whites to kill the whole Indian race. They live in the vicinity of the road, wild and perfectly naked. This would make a great farming country if it only had timber enough to make fires & fences. Doubtless timber would soon grow in great abundance if the Indians could be prevented from setting the grass on fire in the spring of the year, but they fire the prairies every spring to make a good range for buffalo, so they may stay in their vicinity all summer. They kill them during summer and fall to subsist on during the ensuing winter. † 21 = 187 miles.

JUNE 1st 1850

We met 40 or 50 U. S. Dragoons on their way to the settlement from Fort Kearney. We passed over some poor gravelly ground today and made a noon halt on Little Blue

River. The grass is almost all eaten out on its banks by the numerous herds of stock belonging to the present active, energetic emigration. The emigrants on this road to the California Golden Region are from almost every State in the Union and are descendants of English, Irish, Dutch & French. We have seen many going along with their knapsacks on their backs, others with wheelbarrows, others with packed mules and horses, some in buggies & carriages, & thousands with wagons and teams; all in one conglomerate mass marching on towards the golden region of the west. † 22 = 209 miles.

SUNDAY, JUNE 2nd

Having labored hard the last 6 days, we today followed the illustrious example of the Maker of the heavens & the earth, by resting on the seventh day, but we did not

all keep it holy, for while some of us were cooking & washing, others were hunting & shooting buffalo. We started alone, but our company now consists of 10 wagons, 1 cat, 1 dog, 1 mule, 13 horses, 25 cows, 68 oxen and 39 men & 1 woman, which is about an average proportion of animals and women, to the men that are now on their way across the plains to California.

JUNE 3rd

Made a noon halt on the Little Blue. We saw 3 young ladies pass us while we were eating. † 16 = 225 miles.

JUNE 4th

We had another thunderstorm on us last night and the road has been very heavy and muddy all day. The road side is strewn with odorous wild flowers. We are still

ascending a branch of Little Blue River.

‡ 21 = 246 miles.

JUNE 5th

Passed the last wood and water & drove on through a hard rain to the edge of the bottom of Platte River & camped in a wild prairie. No wood but plenty of rain. Saw the name of Cousin B. Melton written on the sign post, at the forks of the road, dated May 19th 1850. ‡ 19 = 264 miles.

JUNE 6th

Made a noon halt on the west side of Fort Kearney - passed the Fort at 2 o'clock and camped on the slough in the bottom of Platte River. Plenty of grass & water but no wood of any kind nearer than the river, which lies about 3 miles north of us, and there is no wood on it except a few willows

about two inches in diameter. Fort Kearney is situated in a low wet marshy place in the bottom about half way between the river and the sand hills. The stables are built of prairie turf and some of the dwelling houses about $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet thick. The best looking houses are new common framed about 40 feet long & from 25 to 30 wide & two stories high. It is a poor Fort and a bad location. † 18 - 282 miles.

JUNE 8th

This morning our intention was to make an early start as we had laid in camp all day yesterday, but we were awake by the groans of I. Biggs from Pettis Co., Mo., who had joined our company several days ago. He was taken violently ill with cholera about daybreak and died before 12 o'clock. He had his wife with him, who