

EMIGRANT DIARY DESCRIPTIONS OF TRAVEL THROUGH THE FERNLEY SWALES

1849

Charles Tinker, Aug. 3-4: “we arrived at the [*Truckee*] river at sunrise on the morning of the 4th with three of our wagons and all of our cattle except one which we had to leave he got within 3 miles of the river & that was the last that we saw of him five of the wagons belonging to our train we had to leave 8 m from the river and hitch all the teams on the 3 wagons that we got through with here we found a stream of pure soft water from the Siera Nevada mountains and a plenty of feed & the first trees we had seen for 460 miles you cant imagin our joy on our arrival here. we was parched to death by thirst almost. when within 8 or 10 miles of the river I lay down several times to rest, it did not seam as though I could go any farther but it was death to stay their so I had to budge along as best I could through the burning sand till I reached the water. water was all my wants I would have given all I possesed for a drink of cold water my tongue and lips was parched and fured over so it took one hour to soak it of.”

Samuel J. Tutt, Aug. 5: “We got ready to move out [*from Boiling Hot Springs*] about 7 oclock & once more took the road. We had yet 20 miles to accomplish & the heat of the day to make it—but it was the only chance & we went on. About 2 oclck we struck the heavy sand 10 miles from Truckey river & had the utmost difficulty in getting our stock thro—stopping every few yards to rest. A little before night we reached the river with every head of stock that we started with. All along the desert road from the very start even the way side was strewed with the dead bodies of oxen, mules & horses & the stench was horrible. All our travelling experience furnishes no parallel for all this. Many persons suffered greatly for water during the last 8 or 10 miles, and many instances of noble generosity were developed on these occasions. Some trains that got over before us sent water back in kegs & left them on the road marked for the benefit of the feeble.”

Benjamin Hoffman, Aug. 13: “We started at one o’clock this morning [*from Boiling Springs*] and made an effort to get through the desert today. We traveled about ten miles when our teams all gave up and left us in the burning sand without any water and nearly all famished. This is indeed a trying time. We remained here until late in the evening, when we made another effort. By double-teaming we succeeded in getting a part of the wagons over the end of the route. It is very heavy sand which is burning hot, and there has been great destruction of property for those who have preceded us through this desert. Dead mules are lying around us by the hundreds.”

Evan Jones Bonine, Aug. 16: “We gave our mules some hay and started [*from Boiling Springs*] for the balance of the desert 25 mi. which has not a particle of water or grass. During the day we passed many animals as befor. You could smell them all the time. When we came within view of Salmon trout River the sand got so deep that we had double teams to pull through. We got through late in the night over a desert of 65 mi. without water or grass. A pint of cold water would have been a fortune to me at that time. I did not think of the California gold at that time.”

John F. Lewis, Aug. 24: "Struck out at dusk [*from Boiling Hot Springs*] for Truckee River, 25 miles being cool our cattle traveled pretty well for about 12 miles after which some were trying to lay down whilst going along, but by untiring application of the whip, we kept them up 8 miles before reaching our ends journey, the sand became 10 or 12 inches deep which seemed as though it would pull our hollow looking beast almost to death."

Joseph Hackney, Aug. 26: "Left the hot springs at nine in the evening and drove on till one o'clock when we stopped to feed our oxen one ox was left on the road we then pushed on till five in the morning when we came to a heavy sandy hill from this to the river a distance of 8 miles was nothing but sand from 6 to 8 inches deep two of the teams gave out before they had got one mile we passed thirty wagons that had taken their cattle off and drove on to the river to water them oxen wear a laying every few hundred yards perfectly exhausted oxen would drop in the teams every mile some had lost every ox and had been forced to leave their wagons after dragging through the sand seven miles we came in sight of Truckee's river there was nothing in the whole world that I would have sooner seen at that moment than it"

T.J. Van Dorn, Aug. 26: [*After leaving Boiling Hot Springs*] "We had made the sand ridge 10 or about 8 miles from Truckee at early sunrise. Here the tug of war commenced, a deep heavy sand, not ashes and sand as we had had, but the pure silica [*silicate*]. On this 3 of our teams found it necessary to leave their wagons and drive their cattle through to recruit and drive back- this saved them, as also many of the emigrants have been forced to the same measure & scarcely any train got through without adopting this- "

Ansel J. McCall, Aug. 29: [*After leaving Boiling Hot Springs*] "About ten o'clock we struck the heavy sand belt, evidently the beach of some ancient lake or sea. We passed there a large covered wagon standing by the wayside destitute of motive power, loaded with flour, bacon sugar coffee, rice and dried fruit, enough to supply our needs for three months. The owner called to us as we passed, saying that he had been compelled to abandon the wagon and its contents, and we could help ourselves, in welcome, to all we desired. Our jaded horses had all they could carry. It was with difficulty that we urged them along. They were disposed from the pinchings of hunger to wander from the trail, to crop the wild sage, which was green, but dry as powder, without a particle of nourishment in it. I fell somewhat behind while adjusting the load on one of the horses and when I come up to my companions I found that another horse had given out, so that his load had to be removed. My favorite horse, Charley, in their judgment, being best able to bear an additional burden, they had already added it to his load. I at once, for the first time on the trip, lost control of myself and flew to the rescue, and with my knife cut the cords that lashed the burden and let the packs all tumble to the sand. Not one of them uttered a word but looked on in mute surprise. I shouted, 'whoever has anything here let him take care of it for that horse shall carry not a pound more.' I picked up Brower's large carpet sack, containing his clothing and effects, threw it over my shoulder as if only a feather's weight and stalked on. The other things were left to be picked up by those whom they might concern. Not one word further was said, nor was there ever an allusion made to it. In a moment I was ashamed of myself, for allowing my temper to get the better of me. Really I had no regrets, for it was the result of a

tender feeling that I could not control. We plodded on wearily and expected every moment, more of our horses would throw up the sponge. They staggered and reeled and tried to lie down. With words and blows we urged them on for we knew it was their salvation to be kept moving. As soon as they caught sight of a faint line of green it was astonishing to see, how at once the fainting animals picked up and quickened their pace. Evidently their hopes of relief were revived. They needed no urging and it was as much as I could do with my heavy load to keep up with them.”

James A. Tate, Aug. 31: [*He stayed with his wagon while the other wagons and oxen in his company were taken ahead to the Truckee River.*] “Remained on the sand hill with my Waggon untill after sundown when Ben came with a strong team and took our waggon to the river where we arrived about 10 Oclock this last ten miles is a sand bank where the travelling is of the heaviest description and very laborious to walk over numbers were compelled to do as we did send on their stock to grass and water and recruit them, and go back after their waggon this barren waste is 75 miles length and wholly destitute of grass and the little water on the way is very bad and of but little value to man or beast.”

John Banks, Sep. 2: “This day we scarcely were out of the smell of putridity. Not less than two hundred carcasses of oxen and horses are strewn along the road within thirty miles. Some moping about waiting for death, no possibility of other relief. ... Seven of our cattle failed; some we expect to get in.”

Sallie Hester, Sep. 5-6: “The weary journey last night, the mooing of the cattle for water, their exhausted condition, with the cry of ‘Another ox down,’ the stopping of train to unyoke the poor dying brute, to let him follow at will or stop by the wayside and die, and the weary, weary tramp of men and beasts, worn out with heat and famished for water, will never be erased from my memory. Just at dawn, in the distance, we had a glimpse of Truckee River, and with it the feeling: Saved at last! Poor cattle; they kept on mooing, even when they stood knee deep in water.”

Lucius Fairchild, Sep. 9-11: “The road from the sink to Truckee’s river was lined with dead cattle, horses & mules with piles of provisions burned & whole wagons left for want of cattle to pull them through. We were very thankful to get through safely. That desert is truly the great Elephant of the route and God knows I never want to see it again.”

Andrew M. Orvis [no date]: “in eight miles of the river my horse began to fail and I had to go slow but I drove him until within 3 miles of the river I could not get him any farther and I was overcome and tired out and I would travel a little and I would lay down on the sand and rest and the sun shining on me there is no timber there I thought I never would get through and I laid down to kick the bucket but I thought of home and it give me a little more grit and I would get up and stager along. I was so thirsty my tongue and lips crack and bleed but I was able to get to the water and after drinking a little, I dare not drink much, I felt better and towards night I took some grass and water in my canteen back to the horse he was in the same place I had left him I poured water on the grass and he eat then he went to the river first water”

1850

James William Evans, Aug. 10: Some Dutchmen who had started across the Desert on foot, after traveling in the loose sand all night without water were well nigh famished. One of them lay down in the sand declaring that right there he intended to die, and his companions had to go on and leave him. About 7 o'clock I met an Indian with a little tin bucket containing about a gallon of water. He offered me a drink, but I refused, stating that there were men behind dying for water. ... As to the Indian, he succeeded in finding the Dutchman, gave him a little water every few minutes, and then went off and procured a pony on which he brought the Dutchman safely to Truckee River."

Report of Capt. William Waldo's Army relief mission from Sacramento, Sep. 23: "At the lower Truckee Crossing beef had been deposited, and a number of stout animals sent to carry sick emigrants across the desert. Several starving men were encountered, and the dead bodies of others who had succumbed. Few were found with provisions, save their exhausted teams; on fourth, having no animals, lived on the putrefying carcasses, thus absorbing disease. Cholera broke out on Sept. 8th, in one small train, carrying off eight persons in three hours, several more expected to die. From the sink westward the havoc was fearful ... Of 20,000 emigrants still back of the desert [*from the Humboldt Sink across both the Truckee and Carson River Routes*], fully 15,000 were destitute, and their greatest suffering was to come."

1852

Eliza Ann McAuley, Sep. 5: "We are now seven miles from the Truckee River, but the road here becomes very sandy and heavy. After traveling three miles the teams begin to give out, so we had to unhitch them from the wagons and send them on to grass and water. The boys went on with the cattle, leaving Mr. Daugherty, Margaret and myself with the wagons. After resting awhile, Margaret and I started on, taking with us a cow that had given out and been kept behind. We took a bucket a short distance before her, and the poor thing, thinking there was water in it would get up and struggle on a few steps and then fall exhausted. After resting a few minutes we would get her on a few steps. In this way we had gained about a mile, when we met Thomas returning with a canteen of water. We took a drink and gave the rest to the poor cow, which revived her so that she was able to get to the River."

1857

Helen Carpenter, Sept. 16: "After ascending the hill it was typical desert all the rest of the way. There was deep sand for eight miles, and the road on both sides was strewn with dead cattle. A number in our train succumbed to the heavy travel and heat. ... Dead animals by the way became more frequent, and the articles abandoned were continuous."