

William Gordon Steuben

Memorandum Book 1st

1849 Journal

May 1. Still at camp in Nebraska * (see letter No. 8), excessive high winds, thermometer 32 at sunrise, moderated through the day, at Night a severe thunder storm.

May 2. Quite pleasant through today, showers at a distance, thermometer as high as 78. This country subject to very sudden changes but they do not affect the health as such changes do in the Eastern states. The atmosphere is very dry & bracing, seldom take cold here.

May 3. Broke up camp for the purpose of taking a more advanced position. Traveled west about 12 miles, country very rolling and one vast Prairie as far as the eye can reach. No agriculture, no signs of civilization. Road good and traveled extensively this season being almost one continued line of Emigrant waggons. Passed a small creek where I noticed something singular in the branches of an Oak tree and, on examination, found it to be an Indian Coffin about four feet long. It contained the bones of a child and was made of a trough. The squirrels had made a hole in it and there deposited their rich stores. Thermometer at sunset 72, at sunrise 47.

May 4. Thermometer at sunrise 47. A violent thunder storm through the night, morning, dark & dirty, continues cold through the day. The Prairie assumes a different appearance, Hills & valley covered with nature's green carpet. Crossed Wolf River today, a very difficult pass. Noticed an Indian burying ground, passed some wigwams and land that the Indians had pretended to cultivate but it was like the field of the slothful. Temperature 47.

May 5. At sunrise temperature 44. Found one of our teams deficient and sent Grimes back for another yoke oxen to St. J.** about 25 miles and lay over for repairs. Grass grows finely now, cattle get a good bite. Rains frequent. Temperature at noon 65, at night 60.

May 6. Sabbath. Did not travel today. Spent the time as much as possible in reading and meditation, feel thankful to God for His mercies and pray for Divine Grace to assist me. Thoughts of home and friends today, feel to commend my family to God. Some melancholy reflections a/c of receiving no intelligence from my dear wife since I left her. I am now beyond the reach of mails and do not expect to get letters. Last night somewhat annoyed by wolves that came quite close to our tent. Rattlesnakes are numerous, we have killed several. Indians here appear inoffensive, 10 or 12 came to our camp today, most of them armed with bow and arrows. We gave them bread, showed them our establishment and bid them goodbye. Evening brought them back

* "An interesting usage of reflecting the contemporary agitation for creation of Nebraska Territory. When that Territory was created, five years later, it was divided as Kansas and Nebraska and, in retrospect, Mr. Steuben would have said his camp was in Kansas."

** "St. J." - St. Joseph, Missouri, one of the principal starting points for the emigrant caravans California bound.

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Ms. 4610
Wm. Gordon Steuben

after they had been the round of tents & begged all they could of small pieces of money, food, etc. Then they set themselves down by our campfire, took a pack of cards and commenced a regular system of gambling for their day's labour. This was a novel scene.

May 7. Grimes returned from St. J. with cattle, find them very dear, oxen being in good demand & mules plenty in market & low. Very warm today, temperature 81 but a brisk, lively air, as is usual, consequently the heat is not offensive.

May 8. Broke up camp today & took our journey westward. We passed a Missionary station where we saw some signs of life again. As we advanced the Prairie assumes a different appearance and becomes more level as we left the M. River.** This eve I cannot give a better idea of the former and present appearance of the country than by comparing it to the Ocean in a storm & in a calm, the contrast is so great. We traveled today about 12 miles & that through the most beautiful country I have ever seen. It needs only civilization to make this the garden of the world. Temperature at sunrise 42, at noon 78, at sunset 64.

May 9. Temperature sunrise 51, noon 61, sunset 56. Started at 6 o'clock, traveled about 15 miles. The prospect, if possible, is more and more interesting. The grass grows more finely and the flours are more beautiful. The general tendency of the country is upward as we go west and more level. I have gazed on the endless prospect before me until my eyes are tired of looking on such beauty and wondered until all wonder ceases. I have noticed that our road is strewn for two days past with the Horns of the Elk; it reminds me of the bones of the Pilgrims on their way to visit their Idol Juggernaut. Last night while I stood sentry 2 wolves presented themselves but left 'sans ceremony'. I have seen no Indians for 2 days. The Tribes we have passed are the Sacs, Foxes, Pottawatomies, and Iowas.

May 10. Temperature at sunrise 46, at noon 82, at night 68. Traveled 20 miles today through beautiful, level country. No signs of civilized life but the whole surface appears one vast meadow. Roads full equal to those in our populous Eastern towns. Some trouble tonight to find water for our teams and for cooking but after searching for 2 or 3 miles by a person sent out for that purpose we discovered the joyful signal for water found.

May 11. A fine cool breeze this morning, some rain. After traveling 10 miles we came to a stream of water called by the Natives Niniham* It is a fine stream not very difficult to pass. On its banks many notices are put up giving information when certain companies had passed. We likewise observed a new Grave here with the inscription on the headstone taken from Mrs. Heman's "Leaves have their time to fall, etc." Some poor fellow had journeyed to Eternity instead of to California. This is about 80 miles from St. J. We continued our journey about 8 miles further to a small stream where we camped for the night. Roads first rate, temperature this evening 65.

**"M. River" - The Missouri River

*"Niniham" - Probably the present day Nemaha River which is in Nebraska just about the location referred to in the Journal.

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May 12. High winds today. Passed several small streams with deep valleys. Saw a dead ox on the road. Soon after came to a place of encampment where the emigrants had had misfortune. We found the remains of a burned waggon and a large quantity of provisions scattered on the ground, axes, etc., etc. Today we discovered for the first time in about 100 miles some Woodland, but it was confined to narrow strips in the Valleys and on the Streams. We traveled today 20 miles and for the last 8 on a perfect level, or nearly so. The roads good, the prospect almost tiresome for the eye finds nothing on which to rest. The green fields before you change at a distance to a blue and gradually commingles with the Horizon, in fact, the Sky and the Ocean unite in every direction. We are now in the Prairie Country, the boundary, I am informed, is the Niniham. The Pawnees are noted for their thieving propensities. Some mules and cattle have been stolen although, as yet, we have seen none of them.

May 13. Sunday, Lay by today, temperature this morning 34, at noon 78, night 64. Have time for reflection: thoughts of home; family & friends present themselves. I feel to commend them to God's holy keeping & feel confident that I shall see them again by the blessing of God.

May 14. A Heavy Thunderstorm this morning but at 8 O'clock we renew our journey. Traveled 15 miles. Passed the Big Blue river today, a stream nearly as large as the Mohawk*, saw on its banks a dead wild-cat that some of the emigrants had killed, likewise, the grave of some poor unfortunate fellow. After 7 or 8 miles travel today we found the country more rolling. Passed a number of small streams that were lined with a few scattering trees. We are about 125 miles from St. J. and have, for the first time, formed a connection with others for mutual protection. Our friends consist of 4 waggons and 21 men** from Ohio commanded by Capt. H.C. Mann.*** Temperature today 55.

May 15. A dark, wet morning, cold and windy, a fine day for traveling. Made 25 miles. Nothing worth recording today. Country mostly rolling but some extensive plains. Passed no running water today. Our new company agreeable, I think we shall like them.

* His home village, Steuben, is near the Mohawk River where it flows past Rome, New York.

** Generally, in an emigrant party:

1 wagon required 10 - 12 oxen or mules
5 - 6 men to a wagon
10 - 20 wagons required 1 hour to pass

*** Source: a family letter dated July 3, 1849 from Catherine Steuben, wife of Mr. Steuben, to her brother, Captain Charles S. Hamilton, U.S.A. which reads in part,

"I received a letter from North last Friday dated Fort Childs, Platte River, May 22. They were well and had joined a Co of 21 men & 4 waggons called the Olentangy Co from Delaware Co Ohio, Capt. H. C. Mann, making in all a Co of 28 men & 6 waggons."

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May 16. Cloudy & cool, traveled 17 miles today. Our teams work well. Country very uneven and in some places quite rough. Passed a small stream this morning called Wythe and one this evening called Walnut Creek. All the streams are little runs, are in deep valleys or gullys, many of them. Very difficult to pass. Passed another Emigrant Grave, killed by Mules.

May 17. Traveled about 22 miles, passed a stream this morning called Sandy Creek by leaving the old track. The country was at first uneven but since 10 o'clock our course led through a table land perfectly level for 15 miles when we came to the Little Blue river. This rout is called a cutoff and said to save 5 miles. By taking this rout we have outdistanced about 200 teams.

May 18. Our course today about 17 Miles led us up the valley of L. Blue. Grass not as good as usual. Wood & Water plenty. The country back from the valley is quite broken and more barren than usual. In the valley on the opposite side of the river we saw Deer, Antelope, & Buffalo for the first time. Weather temperate.

May 19. Still onward up the valley, sometimes on the River, at others when the stream curves some distance from its bed we frequently ascend from the bottoms in our course to the table lands which are perfectly level. Our Road today is not as good as usual, we made, however, 18 or 20 miles making about 115 miles this week. Last night a severe thunder storm, started in the morn 1/2 past 4. Cool in the morning, 80 at noon and fell off toward eve 10 degrees in one hour. Today, 2 Antelope were chased by hunters close to our train as we traveled. Game, in general, has been frightened from the track by those who have preceded us.

May 20. Sabbath. We lay over today and are an exception to most of the Californians as above 200 teams passed our encampment today, all very eager to get where most of them are sure to be disappointed. Another violent thunder storm in the morning, the Lightening almost incessant & the Wind a perfect gale. Commenced a letter to my wife today intending to mail it at Fort Childs.

May 21. Traveled 20 miles, our course 5 or 6 miles up the L. Blue where we left the valley and ascended to the table land that separates the waters of the Kansas and Plat rivers. Road heavy on account of the late rains. We came up and passed many of the trains that passed us yesterday. The general surface of the table lands is perfectly level but occasionally we find deep gullys. Water & grass are scarce here when the season is further advanced. Distance from the L. Blue to the Plat is said to be about 25 miles we consequently camped tonight on what, sometimes, is a desert but we find water in ponds now. Our tea this eve is made of rain water with plenty of wigglers in it and our bread is somewhat moldy. Both yesterday and today, in fact, almost every day, the wind blows very hard so much so that we have to tie our hats on our heads. We are now in the Buffalo region but this Season they are scarce. There has been great havoc made of them for their bones are strewn all over the Plain.

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May 22. Started this morning at sunrise, temperature 41. Wind blows fresh from the west. Great coats are comfortable. After traveling 2 hours in a northerly direction we came in sight of the Plat Bluffs at a distance of 5 miles. After passing them we had a fine view of the Plat Valley and at a distance of 4 miles lay the river; its course could easily be traced by the Belt of timber that skirted its banks on either side. We strike the river opposite Grand Island. Fort Childs* is 20 miles above. This river has the most extensive bottoms I have ever seen. Here, for the first time, I had a splendid view of that singular Phenomenon called a Mirage. I will describe it hereafter. Today we had a view of the road for a distance of 6 miles when it was one continuous line of waggons which continued, perhaps, for 20 miles. In this valley is the junction of Ft. Kearney & St. J. & Independence roads. Traveled 22 miles.

May 23. Temperature in morn 41, cold and windy throughout the day. Traveled 18 miles, roads not good. Our course today has been up the Plat and most of the way on its banks. The Plat is a wide, muddy, shoal river, its bottom is said to be quicksand. In some seasons of the year the river is fordable where it is 2 miles wide. It is colored like the Missouri and in some respects resembles it. We passed Fort Childs at 10 o'clock. It is a military Post established last fall, many of its buildings not yet finished. Its commander, Maj. Ruff treated us kindly answering all our questions frankly. We here learned the reason why we saw none of the Pawnee Indians. The winter here was very hard, snow 4 feet in depth and intensely cold. The Buffalo left for a warmer climate, consequently the Indians suffered extremely. Hundreds of them starved to death and most of the remainder have gone to the borders to prevent a like fate. We designed to purchase some Ponys here but the Indians have eaten up all of their horses. Last Friday a murder among the emigrants was committed. One man insulted another's wife. Consequently, the husband split his head with an axe. A court of inquiry pronounced it justifiable homicide so the dead man was buried and the Co moved on, probably without a serious reflection; Fort C is 270 miles from St. J and 340 miles from Fort Larimie, which is on our rout. There are 150 in garrison here and a train start for Fort L today. Left letters here for home. The U.S. has purchased a large tract of land of the Indians. It is, however, inferior to most of the land we have passed on our rout. It is remarkable that but a few inches under its surface it is naught but sand. I have noticed a very singular quality in the soil. I observe frequently Spots in and on the side of the road covered with a white substance which, on tasting, I discovered to be soda with a slight touch of salts. We were informed at the fort that about 1100 waggons had passed the post bound for California. Distance from St. J to Fort Childs 270.

May 24. Cold, damp morning, traveled 10 miles and pitched our tents in a rain storm. Good Grass for the Cattle. No wood and Buffalo chips would not burn. Consequently, a cold supper.

(from the context it is apparent that a leaf is missing from the Journal at this point. Also, the binding of the book indicates that a sheet is gone)

the quality of land improves as we proceed up the valley.

* Now Fort Kearny

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