

COED - Census of Overland Emigrant Documents

PAGE 1: Document Description

Document ID: (66WTSØ1)

Emigrant's last name: Wisner

Surveyed by: Mary J. Sprague MJS46

first & middle names: Sarah A.

Date surveyed: 07-11-96

Title: A Trip Across the Plains

Year of journey: 1866 Year written (if different): _____ Page numbers surveyed: 1-

Type of document: R (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): N Location of original document: OCTA Library

For PUBLISHED documents only:

Published in: _____

Publisher: _____ Year published: _____

Place published: _____

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

first & middle names: _____

Notes about publication history: _____

For UNPUBLISHED documents only:

Notes about format of document: Photocopy of typed manuscript

Notes on back? _____

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PAGE 2: Journey Description

Document ID: (66 WIS 01) MJS46

Emigrant's occupation: _____ Origin: MI
Age: _____ M/F: F With family? (Y/N) Y No. in family: 2

Departed from (code): _____ Arrived at (code): _____
Date of departure: _____ Date of arrival: _____ (use form mm/dd/yy)

Party: _____

Mode of travel: _____ (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 of departure: _____ oxen 4 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? _____

Location	Page	Date
Platte River	1	
South Platte	1	
Fort Sedgwick	1	
Julesburg	1	
Big Bend	1	
Fort Casper	1	
Fort Kearney	1	
Lower Ford	1	
Lodge Pole Creek	1	
California Crossing	1	
North Platte	1	
Lower Crossing	1	
Ash Hollow	1	
Courthouse Rock	1	
Chimney Rock	1	
Fort Laramie	1	
Fort William	2	
Laramie River	2	
Boseman Trail	2	
Fort Hall	2	
Virginia City	2	
Little Piney	2	
Fort Phil Kearny	2	
Green River	3	
Courthouse Creek	4	
Pumpkin seed Creek	4	

The Platte River

5 c There was one stream flowing through the "Great American Desert" that no one who crossed the plains before the Union Pacific was finished can ever forget. Along its banks and between its two branches were staged some of the most thrilling tragedies. I refer to the Platte River. The Sioux, Cheyennes and Arapahoes were ever on the watch for small emigrant trains and during the period from 1864 to 1869 their scalping knives were seldom dry. Nor were the Indians the only menace to life along the Trail. From 1847 to 1853 cholera raged from Fort Kearney to the Sweetwater. If those who died from this disease alone had been buried two hundred feet apart, the headstones would have marked the Trail from Fort Kearney to Independence Rock, and if placed three hundred feet apart would have reached Soda Springs. George H. Himes, historian, says that from 1842 to 1859, not less than 30,000 people died on the plains. In the above estimate I have discounted his figures fifty per cent. According to Himes the Trail could have been marked every three hundred and fifty feet from St. Jo to Portland.

6 There are two branches, the North and the South Platte. Both have their source in Colorado and not very far apart. The South Platte leaves the state near old Fort Sedgwick and Julesburg in the north-east corner of the state and follows a north-easterly course to its junction with the north fork near the present town of Gannett, on the Union Pacific. The North Platte flows farther north into the state of Wyoming, pursuing its northerly course to the Big Bend at Fort Casper, where the Oregon Trail leaves the river, whence it turns to the southward to unite with the south fork in the state of Nebraska. The water of the Platte is never clear, but when it was allowed to settle a little while and poured off carefully it was not bad. The channel was continually shifting and for this reason many drownings occurred at the crossings. It was too shallow for navigation. The Trail from St. Jo followed the main stream and the two forks for 475 miles. The Mormon Trail still farther. Probably no other section of the United States ever produced so much game as that bordering on the Platte River. Immense herds of buffalo, too great to even estimate their numbers watered here. Antelope by the thousands foamed upon the adjacent prairies, besides deer and elk in great numbers along the streams and in the hills where timber grew, Coyotes and wolves made an easy living. Around the headwaters of the streams the grizzly, cinnamon and black bear disputed the right of way with the trapper and hunter.

7 The Platte including its branches was the most treacherous stream on the Trail. Its bottom is one continuous bed of quicksand and to stop when fording it was to go down. For this reason it was necessary to give the teams all the water they would drink before driving into it. The mule has a habit, if anything goes wrong in the water, of lying down and ending all trouble on the spot. Our team consisted of four of these philosophical animals and in crossing bad streams men had to ride on either side of them with stimulators to keep them on their feet, especially if it were a muddy bottom. The Oregon Trail was not one continuous double tracked paved road. There was no gasoline tax to keep it up. Part of the way there were several trails, but they were all headed for the Platte River. One called the Mormon Trail, crossed the Missouri at Council Bluffs and striking the Platte in a few miles followed up the north side of the streams to Platte Bridge, later Fort Casper, one crossed the Missouri at St. Jo and one at Independence, the two latter joining before reaching the Platte at Fort Kearney. In the earlier days of the rush many crossed the main stream about eight miles west of Kearney and joined the Mormon Trail. The next crossing, called the Lower Ford, was about 25 miles below Julesburg, and the next coming west was called the upper crossing. This was about a mile below the mouth of Lodge Pole Creek and the fourth crossing was a mile or two above the mouth of Lodge Pole Creek and was called the California Crossing. The three last named crossed the South Platte only and we still had the North Platte to deal with. The trail from the Lower Crossing bore northwesterly

crossing Ash Hollow near the North Platte and united with the upper crossings between the Lodge Pole and Laramie. Thence the Trail passed on up the river passing Courthouse and Chimney Rocks on our left, and on through Scotts Bluffs and Laramie to Bridger's Ferry or Platte Bridge. The country between the two Plattes was very dangerous ground. Ash Hollow was a favorite place of the Indians for an attack. The emigrant train that got through Ash Hollow was extremely lucky.

8

Fort Laramie.

One of the most important points on the Trail was Fort Laramie. Established in 1834 by William Sublette and Robert Campbell as Fort William, it was located on the Laramie River near its junction with the North Platte. 645 miles from St. Jo, and 168 miles by the Trail from Julesburg. Laramie has belonged to five different states and territories, viz: Missouri, Idaho, Dakota, Nebraska and Wyoming. Here was held many important councils with the Sioux, Crows, Cheyennes, Arapahoes and other tribes. At a great council held here in 1861, a treaty was agreed upon defining the boundaries of the lands of the above named tribes, and these tribes also agreed to cease hostilities toward each other and permit the United States to establish roads and military posts within their limits, the United States agreeing to protect them from white depredations and to pay them annually for a period of fifty years the sum of \$50,000. The Senate amended the treaty by limiting the annuity period to fifteen years. This was to the Indians and evidence of bad faith and was one of the contributing factors to our subsequent Indian troubles. About the first break in the peace occurred in August, 1854, when an officer with a file of soldiers attempted to arrest an Indian of the Sioux tribe near Fort Laramie. The Indians killed the officer and all his men. Following this in 1855, came General Harney's expedition and the battle of the Blue Water, fought Sept. 22nd. Harney made a mistake and attacked a party of Brule Sioux who had had no part in the affair of the previous year, killing eighty-six men, women and children. We passed the fort on the 10th of June 1866 and were urged by Col. Carrington to make all possible speed, as Red Cloud was here considering terms which had been submitted to his tribe which if accepted would put a stop to the Sioux activities along the Trail. Carrington was of the opinion that Red Cloud was getting ready for the war path, as her [sic] was jerking the beef furnished by the government and preparing it for packing on ponies. This was done by making receptacles of raw hide about the size of a five gallon oil can, cooking the meat and packing it in the receptacles, filling the interstices with melted tallow. This made a convenient pack and the meat would keep indefinitely.

9

The Colonel was right in his prophesy, for the Sioux and Cheyennes began operations soon after we passed, but did not overtake us. Gold had been discovered in Montana and many prospectors were on the Trail. The Bozeman Trail left the Oregon about 85 miles west of Laramie and was a short cut to Montana, but it passed through the Sioux hunting grounds, the richest game country in the world and the Indians would not permit its use by the whites. As a result all travel to Montana had to follow the Oregon Trail to Fort Hall and thence go north-east to reach their destination, thus going around the best buffalo country. In order to protect travel on the Bozeman Trail Carrington had been sent out to establish a line of forts along the same and try to open it up. This was the matter under consideration by the council above mentioned. A portion of our train was bound for Montana, but was obliged to travel with us until we reached Fort Hall, where they took the trail from Oregon to Virginia City. They were attacked by Indians and

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roughly handled before they reached their destination. Whether it was the Sioux from Laramie who had taken a short cut and intercepted them, or the Blackfeet we never learned. The Bennocks and the Shoshones had occupied that territory in former years and had been very active, but the lesson Gen. Connor gave them in 1863 had made them very peaceful and they remained so ever after. Soon after we passed Laramie Carrington moved north to the Little Piney and established Fort Phil Kearny. Red Cloud harrassed the command in every way possible. It was unsafe for a soldier to separate himself from his company even to shoot an antelope, for any sage bush might conceal an Indian. On Dec. 21st

Red Cloud surrounded and annihilated a company of three officers, seventy-six privates and four civilians, not a man escaping.

For some reason the Indians never attempted to capture Fort Laramie. They seemed to regard this as a sort of a neutral ground. They could wash off their war paint and come in and shake hands, get the news, eat government beef, meet a few silk hatters from Washington, tell them they were ready to receive presents, locate some emigrant trains and have a good time generally. Agents from Washington seldom got farther west than Laramie. The Indians were not likely to molest these white chiefs, for it was through them that they secured new guns, ammunition, blankets and other presents. There was usually a post surgeon here and emigrants in need of medical attention could generally secure his services. Some of the buildings of the old post are still standing, a reminder of pioneer days.

- 11 Among these is old "Bedlam" an amusement hall erected for the benefit of the army officers and their families. It was in this hall where on Christmas night 1866, a dance was in progress when John Phillips staggered in with the news of the Fetterman massacre and fell fainting to the floor. Jim Bridger spent a good many winters here.

Green River, 341 miles farther on was another important point on the Trail. Here the trappers congregated every spring after along winter in the mountains trapping and hunting. They came from all directions and long distances to exchange their furs and skins for ammunition, traps, trinkets for their Indian friends and fighting whiskey. The traders always met them here with a liberal supply of fire water and it never failed to produce the fights. Many duels were fought and numerous feuds were adjudicated with six shooters. There was no change of venue or appeal to higher courts. One advantage of this method was that feuds thus treated stayed settled. The advent of the railroad interfered seriously with the business of this rendezvous and finally broke it up. Here is where Lander's Cut Off leaves the main trail and bears north into the worst roads a wagon wheel ever rolled over. It has now been nearly sixty years since we crossed Ham's Fork on this road, but I can still see that terrible stream and sometimes I see it in my dreams.

- 12 In the early fifties, Joseph Chamberlain of Romeo, Michigan, made a trip to Oregon and on his return gave such a glowing account of the country that my father and mother became possessed of a great desire to see that wonderland. There were too many cares binding them to Michigan at that time however, as they parents of both of them were living and they did not feel like leaving them to make the journey from which they had little hope of returning. As time passed, one tie after another was broken until at last, in 1865, they found themselves free to go wherever and whenever they chose. The decision was soon made. Oregon received the unanimous verdict. I remember how my father used to joke about it and tell our friends of the wonders of the west; that strawberries grew so large they had to be quartered to be eaten; that they were so sweet they had to be eaten with vinegar. Little did we dream of the hardships and dangers awaiting us along this great overland journey; of the skulking bloodthirsty Indians lurking along the trail seeking to hang our scalps along with hundreds of others in their wigwams; of the treacherous quicksands quietly resting on the bottom of the Platte river yearning to engulf us should our mules stop for a moment to take a sup of water; of the mad rushing mountain streams that must be forded; of the many almost impossible hills to be climbed; of the long nights of guard duty to prevent the Indians from stampeding our stock and leaving us stranded in that vast wilderness. Could we have known all these things, Oregon would have been short three Michiganders. But it would not have mattered much to them for they already had so many wild geese.

- 17 Following is a copy of Mother's journal, also that of the late Stewart B. Eakin of Eugene, Oregon, who crossed with us. He came over the Mormon Trail and joined us near Laramie. Mr. Eakin was one of Oregon's leading citizens and one of the best men that

6				Wednesday
	33	580	20	Drove 20 miles. Passed Chimney Rock. Hail storm. (Chimney Rock is a noted landmark. It rises out of the plain like a great chimney. Can be seen for many miles.
7				Thursday.
	34	598	18	Made 18 miles to-day over bad roads. Passed Scott's Bluff.
8				Friday.
	35	610	12	Started at 10 o'clock, drove 12 miles. Windy.
9				Saturday.
	36	638	28	Drove 28 miles. Rained all night.
10				Sunday.
	37	650	12	Drove only 12 miles to-day. Were detained at Fort Laramie which we passed at 7 miles from Camp 36. Officer in command (Col. Carrington) advised us to make all possible haste as the Sioux were expected to commence depredations very soon. They were holding a council there. (Carrington was right. They did commence soon after to kill and plunder. We escaped them but a portion of our train got caught on their way to Montana.)
11				Monday.
	38	656	6	Laid by and washed in the forenoon. In the afternoon drove 6 miles. Went down one of the worst hills I ever saw.
12				Tuesday.
	39	686	30	Drove 30 miles over bad roads. At 25 miles passed Horseshoe Station. (Here John Phillips sent message telling of Fetterman massacre on December 25th. An hour after the station was burned.
23				Wednesday.
	40	701	15	Drove 15 miles, crossed the North Platte on a ferry and went into camp. This is called Bridger' Ferry.