

## Wagon train finally reaches 'gold country'

### At last, water; thirst for riches yet quenched

By Jerry Bowen

In my last installment of James Pleasants' trek to California, the wagon train members were able to gather scant water for themselves at Rabbit Springs - also known as Rabbit Hole Springs - and began making their way across a portion of the Black Rock Desert.

Although Pleasants' recollections still don't give an accurate accounting of when they continued on from Rabbit Springs, it was most likely September 1849 when they began crossing the flat white, sandy plains of the lower Black Rock Desert.

One finally gets a little idea that things are going from bad to worse for the Pleasant Hill Train. The heat was suffocating and the lack of water began taking an unbelievable toll on the worn-out voyagers. Mirages plagued men and animals alike.

Day and night they pushed on, only stopping briefly to rest, feed and water the cattle with what little fluid that was available in shallow wells dug by pioneers who had passed through before them. It was essential they reach adequate water before their animals gave

This must have been during travel through the very impressive High Rock Canyon with walls about 300-foot high for several miles on both sides of the trail.

The men took empty kegs and, going forward on foot, brought water back to the desperate animals to revive them. After three more days they reached an area with plenty of grass and water, probably at High Rock Lake.

In the previous 50 hours they had lost nearly half of their wagons, several of the cattle, and had to abandon many of their provisions.

They remained in camp for a few days to rest and recuperate. Even after resting, forward progress was slow due to exhaustion, to the edge of mountains that skirted the border of California near Vya, Nev.

Even though the mountains at this point aren't too difficult, it took them an entire day to reach the summit on the border of Nevada and California.

They followed the trail through a fairly gentle slope heavily covered with trees that

Soon after leaving Deer Creek another member of the train, William Massey, died of mountain fever and was buried alongside the trail. Only one more obstacle remained in their way before reaching the Sacramento Valley safely. The trail was over rough terrain and high hills. On reaching a place on top of a hill with a very steep downhill run about 400-yards long, William recounted, "It had been cleared of the small oak brush that still stood thick, like a fence on either side.

So abrupt was the incline, it was thought necessary to rough-lock both hind wheels of our wagons if we would make the descent safely. One light wagon, drawn by a single yoke of oxen, drove up into position to be locked, but was halted too far forward over the edge of the declivity. The wagon, being on a slight downgrade, began crowding the oxen, and before the chain could be put through the wheels the whole outfit, minus the driver, shot

out.

Pleasants recorded, "At this time we came in sight of eight or ten giant springs, their rippling contents so clear and pellucid that small pebbles could be distinctly seen lying on the gravelly bottoms some twenty feet down." They had probably reached Black Rock Point and the Boiling Hot Springs. He goes on to say, "But this sparkling water as if to mock the thirst now almost consuming us, was boiling hot.

*"Our cattle, almost maddened by the sight of water, could hardly be restrained from rushing into the cauldrons, and one poor beast did fall into the hot fluid. We dragged him from it with ropes, but he was so badly scalded we in mercy killed him."*

At this point it's not very clear which trail they followed; the Lassen-Applegate Trail or Nobles Cutoff more directly west. At first, one might think he took the Nobles Cutoff to Gerlach, but later on he says they are on the shores of Goose Lake on the border of Oregon and California.

With that in mind, I'll assume he stayed on the Lassen-Applegate Trail as he went on to say, "Here we were compelled to leave several wagons, the teams that drew them having entirely given out. These were unyoked and left to die. A few of the wagons were cut asunder and made into carts. Quantities of flour and bacon are abandoned and left by the roadside. We struggle on with what cattle and wagons are left, but the loose sand makes heavy pulling. The oxen stagger along at the rate of a mile an hour,

must have been welcome after the trek through the desert. On reaching the shores of Goose Lake, they followed the shoreline south for several days to the Pitt River and finally neared the northern end of Sacramento Valley. They followed the Pitt River and camped for a few days on Deer Creek, west of Lake Almanor.

As they crossed the higher range of mountains, William Pleasants had been suffering from a long spell of mountain fever and the rest stop was quite welcome. While they were camped at Deer Creek another member of the party, Mr. David Meyers Sr., died of mountain fever and was buried there. James Pleasants was very concerned about his son's fever and sent a messenger for a Dr. Powell who was in another wagon train about 10 miles ahead. After Dr. Powell examined William, he told his father he didn't think the boy would survive, but he would do his best to help. The next morning William's condition had improved and the doctor was able to return to his own train. While William recuperated, the members of the wagon train took advantage of the numerous deer in the area to replenish their food supplies. James seems to have particularly enjoyed hunting with a Mr. William Hopper. The weather began to threaten snow, and with the memory of the Donner Party fresh in their minds, the train decided to head down into the valley before the snow began to fly.

away downward like a flash of light, gathering speed as it went, and was soon lost to view in a great cloud of red dust. Strange to say, the animals, poor and weak as they were, kept their feet to the very bottom, where one of the wheels, striking a big rock, caused the yoke to snap asunder, and the two principal actors in the comedy quietly turned about and began eating a lot of grass that was in the wagon, thinking evidently that the occurrence was simply a part of the regular program, and therefore not entitled to be thought the least bit surprising." One more day of travel and they finally reach the Sacramento Valley where they lost another member, Jerry Overstreet, to mountain fever. Following the Sacramento River to the junction of the Feather River, they then turned east and on Oct. 15, 1849, they reached Bidwell's Bar near today's Oroville. They had reached, "...the land of our dreams, after having been five months and eight days or about one-hundred and sixty days on the road." Here was where they would make their try at reaping the hoards of gold that they expected to find. When they left Pleasant Hill, Mo., their expectations were that they would return within 18 months with at least a reasonable share of the riches of California. But as were the dreams of so many others, the hard work for little return would shape their lives in a different way than they had expected.

frequently dropping down in their tracks completely exhausted. Allowing them to rest thus for a little while, we help them to their feet and urge them on. All of the afternoon of the last day we are in sight of Mud Lake, where good water and grass abound."

I'll continue next week with the Pleasants' trip to the real final destination.



**SOLANO: THE  
WAY IT WAS**  
by Jerry Bowen

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