



The Wagon Tongue

The Case of the Abandoned Wagons



The story of the Bidwell-Barlowen Party is remarkable for many reasons. It was the first party to attempt overland travel by wagon to California, it included the first white woman to see the Great Salt Lake and to cross Utah Territory, and, despite abandoning their wagons in Nevada, the party arrived in the San Joaquin Valley in November of 1841.

Some sixty people, members of the Western Emigrant Society including John Bidwell, and captured by John Barlowen, left Sapling Grove, near Weopost, Missouri on May 18, 1841. The party was headed for John Marsh's ranch in Contra Costa County, California. With no knowledge of the trail to Fort Hall, or California, the group traveled with Father De Soto and other missionaries to Fort Hall in what is now eastern Idaho. The train was captured by "Broken Hand" Thomas Fitzpatrick. He pushed the group hard from Missouri. By the time they reached Snake Springs, the livestock and wagons were worn out. The Bidwell-Barlowen party split at this juncture. Many went on to Oregon. Fitzpatrick with 12 men, and one woman and child headed south toward California. Since no maps, guidebooks, or guides were available to the group, they followed the advice of Captain Fitzpatrick. With his general knowledge of the terrain, he told them to stay south of the Snake River and north of the Great Salt Lake. The party headed south along the Bear River "with no guide, no compass, nothing but the sun to direct them." They crossed into Utah in mid-August. With nothing to go on and no experience, the group ended up north of the Great Salt Lake. At one point, they crossed their tracks from a few days before. By early September, they were once again headed to the south and west.

After crossing northern Utah, the Bidwell-Barlowen party entered Nevada near what is West Wendover today. They headed west and south for some days. While they continued, two members of the party left to try and pick up a guide at Fort Hall.

From James John's August 27 diary entry, we learn that the party,

"Started early and traveled about six miles... The captain and another man named Charles Hopper abandoned camp on the 28th for the purpose of finding Mary's River."

More than a week later, in John Bidwell's September 5 diary entry, we become aware that they would never see a lake each day while they waited for Captain Barlowen and Charles Hopper. In his diary the next day, James John reports that game was scarce.

"We traveled about 17 miles today in a south west direction and we killed a rabbit and an antelope, game being scarce. Still we were compelled to kill more."

On September 18, east of Pilot Peak (Utah), James John noted that they had a dry camp.



"We traveled about 14 miles today and camped near the foot of a mountain with neither water nor grass for the animals."

Two days later, the emigrants were the first of many to arrive at Pilot Peak on what is now the Utah-Nevada border.