

# THE GOLD RUSH

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*Letters of David Wooster  
from California to the Adrian,  
Michigan, Expositor  
1850-1855*



THE CUMMING PRESS

Mount Pleasant

Michigan

He founded the *Pacific Medical Surgical Journal* in 1857 and continued to edit it for four years until 1861, when he turned the editorial task over to others. In this year he made a trip to the East and attended the inauguration ceremonies of Abraham Lincoln. Upon his return to California in September 1861, he entered the army as a surgeon with the rank of major and served with the Union forces in Arizona and New Mexico. A bout with the mountain fever impaired his health and caused his retirement from military service in 1863, when he returned to his practice in San Francisco.

In 1866, he accepted the appointment from the United States government of the post of Special Examiner of Drugs for the Port of San Francisco, a position he filled until 1870, when he became Surgeon of the United States Marine Hospital in San Francisco.

He published several works on medicine, including a 200-page volume *Diseases of the Heart* (1867); a pamphlet *Diphtheria* in 1859, reputed to be one of the first on that disease published in the United States; and a pamphlet *Hip Joint Disease* in 1876.

The original spelling in Wooster's correspondence as published in the *Expositor* has been retained, even when inconsistent, although obvious typographical transitions have been corrected. The dates in brackets are the dates on which the letters were published.

John Cumming



[May 14, 1850]

St. Joseph, Mo., April 21, 1850.

Messrs. Jermaines—Dear Sirs: I am at length at the rendezvous. We reached here the 17th, or one month from the time I left Adrian. Let no one believe the distance less than 750 miles. I suppose it only 600, but I find the road is not measured on a straight line; nor all the way on the surface of the earth.

Calls on my relatives delayed me five days, and we lay over one Sabbath out of the four, for conscience sake: with these exceptions, we have travelled constantly. By *we*, I mean my brother and myself. All the Adrian boys are not here yet. Mr. Kingsland and a few others, are expected every day. Mr. Wadsworth has been in town twelve days. We have no hope of finding grass sufficient to start in less than ten or twelve days yet. It is all humbug about the great number here; all that have left and are here yet cannot exceed 8000. In this estimate I include those that are camped across the river, and all others camped within a circuit of fifteen miles of town. The emigrants are generally in good health. A couple were shot accidentally a few days ago. The boys are accustomed to fire at random, and their shot sometimes takes effect in a place not intended. Yesterday a couple of spent duck shot fell on the brim of the hat of a man standing near me. A "live sucker" discharged the fowling piece at random, and being very penitent, was pardoned with a few admonishing curses.

Most articles are as cheap here as at Adrian. It is useless to outfit east of this. St. Joseph is a little larger than Adrian in the business department. If any should wish to come yet, they will be in good season if they leave by the 5th or 10th of May—

grass will not be good much sooner. For the benefit of such, I will give a few prices: Mules \$70 to \$100; ponies \$30 to \$80; flour \$5,50 per bbl.; sea biscuit \$6,25 per cwt.; sugar 6-1/4 to 12-1/2 cents per lb.; coffee 19-2/3 cents; bacon \$4,50 per cwt.; rice 6-1/4 cents per lb.; etc. Corn is very scarce at present. It sold readily yesterday in the streets at \$1 per bushel, and there was not half enough in to supply the demand. Wheat at the same time remained at 80 cents. Arms and amunition as cheap as any where. Every thing a man wishes for the journey he will find here, whether luxuries or necessaries.

I attended Catholic Church to day, it being St. Joseph's day, the patron Saint of this city. After expatiating, to boring, on the virtues of the great Saint, the priest closed with a sermon on the "sacrafice of the mass." I woke up when the money plate was passing. The church has two tolerable paintings, and several pictures that would better become a barber shop. I am writing leaning on my elbow, lying down in my buggy, and the position not being very agreeable, I will stop awhile.

*April 25.*—We are yet in camp, but shall cross the river to-day. The boys are all up. We do not go in company. We shall take up the line of march in two or three days. We start with forage for twenty days. All are well. Teams are coming in constantly, and others are going out as fast as two or three ferries can cross them. Though scores of wagons cross daily, there is no sensible diminution in the number on this side. The sun is out bright and warm for the first time, and the grass begins to grow. But I must close, I was never more hurried. No incidents—yes: I have one. The chief of the Ottoes, accompanied only by one of his band, passed through our camp the other day. He is a stalworth, bony savage of about seventy years. He called at my wagon, and we got his attendant to shoot with his cross-bow at a five-center placed in a split stick, at twenty yards. The heathen won a dozen pieces in twenty shots; the arrow either hitting the coin, or the stock, with

sufficient force to dislodge it. I gave the young Indian two sea-biscuits, one of them twice the size of the other, and the villain deliberately gave the smaller to his Chief, and devoured the larger himself. From this, I judged that the court of the Ottoe prince is not very civil. The old fellow is about six feet two. He wore a red blanket, and about his head a beaded sash, and about four ounces of silver in his ears. But no more now.

*Yours truly,*

D. WOOSTER.



[June 9, 1850]

*Plum Creek, May 7th, '50*

*Dear Expositor:*—What do you think your Correspondent can find to write about in this eternal solitude? I rise in the morning from a bed composed of sacks of hard bread and corn, and the cold wind from the North and North-east strikes me in the face as I look out of my wagon, and half stops my breath. I look about me and see a hundred or two of horses and cattle grazing on grass that is yet an inch below the surface of the earth; the plain about for half a mile is *dotted* over with the wagons of the pilgrims; hazy clouds hang about the horizon which rests on the limitless, treeless, shrubless, flowerless, grassless, lifeless prairie; the sun rises lazily, looking very much like a raw beef steak if you except the form; the wind blows all day and all night, stopping an hour or two occasionally to rest and then with redoubled violence tearing on again over the plains as if on a telegraphic mission of mercy to some suffocating universe. Days come and go without change or variety. These are the materials of which one has to write a letter by piece-meal, after a long day of toil, and a supper which one cooks himself, or eats raw if he pleases. But I promised to give you something like a journal.

*April 26.*—We leave St. Jo, without the Adrian Company, that not being ready yet. Pass three or four graves in the fore-

noon, whose contents have been dug out by the wolves. The road is hilly but smooth as your streets. Twenty-five miles out we come to a tollbridge: the bridge consists of logs thrown into a ravine ten feet deep. A pole across the road at the brink of the ravine stops the team, but is removed for a quarter by a solitary white man, who tends the pole, and lives near it alone—ten miles from any of his color.

At this place were half a dozen Indians amusing some loitering emigrants, by shooting arrows at the half dime mark. Several Indians discharged their arrows at the target at fifteen yards and frequently missed: at length a young savage with his face painted a bright red about the eyes and temples, and with many colored plumes nodding from his head, a red sash about each leg above the knee, a beaded necklace and a blanket white as milk and downy as a swan's breast, who had been standing one side smiling at the random shots of the others, stepped into the arena with a haughty air, and taking from his well filled quiver a beautiful winged arrow, deliberately placed it upon his long bow, and taking careful aim, let go the shaft which whizzed by within half an inch of the mark; a laugh only made him look the prouder: another and another flew close by the target, till the fifth, which hit the coin upon the edge and threw it several yards: another coin was carried away by the next shaft and a third also, when the air was rent with cheers. Then the son of the Chief of the Iowas—an Indian prince of the blood—leaned upon his bow satisfied, without speaking or smiling, while the sport was continued by his followers.

A little farther on I met an Indian whose head was white with age. His only clothing was his moccasins and his blanket. "Iowa?" I enquired. "Iowa," he responded, and then held out a pair of buffalo moccasins; to tell me the price he took a half dollar and drew the tip of his finger across its center, by which I understood, and gave him a quarter; he then said something which sounded so much like the English word "charity," that

I thought he might have learned the word and wanted more money as a gift. I offered him more, which he refused! but repeated the word and made signs until I understood that he intended to tell me if the moccasins were too long, I could with the buckskin string which he gave me, make them shorter.

We passed "the Agency," and "the Mission" to the Iowas. At these two places were forty or fifty whites, several houses, cultivated fields, etc. The Mission School has seventy or eighty pupils, but a small portion of what might be spared from the wigwams, if the fond savages could forego their company at the fire-side. We found where we camped to-night, a solitary Indian. He remained with us an hour or two, told us a great many Indian words. We gave him a flannel wrapper, which he immediately put on over two calico shirts, to our great amusement at his awkwardness in the operation; we gave him a supper such as we had, which he devoured like a wolf, and then started for his wigwam on a trot. He is the last Indian we have seen.

*April 30th.*—The wind continues a perfect blast. We are encamped on the Big Blue River. A hundred teams are already here and more are coming in every moment. I have never seen so violent a gale on land or sea. I built a fire this morning in a deep ravine to avoid the wind, and soon after I saw a woman on the bank above me twenty or thirty feet—an emigrant's daughter of about eighteen. Heavens what a boon! A live white woman in this wild waste! I asked her to come down the bluff and warm by my fire; she replied by enquiring how she could make the bold descent? I let go my shortcake in a twinkling, and giving her my hand, which more resembles the paw of a wild beast than the hand of a human being, we clambered down holding on by the shrubbery till we reached the fire; a pleasant chat, warm fingers, a cup of coffee, and we remount to the plain again.

I write to the Adrian boys and nail the letter to a pine board, drove in the ground by the road side. This is the kind

of post office arrangement we have on the plains.

*May 3d.*—Pass several graves—find no grass, prairie is burned as far as the eye can reach, ride off half a mile from the road on a hunt, get a shot at a chicken on the wing, bring her down, getting knocked over myself by the recoil of my fowling piece, not hurt nor marred with the exception of a couple of square inches of the surface of my face which the gun barrel carried away *en passant*.

*May 6th.*—Pass Fort Kearney, a miserable looking military post, with two or three frame and half-a-dozen *adobe* buildings. The soldiers were in good health and looked very clean: several emigrants who had tired of gold seeking and enlisted for five years, were drilling in the awkward squad. A pretty lady and the surgeon of the post, came galloping in, on fine horses, after a ride over the plains. We find that Wadsworth, Wilder, and Foster, passed us the night before while we were in camp on the Platte twelve miles below; we drive on after them and pass them in camp without knowing it. They come up with and pass us yelling in triumph, on the 8th, in the morning. That night we camped together, and since then have not parted. Kingsland and the rest had not come up yet.

*May 10th.*—A fine morning; the wind has lulled into a gentle breeze; our road winds among the hillocks of the bluff, two miles from the Platte river bank. An antelope bounds along to our right in twice rifle shot; he comes nearer, Foster aims, pulls, the gun won't go; seven more antelopes bound up after the first in half rifle shot; the train halts, away they bound up the hill to our rear, and are met by a dozen men shooting at random. They turn back and run down close upon us; our guns have been loaded too long; they won't go, nothing will go but the game and that bounds for life right across the road between Wadsworth's and Wilder's horses, within half pistol shot of either; but before their pistols are ready, the "silvery footed antelope" is a quarter of a mile off. Doctor Graham—of Philadelphia—and I, excited half out of our wits,

think we see them halt, just over the brow of a hill. Our horses are swift and away we start in chase of antelope! We get near the hill, dismount and run up to get a shot from the crest, but they are not there! We get back to the road and find a man mounted on one horse and holding the other for us, looking at two Buffalo with a spy glass. They are across the bottoms, near the bank. Away we dash to get round them and drive them back across the road. We are getting around them and coming up on them rapidly, when twenty or thirty loiterers ride out of the side of the bluff and draw up in bold relief in full sight of the game. They both see them and smell them, and away they bound towards the river; now we are in full chase on good ground, but a mile below, just as we think we shall turn them, our horses go into a bog to the girths. We dismount in mud above our knees and wallow through; but we are too late, we reach this bank just as they are climbing the other. We come up with the train after noon, half famished, with a snipe a-piece, the rewards of a half day's chase.

*May 11th.*—Wilder and myself are riding along the bank of the river a half a mile from the road, we see three buffalos coming down into the river from the opposite side. We halt under cover of an island sixty rods below and to leeward of them, and dismount to wait till they reach this bank. We might have crawled nearer and got a fair shot at their heads just as they should come round the point of the island; but a chase was the object. They came up and we mounted, and away we went with a yell and a shout, and away bounded the buffalo; up the bluff they went, right across the road, between two wagons and halted in pistol shot of each. Foster was double rifle shot behind, coming up on a run with gun cocked; Wilder and I came up over the brow of the hill and seeing the shaggy beasts standing in such proximity to the teams, supposed they were all wounded, and attempted to ride close upon them and finish the sport at a single well directed shot. Just at this crisis Wadsworth discharged a pistol without farther effect than to