

#629

August 29, 1925

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THE ARGONAUT



[This drawing of the Bear and the Walrus appeared at the "mast-head" of the Argonaut in its early years. It is restored to head this column of reminiscences and stories of Old California.]

CROSSING THE PLAINS IN A COVERED WAGON IN 1849.

Written for the "Argonaut" by Mrs. Belle Redman Somers.

In the Spring of 1849 some families from the States of Indiana and Kentucky formed a "Train," as it was then called, to make the journey to California. These Trains, as a rule, consisted of from five to twenty-five families, a covered wagon or two to each family and each wagon drawn by four oxen. The families that intended to join this Train got to St. Joseph, Mo., by devious ways, as this town was the fitting out and starting place of many emigrants to California.

Our family consisted of my parents, a brother and sister, and we had two covered wagons. One we rode in and the other was for freight. When we were ready to start our Train contained fifteen families and was led by a guide, a Mr. Wilcox. This young man had made the journey a number of times and had come to us highly recommended. These guides were very important personages and a successful journey, to a great extent, depended upon them.

One of the first incidents of the journey that comes to the mind of the writer, who was, at that time, six years of age, was in crossing the Mississippi River. One of the passengers on the steamboat was President Zachary Taylor, who spoke very kindly and gave out many words of cheer to the departing emigrants and kissed all the little girls on board.

All went well on our journey for the first two months, and many happy hours were passed. We carried large iron stoves on the hind end of the wagons and at supper time the women got busy. There was no lack of food, for game, both big and little, was very plentiful. After supper a camp-fire was built, around which the old and young would gather and sing the negro melodies and also the popular songs of that day. One song, that seemed to strike the popular fancy particularly, began in this way:

O! Susanna don't you cry for me
I'm goin' to California
The gold mines for to see.

But not one of our family ever saw the gold mines. My father came to California to practice law and brought my mother, whose delicate health demanded a milder climate.

As we proceeded on our journey, the weather became warmer and the so-called water-holes became scarcer. Finally one of the oxen, Snider by name, fell to the ground exhausted. We thought he had laid down to die. It surely was a sad day for all of us. All the children cried as we hid Snider what we thought a lot

dians, as unwelcome guests, had been following us for a number of days. One of them had become quite friendly with the guide. So well had the Indian gotten into the good graces of Wilcox that the latter had invited him into the wagon to sit with him. While the Indian was examining some firearms that Mr. Wilcox was explaining to him, a pistol shot rang out and the body of Wilcox rolled out of the wagon to the ground. He died instantly. The Indian's horse had fallen back from the guide's wagon to such a distance that he lost much valuable time in trying to make his escape. He was quickly captured and put to death. We learned later that he was a chief and was so hated and despised by his tribesmen that they intentionally placed his pony in such a position at the rear end of the Train that there could be no possibility of the murderer's escape. The Indian's body was quickly buried and brush placed over the grave so that the friends he did have would not discover it and seek revenge.

A leader was chosen to take the place of Wilcox. This man had some ability as a guide and we got along fairly well notwithstanding that most of the roads were not much more than infrequently traveled trails.

The general health of the party was good with the exception of an epidemic of cholera which attacked the train as we passed along the North Platte River country. Ten of the party were stricken and all of them died. Strange to say, not one of the children was taken sick with this malady. No physician accompanied the train. All the knowledge of medicine was obtained from the medical book that each family possessed.

We finally reached Utah, and although worn out and at times discouraged, we were glad to get again into a land approaching civilization. Here we could obtain fresh fruit and vegetables. The Mormons came out to welcome us and were very kind. They begged us to go no further, but to settle among them and even join their church. I can remember how horrified my mother was at the very thought of such an idea. The women up to 100 per cent voted a decided NO and said they would go right on. The Mormons further pleaded, and I might add, untruthfully, that it would be dangerous for us to move on. We would encounter and be buried in snow storms and perish, and still it was in the month of July. We learned later that this was all propaganda thrown out to each train as it passed through Utah. The Mormons in this way gathered many recruits into their fold. We heeded not the warnings of the Mormons, but continued on our way.

Nothing of import happened to us from now on, and to the completion of our journey to San Francisco, which place we reached the first week of September, 1849. We delayed in Sacramento just long enough to sell our wagons and oxen. The oxen were such good faithful beasts, I often think of them to this day.

At Sacramento our family embarked on a little steamer called the *Mint*. How distinctly I remember that it took us three days to reach San Francisco, with no mishaps to mar our progress. The fare for five of us was fifty dollars.

Our journey covered a period of five months, and considering that many others were on the road from six months to a year, it was a very successful journey indeed.

As we landed in San Francisco, we thanked God that he had taken such good care of us through such a long and hazardous journey.

O! Susanna don't you cry for me
I'm goin' to California
The gold mines for to see.

But not one of our family ever saw the gold mines. My father came to California to practice law and brought my mother, whose delicate health demanded a milder climate.

As we proceeded on our journey, the weather became warmer and the so-called water-holes became scarcer. Finally one of the oxen, Snider by name, fell to the ground exhausted. We thought he had laid down to die. It surely was a sad day for all of us. All the children cried as we bid Snider what we thought a last farewell. We could linger no longer. The day was passing and water must be found before dark, and at last we did find it many miles beyond. After supper that evening, after every one had gone to bed, excepting the men who were on guard, a slow lumbering step was heard in the darkness, and it proved to be the late lamented Snider. The cool night air and the smell of water had revived him and he seemed as good as new. After that he was given the name of Hero.

During the entire journey, a period of five months, the men were constantly on the lookout for Indians of evil intent, and also wild beasts. This watch became more diligent as we grandually left the borders of civilization. An incident occurred with the Indians, a real serious one, in which the writer played one of the principal roles. Two Sioux Indians had been following our Train for a number of days. We felt that they boded no good intent and so we kept a close watch, but at the same time were very good to them as that was the settled policy among the emigrants toward all Indians. Not until they had tried and failed in their cowardly mission to capture the writer, did we realize their true intent. Riding alongside our wagon, they pleaded with my mother to swap (the one real English word they all seemed to be familiar with) me for a pony. My mother was thoroughly frightened and held me closely to her side. The two Indians then retired to the rear end of the Train, and while one sat on his horse and waited, the other Indian moved forward rapidly to our wagon and reaching forward made a quick movement to grab me. Mother's frightened screams gave the alarm, while at the same time the Indian rapidly joined his companion, swung on his pony and dashed away at top speed. The men of the Train followed in hot pursuit but failed to capture the Indian.

The murder of our guide, Mr. Wilcox, was probably the most appalling of the many incidents of the journey. Aside from the sadness it threw upon the entire Train, it gave us much concern as to how we were to continue onward without someone to direct the way. A few In-

that it took us three days to reach San Francisco, with no mishaps to mar our progress. The fare for five of us was fifty dollars.

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INPUT 6/15/94 mjp

COED MANUSCRIPT CHECK-OUT SHEET

MANUSCRIPT AUTHOR: Somers, Belle Redman
MANUSCRIPT TITLE: Crossing the Plains in a Covered Wagon
in 1849 - written for the "Argonaut"
DATE OF JOURNEY: 1849
COED CODE NO.: 4950MØ1 MATTES CODE NO.: 629
DATE MANUSCRIPT CHECKED OUT: Ø2/26/94
DATE SURVEY COMPLETED: Ø5/15/94
NAME OF COED SURVEYOR: Mary E. Maag
DATE DATA ENTRY COMPLETED: _____
DATE SURVEY FORWARDED: _____

Instructions: Please make one copy of this form. File copy with the manuscript and file original in CCC Check-Out File.

*from National Frontier Trails Center,
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*need
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SURVEY/INPUT TIME LOG

DOCUMENT INFORMATION (TO BE COMPLETED BY THE SURVEYOR)

Somers Belle Redman 4950M01
EMIGRANT'S NAME DOCUMENT ID NO.

SURVEYOR INFORMATION (TO BE COMPLETED BY THE SURVEYOR)

Mary E. Maag mem69
SURVEYOR NAME SURVEYOR ID NO.

02/26/94 05/15/94 45
DATE SURVEY ASSIGNED DATE SURVEY COMPLETED HRS MINS
TIME TO COMPLETE

CCC REVIEW/INFO (BEFORE DATA ENTRY) (TO BE COMPLETED BY CCC)

Mary Jo Sprague MJS46
CCC NAME CCC ID NO.

6-10-94 6-15-94
DATE RECEIVED FROM SURVEYOR DATE REVIEWED

20 6-15-94 Mary Jo Sprague
TIME TO REVIEW DATE SENT FOR ENTRY DATA ENTRY VOLUNTEER

NOTES: _____

DATA ENTRY INFORMATION (TO BE COMPLETED BY DATA ENTRY VOLUNTEER)

Mary Jo Sprague MJS46
DATA ENTRY VOLUNTEER NAME VOLUNTEER ID NO.

6-15-94 6-15-94
DATE RECEIVED FOR ENTRY DATE ENTERED HRS MINS
TIME TO ENTER

Kathy Roubal
DISKS/SURVEYS FORWARDED TO DATE SENT

NOTES: _____

CCC REVIEW/INFO (AFTER ENTRY) (COMPLETED BY CCC IF APPLICABLE)
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DATE RECEIVED FROM DATA ENTRY DATE DATA ENTRY REVIEWED

TIME TO REVIEW DATE SENT TO COED ADMINISTRATOR FOR INPUT

Emigrant's last name: Somers Surveyed by: mem69
 first & middle names: Belle Redman Date surveyed: 05/15/94
 Title: Crossing the Plains in a Covered Wagon in 1849

Year of journey: 1849 Year written (if different): 1925 Page nos. surveyed: 01-02

Type of document: N (D - diary; J - journal; R - reminiscence; L - letter; N - newspaper article; G - guide; A - autobiography; O - other)

Items in document: _____ (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: copy from Denver Public Library

For PUBLISHED documents only:

Published in: The Argonaut

Publisher: _____ Year published: 1925

Place published: San Francisco, CA

Editor's (or translator's) last name: _____

first & middle names: _____

Notes about publication history: _____

For UNPUBLISHED documents only:

Notes about format of document: _____

Notes on back? _____

Mary E. Maag

Somers, Belle Redman

Membr
Mattesz 629

Document ID: (4950M01)

Emigrant's occupation: child Origin: _____
Age: 6 M/F: F With family? (Y/N) Y No. in family: 4

Departed from (code): J3 Arrived at (code): Sacramento C5
Date of departure: 1849 Date of arrival: 09/49 (use form mm/dd/yy)

Party: Wilcox

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

Guidebook used by emigrant (enter either a title, or an author and title, if given):

Routes: _____ (use codes from the trail maps)

Notes on back? yes

(Mary E. Maag

Somers, Belle Redman

mem 69

Mattes # 629

Document ID: (4950MΦ1)

Location

Page

Date

North Platte River

Φ1

Utah

Φ1

