

## Vacaville settler tells of his travails

### People, animals alike suffered on trek west

By Jerry Bowen

When we last left the Pleasant Hill wagon train, it had split into three groups because of the increased scarcity of feed for the animals as they continued their weary trek toward Independence Rock, the next major landmark.

It's at this point that James S. Pleasants in his chronicle lets us know that it is the latter part of July. J. Goldsborough Bruff was also approaching Independence Rock on July 27, 1849, so the two wagon trains at one time must have been in the company of each other. Pleasants had little to say about the trail at that time other than they were out of the buffalo's range and they had to use greasewood for fuel.

Bruff describes the weather at the same time as follows: "Rain fell in a perfect sheet, blinding and appalling lightening, and crashing thunder ... then hailstones of extraordinary size, not only cut and bruised the men, whose faces and hands were bleeding, but it also cut the mules."

When the Pleasant Hill party arrived at Independence Rock, William Pleasants climbed up on top and, "... and wrote my name there." Unfortunately, his name is one of many that haven't survived the ravages of time.

The emigrants felt that if they reached Independence Rock by July, they would be able to go the rest of the way without being trapped later by the deep snows of winter. Many also thought they were halfway to their destination, but they still had many miles ahead of them to that point.

Another diarist, Wakeman Bryarly, (Trail to California, published in 1945 by Yale University Press) who passed Independence Rock a few days earlier than Pleasants, commented about another of our pioneers of Solano County, Lansford W. Hastings, and an experience at Independence Rock in 1844:

"It was the Oregon emigration of 1844. Two men with it, by name Hastings & Love-joy, (went) ahead of the train some distance for the purpose of ascending the rock before it came up. They imprudently left their guns sitting against the rock at its base & went up. They scarcely got up before the war whoop of 250 Indians was heard & they were described by the men as jumping up from every sage bush & bunch of grass. The men were the more surprised because they had examined, as they thought, well, all around the place for fear of these

self-same fellows. They were still more surprised when they saw their own guns pointed towards them and ordered to come down. They came down and were seized by the Indians & treated with the greatest indignity. The young Indians spit in their faces, pulled their ears & nose. They were stript & whipt most unmercifully & driven thus towards the train which, so soon as they perceived them, corralled. One Indian snapped a pistol three times at Lovejoy's head, but his time had not yet come. They demanded a most exorbitant ransom, in provisions, for them, which had to be paid, and they were released. This taught them however, never to stray too far from home. Lovejoy is now Mayor of Oregon City, & Hastings is one of those who with Sutter, just invited the emigration to California."

About four miles west of Independence Rock the wagon train came to "Devil's Gate." Pleasants described it as, "This river (the Sweetwater River) flows through a wonderful canyon, known as the Devil's Gate. It is a narrow gorge, only about sixty feet wide, and probably three miles in length. The walls on either side are of solid rock about three hundred feet high and perpendicular." The trail skirts around the "gate" because it is too rocky to pass through.

For the next 25 days, Pleasants comments only that they followed the entire length of the Sweetwater River and that on the 15th day they crossed over the continental divide. He says little about the hardships on the trail at the time.

While most trail journals comment about the increasing number of dead animals and human graves, Pleasants says little. It is apparent that he was getting a little homesick. At this time the party has lost four men to cholera and one, David Rice, to fever. They had seen thousands of Indians and traded with them.

As they crossed the "Great Divide," he reflected on the trip up to that time. "Since leaving the Lone Elm, our starting point, some ninety days ago, our course has been uphill ... In all this time no word from home has reached us, neither has there been an opportunity to send a message back, hence the anxiety of our loved ones must be extreme. They know that a hundred dangers to one that threatens them ... the days lengthen into weeks and weeks into months, and still that awful silence and uncertainty, and hope deferred that maketh the heart sick."

About 20 days after passing the Divide they reached the Green River and passed over the Bear River Mountains, and their course took them to Fort Hall, Idaho on the northeast edge of American Falls Reservoir.

From there they followed the Oregon Trail along the Snake River until they reached its junction with the Raft River. At this point, known as the Raft River Crossing, they turned south onto

the California Trail and headed into the desert country of Nevada to the Humboldt River. The crossing over the desert lands had taken their toll on numerous wagon trains as they wound their way west.

Pleasants says nothing about the 200 miles traveled alongside the Humboldt River until they reach a point where the trail forks once again west of today's Winnemucca, Nev. The trail divides at this point, the California Trail heading south across the dreaded Humboldt Sink, also known as the Forty Mile Desert, and the Applegate-Lassen Trail continues westerly toward the Black Rock Desert. Some choice! Both trails become even worse, with worn out animals, and deadly.

Pleasants commented, "After due consideration and much discussion regarding the merits and demerits of the two routes, we decided in favor of the Oregon Trail."

If one were to take a critical look at suffering on the trails to California and Oregon, perhaps you would come to the conclusion that the ones to suffer the most were the oxen, mules and, in fewer cases, horses that dragged the heavy wagons day after day. Even though many of the owners developed a genuine affection for their beasts of burden, much as a dog is to today's pet owners, there was often little they could do to lessen their agony. They were essential to the survival of the owners.

Pleasants goes on to say, "All that afternoon and night our train crawled slowly on across this silent barren waste, and then just as the day was breaking, we reached Rabbit Springs. Here was only a weak flow of water, but we managed to replenish our water casks and give to each head of stock one gallon."

What an understatement!

Rabbit Springs is the last stop for water before entering the Black Rock Desert, and as J. Goldborough Bruff described it at about the same time, "Road powder blinding & choking one. Afternoon the road branched around a bluff to the right; where, in 200 yards I found, near an orange colored clay spur, a well, or tank of water, and a crowd of thirsty men and animals surrounding it. A few yards to the left of this another similar hole, filled up with a dead ox, his hind-quarters & legs only sticking out above ground. Dead oxen thick about here, and stench suffocating. The road here sweeps around westerly, a few hundred yards, then SW-descending very gradually, to a level white clay hill, beat perfectly bare of everything but dust, carcasses, and relics of used up wagons, &c, by innumerable travelers and camps."

With that imprinted on your mind, I'll close this session of the trip with the Pleasant Hill Train and continue it in my next column.



SOLANO: THE WAY IT WAS  
by Jerry Bowen