

**THE EMIGRANT'S VOICE: CROSSING THE GREAT PLAINS  
DURING THE GREAT MIGRATION TO CALIFORNIA,  
1849-1851.**

**by  
Robert Willoughby**

It has been the good fortune of historians and students of history that the story of one of the most marvelous events in the annals of American Western has been recorded for us by a number of the actual participants. Several excellent diaries and personal journals have survived, some published, others still in the original hand, or typescript or on microfilm. Those journals provide a true emigrant's voice telling what it was like to make the two thousand mile trek to the gold fields of California during the height of the rush, 1849-1850. In this article we look at the emigrant's views of the first leg of the trip, the crossing of the Great Plains, the five hundred miles from the banks of the Missouri River to the vicinity of Fort Laramie in present day Wyoming, the gateway to the Rocky Mountains.<sup>1</sup> The first views that most all emigrants commonly wrote about described their jumping-off points, the place from which they disembarked for their excursions across the Great Plains. There were three primary jumping-off points along the Missouri River bordering northwest Missouri and southern Iowa. The common thread was that all were frontier mercantile centers providing a good supply base for those heading west and were convenient rallying points for the hundreds of various wagon companies to assemble. Independence, Missouri, the southern most and oldest of the towns, had made its name already from the Santa Fe Trail business. St. Joseph, Missouri, sixty miles up the river, bloomed into a city primarily because of the outfitting business. Council Bluffs or Kanessville, Iowa, provided a convenient

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place on the upper Missouri for those crossing through Iowa, and already had an established road created by the Mormon migration to Utah beginning in 1846.

One emigrant who observed the bustle that surrounded St. Joseph in 1850 wrote, "I could not begin to tell you how many their are in St. Joseph that are going to Oregon and California but thousands of them. It is a sight to see the tents and wagons on the banks of the river and through the country they are as thick as camp meeting tents 20 or 30 miles and some say 50 miles." She added, "we did not stop at Independence. Tomorrow we go to St. Jo to lay in our provisions and cross the river to Indian territory."<sup>2</sup>

There were crowds around all the major out-fitting centers, beginning in March, and lasting through April and May of those years. Emigrants had been advised to start their trek no later than the end of May, if they hoped to get through the high mountains along the California border before the snows closed the passes. Though the horrible events at the Donner Pass had occurred but a couple of years earlier, nearly every emigrant for the gold fields knew the stories. In reality, there were numerous other jumping-off points both north and south of St. Joseph, depending on where one could purchase supplies and find a ferry to cross the Missouri. Roads from all three of the major outfitting centers converged into the single main Oregon-California Trail near Fort Kearney along the Platte River in present day Nebraska.

As thousands thronged into the jumping-off points, some brought their own provisions and wagons with them, while others, having come up river on a steamer, had to buy literally everything from the local merchants, or sign on with express companies that promised to provide everything for the trek. The mercantile houses and livestock dealers found no incentive to offer any discounts and often sold excited emigrants more than they needed, at substantial markups. Large companies of wagons regularly formed, fifty or more not being uncommon. A few weeks later, in the middle of the plains, those large companies would break up when the grass got too thin, the campgrounds too crowded, and the speed of some companions proved either too slow or too fast for the rest. Niles Searls summed up the whole experience of outfitting for the trek when he said, "the obstacles to be surmounted in preparing so large a train for an extensive journey are more numerous and of greater magnitude than can be well imaged by an individual unacquainted with the trip."<sup>3</sup>

After supplying, organizing, and ferrying across the Missouri, the emigrants stepped onto the Great Plains for the first time. On average they would make

between 18 and 25 miles per day, depending primarily on whether their teams were oxen, mules or horses, and considering all the other variables that could possibly arise during such a monumental trek.<sup>4</sup> Taking into account the unfamiliar topography, the flora and fauna of the landscape, and the volatile weather of the plains in the spring, the emigrants might as well have been on the moon. Using words that reflected his education and training as a lawyer, a philosophical Niles Searls wrote:

We have launched out upon those broad plains which for months must be our home, and what is the object of our present journey? Are we led on by a kind of indefinite wish to roam over creation's broad expanse without any particular object in view; or, are we led on by the all absorbing mania for getting gold; or, by the more laudable one of seeking for knowledge at her primeval source, of surveying and admiring the majestic work of Providence as displayed in their native grandeur? And what is to be the result of this expedition upon our future lives and fortunes?<sup>5</sup>

Whether the emigrant departed from Independence, St. Joseph, or points in between, the opening few days on the trails took them west over the plains toward the Blue River and its tributary the Little Blue which flowed south from Nebraska across northern Kansas and into the Kansas River. At the Blue River the road turned northwest and guided the emigrants to the Platte River in Nebraska. At first the landscape just west of the Missouri River remained similar to that back east—green, rolling hill country, with good agricultural potential. The flat, dusty, treeless plains were yet to come. The valley of the Blue was often described by the emigrants as being a most pleasant landscape. Sallie Hester's diary entry, describing the Little Blue, reflected a common view. "Camped on the beautiful Blue River 215 miles from St. Joe, with plenty of wood and water and good grazing for our cattle."<sup>6</sup> Another wrote, "The little Blue was in full view. Its bottoms are broad and heavily timbered. Sweet and refreshing waters. Got sight of the first antelope and a few wild Turkeys."<sup>7</sup>

On the less complimentary side, some commented at first that the Blue had steep and muddy banks and that the valley was an uneven prairie with the road frequently broken by ravines. As they traveled further north and west, the emigrants, "approached a fine level country where the eye commanded a

prospect of great extent, embracing several winding streams, bordered with green trees.”<sup>8</sup> By the time they reached the headwaters of the Little Blue, only about thirty miles from the Platte River in Nebraska, the soil had turned sandy and ravines, gullies, and hollows cut the landscape again.

Beyond the new landscapes, the weather of the plains left an indelible impression on the emigrants. The Great Plains region is known for the giant thunderstorms, which often spawn tornadoes, during the months April through July. Often developing in the late afternoon heat of the day, when the warm air near the earth’s surface rises and collides with cool air aloft, rapidly moving storm systems create towering cumulus thunderheads. Emigrants from the East were often taken back by the suddenness and violence of the storms.

“Seldom have I witnessed a more vivid display of electricity than accompanied this storm. Peal succeeded peal in quick succession till it seemed as though Pallas had again seized the thunderbolts of Jove and was bent upon wreaking upon us poor mortals his direst vengeance,” wrote Niles Searls after experiencing his first spring thunderstorm rolling in across central Kansas and across the camps around Independence. About other storms on successive days, he commented, “the rain of last night has abated, the wind still remaining S.W. and blowing briskly,” and “the violence of the wind was such as to render it almost impossible for a man to retain his equilibrium.” He added, “Hailstones the size of the end of a man’s thumb driven by the blast, pelted us with unprecedented fury.”<sup>9</sup>

J.A. Pritchard described his first experience with a Great Plains thunderstorm, “loud peels of thunder and fierce lighting - many of the tents were upset and the men exposed to the storm till their clothing were perfectly saturated.”<sup>10</sup>

Pritchard later described a classic plains thunderstorm rolling toward the Platte River in west central Nebraska.

At 4 p.m. I discovered in the southwest a very angry looking cloud arising I halted the train, and gave orders to stake the mules, pitch tents as quickly as possible which was done. The cloud changed route west-north-west and then bore square down upon us-And at 5 p.m. it commenced raining accompanied with hail and heavy wind - with fierce and vivid flashes of lightening and loud crashing peels of thunder. It raged with increased fury for the space of an hour and a

half. Tent pins gave way and tents went by the board—nearly all the tents round the camp were blown down and the men exposed to the fury of the storm which raged with such violence that it was impossible for a man to stand erect in it.<sup>11</sup>

Many emigrants commented on the size and quantity of hail which accompanied the storms, ranging from the diameter of a man's thumb to that of a walnut. S.M. Jamison wrote of a hale storm he encounter in May 1850. "Sunday lay by. I done my first washing today. we had a very heavy hale Storm to day it hailed so hard that we gathered a buckit full of hale to make Ice water for our water is very bad here."<sup>12</sup>

Most emigrants also realized they were taking their first venture into Indian territory. Nearly all the diarists had a comment, ranging from expressions of fear and trepidation to outright bravado. Margaret Frink wrote on 20 May 1850,

We had with us some guidebooks, Fremont's and Palmer's, from which we learned that to-day we would pass the village of the Pawnee Indians, who had the name of being very warlike. In anticipation, every gun and pistol was put in good order, and regular military tactics were observed. At ten o'clock we came to the village, but instead of a bloody fight, we took the village without firing a gun. From appearances the place had not been occupied for years.<sup>13</sup>

J. Goldsborough Bruff passed what may have been the same village the year before, in June 1849, and wrote, "we passed through a deserted Pawnee village. In the open spaces between the huts, are scattered about circular pits, filled with rubbish, and are dangerous to fall into."<sup>14</sup>

It appears in most cases that those jumping off from either Independence or St. Joseph and traveling toward the Platte on the Blue River road saw very few if any live Plains Indians. Sallie Hester also mentioned the Pawnee, describing them as, "a dangerous and hostile tribe," of which "we are obliged to watch them closely and double our guards at night." However, she added, "They never make their appearance during the day, but skulk around at night, steal cattle and do all the mischief they can."<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, those leaving further north, from the area of Council

Bluffs, encountered a number of Indians as soon as they crossed the Missouri. Amelia Hadley, wrote in her diary in May 1851, "There are tribes of Omahas, the first tribe we pass through, they are the most filthy thievish set and are mostly naked. Their chief can talk very good American, also his daughter. She lived 2 years in St. Louis and had been in school." She described a group of Potawatamie which she met a day later as, "a filthy tribe and barbaric," similar to the Omaha, "which had been reduced to a clan of beggars, that followed us from one camping place to another."<sup>16</sup> Once clear of the Missouri River it seems the Indians made few appearances. Lucena Parsons writing in 1850, "We have not seen an Indian since the first night after we started from the river."<sup>17</sup> In most cases, not until the Sioux were encountered in western Nebraska, did the emigrants make any further mention of Indians. An observation by Margaret Frink may explain why Native Americans kept their distance from the emigrants, "Today the line of white wagons reaches out to the front and to the rear farther than we can see." She concluded confidently, "Among such an army, we have little fear of trouble from Indians."<sup>18</sup>

Most emigrants found the standard farm wagon, drawn by a team of oxen, horses, or mules to be the nearly universal mode of transportation within the organized trains. Some so-called express companies, overland freight haulers or teamsters, got in on the transportation boom by operating "pioneer lines," in which the emigrants bought space in a coach for riding, with baggage brought along in freight wagons. Some traveled without wagons, "packing" their gold digging kit on the back of a horse or mule, and then riding another animal or walking along side to El Dorado. Margaret Frink described the vast number and wide variety of travelers crossing the Great Plains near where the tails converged along the Platte in southern Nebraska:

It appears to me that none of the population has been left behind. It seemed to me that I had never seen so many human beings in all my life before. And when we drew nearer to the vast multitude, and saw them in all manner of vehicles and conveyances, on horse back and on foot, all eagerly driving and hurrying forward. There was a cart drawn by two cows, a cart drawn by one ox, a man on horseback drove along an ox packed with his provisions and blankets. There was a man with a hand cart, another with a wheelbarrow loaded with supplies.<sup>19</sup>

Fort Kearney presented a welcome sight for many emigrants who had been out of touch with civilization for a couple of weeks by the time they reached the outpost in southeastern Nebraska. J. A. Pritchard described the place as he passed, "At noon we reached Fort Kearney and passed through the place and stopped to graze and rest a couple of hours. Here we found a military post established and some 80 or 90 dragoons posted here. Also a kind of Post office establishment which gave us an opportunity of sending back letters. The fort is about 12 miles above the head of Grand Island, and the houses are built of adobe or sun dried brick."<sup>20</sup> Margaret Frink commented that, "this is the first human habitation we have seen since crossing the Missouri, two hundred miles distance."<sup>21</sup> A number of other emigrants commented on the welcome sight of military personnel, the post office, and the slight semblance of white civilization it offered. Another diarist, Sarah Davis, recalled in a barely literate style, a marvelous encounter with frontier justice, "at fort carney thare was some men in encampment that sold liquor to the soldiers and they were fiend[ined] and to[two] of them taken to the forte and confined and the rest of their liquor turned out of the casque."<sup>22</sup>

After leaving Fort Kearney the emigrants moved west on the main trail along the south bank of the Platte River. A less used trail paralleled them on the north bank, and emigrants could on occasion see travelers on the opposite bank. Everyone commented on the width of the Platte, estimating it to be from a half to two miles wide. Many liked the looks of the valley, writing comments like, "traveled over a beautiful country," and "the Platte is a delightful stream." But it was not perfect. Despite being along side a major river, the drinking water was not good at times and fuel for heat and cooking could be scarce at times. Amelia Hadley summed up the major complaint of most traveling along the Platte River when she wrote, "we find little or no timber, principally willow and this serves for fuel, that is the dead ones." Emigrants quickly learned to burn dried buffalo dung, called chips, to compensate for the lack of firewood. Hadley also recalled, "The water of the Platte is very good when settled which we do by throwing a little alum, and letting it stand a while."<sup>23</sup>

Some of the most remarkable and often recurring commentaries about the migration across the plains involved death, and dealing with it. Sallie Hester began her diary entry on 3 June 1849 by writing, "Our tent is now pitched on the beautiful Platte River, 315 miles from St. Joseph." Then she continued, "the cholera is raging. A great many deaths, graves everywhere."<sup>24</sup> Cholera, a

disease caused by a bacterial infection, usually in the small intestines, and transmitted by unsanitary contact through food and water supplies, ravaged many trains through the heavy rush of 1849 and 1850. The amazing thing about the spread of the disease was that both time and geography localized it. Early starters seemed to outpace the epidemics, and traveling the less congested trail on the north bank of the Platte seemed to help greatly. Pritchard's company, which jumped off early in May 1849, reported practically no deaths and only when some mail caught up with him well into the Rockies did he hear about the cholera scourge.

Some diarists chronicled death by counting the number of graves in relation to the number of miles traveled. Sarah Davis recorded in her 1850 diary just two days west of Fort Kearney, "June 13, we traveled for eighteen miles that day and camped on the plat river. I saw twelve graves today, it seemed like a grave yard almost to me. We traveled ten miles farther, we past thirteen graves. June 14, we had past six graves today. We past twelve more and one grave they had not put the body in yet."<sup>25</sup> J. Goldsborough Bruff, the leader of a party of gold seekers from Washington, D.C., kept copious notes on his travels, even to the point of recording the information from every makeshift head stone he passed. "June 19, Grave close to the camp: C. H. Cornwall, of Waukeshaw, Wis: Died June 10, 1849, Aged 26 years."<sup>26</sup> Lucena Parsons wrote over a series of days in 1850:

June 20. past 6 graves all made within 5 days & all died of cholera. We met some wagons on the back trace. This afternoon past 2 more graves, they seem to be of the same company as the 6 who died. June 21. We are obliged to stop this morning and bury 2 of our company, the first to die with cholera. Made 15 miles. Our company camp up with another child dead. They buried it at twilight on the bank of the stream. June 22. This morning we have buried 3 more children who had the cholera, they all belonged to one family.<sup>27</sup>

A few weeks later, still recording the grim count in her diary, she reported passing 19 graves in a single day, "most from Missouri, they died in June and all are young men between 20 & 30 years of age."<sup>28</sup>

Death also visited in other ways. Parsons recalled two such incidents—"We were looking for a place to wait when a little boy of Captain Maughns, 3 years

of age, fell from the wagon. The 2 wheels run over his stomach & he died in about an hour,” and on another occasion, “They had to bury a boy of Lovells. he fell from the wagon & broke his leg and died soon after.”<sup>29</sup>

Nor did peace always exist among the many thousands moving across the plains. No official law enforcement traveled with the trains so civil order had to be self-enforced. Reports of harsh words, fist fights, and the use of weapons appear in more than one journal. Pritchard reported one such event in his journal in May 1849:

Some unpleasant words passed whereupon Hodges struck Hamline & knocked him down—and was beating him severely—when the cry of fight was given—I was the first who got there—and pulled Hodges off of Hamline—when knives and pistols were drawn—I caught Hamline—just in the act of stabbing Hodges with a large Bouy-Knife—and in the effort to arrest the stroke I received a slight cut myself about one and a half inches long across my right arm. Other men interfered by this time, and the combatants were finely [finally] separated. Hamline received a very bad cut on his upper lip done when Hodges first struck him—Hodges withdrew from the mess next morning & we left him on the road side with his mule & good & chattels and what became of him I know not.<sup>30</sup>

The plains presented the emigrants with a range of opportunities to hunt. The size and variety of game, particularly the buffalo that presented a real chance for fresh meat in an otherwise stale and starchy trail diet, awed most Easterners. Taking one of the beasts down proved the real challenge, as Goldsborough Bruff reported:

The casualties of buffalo hunting are very common. Men charg'd by wounded bulls, unhorsed & many badly hurt - the horses generally running off with the band of buffaloes, for the Indians to pick up hereafter. Lots of rifles and pistols lost, as well as horses: and many poor fellow, after a hard day's hunt, on an empty stomach, unhorsed some distance from camp, has a long & tiresome walk, after night, to his own, or the nearest camp he can make. And some have been lost for days at the imminent risk of their lives.<sup>31</sup>

“Our company to day have killed 2 deer and 4 buffalo, plenty of fresh meat,” wrote Amelia Hadley. “It is good and quite a luxury after living on salt meat so long. Having had some to eat, you could not tell it from beef. You will perceive that is a little coarser grain and a little darker.” She added, “One of our company killed an antelope and gave us some. It is very sweet and tender, a good deal like veal, much better than venison.”<sup>32</sup> Pritchard also commented on the plains antelope, “this afternoon a large number of antelope were to be seen. A number of our party gave chase to them but to no effect. I never saw an animal that can run with the same speed, grace, ease and elegance of these Antelope. When hotly pursued on our best horses they fled almost with the fleetness of the wind.”<sup>33</sup>

From the time they crossed the Missouri all the emigrants saw wolves, and most of them reported shooting at them. Pritchard observed, “Our mules were kept in a constant state of alarm by the Woolfs that were prowling around our camp that night. Here I will just remark that a wolf will frighten mules equally as bad as an Indian.”<sup>34</sup> Sarah Davis wrote on 17 June 1850, “the men all went in a swimen and I sow and wash. Their was three large white wolfs atacked a cow and calf. They then surrounded the cow and would have killed her but whilst they ware eating their kill a Mr. Crous [Crouse] shot one and he dropped down and he thought he was dead but he rose again and run of [f].”<sup>35</sup> Lucena Parsons’ comments on the wolf’s practice of scavenging anything left by the emigrants left a chilling reminder of their nature. “I see some painful sights where the wolves have taken up the dead & torn their garments in pieces & in some instances the skulls & jaw bones are strewed over the ground.”<sup>36</sup>

Populating some areas of the Great Plains, another of nature’s creatures fascinated many emigrants. “Rode through a number of dog towns,” recorded Pritchard. “Their towns cover an area of several acres & some times they are one fourth of mile in diameter. They burrow in the ground—dig out large holes and throw up oval shaped mouns of from 4 to 6 feet in diameter and from 1 to 2 feet high. It is extremely dangerous to ride through those towns on horse back at full step. They are the size of the largest kind of ground hogs in our country. They are rather shy and cunning in their appearance.”<sup>37</sup>

Another feature of the Great Plains which many diarists commented on during their trek, and which came to be more dreaded than an Indian attack, were the swarms of insects along the Platte, mosquitoes in particular. “We have been annoyed several days with mosquitoes, but until last night were able

to battle them with some success,” wrote Niles Searls. “They came, however, with the twilight of last evening in myriads, falling like famished tigers upon their prey. To resist these small shredders of human blood was out of the question. All that could be done was to yield in quiet submission to our fate.” And in keeping some sense of humor through the dire situation, Searls concluded, “many a hero renowned in history has won his laurels with the loss of less blood than was shed by each of us during this eventful night.”<sup>38</sup>

On reaching the confluence of the northern and southern forks of the Platte River, the emigrants, traveling the main trail, had to ford the South Fork in order to continue north and west, on toward Fort Laramie. Getting across the South Platte could prove a daunting experience, and some drownings were reported. There were some ferry services available but most simply drove their wagons into the stream and hoped to miss the pockets of quicksand. Others took the crossing as just another chance to go wading. Jamison recorded the event by simply writing, “crossed the platt this afternoon. Howe and Sprankle waded over by taking off their pants.”<sup>39</sup>

Bruff recorded in his 27 June 1849 entry one of the more interesting fording accounts:

Early this morning Capt. McNulty tendered me a mule, and I forded the Platte, with them. Found 2 men with a St. Louis Company on crossing. My New York friends got all their train over without accident, except one wagon, which sank so in the sand that they had to leave it for the day. It was about four yds from shore, and about 400 below the landing & camp, and contained a sick man. It looked queer to see a man wading down stream, waist deep, in the rapid river, with a pot of coffee in one hand and a plate of bread and meat in the other, going to the wagon, to the relief of his comrade. On the opposite shore could be seen a pointer dog, at the water’s edge, howling for his lost master, on this side. 12 mules were needed to drag the wagon out.<sup>40</sup>

Once beyond the fords on the South Fork, the emigrants traversed the land between the northern and southern forks before the road fell in along the North Fork. “We bid adieu to the South Platte. Mounted the Bluffs and struck for Ash hollow on the North fork, a distance of 22 miles,” explained James

Pritchard. "Struck the head of Ash hollow, so called there are few clumps of Ash trees standing along a hollow. The North fork of the Platte here bears some resemblance to the main stream- yet the channel is not so wide-the banks are higher and the current much more rapid."<sup>41</sup>

Near Ash Hollow, the emigrant trains entered Sioux Territory. All who wrote of encounters with those masters of the Great Plains, seemed impressed, but also a bit apprehensive. "There is a village of the Sioux Indians two miles above the crossing," wrote Pritchard, "and some 2 or 300 of them of all sex, ages, and size were loitering round our wagons pretending to trade moccasins & skins for something to eat. The men are large well proportioned & fine looking-the women are rather fine looking. The Sioux Indians have never been hostile to the whites. We encamped about one mile above the ford-where we found good grass-there are some ten or a dozen Frenchmen living here in lodges or wigwams-with Squaws for their wives. After we had encamped a large number of the men came round our camp. I was not all together pleased with their appearance-So I told the boys about sunset to bring out their Guns and stack them in the center of the corral. After seeing the guns they took very good care to stay away."<sup>42</sup>

Amelia Hadley's encounter with the Sioux, two years after Pritchard's, left her with a favorable impression.

Came to an Indian camp about noon where they had quite a little village of wigwams & a great many poneys. They are the tribe of Soos. They are kind and hospitable and are the most polite and cleanest tribe on the road. They are whiter, to[too] than any that we have seen. They are well dressed and make a fine appearance. Went in one of their houses made of dressed skins sewed together and very large. They are all busy some of them jerking Buffalo, some painting skins for boxes which looked very nice. The old chief came out shook hands with me, invited me in, and seemed almost tickled to death to see a white woman, quite a curiosity.<sup>43</sup>

By the time the emigrants reached western Nebraska, the cholera had done its worst and they began to comment less on death and more on the scenery again. Universally the emigrants noted the dryness of the western plains and the shortage of grass. The problem was not one of nature but created

by the huge herds of stock, used to pull the wagons, having eaten everything, sometimes for several miles, either side of the trail. They found sand bluffs, semi-arid vegetation, and as Lucena Parsons observed, "There seems to be plenty of saleratus, salt & large beds of prickly pear & some smart weed on these bottoms."<sup>44</sup>

The high plains began to ripple, forming the ridges and bluffs of the most eastern extension of the foothills of the great Rocky Mountain range. "We discovered some hills or bluffs called Ancient Bluffs which are decidedly grand and beautiful," wrote Amelia Hadley. "It looks like the ruins of old castles and buildings of all sizes and descriptions. I have seen visitors have to be very careful on account of the many rattlesnakes lurking among the clefts of the rocks."<sup>45</sup>

Other landmarks appeared in quick succession and were noted by all who passed them. Pritchard wrote, "We came in sight of the Court House rock. It presents to the eye the appearance of an artificial superstructure. It has a round top with domes and spires. At the same time we came in sight of Chimney rock."<sup>46</sup> Henry Wellenkamp described Chimney Rock succinctly when he called it, "A grand whim of nature, 300 feet high."<sup>47</sup> Lucena Parsons described Chimney Rock, "I was struck with amazement at the grandeur of the scene. It is large at the base & then runs up some 300 feet, the last 100 feet is nearly square & in the form of a chimney in the tip of a round tower. We found thousands of names engraven in every place up and down its sides."<sup>48</sup>

Scotts Bluff rose on the horizon as the next major landmark. According to Wellenkamp it was, "a days journey from Chimney Rock, stands 300 feet above the plains where there was a spring, fine grass on top of it, and a first glimpse of the Rocky Mountains."<sup>49</sup> Bruff called Scotts Bluff, "beautiful and romantic," with a view of Laramie Peak, sixty miles away. Pritchard offered an explanation in his journal as to the origins of the bluff's name. "Scotts bluff took its name from a man of that name, who was a trapper—and in descending the river he was taken sick—and left by his ungrateful companions to perish. They returned and reported that he had died and that they buried him. The next year his remains were found by some trappers who were passing that way, and with him a journal that gave a full account of the whole transaction." Pritchard went on to describe how the bluffs, "present almost every variety of architectural shape that you can imagine—arches, pillars, domes, spires, minarets, temple, gothic castle, a magnificence and grandeur far surpassing the constructive

efforts of human strength and energy.”<sup>50</sup>

Fort Laramie, just over the boundary of present day Wyoming, with the Rocky Mountains to the west in full view, marked the end of the first leg of the trek to the gold fields. It presented the emigrants with the first outpost of civilization since leaving Fort Kearney, almost three hundred miles to the east.

Sallie Hester described the place, “The fort is of adobe, enclosed with a high wall of the same. The entrance is a hole in the wall just large enough for a person to crawl through. The impression you have on entering is that you are in a small town.”<sup>51</sup> Bruff, looking at the fort with the eye of a soldier, described it as, “an extensive rectangular structure of adobe. It forms an open area within, houses and balconies against the walls. Heavy portals and watch tower and square bastions at 2 angles, enfilade the faces of the main walls. It has suffered much from time and neglect.”<sup>52</sup>

Lucena Parsons, who traveled somewhat late in the season of 1850, saw Fort Laramie on August 1. “This is a very pretty place to look at, it is so clean. The Fort is commanded by a Major Anderson, he is a fine man, there are 250 soldiers and some 12 families. They have blacksmiths, a saw mill, a public house, one store. They hold goods high & work is also high [reference to prices]. They offer for carpenter work [\$]60 a month and find them, & women to cook for 20 a month. flour is [\$]10 per hundred & whiskey 8 per gallon in the emigrants store. They say 75 thousand pass here this season and some days there are 1500 here. There are hundreds of waggons left here which can be bought for a few dollars each from the soldiers.”<sup>53</sup>

Like Parsons, many emigrants commented with amazement on the number of abandoned wagons and piles of supplies discarded around Fort Laramie. Many had come to realize that they were grossly overloaded for the coming trek through the mountains. And as the emigrants left the Great Plains and headed west from Laramie into the Rockies, “the abandonment and destruction of property here is extraordinary,” wrote J. Goldsborough Bruff. “True, a great deal of heavy cumbersome, useless articles: a diving bell and all the apparatus, heavy anvils, iron and steel, forges, bellows, lead, etc. etc. and provisions: bacon in great piles, many chords of it, good meat, Bags of beans, salt, etc. Trunks, chests, tools of every description, clothing, tents, tent-poles, harness, etc.”<sup>54</sup>

Bruff observed that not only were many items discarded, but also many physically destroyed. “I was told of a man here, who a few days ago offered a barrel of sugar for sale, for about treble its cost, and unable to obtain that, he

poured spirits of turpentine in it and burnt it up. The spirit of selfishness has been here beautifully developed. Discarded effects generally rendered useless; camp utensils and vessels broken, kegs and buckets stove in, trunks chopped with hatchets, & saws & other tools all broken.”<sup>55</sup>

Crossing the Great Plains presented a real challenge to the emigrants. Yet in terms of miles, two thirds of their journey still lay ahead of them. The real nadir of the trip, the scorching heat and dryness of the Nevada Desert, waited for them ten weeks further along. There, many would reflect on the deaths and hardships of the plains crossing, and view it as a more halcyon time. They wished again for the wide meandering Platte, vast fields of wildflowers, the mid-day heat broken by refreshing thunderstorms, the buffalo chase, and the entertainment of the prairie dog towns.

## NOTES

1. In most cases the author has tried to quote the emigrants exactly, using the spelling and punctuation as it appeared in the original writing. While some of the gold seekers were quite literate, others had minimal mastery of the language and created their own spellings and style of punctuation. That in no way diminishes the value of their work, but many rules of modern grammar are not applied within the quotations.
2. From a letter written by Mary M. Colby, 6 May 1850, in Kenneth L. Holmes, ed., *Covered Wagon Women*, 10 vols. (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clarke Company, 1983), 2:48-49. (hereafter cited as *CWW*).
3. Niles Searls was a young lawyer from New York, who with a number of friends, signed on with an express company from Independence, Missouri, to be transported to the gold fields in 1849. From his diary, 13 May 1849. *The Diary of a Pioneer and Other Papers*, (The Searls Family, 1940), 11.
4. The majority of diarists kept records of how far they traveled each day. Some took the distance from guidebooks, which gave distances from a specific landmark to the next. Others traveled with a device called a roadometer, which measured distances according to the revolutions of a wagon wheel. In one case, a group of emigrants actually carried a surveyor's chain and measured their progress over a few days to calculate their speed.
5. Searls, 15 May 1849, 13.
6. Diary of Sallie Hester, 21 May 1849. Hester's diary was originally published as a serial titled, "The Diary of a Pioneer Girl" in the San Francisco *Argonaut*, beginning on 12 September 1925. Also see the Hester diary in Holmes, *Covered Wagon Women*, 1:236.
7. Diary of J. A. Pritchard, 13 May 1849. *Diary of a Journey From Kentucky to California in 1849*, typescript, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Columbia, Missouri.

8. Searls, 31 May 1849, 24.
9. Searls, 13-21 May 1849, 15-18.
10. Pritchard, 18 May 1849.
11. Pritchard, 29 May 1849.
12. Diary of S. M. Jamison, 19 May 1850, Nevada Historical Society Quarterly 10 (winter 1967): 3-27.
13. Diary of Margaret Frink, 20 May 1850. Manuscript, The Yale University Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Also see the Frink diary in Holmes, *Covered Wagon Women*, 2:84-85.
14. Journal of J. Goldsborough Bruff, 12 June 1849. Manuscript, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California. Also see, Georgia Read and Ruth Gaines, *Gold Rush: The Journals, Drawings, and Other Papers of J. Goldsborough Bruff*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), 18.
15. Hester, 21 May 1849. *Argonaut*, 12 September 1925, CWW, 1:237.
16. Diary of Amelia Hadley, 7 May 1851. Holmes, CWW, 3:57.
17. Journal of Lucena Parsons, 25 June 1850. Manuscript, Department of Special Collections of the Stanford University Library. Also see the Parsons diary in, Holmes, *Covered Wagon Women*, 2:243.
18. Frink, 23 May 1850, CWW, 2:88-89.
19. Frink, 20 May 1850, CWW, 2:84-85.
20. Pritchard, 18 May 1849.
21. Frink, 21 May 1850, 2:84-85.
22. Diary of Sarah Davis, 11 June 1850. Manuscript, The Yale University Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Also see the Davis diary in Holmes, *Covered Wagon Women*, 2:177.
23. Hadley, 9 May 1851, CWW, 3:59.
24. Hester, 3 June 1849. *Argonaut*, 12 September 1925, CWW, 1:237.
25. Davis, 13-14 June 1850, CWW, 2:177-178.
26. Bruff, 19 June 1849. *Gold Rush*, 22.
27. Parsons, 20-22 June 1850, CWW, 2:241-242.
28. Parsons, 17 July 1850. CWW, 2:241-242.
29. Parsons, 9-12 July 1850. CWW, 2:247-248.
30. Pritchard, 23 May 1849.
31. Bruff, 26 June 1849, *Gold Rush*, 24.
32. Hadley, 25 May 1850, CWW, 3:63.
33. Pritchard, 26 May 1849.
34. Pritchard, 23 May 1849.
35. Davis, 17 June 1849, CWW, 2:178.
36. Parsons, 18 July 1850, CWW, 2:250.
37. Pritchard, 25 May 1849.
38. Searls, 22 June 1849, 35.

39. Howe and Sprankle were two of Jamison's traveling companions mentioned frequently in his diary. Jamison, 20 May 1850, 9.
40. Bruff, 27 June 1849, *Gold Rush* 25.
41. Pritchard, 27 May 1849.
42. Pritchard, 26 May 1849.
43. Hadley, 30 May 1851, *CWW*, 3:67.
44. Saleratus is naturally occurring bicarbonate of soda or baking soda found in places on the surface of the ground and noted by many emigrants. Parsons, 17 July 1850, *CWW*, 2:250.
45. Hadley, 1 June 1851, *CWW*, 3:68.
46. Pritchard, 29 May 1849.
47. Diary of Henry Wellenkamp, 4 June 1850. Typescript, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Columbia, Missouri.
48. Parsons, 27 July 1850, *CWW*, 2:253.
49. Wellenkamp, 5 June 1850.
50. Pritchard, 1 June 1849.
51. Hester, 19 June 1849. *Argonaut*, 12 September 1925, *CWW*, 1:238.
52. Bruff attended West Point military academy for a period, but did not graduate or actually serve in the army. He was a ship captain and a draftsman, but retained the military eye when describing things. Bruff, 10 July 1849, *Gold Rush*, 35-36.
53. Not having reached Laramie until the first of August put her party very late in the travel season. The bulk of the emigrants, if on schedule, would have passed that point a month earlier. Parsons, 1 August 1850. *CWW*, 2:255.
54. Bruff, 10 July 1849. *Gold Rush*, 35-36.
55. *Ibid.*