

THE TRIP WEST

Although the journey west was still a demanding adventure in 1843, the trail had been broken initially by the mountain men and subsequently by the Bidwell - Bartleson party in 1841. Promotional material about California was both available and full of promise. And so, thrust forth with hope, engendered by youthful optimism as well as the saddening compulsion of personal loss, P. B. Reading left his small daughter in the care of a New Orleans convent and, after a journey to New Jersey, joined the Chiles - Walker party bound for California in May, 1843. Reading indicated the paramount thrust of human tragedy when he wrote to his brother: "All this (the adventures of western discovery) would never have induced me to make the sacrifice...had not one circumstance of a private and painful nature...driven me to seek relief for a mind sick and wounded with the insincerity I had experienced in civilized and refined life."

Reading's description of that historic trek, available in his Journal at the California State Library, serves as a basis for the remaining portion of this chapter. Although his account is condensed, because as Reading stated: "I was forced to make hurried sketches as we were constantly traveling, giving but little time from the various duties, such as attending to our animals, unpacking and packing luggage, hunting, cooking, standing guard, etc.", it was, nevertheless, a vivid and illuminating description of the journey west.

In the Spring of 1843, several parties from various parts of Missouri met at Fitzhughs Mill near Independence. By the time twenty-six year old Pierson Reading joined the assemblage on May 19, rules of the journey had been set down. John Gautt was engaged as pilot at \$1.00 per head and nearly 1000 emigrants had joined the group. Reading later described his feelings regarding the anticipated journey to his brother. His letter stated: "Tis all in search of fancied happiness which dances before our eyes...leading us from place to place."

Although Reading's journal is concise, it is also descriptive and frequently personal. As they left the embarkation point on the Missouri River, he vividly described the rolling prairie country they were crossing and added a favorable comment regarding the efforts of a Methodist mission to the Shawnees in that vicinity. There were now about 100 wagons in the contingent. Monotonous landscape, "delightful weather" and "large rattlesnakes" characterized the initial days of this venture. By May 27 the party reached the Kansas River in what is now northeastern Kansas. The lengthy process of crossing this stream, involving four days, prompted the party to term their stopping place "Camp Delay". While at this point Reading described some of the many Kansas Indians encountered. He vehemently denounced the delay necessitated by waiting for those emigrants who were driving 50 - 100 head of cattle, "for the purpose of speculation." "It is most unreasonable," he stated, "expecting the company to protect them from the thieving tribes of Indians, when the men will be fully employed in taking care of themselves, their family and the work-stock."

A division must take place." At this point Peter Burnett, later to become the first governor of California, was elected Captain of the trail. The election process was a unique one in which the candidates stood in a row and the members of the party voted for their favorite by taking their places behind him, the man with the longest tail being elected Captain.

As the month of June arrived, the party was moving north-westward over open prairie country. A war party of Osage and Kansas Indians were encountered on the north fork of the Blue River. They had killed several Pawnees and according to Reading exhibited: "most disgusting sights as fingers, thumbs, hands and scalps of their victims." "One man," he added, "had a nose he wore around his neck." Reading described the appearance of these Indians as "singular and grotesque."

Fierce thunder storms, "the heaviest I ever knew," were encountered early in June and Reading admitted: "I felt much uneasiness, sleeping in the back part of the tent at the foot of six guns." Reading was assigned to the cooking detail during this period "made three loaves of light bread," and commented "nothing more tiresome and unpleasant than cooking."

Internal dissention continued to haunt the party as it moved up the Big Blue River in present-day Nebraska. There the members of the train determined to divide themselves with the "light" party of those possessing five cows or less, including Reading, going ahead and the "heavy" or "cow" column following behind. As they continued along the river, these adventurers encountered and traded with a party of eighty Pawnee returning from a buffalo hunt. Admiration of these warriors is evident in Pierson Reading's comments about them. Describing them as the best featured Indians he had seen, Reading indicated that "they bear the character of being a proud and honorable nation."

By the end of June the emigrants had reached the Platte River and as the company was short of provisions, twenty hunters including Reading went ahead to kill buffalo. Five days were spent in crossing the river, requiring many of the men to remain in the cold water for nearly a full day at a time. As a result of such exertions and exposure, Reading came down with recurring chills and fever on July 4. He commented, "I have been in the water nearly all day crossing the goods of our wagon and Mr. Cassans - the exercise and experience has made me quite sick...little did I imagine the 4th of July past I should be swimming the Platte on my journey to the Rocky Mountains." However, he was ready to re-join the buffalo hunters the following day. Some personal sidelights are featured in his journal at this point. One nostalgic interval came with the birth of a baby girl in a tent next to his own. "Success to the little one," he wrote, "...we old bachelors feel ourselves fortunate in occupying an adjoining tent, as there is embraced in the family a very pretty, intelligent and interesting lady - Miss Fanny." The presence of some young ladies in the party also caused Reading to wax somewhat lyrical at this time. He sentimentalized:

"There are in Mr. Chiles company some very handsome young ladies and, I am informed, accomplished and intelligent, having bid farewell to the land of their birth to emigrant to the far distant shores of the Pacific. For their sake may the Gods grant most propitious weather. May the clear blue sky and the flowers of any hill flattered by the bountiful hand of nature, the beautiful romantic mountain scenery and the dancing rill, serve to exhilarate and delight, causing them to forget in their distant wanderings the many privations and discontents they must necessarily encounter."

During the month of July they continued to painstakingly move through western Nebraska, past Scotts Bluff and on July 14 reached Ft. Laramie, owned by the American Fur Company. Here they repaired their wagons and purchased provisions. The prices here were high: Coffee - \$1.50 per pint, the same for brown sugar, flour, \$.25 per pound, and inferior calico - \$1.00 per yard. Leaving Ft. Laramie in present-day Wyoming the party encountered the noted hunter and trapper Joseph Walker, who told them he would act as their guide. By the 27th they reached a recognized landmark on the Oregon Trail - Independence Rock. Reading was attacked by dizziness at this point. He attempted to bleed himself but failed and had to be carried in a wagon. Dr. Whitman, the noted missionary to Oregon, subsequently bled him and according to Reading: "cut an orifice in my arm large enough for a beaver to make his ingress." Despite his malady, Reading continued his journal commenting that: "This is a noted place, a large rock separated from the mountain and standing in the valley near the river. It is covered with the names of trappers, mountain men and travelers."

In spite of the severity of both Readings illness and Dr. Whitman's medical treatment, he recovered quickly and was soon able to rejoin the party as an active member. Since the major danger of the Indian menace was now over, the party spread out into smaller groups of 8 - 10 families. They were now in mountainous terrain, moving along the Sweetwater River nearly to its source in the Wind River range. That welcomed cleft through the mountains, South Pass, discovered in 1824 by the most intrepid of mountain men, Jedediah Smith, was their next point of destination. From thence they moved down the Green River (southwest Wyoming) to Ft. Bridger, arriving at that humble fortification on August 14th. In three days they were moving again, this time north along the Bear River, then to the Snake and finally to Ft. Hall in present-day Idaho. This important Hudson's Bay post served as the dividing point on the train for emigrants continuing on to Oregon or turning south to California. The party remained at this post for several days purchasing what supplies they could and enjoying the generous hospitality afforded by Mr. Grant, Hudson's Bay agent at Fort Hall. This outpost was in Snake Indian territory and Reading's journal includes an account of an old Indian crone who came into camp and sought to sell him a pretty squaw for a camp keeper and cook in exchange for a horse. Reading turned down the offer and the old woman left in a fury, cursing him vigorously.

Supplies for the train were limited and to alleviate this need it was decided that thirteen men under Joseph Chiles should proceed more directly into California by a route talked of by hunters, obtain supplies at Sutters Fort and then send aid to Joseph Walker who would be bringing the wagons with families by a less circuitious southern route. Pierson Reading was a member of the first party. By October 1, these men had proceeded on to Fort Boise and then turned southward to break a new trail into California.

With a limited food supply (enough for one meal for fifteen days for each man) and cognizant of the hostility of the Indians into whose area they entered, these men left Fort Boise on October 3. The Malheur River in eastern Oregon provided their initial line of travel. Difficulties were soon forthcoming - the Indians were troublesome and had to be driven away regularly and the country was not only rocky and hilly but also dry and sterile. In five days the bedraggled group reached Lake Albert near the California - Oregon border. Reading described the lake as very singular in appearance. He stated that: "the valley for nearly a mile from the water is covered with pure, white salt resembling snow," and added that: "the grass around the lake is poisonous." Nevertheless, the party was able to find a fresh water spring near the lake to satiate their thirst and with a few ducks they were able to kill, were partially refreshed. Despite this brief respite, Reading described both men and horses as weak and exhausted as the party passed Goose Lake into California. On October 18, joy pervaded the group as the "clang of the rifle which was music to our ears" announced the killing of a small buck antelope. Reading characterized Goose Lake as "a very large lake. It is fresh water and one of the most beautiful, romantic sheets of water I ever beheld."

A short distance from the lake the party camped at the source of Pit River in present-day Modoc County, and as they moved south along the river the following day came into view of a "high mountain covered with snow and turning up in the shape of a sugar loaf." Mt. Shasta, according to Reading, was entirely covered by snow "with not a dark speck appearing." Beaver were abundant in the streams encountered in this area, but edible game was not available and the Indians were proving troublesome. The Indian's deer pits which ultimately led to the naming of the Pit River were rudely encountered by Mr. McGee, a member of the party. Reading commented: "Mr. McGee was walking ahead of the company and very suddenly disappeared...in a few minutes we saw the top of his head rising in the path, having met with the misfortune of having been trapped."

The descent of the Pit River proved most difficult. Not only was the terrain almost impassable in places, but the party was also out of provisions. On the 29th, Reading reported, supper consisted of a handful of antelope grease, and he termed the men "weak from starvation." As they continued down the river, Reading spoke of a locality of very rapid descent, possibly Burney Falls in northeastern Shasta County. On October 31 this tired, destitute group entered the Sacramento Valley.

Reading's account of the expansive plain reads like exuberant promotional literature. He exclaimed in a letter to his brother:

"After a long exercise of all the fortitude and perseverance we possessed, we at last reached this happy country. So sudden was the change from the high, barren desolate mountains into a lovely valley where everything bore the appearance of spring, the soft and balmy atmosphere, the blooming of flowers, the singing of birds. A large and placid river winding its way through the middle of the valley with the banks skirted with groves of live oak, under whose shade were reposing herds of deer, antelope, and elk. So enchanting was the view that it seemed as if we were in some fairy land. I was forcibly reminded of the Indians heaven, of the happy hunting ground which they believe awaits them in the world to come."

With the availability of game, Reading stated that the men threw away their sack of horse and mule meat and ate.

The party now proceeded rapidly down the Sacramento River encountering "many Indian women gathering acorns, very shy - no clothing except a small apron." Here as they camped on Battle Creek, Reading initially viewed the land he would subsequently acquire from the Mexican Government. After crossing the Feather River they encountered John Sutter's Hock Farm, where they were welcomed by Sutter's employee - John Bidwell. On November 9th they reached Sutter's Fort, which Reading described as "large and imposing." His comments on the fort and John Sutter in his daily entry for November 9th are both extensive and complimentary. "It is almost impossible," Reading declared, "to conceive in what manner and so short a time Capt. Sutter has made such extensive and permanent improvements, but when you read the character of this gentleman you will perceive that with his intelligence he is remarkable for his perseverance and industry and enterprise." Reading would soon be able to appraise the attributes of this hospitable baron of the Sacramento Valley more candidly after entering the employment of John Sutter as clerk and chief trapper. In the meanwhile, a trip to the provincial capital at Monterey was necessary to procure a passport and passage of safety for one year.

As he reminisced about California and his transcontinental journey in a letter to his half-brother post-marked Monterey, February 7, 1844, Pierson Barton Reading stated:

"With California I am truly delighted. The atmosphere is so very pure and mild that bilious diseases are entirely unknown. The skies too vie with that of Italy so cloudless and serene. As regards to soil gives greater yield than I have ever know in any part of the United States...After following through trackless waste exposed to a hundred dangers, enduring cold, fatigue and hunger, there is one question I am certain you would ask, 'Do I feel myself remunerated?' Candidly I would answer 'Yes', it has taught me the advantages of a civilized and Christian land, has given me fortitude and patience and a stock of information to which I can ever be gratified in referring to."