

The following description of St. Joseph is by a Baptist minister, Elder Wisner, who was a fellow traveler with Israel S.P. Lord on their overland trip to California in 1849. Lord sent portions of his diary back to The Western Christian: A Religious Family Newspaper, published weekly at Elgin, Kane County, Illinois. At the end of Lord's diary, now held by The Huntington Library, is a letter also sent to The Western Christian by M. L. Wisner. Apparently Lord included his friend's letter along with his own.

St. Joseph, Mo. May 10, 1849

Br. Walker:

We are now at the extremity of civilization, on the western bank of the Missouri River, where we have been three days waiting for 'our turn' to be ferried over, having journeyed, since I wrote last, about three hundred miles, through a part of Iowa and almost the whole length of Missouri. We have gradually wound our way along over high hills, through deep valleys, and across the muddy streams of Missouri, with very few bridges, until at last we have reached the greatest stream of mud I ever saw. Whoever has noticed a puddle of water in a clay bed, after a heavy shower of rain, can form something of an idea of the appearance of this river; and the appearance of the inhabitants, with some exceptions, resembles the rivers of the country.

Never was I more sensible of the present benefits of the Christian religion than since I commenced this journey. Every thing corresponds. You may commence with the Eastern States. The air is pure; the water is clear and sweet; schools flourish; society is elevated; the Sabbath is observed; religion has a strong hold upon the affections of a majority of those who roll the wheels of improvement along. Traveling westward until you pass through the State of Ohio, you will barely perceive the change; but travel on, and before you have passed the centre of Illinois, you will find yourself among those who have few schools, few or no Sabbaths, very little religion, and the great majority of them exceedingly vile and profane.

When we leave this place we leave the white man's habitation. We shall probably not see as many drunken Indians as we have seen white men reeling about the streets of this village; yet I should think, from what I can learn, that there are some who are followers of the Savior here. There are several places of worship in this town, and I learn from one merchant, a brother Newman, who resides in this place, that the Baptists have a church numbering some seventy, and enjoy the labors of Elder Williams a part of the time. This being an important starting point through the Indian country, at this season of the year, emigrants throng the streets, and one would think from appearances that the whole world were moving to California. I have tried to satisfy myself as to the probable number of those going this season by the South Pass, but I cannot tell, and dare not hazard an opinion. I can compare the movement to only one event of which I have ever read, and this is the children of Israel going from bondage to the land flowing with milk and honey, only making this difference--the one groaning under bondage, and seeking for the enjoyment of man's God-given rights; the other leaving a land of comparative freedom and plenty, to seek for earth's hidden treasures.

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You may cast your eye to the right or left, and you can see the various colored covered waggons, drawn by mules, horses, oxen, and even cows, and the white tents scattered all over the hills and valleys.--Very little contention is known among the emigrants. Occasionally a quarrel of words rises but there are generally enough who are in favor of good order to quell disturbances, and see that every man has his rights.

The United States armies were never armed as these emigrants are,--every one a little afraid of the Indians has prepared himself, if necessary, to force his way through the uncivilized country. My impression is, that if the emigrants treat them civilly, they will not make war upon us; and if they do make war upon the Californians, it will be death to hundreds of them --for there is hardly a wagon but what can give out from six to thirty shots from rifles, revolvers, pistols, etc. without even halting to load. Hundreds of families are moving with women and children to California, while thousands of men are going without. Some are selling their outfits and going back, but the number is comparatively small. Very few instances of the cholera have appeared among them, and almost always among those who come around by water. Last evening, the steamer Mary landed at this place some Welch Mormons, on their way to join their brethren at the Salt Lake--forty-three had died with cholera on the passage from St. Louis to this place. I tell you, the news made some sober-looking countenances.

My health is improving very fast, and the prospect with me is, that I am to be a well man again. This out-door life, living in the woods, along the road, cooking my own victuals, washing my dishes, my clothes, making my bread, sitting frequently flat on the ground to eat, sleeping in my wagon, dreaming along after an ox-team,--a singular kind of medicine indeed it is--but if it only gives me health, and drives away the ague and fever, I bless the Lord for it, and take courage.

M. L. Wisner

This is a photo copy of the letter as it was published in The Western Christian and later included at the end of Lord's diary

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M. L. WHEELER.

San Francisco, Mo. May 15, 1849.