

Chapter Four- More Adventures on the Trail

Families, as well as single men, moved west. Just like the Harvey family, the men would sometimes go ahead to establish base in the western lands, then went back for their families. More often, however, this plan was not



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financially possible, so the entire family went together. In her stories about her family, Florence Baker (granddaughter of I.J. and Sarah) wrote about the family's journey.

“ Sophronia Barnes, a niece of Sarah Harvey’s was five years old when she witnessed the family starting out at night in a torchlight caravan of covered wagons. It was a common practice to start for the West at night and camp about 20 miles from the starting place, so they could easily return home the next day if they had forgotten anything critical.

The Harvey family left from St. Joseph, Missouri on May 1, 1852 with seven teams of oxen and 21 young men who were paid \$400 each to help drive the cattle. The trip took five months and the four children seemed none the worse for wear from their adventure. They encountered Indians along the way and once, when they saw Indian smoke, they drew the seven wagons in a tight circle. Several braves came to the camp and Grandfather gave them presents. They were not bothered again. Grandfather would go ahead on horseback each day to find the next night’s camp group.*

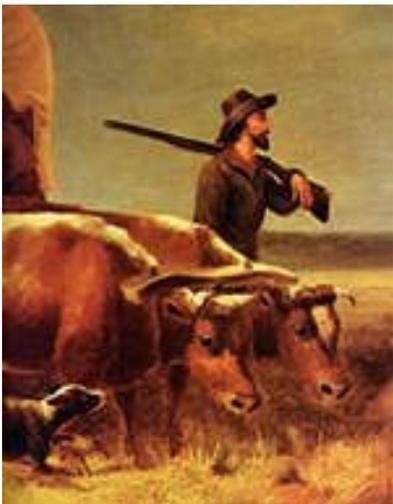
They came to California through the Beckwourth Pass, named for Grandfather’s acquaintance from his first trip, James Beckwourth. California was to be their new home and their trip through this beautiful pass was cause for great celebration.

Jim Beckwourth was a capable scout and honorary chief of the Crow Indians. He was described by Ina Coolbrith in the Plumas County historic records like this:

Ours was the first of the covered wagon trains to break the trail through Beckwourth Pass into California. We were guided by the famous scout, Jim Beckwourth. He was rather dark and wore his hair in two long braids, twisted with colored cord, which gave him a picturesque appearance. He wore a leather coat and moccasins and rose a horse without a saddle. “ (Jim Beckwourth was one of the

members of Fremont's 4th expedition which visited the Salinas Valley. He and his wife later lived next door to the Harveys at Spanish Ranch and the men herded cattle together.)

Life was an adventure for children on the wagon trains. Although there were many dangers, most of the children were excited. They still had chores to do. Milking the cows, carrying water, picking up firewood, gathering berries and helping with the cooking and washing up were all part of their day. The children soon tired of the dust and mud. Most walked the entire trail of over 2000 miles, so it was challenging and exhausting. If it rained, they pulled on oilskin ponchos and kept walking. The oxen only went one to two miles per hour, so it was easy for the children to keep up. Older children helped herd the cows, watched the younger children and picked up fuel for the fires as they walked.



Clothing for the trail was simple and durable. Even though it was summer and hot, the men wore long sleeved flannel shirts to protect them from the sun. They wore sturdy boots and broad-brimmed hats to keep the sun off their heads and faces.

The women wore dresses of wool or gingham. The skirt was hemmed shorter than usual to make it easier to walk on the rough ground. Aprons were worn to help keep dresses clean and most women had a light colored apron for special occasions.

Sunbonnets were worn to protect the face and neck from too much sun.

Children dressed much like their parents. Boys wore shirts and pants of cotton or buckskin. Girls wore skirts or dresses, usually of calico or gingham. They would usually wear through two or three pair of boots during the journey. Most would have two sets of clothing for the trip with the rest of their clothing packed at the bottom of the wagon. About once each week, the train would stop at a place with good water so that laundry and bathing would be done. Women often carried bolts of cloth with them so they could make a new skirt or shirt if the old ones wore out. Sturdy shoes were important and the pioneers took extra leather so they could repair their shoes as they wore out. Many purchased moccasins from the Native American tribes along the way. These were both more comfortable and more durable than boots.

A day on the trail began well before sunrise. The fire was started and breakfast cooked. It was often pancakes (made from only flour, water, and baking soda) with beans which had been cooking on the coals all night and fried bacon. It was important to start the day with a hearty meal. Coffee was served at every meal, even for the children. The water was often muddy or tasted so bad that coffee was used to disguise the taste. Milk and sugar or honey were added to the children's coffee to make it tastier. The meals were simple and filling. When fresh meat or fish were caught or when wild onions or berries were found, they made a refreshing change from the regular diet.

As the wagon train entered the Plains, the number of trees decreased and available firewood disappeared. Children learned to pick up dried buffalo chips (dried buffalo droppings), which made a good fire. As they went even further west, there were fewer buffalo chips and no wood. Children learned to gather dead sagebrush, so they could have a fire to cook breakfast.

While the mothers prepared breakfast, the men rounded up the livestock, which has been left to graze. Soon the oxen were hitched up, the cows were milked, the blankets and bedrolls were stored in the wagon and everyone was fed.

At 7 a.m. a bugle sounded to announced that it was time to “Roll the Wagons”. Few pioneers set out alone. Being in a group provided increased security and the wagon train seemed like a village even if it increased the dust or mud and, sometimes, led to disagreements.

At the nooning, or lunchtime break, the oxen were given a chance to rest, graze and drink. The pioneers ate cold biscuits and jerky while they rested. After an hour or so, the train moved on, stopping around 5 p.m. Then, the fires were lit, dinner prepared, oxen led to water and grass, horses watered and hobbled for the night, and children prepared for bed. By sunset, which was around 8 p.m. in the summer months, everyone was preparing for the night. The men would take turns patrolling at night, protecting their cattle and horses from thieves or wild animals.

Sometimes children slept in the wagon, sometimes under it, in a tent or outside under the stars. Babies and little children usually slept in the wagon. If it was rainy, tents might be set up. The men and older boys dug a ditch around the tent so that water would run off and not come into the tent. Cloth rubbed with oil, called on oilskin, was also used to protect the pioneers from the rain. When the weather was nice, however, everyone preferred to sleep outside under the stars. Soon it would be morning and time to begin again.



The captain was responsible for the major decisions. First, he determined when it was time to start the journey. Too early and there would not be enough grass for the oxen and the roads would be muddy with spring rain. Too late and they ran the risk of being caught by snowstorms in the mountains. He selected the route, found sites for

camping, and scheduled the posting of guards and the rotation of the wagons. The order of the wagons was changed regularly so that everyone had a chance to be in front and everyone had to suffer the dust at the back. When they reached a river fording, the captain decided whether or not it was safe to cross and organized the men to get everyone across safely. Sometimes there were rafts already set up at fordings to take the wagons across. If settlers had the money, this could be a good option. Most of the time, the wagons were sealed with tar and candle wax and could be floated across. Children usually rode inside the wagon. Two or three men rode alongside and guided the

wagon and the oxen. Sometimes wagons tipped over and everything inside was lost or the water dragged the wagon away and it couldn't be caught. If that happened, the family would have to ride with others in the train.

One of the most interesting animals the children saw on the Plains was the buffalo. Buffalo could be up to ten feet tall and weigh a ton. Travelers were happy to be able to kill one. They roasted the hump, boiled the bones for soup, made the extra meat into jerky and cured the hide to make a warm blanket. Jerky is made by cutting the meat from buffalo, deer or antelope into thin strips that were hung over a smoky fire for two days. Since they didn't usually have that much time, the pioneers tied strings on the outside of the wagon from the front to the back and hung the strips of meat over the strings. The sun would dry the meat as they traveled along.

Several Native American tribes lived along the pioneer's route. Some were friendly and traded with the wagon trains.. One thing that the pioneers wanted was moccasins. These were strong, but soft shoes made from buffalo or deer skin. These were decorated with colored beads. Some of the things the tribes wanted were cloth, red paint, and metal fishing hooks.

If the Native Americans were not friendly, they might try to steal the pioneers' cattle and horses. That is why it was important to have guards at night. Sometimes, a tribe became very angry because so many people were crossing their lands and they attacked the settlers. The wagons were driven into a circle and everyone who knew how to use a gun would help fight. The major wars began in the 1850s and 1860s as pioneers began to build their homes on lands that the Native Americans considered theirs.

Before heading out on the trail, most pioneers planned for enough supplies to make the entire trip. Some were not so careful and sometimes, the unexpected happened. Flour got maggots, or supplies became wet or lost in a river fording. The forts provided a source for supplies but at greatly increased prices.



Forts Laramie and Bridger

Most of the forts had started as trading posts for fur traders. The owners realized that they could make money selling supplies and offering services such as a post office, blacksmith, and doctor. Gradually, several of the trading posts were taken over by the cavalry. Villages of Native Americans who were eager to trade usually encircled the walls of the stockades.



Formal education was not a priority while on the trail. Since the journey west took place from May until September or October, much of it was during summer vacation. In the mid-1800s, school usually didn't begin until crops were harvested and was over in time for the older boys to help with spring planting. (October to April). Nevertheless, the children on the wagon trains learned many important and interesting lessons about the natural world and how to survive in it. Their parents also organized spelling bees, recitations, and other activities to entertain and to reinforce the importance of learning.

Churches were another institution that was missing on the trail. Wagon trains often stopped on Sunday to give the people and animals a much needed rest. There were usually musicians who had brought their fiddles, banjos and harmonicas. Others brought their Bibles and would lead a time of worship and hymn singing. Funerals, weddings, and baptisms were all part of life on the wagon train. After services, women would take advantage of the day of "rest" to wash clothes, take baths (if there was enough water), clean and reorganize their wagons.

The first part of the Emigrant Trail was traveled by most of those going west. At Fort Hall, the route split into the Oregon Trail and the California and Mormon trails. One section of the California trail was particularly treacherous. The pioneers followed the Humboldt River Valley across the Great Basin. The water turned increasingly alkaline until it disappeared into a sink. Then there was a forty mile wide desert to cross before finding either the Truckee or Carson Rivers and the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Ruben Cole Shaw described it like this.

" The Humboldt is not food for man or beast...and there is not timber enough in three hundred miles of its desolate valley to make a box or sufficient vegetation along its banks to shade a rabbit, while its waters contain enough alkali to make soap for a nation."

By the time the families reached their destination, most of the children had walked nearly 2000 miles. Their shoes had disintegrated, their clothing was held together with patches, and they were thin and tan. Because of the lack of fresh fruit, many also had scurvy, which is caused by a lack of vitamin C. The journey was hard, but most felt like it was worth the effort.