

Winter Issue

2022



CALIFORNIA TRAIL HERITAGE ALLIANCE

The Wagon Tongue

The Case of the Abandoned Wagons



The story of the Bidwell-Bartleson 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 captained by John Bartleson, left Sapling Grove, near Westport, 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 Smet and other missionaries to Fort Hall in what is now eastern Idaho. This train was captained by "Broken hand" Thomas Fitzpatrick. He pushed the group hard from Missouri. By the time they reached Soda Springs, the livestock and travelers were worn out. The Bidwell-Bartleson party split at this juncture. Many went on to Oregon; 9 wagons with 32 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-Bartleson 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.

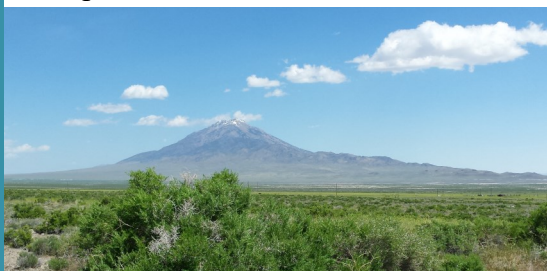
From James John's August 27 diary entry, we learn that the party,

"Started early and traveled about six miles.... The captain and another man named Charles Hoppers (Hopper) left camp on the 30th 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 move on a little each day while they waited for Captain Bartleson and Charles Hopper. In his diary the next day, James John reports that game was scarce.

"We traveled about 10 miles today in a south west direction and we killed a rabbit And an antelope, game being scarce. Here we were compelled to kill oxen."

On September 10, east of Pilot Peak (Utah), James John noted that they had a dry camp.



"We traveled about 14 miles today and encamped 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

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and find relief at the freshwater springs at its base. We learn from diary entries of both Bidwell and John that Benjamin Kelsey was forced to abandon his wagons soon thereafter. John's diary entry on September 12:

"This morning left two wagons belonging to (Benjamin) Kelsey, their oxen being worn down by fatigue. They were compelled to leave their wagons and pack their baggage on horses and mules. We traveled about 10 miles today south west and camped at an excellent spring near a large plain covered with salt, partly surrounded by high mountains."

The next day, September 13, James John wrote,

"Today we traveled about 15 miles on a south course, leaving large salt plains our left and high mountains to the right and camped at a spring of good water this evening."

After four months of travel, and some dry camps, the Bidwell-Bartleson party arrived at what is now called Big Springs. Located on the east side of the Pequops Mountains, about five miles south of what is now Silver Zone Pass, the springs and associated rich forage were a welcome site to the emigrants.

Unfortunately, the hard travel from Missouri to Soda Springs and then the continued stress on the livestock during their travels across Utah Territory, resulted in the livestock being unable to pull the wagons any further. Here they abandoned their wagons. Both James John and John Bidwell addressed this on September 15.



Looking east from Pequop Summit toward Silver Zone Pass.

John Bidwell wrote,

"Started very early, day was exceedingly warm, passed through a gap in a ridge of mountains, came into a high dry plain, traveled some distance into it, saw the form of a high mountain through the smoky atmosphere— reached it, having come about 15 miles— found plenty of water — our animals were nearly given out. We were obliged to go so much further in order to get along with the wagons. We concluded to leave them, and pack as many things as we could."

Diary entries on the 16th of September provide insight into the transition of animal-drawn wagons to pack animals. James John reported,

"Today we lay at camp and made pack saddles and packed up (and) chattels for we left the balance of our wagons here, 4 in number, for we cannot get them through to California."

Bidwell provided additional perspective about their engagement with a Native American,

"All engaged, an Indian, well advanced in years, came down out of the mountains, to our camp. He told us by signs that the Great Spirit had spoken to him to go down upon the plain in the morning, and on the E. side of the mts. He would find some strange people who would give him a great many things. Accordingly, he had come. We gave him all such things as we had intended to throw away; whenever he received anything which he thought useful to him, he paused, looking steadfastly at the sun, he addressed him a loud voice, marking out his course in the skies he advanced in his invocation, which took him about 2 minutes to perform. As he received a considerable number of articles, it took him a considerable part of the day to repeat his blessings. No Persian, in appearance, could be more sincere."

We learn from Bidwell's September 17 diary entry,

"Two of the oxen that were carrying packs got lost from the Company in the night, about 8 miles from where we encamped, but it was supposed they would follow on."

James John notes that by the morning of September 17, the party is ready to move on.

"By morning we left the balance of the wagons and come packed their goods on oxen. The oxen not being used to such sport run away and strewed the goods over the plain which caused some sport and a little trouble. Here we gave a great many things to the Indians not being able to take them along."

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On the same date, John Bidwell writes,

“About 11 a.m. all were ready to start; horses, mules and 4 oxen packed. Proceedes south along the mts ...”

We learn from the two diarists that the first day of travel with the pack animals was not as successful as they might have hoped.

James John reports on the 19th of September,

“This day we did not travel in consequence of Bidwell loosing his ox-en on the night of the 17th. He left the camp alone and on the 19th inst. return-ed and brought his cattle with him. We killed a wolf and antelope today and an ox for beef.

In his diary entries for mid-September, Bidwell shares concerns about an Indian presence and possible theft of the oxen by the Indians. He travels on the 18th and does not return to the wagon train until the 19th. He was concerned about the loss of oxen as potential food for the emigrants. He said,

“But what made me most anxious to find the oxen was prospect of our wanting them for beef. We had already killed 4 oxen and there were but 13 remaining, including the lost ones, and the Co. was now killing an ox every two or three days. Having followed the trail about 10 miles directly north, to my great delight I found the oxen.”



After leaving Big Springs, the party spent another seven weeks on the trail. They traveled along the Humboldt (Mary’s) River to the Humboldt Sink. After struggling across the Forty Mile Desert and the Sierra Nevada, they arrived at John Marsh’s Los Medanos Rancho, on November 4, dressed in rags, destitute and starving.

While no tracks or traces remain of the route taken by the Bidwell Bartleson Party, evidence of their passing was noted by travelers in 1845 and 1846. Wagon tracks of the Bidwell Bartleson Party were seen in 1845 by Edward Kern, a topographer with the Fremont Expedition and in 1846 by a member of the Bryant-Russell party.

Reference

Doyle B. Nunis, Jr., *The Bidwell Bartleson Party 1841 California Emigrant Adventure*, Western Tanager Press, Santa Cruz, California, 1991.



John Bidwell, Utah Historical Society



UPCOMING EVENTS

CTHA Board Meetings

*At this time California Trail Center Foundation Board meetings will be held at 5:30 p.m.
Location to be determined.

- February 10, 2022 – Board Meeting
- March 10, 2022 – Board Meeting
- April 14, 2022 – Board Meeting
- May 12, 2022 – Board Meeting

KEY LINKS

www.facebook.com/pages/California-Trail-Center-Foundation/157116030992463

<http://www.californiatrailcenter.org/>

www.emigranttrailswest.org

www.octa-trails.org

www.appl.org

www.blm.gov/nv/st/en/fo/elko_field_office/blm_programs/blm_special_areas/

The California Trail Interpretative Center's website message regarding their hours:

"The California Trail Center is finally open again! Our days/hours of operation will be limited as we align our staffing and finish some crucial facility repairs but hope to extend these hours soon. Hours of operation for the time being will be Friday and Saturday from 9 am to 4 pm..."

The CTIC hours may occasionally change but you should call to make sure it is open before driving there. (1-775-738-1849)

CTHA Board of Directors

Core Members:

- Leah Brady
- Marlene Goddard
- Walt Goddard
- Helen Hankins
- Duane Jones
- Kevin Lee
- Grafton Miller
- Rebecca Stanton

At-Large Members

- Chuck Briggs
- Lisa Dinwiddie
- Paul Dinwiddie
- Jacqueline Lucero

- Larry Schmidt
- Jordan Thomas
- Frank Tortorich
- John Winner

Newsletter

- Editor: Leah Brady
- Contributors:
Helen Hankins



Women and Children on the Trail

As I started researching information for women and children on the trail, I found that in all my diaries that I usually use, there was very little information. If there was any information, it was usually very sad and bleak such as Gordon Cone reported in 1849 as he was just starting out on the plains,

“We met some people on the road today coming back; having lost some of their company, they have become discouraged, have given up “the journey”, and are going back to lament that they ever started for California. One Women with her husband and four children started for California, the husband was taken with the Cholera and died, and the mother with her little children are on their way back, solitary, and alone.”

In 1849, even as they traveled in a mountainous area, Alonzo Delano noted the dangers to families,

In this dreadful storm hundreds of cattle were lost, and some trains were almost ruined; some lost half, while others had only one or two yoke left; and for several days after, we met many persons who were searching for their cattle, unable to proceed. No situation can be more deplorable than that of being left upon a broad prairie, hundreds of miles from aid, without the means of locomotion. We found families, with women and helpless children, in this sad condition, and yet we were without means to give them relief.

So why wasn't there more mention of the family life and children on the trail. In 1984, Barbara Burgess wrote a masters thesis on Journals, Diaries, and Letters Written by Women on the Oregon Trail 1836-1865 in which she noted,

“For women, making the trip was a different matter. At first in the early 19th century no one seemed to care whether or not American women could safely travel across the western frontier. It was accepted that Indian women could do it, and many had heard about the Indian woman Sacajawea on the Lewis and Clark expedition. But Indian women and white women were hardly alike in the minds of 19th century Americans...”

But starting as early as 1836, women were on the Oregon Trail. Narcissa and Eliza Spalding were travelling with their husbands to Washington. They wrote letters home letting people know that women could make the trip. Trains to Oregon, started mentioning women and children travelling with them. While in 1849, it was mostly men that rushed to California on the trail and by 1850 that changed.

Burgess goes on to share:

“The body of literature about the trail and the travel was growing every year. By 1851 the women's journals began to quote from letters and diaries of friends and relations who had travelled the trail in previous years. Some of the women wrote in their journals that they were keeping a journal for the benefit of friends and/or relations who were planning to go west in the future. Women were reading and writing about the trail.”

“...From 1850 to 1865 there are over 40 women's letters, journals and diaries. These writings chronicle this great period of westward movement. In their writings these women describe what they saw and experienced along the trail— the other emigrants, the Indians, fur traders, soldiers, the flora and fauna, the weather and the countryside and landmarks. They narrate their adventures on the trail. They discuss their preparations for this journey; they record their health problems, accidents, deaths, and births. They tell about their clothing, discuss style among the travellers and Indians; and they often complain about washing and ironing enroute. The women describe food and drinks and cooking, express their opinions about buffalo and antelope meat and about cow chips as fuel, and comment on picking berries, hunting, and fishing. Most of them describe their beds and sleeping arrangements, their wagons and tents, their livestock and pets. They relate their joys and fun as they are entertained. The journals and diaries contain descriptions of a variety of Fourth of July celebrations. The women express opinions about their religion, worship, observation of the Sabbath, and in a few journals the women record their prayers. At some point in her writing, each woman makes some statement about the trip...”

Burgess lists the 40 women that she used for this thesis. It looks like I have more research to do so we can share more versions of how emigrant women and children traveled on the California Trail.



Remember when.....

Pictures from the past events



On This Day In January 1849... Kimble Webster wrote about the Tidings of a New Eldorado in his narrative called *The Gold Seekers of '49*. He writes about his decision to go on the California trail,

“During the early part of the winter of 1848-49 these reports were in a great measure corroborated and confirmed by official statements from government officers, who were stationed on the Pacific coast; and as early as January, 1849, vessels were fitting up in Boston, New York and other Atlantic ports, in a manner suited to convey passengers around Cape Horn to the New Eldorado, as it was then called....So great was the rush to California by the way of the Isthmus in a short time, or as early as January, the tickets by that route were largely sold in advance for several trips, and thousands of passengers who had taken passage to Chagres were unable to get any conveyances from there to California, and were compelled either to remain at Panama for weeks, and in many instances for months, or to return to New York or Boston. This congested state of affairs rendered the Mail route extremely objectionable....As soon as I had sufficient reasons for believing California to be what it had been represented to be as a gold bearing county, I was determined to go myself; and after taking a prospective view of the difficulties and dangers incident to a protracted detention on the Isthmus and the tediousness of a long, monotonous journey via Cape Horn, I finally concluded to cross the country by land; believing it would be an interesting and romantic journey and one not entirely free from difficulties and hardships...”

20 year old, Kimble Webster joined the Granite State and California Mining and Trading Company that was organized in Boston in March, 1849 to travel to California. Leaving Boston in April 17, 1849, he followed the California Trail. Taking the “Greenhorn’s Cut-off,” he reached the headwaters of the Pitt River in California by the end of September 1849. Looking back, Webster reflected on the trip:

“..The journey ‘across the plains’ is a very hard experience, the hardships and privations of which cannot be realized by any one who has not undertaken it. On the other hand, it presents much interesting scenery - the grand, the beautiful and the sublime. Lofty mountains and green, verdant valleys, majestic rivers and sandy, barren plains —all contribute, with much more, to make it a very interesting, and in a way, an enjoyable experience...”



CALIFORNIA TRAIL

HERITAGE ALLIANCE



President's Message February 2021

2021 was a productive year for the California Trail Heritage Alliance. Our wonderful momentum is a testimony to the hard work, commitment and dedication of all of our volunteer board members! Here is a quick rundown of some of our accomplishments in the last year:

OCTA Computer – Kevin Lee took the lead to research the type of computer needed at the Trail Center to host some diaries on the hard drive, and to provide access to specific websites which contain more diaries of interest to emigrant trail researchers as well as key OCTA Sites. Jordan Thomas provided electronic copies of diaries to support this effort. The computer is now fully functional at the Trail Center. Funds donated in memory of former Trail Center Manager David Jamiel helped support the purchase of the computer.

Educational Trunks – With the help of a generous grant from the Union Pacific Foundation and a lot of hard work, a road trip, and commitment to the project, Lisa Dinwiddie led the charge to place educational trunks in five locations. The trunks are filled with educational materials that educators can use in the classroom to teach about trail history. School children in Reno, Carson City, Elko, and Winnemucca will all benefit from Lisa's efforts.

Grants - Grants from the Nevada Commission on Tourism, submitted by Duane Jones were key to funding the billboards along I-80 promoting the trail center. Helen Hankins also received some small grants from the Elko County Recreation Board.

MET Mapping – The Covid pandemic resulted in a slow down of our MET Mapping activities. However, work did proceed forward. Kevin Lee led a trip in the Goshute Valley in the fall near the Long Canyon Mine. It was a fun outing but no definitive new information was acquired. David Fullerton, Mike Mauser, Helen Hankins and Paul Brownlee (CTIC) conducted one trip along the Greenhorn Alternate which runs westerly north of the Trail Center. Many artifacts were found but none that could definitively tie to emigrant travel. Helen Hankins and Mike Mauser completed a half dozen trips on the Greenhorn Cutoff to reset carsonite markers prior to the OCTA convention.

Hot Hole – Interpretive panels for the Hot Hole were completed. Funding from the National Park Service covered approximately half of the cost which we greatly appreciate. The post and the oxbow and NV map were forged from steel late in the year. Installation of the panels and the steel components should occur in the spring.

Gravelly Ford Conservation Easement – CTHA continues to monitor the work on the Gravelly Ford Conservation easement – Nevada Gold Mines and the NV Land Trust continue to move forward on establishing the easement. Despite the slow pace progress on the easement is occurring.

Interpretive Signage in Elko Corridor – Brad McMullen has begun research on what the text might be on interpretive panels in the Elko Corridor. When weather and the pandemic permit, a walk around downtown will occur to determine where interpretive panels on Elko's history might go.

Permitting – A productive meeting was held with the Elko BLM Office in December on getting a permit from the BLM for MET Mapping the Hastings Cutoff. The permit is issued by the NV State Office and Helen Hankins has initiated contact with them. The permits from the FWS and FS are both still in effect for the 2022 field season.

Newsletter – Leah Brady has done a great job with our quarterly newsletter. In addition to soliciting articles from others, Leah does research and writes much of the content.

Finance – An unsung heroine of the CTHA is Marlene Goddard. She provides careful and critical oversight of our finances. This includes tracking funds that are needed to support matching grants, as well as preparation of monthly reports and our 990 tax forms.

OCTA Convention – Many of our board members were involved to a great extent in the OCTA convention. John Winner participated in the board meeting as well as other convention activities. Frank Tortorich made a presentation about the Mormon Battalion and also had an activity station on that subject. Leah Brady talked to the attendees about the first sightings of emigrant trains by the Shoshone. Chuck Briggs was a tour guide for the Guns and Ruts tour, Jackie Lucero had an activity station on botany and Leah Brady had one on basket weaving, Duane Jones and Helen Hankins co-chaired the convention. Kevin Lee was a key presenter at the MET Mapping workshop and made the stand to showcase the Hot Hole interpretive panels during the convention. Brad McMullen was one of the emcees, and the Kevin Dinwiddies and Goddards as well as Larry Smythe and Paul Dinwiddie were wonderful attendees.

It has been an incredible year and 2022 will bring more collaboration with the Trail Center, MET Mapping, and other projects. This is only possible because of the caliber of our board and their dedication and commitment to trail preservation and education.

Helen Hankins, President

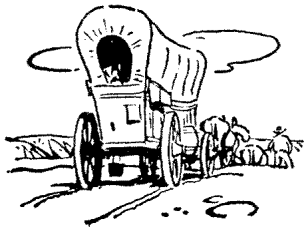


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Join your friends and neighbors and become a supporter of the California Trail Interpretive Center! Every membership supports the California Trail Interpretive Center and Trail preservation. When you join other enthusiasts to become a member, or renew your membership, you directly support interpretation, education, and special events at the California Trail Interpretive Center, and help preserve the Trail and its history for the benefit of current and future generations.

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All members receive the informative electronic newsletter, electronic updates about special events and activities and a 10% discount at the California Trail Interpretive Center store. Invitations to one or more special events are extended to the Supporter membership levels & above.

| Level | Individual | Family | Supporter | Partner | Lifetime |
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| Special Events) | | | 1 | 2 | 3 |
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