

Diary of a Pike's Peak Gold Seeker in 1860

With an Introduction and Notes by HARRY B. PRATT\*

This is a day-by-day account of a journey of a group of 16 gold seekers from Bloomington, Illinois, to and from the Colorado mines in the year 1860. The diary begins March 1, 1860, and closes September 28th. The author of the diary, Edward J. Lewis, was born in Philadelphia, September 25, 1828. His father, Enoch Lewis, was an instructor of mathematics in the Friends School at West-town, Pennsylvania. Edward was educated at home and studied law with his brother, Joseph J. Lewis. It was Joseph J. Lewis who took the autobiography of Abraham Lincoln and other material furnished by Jesse W. Fell and prepared the first biographical account of Lincoln, used in the campaign of 1860. It was published in the *Chester County* (Pa.) *Times* on February 11, 1860, and immediately copied into Republican newspapers throughout the north.

At the conclusion of his law studies, Edward J. Lewis took the position of exchange editor of a Philadelphia newspaper. In 1856 he accepted the invitation of Jesse W. Fell of Bloomington, Illinois, to move to Bloomington and take editorial charge of the *Pentagraph*, the local newspaper. He held this position from June, 1856, to January, 1860; and again for some months after his return from Colorado, until his enlistment in the Civil War in August, 1861. His last term as editor covered the years 1871 to 1879. During the last two years of his four and a half years' service in the Union army he was captain of Company C of the 33d Regiment of Illinois Volunteers.

In 1884 he was appointed postmaster of Normal, Illinois, and following his term worked for several years as a clerk in the office. His last years were spent in retirement at his home at 208 W. Kelsey Street in Bloomington, where he died November 3, 1907.

The news of the discovery of gold in the Pike's Peak region attracted many prospectors from Bloomington in 1859. The *Weekly Pentagraph*, March 6, 1859, said: "Two handcarts are being made here for the trip and a cow train is to leave shortly." The cow train started ten days later and stuck fast in the mud a mile from the courthouse for a day, but went on to Ft. Kearny, Nebraska.

\*Mr. Pratt, Executive Secretary of the Abraham Lincoln Association of Springfield, Illinois, kindly submitted this diary for publication.—Ed.

Matter 3★  
Edward Lewis  
Independence to Denver 1860  
In Sep to Lawrence to Doughham  
x Troy to Iowa Point to  
Arls to Nebraska City

where it turned back. Many, however, reached Auraria (Denver) as early as May. A part of those who returned in the fall determined to try again the next spring. Three of these, John F. Rees, Thomas J. Donahue and Linus Graves, formed a party of 16, including the author of the diary, Mr. Lewis. Two of the party, John and Peter Pitsch, left Bloomington February 29, 1860, to pick up Graves' team and wagon in Iowa and take it on to the place of rendezvous, Nebraska City, Nebraska. The next day four of the party took the train to St. Louis and on March 5th the rest followed, with the exception of Thomas Rees, who went directly from Cleveland, Ohio, to Nebraska City. The party as organized at Nebraska City consisted of four groups without a captain. Group one included James White, S. S. Adolph and Duncan Wallace with two horses. Group two included Linus Graves, Thomas Fell, John Pitsch and Peter Pitsch with two mules. The third group consisted of Thomas J. Donahue, John F. Rees, Thomas Rees, William Hill and Enoch Moore with three mules. The last group was E. J. Lewis, his nephew Enoch E. Lewis, Henry C. Fell and Wm. O. Davis with four mules.

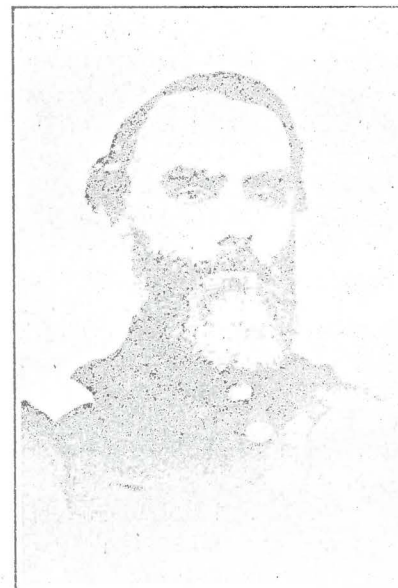
All the men were from Bloomington except Thomas Rees of Cleveland, Ohio; Thomas Fell of Lexington and James White of Oldtown, McLean county. Supplies were purchased in St. Louis and taken on the steamboat *Florence* to Nebraska City. The mules were purchased in Independence, Missouri, and driven north to the place of rendezvous. The party left Nebraska City March 21, 1860, over the well-marked government trail on the 110-mile journey to the Platte River. Each group had a tent and all wagons were well loaded with mining tools and provisions. Several sacks of ground feed were taken, though the animals subsisted mainly on the short dry buffalo grass of the previous year's growth. They followed the Platte River to Denver and the same route on the return as far as Ft. Kearny, where they crossed to the north bank of the Platte River and followed the Mormon Trail to Omaha.

On the 18th of April, the day after their arrival in Denver, they started west to Gregory's Diggings at Mountain City. The cabin of Linus Graves, some 25 miles west of Denver, became the headquarters for a month. Reports of rich discoveries on the headwaters of the Arkansas River caused most of the group, with the additional arrivals from Bloomington, to move there. They went the long route by Pike's Peak, arriving in California Gulch May 25th, where they remained for two months.

Not one of the party or their immediate friends struck it rich! They found many difficulties in their way; the climate was very cold, with snow squalls and ice as late as the 11th of June and frost and ice on into July. The rainy season began the last week

of June and it rained for a week, then followed a week of dry weather, and for the rest of July it rarely missed one rain per day. The rarity of the atmosphere made hard work for several weeks almost impossible.

Most of the party returned to Denver around the first of August and started home in small groups. Lewis and Linus Graves took a horseback excursion back to an alleged silver lode near Breckenridge, a round trip of 200 miles. On the 20th of August the party consisting of E. J. Lewis, Enoch Lewis, W. O. Davis and Linus Graves started for home. They arrived in Bloomington September 28th, completing their seven months' journey in search of the El Dorado. Lewis attended the county fair on the day of his arrival and was so changed in appearance that no one recognized him.



CAPTAIN EDWARD J. LEWIS  
IN CIVIL WAR UNIFORM

Lewis wrote three letters to the Bloomington *Pantagraph*. They were published May 4, June 1, and September 6th, and in large part are the sources of material for the footnotes given in the diary. In the last letter Lewis said: "Although I have joined the great crowd of the returning disappointed, I am not coming home with my finger in my mouth, to denounce Pike's Peak as an unmitigated humbug." The diary follows:

Thursday, March 1st [1860].—Left Bloomington, Ills. at 2½ A. M. with H. C. Fell, J. F. Rees and T. J. Donahue in company. Reached St. Louis at about 11 A. M. and put up at Missouri Hotel, corner of Main & Morgan. Spent the P. M. in pricing goods. Retired early. Day rainy in morning; fair in P. M.

Friday, 2nd.—Busy all day pricing and buying goods. In morning I visited several hotels to learn about mules on the frontier but with poor success. Met Jacob Hall of Independence, Santa Fe mail contractor who said mules would cost \$150, oxen \$70 per yoke & etc. Didn't credit him much. Priced some mules today but found them very high. Smith & Co. offered 4 for \$490; 2 horse mules \$230; etc. Bushnell offered 4 neat ones for \$425; and 5 for \$545. Met F. Price, whose place of business is 18 N. 2nd St.—house 183 N. 8th St.

Saturday, 3rd.—Weather still fine. After a busy day Rees & self took passage for Independence on the Spread Eagle,<sup>1</sup> Capt. Labarge at \$9 each. Left Donahue & Fell to finish the work here. I took with me \$470 in gold. Rees had a little over \$300. Learned at Moody, Michel & Co's (successors to Singleton) N. W. Pine & Commercial, of mules near Independence at \$80 @ 100. Clayton Vanhoy, 1½ m. n. of Pleasant Hill, Cass Co. has some. Dr. J. D. Stephens gave us this name.

Sunday, 4th.—Fine day. Still lying at St. Louis. Captain and officers lying on board. Spent evening at Dutch lager beer theatre on Broadway.

Monday, 5th.—Day still fine. On boat which was to have left certain at 4½ P. M. today. Donahue, Fell and Price called on us, and the two latter saw us off. Steamers Post Boy, Polar Star, Die Vernon, Belle of Peoria, all passed us within a few miles and the Quincy about dark. Entered mouth of Missouri about 8½ P. M. Seem to be some 40 cabin passengers on board and a number deck.

Tuesday, 6th.—The gang of gamblers left us before day at St. Charles. They got \$20 from a Dutchman last night. Left bank of river this morning mostly bluffs. Exposing rock horizontally stratified, and slightly columnar toward top. Right bank low. Afterwards character of banks alternating. Lightning early in morn & some rain. Met W. H. Russell at 12½ noon below Augusta 76 miles from St. Louis. Day generally fair, lightning and rain at night, and quite warm.

Wednesday, 7th.—Morning foggy. Grounded once or twice last night and this morn, and finally laid up at mouth of small creek on left bank. Fog clear at 9 and we started at 11½, met S. E. Treat above St. Aubert. 12¼ met down train. 1 P. M. overtook or met Southwester, which left St. Louis on Sunday (?).

<sup>1</sup>One of the boats which made the extraordinary voyage upstream to Ft. Benton in the summer of 1859.

Spent about 4 hours in crossing Osage bar, and left Southwester there. Reached Jefferson City at 9 P. M. and left at 9½. Met Carrier opposite Jefferson City.

Thursday, 8th.—Cold wind. Met White Cloud above Rockport, wooding. Landed at Boonville at dinner time, Glasgow at about 8 P. M.

Friday, March 9th.—Cool and windy. Above Brunswick at getting up time; first stopping place Miami. Many geese and swans in river today. Wind so high as to make steering quite difficult for a considerable part of the afternoon. Landed at Dover at 8½ P. M. Reached Lexington somewhat before midnight.

Saturday, 10th.—Beautiful morning. Above Napoleon at rising, 396 miles from St. Louis. Met Emma at 11 A. M. below Blue Mills, 428 miles from St. Louis, 14 from Independence. She left St. Louis on Saturday eve and we ought to have gone on her. 8:10 P. M. landed at Maxwell's. 4:25 reached Independence and stopped at Hiskman House. Called on Wm Stone in evening. Prices of his mules are high.

Sunday, 11th.—Fair but windy. Drove out to Jack Stone this morn, 8 miles S. E. Mules did not suit. Called at Whites. Not at home. Returned to town. We went out to Maxwell's, 3 miles on Lexington road. Good mules, but at \$135 @ 200 each.

Monday, 12th.—Fair but cool. Circuit court opens today. Some mules in town, generally yet a little high. Saw two negroes sold publicly.<sup>2</sup> Walked out 8 ms. on Blue Spring road to C. C. Childs.

Tuesday, 13th.—Fair. Bought of Mr. Childs 7 mules, 5 for \$105 each and 2 for \$75 each or total \$625; of which I paid \$400. Mounted and drove to Independence. Bought saddles &c; left about noon; had much trouble at the bridge; finally forded. Reached Kansas City<sup>3</sup> at about 3:30 P. M.; saw Jack McReynolds;<sup>4</sup> learned the Florence only left Wyandotte late last night. Ferried the Kansas and left Wyandotte at 4:30. Stopped for the night six miles out at Cotter's in the Wyandotte reservation, having gone about 28 or 29 miles today.

Wednesday, 14th.—Fair and warm, very dry. Left at 7:30 A. M. Reached Leavenworth (22 miles) at a little before 1 P. M. and put up at Lawrence House. Called at Dr. Weed's office. Left at 2½ P. M. Stopped for the night at John D. Clashy's about 6 ms. short of Atchison and 18 from Leavenworth, having made about 40 miles. Passed over considerable prairie country today, quite rolling.

<sup>2</sup>The town of Independence was full of people. The Negro boy of 13 sold for \$1,345, and a woman of 28 for \$875.00.

<sup>3</sup>Kansas City then had 12,000. It was grading the streets and cutting down the bluffs to make a city of itself.

<sup>4</sup>McReynolds was a former printer on the staff of the *Pantagraph*, a Bloomington, Illinois, newspaper.

Thursday, 15th.—Fair and warm. Left at 7:30 A. M. Got \$10 piece changed for silver at grocery store in Atchison; bank not being open. Followed telegraph wire to Doniphan, where it left us. Heard railroad train above Doniphan; also saw railroad partly graded below Doniphan. These two towns on rather rough ground, some good buildings. Fine country up to Troy, on a high prairie 10 miles above Doniphan, thence rough and very rough to Iowa Point 25 miles from Doniphan, which we reached shortly after sundown, and stopped at Wood House. The Florence only left here about 5 P. M. today. Drive about 36 miles today by reputation, probably farther on account of missing the road.

Friday, 16th.—Fine and a little windy. Left at 7:20 A. M. Passed through White Cloud (5 ms.) reached the Great Nemaha and were ferried over by an Indian; went on to Rulo (75 ms. from I. P.) thence to Archer (25 ms. from same) where took dinner. Thence 20 ms. over a fine prairie road, with a jolly mail rider for guide. Ferried Little Nemaha, and reached Nemaha City at about 5½ P. M. having made a drive of about 45 miles today. The river distance is 51 miles.

Saturday, 17th.—Windy and rather cloudy. Left a little before 7 A. M. and drove over a rolling prairie road, following an old Government trail, to Nebraska City, which reached at a little before 1 P. M. in a perfect whirlwind of dust. Found Jesse Blackburn<sup>5</sup> and took supper and lodged at his house. Omaha came in in evening. Florence not in. Met Rees' brother, and learned that Grave's Dutchmen [John and Peter Pitsch] had been here for a week. Day's drive 30 miles, total distance about 180 miles. Mules in good condition, except that my Maggie is a little lame.

Sunday, 18th.—Windy but fair. Florence came in at 9:40 A. M. with boys all on board, looking a little rough. Got goods off and up town and put up tents, and slept in them.

Monday, 19th.—Fair but cool. Busy with various preparations. Got five mules shod. In taking home the last one after dark, I got lost in the brush and wandered round to the tents again; then restarting, was overtaken by Davis and Enoch from camp with another mule, and went with them. I stood guard 1st half of night and Enoch 2nd.

Tuesday, March 20th.—Fine. Finished shoeing the mules, tied two of them to the wagon successfully; got the feed and partly packed for the journey. Cooked breakfast and supper at camp. Wrote to K. H. Fell<sup>6</sup> and A. A. this eve.

Wednesday, 21st.—Fair but windy. Made a start at 10 A. M. Mules went off well. Went to 10 mile house over a rolling prairie

<sup>5</sup>Blackburn lived in Nebraska, 1856-1865, when he moved to Normal, Illinois, and engaged in the lumber, hardware and coal business.

<sup>6</sup>Kersey H. Fell, brother of Jesse W. Fell, a Bloomington land dealer and lawyer.

on Govt. trail. Settlements scarce, camped at a slough about 4 P. M. Mule tore our tent tonight. Prayers tonight.

Thursday, 22nd.—Wind nearly facing us today; was with us yesterday. Left camp and pursued our N. W. course over a similar country to yesterday, becoming less rolling as we advanced. Saw timber 2 or 3 times at a distance on left, and in P. M. sighted Weeping Water timber at intervals on right. Stopped at noon on ridge with good slough water within ½ mile. Flock of pelicans (?) came over us while eating, and once or twice afterwards. Met near camp in the eve an ox train from Elm Creek (100 miles west) driven by Mr. Beardsley, who lives there. Pulled Iowa team out of mud once this morn. Camped at 5 P. M. on Weeping Water creek 18 miles, with good water and timber. 3 houses near.

Friday, 23rd.—Cloudy and rather still in morn. Left at 7 A. M. and forded creek, good stream of water.<sup>7</sup> Shot some prairie chickens. Saw Platte Bluff at its S. bend only a few miles distant. Reached Salt Creek (45 miles from Nebraska City) at 5 P. M. only 6 miles from Platte; crossed a toll bridge to an excellent camp ground. Bought ½ bu. of potatoes at 50c per bu.; some corn at same; eggs 10c; hay 60c per 100. Several houses near here, some farming done. Wild geese flying over at night, wild turkeys seen. Met a freight team here, returning from Denver with oxen. Henry found some wild flowers on prairie today.

Saturday, 24th.—Very cold last night, ice ½ inch to inch on buckets this morning. Lying over today, making various preparations. Settled with Donahue & Co. and found them owing us \$93.29; they paid \$72.20 and gave note for \$21. Drew out our own account. Henry shot himself in foot this morning.

Sunday, 25th.—Cold with furious wind from N. W. facing us. Left camp at 6:15 and travelled all day over very rolling country. White lost tire of wagon wheel and detained us an hour. Finally camped on prairie near water 2½ miles short of Wahoo creek. Very cold tonight. No guard. Journey 32½ miles.<sup>8</sup>

Monday, 26th.—Cold and windy in morn, very fine in P. M. Left camp crossed Wahoo and travelled all day with Ft. Kearney team, sighting Platte bluffs at eve. Camped on prairie some 6 miles short of Platte, and used wood brought from Wahoo. Days journey 26 or 27 miles. Aurora tonight. No guard.

Tuesday, 27th.—Left camp about 7 A. M., rather cold with S. W. wind but soon warm and pleasant. Continued some 5 miles over level prairie, then a mile or so through bluffs and struck Platte bottom, river 2 or 3 miles distant, visible from bluffs. A little wood in ravines on this side. Met a team or two here, the first since

<sup>7</sup>Coffee made of it was so salty as to be utterly undrinkable.

<sup>8</sup>This day's march was the hardest of the seven months' trip.