

Charles Tinker's Journal
A Trip to California in 1849

Introduction

Don't go to California, boys,
Don't go to Oregon,
There's wealth for you in the Buckeye State,
And wealth that may be won,
Aye, wealth that may be won, boys,
By true hearts, strong and bold,
Then don't go to California,
Stay home and gather gold.

James H. Rodabaugh
Franklin G.

If this somewhat belated appeal had appeared in print in the spring of 1849, the hundreds of Ohioans then starting on the long journey to the land of gold would have scoffed at it. A year later many of them, sadder and wiser but not wealthier, were offering the same advice in letters home but in language more forceful than that of Mrs. Francis Dana Gage's sentimental verses. A sure cure for the California fever was an overland trip to the gold country and a few weeks in the diggings. The number of Ohioans who succumbed to the lure of Sutter's gold may only be conjectured, but 5,500 were in California when the census of 1850 was taken and thousands more were on the way. How many returned home in the next few years is an even more elusive conjecture, but the disillusioned far outnumbered those who had struck it rich. Many remained in the land of gold but usually found material success in more prosaic occupations than the one they had envisioned as a short cut to riches when they started on the Overland Trail.

But posterity has paid slight attention to the material success of the Argonauts. Their achievement lay in their participation in an epic American adventure, and the name Forty-niners is inscribed in golden letters high on the Independence Rock of the nation's immortals. Historians have kept their memory green by a steady flow of books and articles about them, and the publication of their diaries, letters, and reminiscences continues to add to their saga. Many of the gold seekers started diaries or journals but too often discontinued them under the strain of the long trek. A goodly number of faithful souls, however, persisted to the end, and even more important, preserved these records of their trials and hazards for the enlightenment of their children and their children's children. The immortality of the printed page has been their reward in some instances, but many diaries still remain as their authors wrote them, in family possession or in the archives of libraries and museums. Over twenty-five contemporary accounts of those who followed the South Pass route in the first year of the gold rush existed in printed form in 1945 and the number has been added to since then.

The journal of Charles Tinker, which follows this introduction, was brought to the attention of Dr. James H. Rodabaugh, editor of the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, by Miss Henrietta McKinsey, principal of Bunker Hill Elementary School, Ashtabula, Ohio. It was in the possession of Mr. Tinker's granddaughter, Mrs. A. T. Faulkner, who kindly consented to its publication. Mrs. Faulkner and Mrs. Nettie Curtis, another granddaughter, both of Ashtabula, have preserved this and other interesting possessions of their grandfather. The journal was written in a little leather notebook, three by five

inches in size, which is in an excellent state of preservation. The entries are not separated in day-by-day diary form but were written rather as a running account of the journey with dates sometimes inserted in the texts of sentences. There are no entries for some days when apparently the writer had nothing significant to record or was too weary to bother with his chronicle. The earliest entries were evidently inserted later to provide a suitable introduction, for they appear at the end of the journal in the original manuscript. They have been put in the proper place in the printed version.

Charles Tinker was born near Kingsville, Ohio, on September 7, 1821. He was brought up on a farm and received a limited common school education. His father, a Connecticut Yankee, taught the son a trade he had learned, that of wagon making, a skill that must have proved very useful on the California trail. Young Tinker must have had a mechanical turn of mind, for he built a sawmill in 1843, and then an oil mill. He married Mary Webster in 1842 and five children were born to them, four before the father left for California. Why a family man in his late twenties succumbed to the gold fever is not made clear in his journal or elsewhere. A biographical sketch in a county history does reveal that he was never very successful at farming, which he tried soon after his marriage, and twice in his later years. Perhaps this initial failure and the needs of a growing family entered the picture. But it is equally possible that the lure of adventure and the influence of friends who were going may have played their part. His journal ends with his arrival in California but apparently he did not remain there very long. He was back in Ohio the next year, returning by boat "around the Horn", and was soon applying his mechanical aptitude to the manufacture of farm machinery and tools. He became an active figure in several enterprises, eventually becoming president of the Phoenix Iron Works, and for many years was a respected citizen of Ashtabula County. He died on December 29, 1908, fifty-nine years after his California adventure. His granddaughter, Mrs. A. T. Faulkner, remembers him as "a splendid family man" and an indulgent grandfather, living in a big house surrounded by flowers and fruit trees.

Tinker's journal is the brief, matter-of-fact record of a practical man, quite observant, but unaccustomed to putting his thoughts on paper and not too familiar with the orthodox rules of grammar and spelling. Except for the desert crossing there are no striking descriptive passages nor is the reader permitted more than a fleeting glimpse or two into the feelings and thoughts of the writer. If he was ever exasperated at his companions, the journal does not reveal it, for he religiously refrained from censuring anyone. Generally he is content to write of what he saw and did, not of what he thought. On only two occasions do his emotions break into the journal. When he was ill with mountain fever (July 23 entry), he wrote, "I was hard sick all the way and had to ride it seemed as though the wagon hit all the stones on the road every bone in me was on the aiche it made me think of home some." The other occasion was the difficult desert crossing. Tinker reveals himself here as a young man of kind heart and simple faith, distressed at the abandonment of faithful oxen and happy to see trees again and to hear a Sunday sermon by an elder from a nearby camp. "It seemed the most like home to me here than it had in any place since I left the States." (August 5).

In one respect the journal is disappointing, a result of its brevity. It contains too little about the details of daily life - company organization and assignment of duties, menus of the trail, liquor consumption, sleeping accommodations, health problems, the handling of animals and equipment, recreations, the weather from day to day, insect pests, and

so on. Forage, water, fuel, Indians, river crossings, hunting luck, road conditions - these are the meat of the journal. Tinker wastes no words on non-essentials but there is one exception - he could not overlook the changing scenery and the wonders of nature in the Great West.

The Ashtabula Sentinel supplies some meager additional information about the Kingsville company. A news item in the issue of May 5, 1849, evidently copied from a Missouri newspaper, reported the presence of two Ohio companies at St. Joseph on April 14, ready to move, one of them from Ashtabula County. The list of names is that of the Kingsville group. H. B. Stone (Henry A.) in the diary) was the captain, Charles Tinker the lieutenant. Tinker's journal is silent as to the first officers but later refers to the election of James Haynes as captain. This is also confirmed by the Sentinel. Another Western Reserve group - from Painesville - started from Independence, Missouri, and joined forces with the Kingsville party shortly before the crossing of the South Platte. A California letter from John Packer, printed in the Sentinel of March 23, 1850, states that James Haines (spelled "Haynes" by Tinker) was elected captain, apparently of both organizations, as they were traveling together. Since the Kingsville men were accompanied from the start by a small Springfield group (organized at neighboring Springfield, Erie County, Pennsylvania) the traveling "train" consisted of three little companies with a total of over thirty men.

These companies were typical of the hundreds of organized parties that followed the overland trail in 1849. Each usually had some kind of constitution or articles of agreement, for cooperative organizations were essential for protection and in coping with the hardships and difficulties of overland wagon travel. The constitution of the Kingsville group is not given in Tinker's journal, but there are references to the election of officers for fixed terms. The Ashtabula Sentinel's reprint of a Missouri newspaper article, referred to earlier, has this revealing sentence: "They go as a joint stock company, bound together for two years, and carry with them two tents, four wagons, twelve yoke of oxen and provisions for nine months." Near the end of the journey Tinker records that the constitution was missing, that an election could not be held, and so the company decided to divide the money in the treasury. "The provisions we agreed to consume together and divide the rest when we got through". (entry of August 6). At least the Kingsville men, unlike so many other parties, held together until the trek was completed, though dissolving as a company.

Although Tinker seemed unaware of it, his group had a surprisingly successful trip. One man was injured before the start from St. Joseph, but he recovered, and all the others made the journey safely. Cholera, gunshot accidents, Indian raids, and the other dangers of the overland train passed them by. They made good time, requiring 114 days to reach some outlying diggings, forty miles from Johnson's Ranch. This was well below the average for the transit and requires explanation.

Three factors may be suggested to account for their success, namely, the size and homogeneity of the party, an early start, and the fortunate assistance of a Missouri company in crossing both the North Platte and the Green rivers. The Kingsville - Painesville companies, traveling together but maintaining separate organizations, constituted a party of some thirty men, all from the same general locality. Larger groups, unless well organized and skillfully managed, traveled more slowly, found grass for animals more of a problem, and developed feuds and dissensions that often split them apart. The advice of a member of another Ohio company, written from California, is the voice of experience: "A company of 15 is enough, I do not mean joint-stock company but only for

protection, two is enough for a joint-stock company, and perhaps they will break up."

The early start is not explained in the journal or elsewhere. A late spring held back the grass, essential for forage, and few companies started before the second week of May. How Tinker's group solved the forage problem is not clear. It did not make very rapid progress until Fort Laramie was reached, but, even so, escaped the worst congestion by a margin of nearly two weeks. Besides the delays occasioned by river crossings, steep hills, the narrowing of the trail, and other obstructions, the late starters found forage used up in more arid and barren sections and ran into severe competition for good camp sites. Cholera was also more widespread. It came up the Mississippi and accompanied the gold seekers for many weeks.

A third advantage was purely accidental - the tie-up with the Findley - McCulloch party from Missouri, an incident explained at some length in the journal. Undoubtedly the aid of the grateful Missourians speeded up the crossings of the North Platte and Green rivers, two formidable obstacles. Yet even this assistance is hardly sufficient to explain the excellent time made by the Kingsville men between Fort Laramie and Fort Hall. Their animals must have been in good condition to have covered one difficult stretch of fifty-three miles (their reckoning) in twenty-three hours with an hour and a half for rest periods. Later, marauding Indians stole four cattle and several were lost in the desert crossing, but there is no mention of the abandonment of any wagons. The oxen were in poor condition at the end of the long trek, but they had brought the party safely to California.

Did the Kingsville men make use of a guidebook such as that of Joseph Ware, published early in 1849, and referred to frequently in many diaries? There is no direct evidence in the Tinker journal, but there are some parallelisms that make it seem probable. At least they followed the orthodox trail and did not use cut-offs or alternate routes (except for Sublette's Cut-off), as did those who started later.

Chas Tinker Journal on trip to California in the year 1849

He left Kingsville Mar. 20, 1849, Astabula Co. O. with a company of twelve from same Township. Names to wit Charles Tinker, Chauncey Tinker, Lyman Luce, Webster Albert Webster, Hamilton Way, Lemuel Beckwith, John Perkins, A. N. Kent, Albert Kendall, John Packer, Henry A. Stone, Horace Tinker - and they were accompanied by John Capron & James Haynes of Conneaut and James Bancroft, Alford Marsh, Henry Marsh and Augustus DeFor of Springfield, Erie Co. Pa. - James Haynes and John Capron clubed in with the Springfield Co. gott up by James Bancroft and they started with the Kingsvill on the same day. The Kingsvill Co had a general outfit of such tools & clothing as they thought they should need, and three wagons & two tents. The Springfield Co. had one wagon and 1 tent. The first night after starting we stopped at the house of Mr. Gould in Richmond Ashtabula Co.

The next night the 21st we stayed in Poland Trumbull Co. O. The next night the 22nd we camped at town in Columbian Co. The 23rd we staved overnight in Bever Pa. The 24th we took a boat in Rochester Pa. at the mouth of Beaver River - by the name of Germantown the 25th day and called at Stubenville over night and one day at Cincinnatti and arrived at St. Louis April 1, 1849. We bought our provisions here for our journey and left on the steamer Elexander Hamilton for St. Joseph,

Mo. the 3rd day of April and arrived at St. Joseph April 9, 1849. Here we bought our cattle. Ten yoke at an average of \$50 each and one horse at &40, with saddle & bridle and three cows at &10 each.

April 11 Way got shot accidently while looking at some cattle at Mr. Stevens about 4 miles out east of town. On the 19th of April we got all things ready and started out with 3 wagons and 10 joke of cattle for Savannah Landing where we arrived the 20th near sunset.

Journal

Hamilton Way was shot in the thigh April 11th with his own gun by an accident from James Haynes stepping on an ox bow partly straitined out which flew up and struck the hammer of the gun which caused it to go off and discharge its contents in his thigh. Way was sitting on the fence just over his gun looking at some cattle that we talked of buying. This hapened at Mr. Steven's about four miles from St. Joseph where he remained till we left for California.

Journal For California

April 19th we got all things ready for a start. We started with three wagons - ten yোক of cattle at an average price of fifty-four dollars a yোক. Our load consisted of 2000 lbs hard bread at $3\frac{1}{2}$ cents pr lb, 500 lb side of bacon at 4 cents, 300 lbs muton hams at $2\frac{1}{2}$ cents pr lb, 600 lbs indian meal $1\frac{1}{2}$ cent pr lb, 100 lbs of flour @ $2\frac{1}{4}$ cents pr lb, 12 gallons vinegar @ 15¢, 15 gallons Monongahela at 65 cents pr Gall, 3 Keggs Powder @ \$5.25 pr keg, three pigs of Lead 72 lbs each @ $4\frac{1}{2}$ cents, 17,000 cap Percussions @ 65 cnt pr thou, four chests of Tea 24 lbs at 65 cents pr lb, saleratus, medicines, roaps, axes, shovels, hoes, Pick, Blacksmith tools, Gilletts Goods & C.

Thus rigged we left St. Joseph for Savannah Landing to cross the Missourie. We arrived there at sunset.

April 20th we camped on the banks of the river. The day was pleasant and warm.

21st we got our traps ferried acrosst the river and encamped in the Indian territory on the west bank of the Missourie. Here we lay till the 24th day of April when we hitched up our teams & moved back to the bluff about five miles and encamped on a small brook.

Thursday April 26th we took our final leave of the frontier and moved on our way to California. We passed over a rolling paraire dotted here & there with a few shrubby trees and encamped on Moose Creek.

27th we arrived at the missionaray station about 10 AM. Here Uncle Sam keeps an Indian Agent. We traveled 9 miles and encamped after a dispute as to where we should stop. Beckwith was in bad humor and had a good deal to say & blamed most of the company for being such fools as he termed us, but after a general confab their was a vote taken to drop the subject & the company incamped with a general good feeling.

Tuesday May 1st we arrived on the west side of the Nimewha and encamped. Here we held our election which resulted in the election of the same officers that we started with except the steward. We chose John Capron in the place of A. N. Kent some dissatisfaction was mani-

fested by some of the company about the chois.

Wednesday May 2nd we broak one of the hind wheels to Way's wagon in crossing a small brook. It hindered us about $\frac{1}{2}$ day.

Friday May 4 we arrived at the Big Blue at 1 AM. Crossed by raising our wagon boxes and incamped one miles from the river on good feed, wood and water.

May 16th we passed Fort Charles 300 miles from St. Joseph and incamped about 3 miles west of the Fort.

Sunday May 20th our boys went out on to the bluff to hunt. They all returned about noon without bringing in any game except Webster, Luce & Capron. They had better luck. Luce killed two antelope at one shot. They backed on to the road & we had got so far ahead that they could not overtake us that night, so they waited till Cap Bowman's company came up and staid with them all night. The next morning before breakfast they got into camp with one quarter of the antelope which we had for breakfast.

May 21st I with 7 others started for the bluff in search of game. About 10 AM we got in sight of 3 Elk. Beckwith & Nash shot and wounded one when we all commenced the chase. 4 of us shot 16 shots, 9 of them taking effect before we got him. He weighed about 140 lbs. We see some antelope & see some fresh buffalo tracks but we could not get any shots at them. We had two horses along & packed the meat on to them and got into camp about 1 PM. We had all we could eat as long as it would keep. I shot at him 4 times, 3 shots taking effect.

Tuesday the 22nd all that could leave the teams started for the bluffs in serch of Buffalo. They see 4 but could not get shots at them. Deer & antelope was plenty. Horace killed one deer & wounded another in the hips. Wm. Nash shot one antelope but it was so far from camp that he could not fetch it in. The boys was so tired when they came into camp that they concluded not to hunt any more till we had eat up what fresh meat we had & got rested from their leight tramos. We encamped at the forks of the Platt river on a little brook. The feed was poor. It had been eat down by Buffalo. Their is not much wood at this place.

23rd we passed up the south fork of the Platt. Their is considerable game in the bluffs along here. The Buffalo had been driven back by the first emigration. There is but a few small bands to be seen as we passed along.

Saturday 26th we crossed the south fork of the Platt river. It is one of the muddiest streams that I ever saw. The crossing is about 40 miles from the junction of the north and south fork of the Platt. The river here is $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile wide & $2\frac{1}{2}$ deep. At the time we crossed their was some 40 wagons in the river at once. Their was in sight at this time one hundred and 14 wagons. We encamped for the night about a mile up the river. Here we held election for capt. of our train when James Haynes was unanimously elected Capt. of our train.

Sunday 27th We traveled up the south fork 12 miles and nooned at an Indian Village. Here was 100 lodges strung along the river and about 600 Indians. These were Sioux Indians. We encamped for the night about 14 miles to the north west on our way to the north fork of the Platt river.