

ABSTRACT

GRAY, ANDREA REBECCA. *Supper on the Trail: How Food and Provisions Shaped Nineteenth-Century Westward Migration*. (Under the direction of Craig T. Friend.)

Between the late 1830s and the 1860s, over 350,000 men, women, and children traveled overland along the Oregon and California Trails to the American West. Using primary sources including narratives, diaries, journals, reports, and letters, one discovers that obtaining food was perhaps the most critical concern for westward migrants. That overlanders and their animals had to eat is nothing new or alarming, but their need for food did carry many unexpected implications. Food connected migrants to the land, and in turn the land connected people to each other through competition over resources such as water, grass, and timber. Through their primary role as cooks, women's experiences of the trail centered around the preparation of food. Native Americans and white migrants interacted peaceably by sharing or trading food, while competition over natural resources at the same time strained relations and devastated many western tribes whose land was ravaged by the train of migrants. Food influenced the timing and routes of travel, the health and mood of travelers, and the economic and physical status of settlers upon arrival in the West. The overlanders' need for nourishment serves as the framework for understanding how provisions helped determine the overall experience of westward travel and reveals that food shaped mid-nineteenth-century westward migration.

Supper on the Trail: How Food and Provisions Shaped Nineteenth-Century
Westward Migration

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Biography

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Introduction

Immediately after the Civil War, journalist Samuel Bowles, accompanied by Speaker of the House Schuyler Colfax, embarked on a sort of “official junket” to observe the American West. During their journey, Bowles wrote a series of letters to be eventually published in the East in which he described “the distinctive experiences of the Overland Journey:” “When the Puritans settled New England, their first public duty was to build a church with thrifty thought for their souls,” Bowles observed. “Out here, their degenerate sons begin with organizing a restaurant, and supplying Hostitter’s stomachic bitters and an European or Asiatic cook. So the seat of empire, in its travel westward, changes its base from soul to stomach, from brains to bowels.”¹

How and why did the stomach become the organizing impetus for travelers’ journeys through the West and arrival in California and Oregon? The answer lies in the distinctive experiences of approximately 350,000 nineteenth-century migrants who journeyed across the continent. Though it is often overlooked, food proved a critical and defining aspect of early western travel, and even as late as the 1860s, Bowles captured its significance as he wrote, “It is a wonder how people can go alive through this country at the rate of twelve and fifteen miles a day, and finding food and drinks as they go. But they do, year by year, thousands by thousands.”²

The availability of food helped to dictate the health, happiness, and even routes of westward travelers. When food became scarce and stomachs felt empty, spirits felt low.

¹ Samuel Bowles, *Across the Continent: A Summer’s Journey to the Rocky Mountains, the Mormons and the Pacific States* (1865; reprint, Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, Inc., 1966), v, 201-202.

² *Ibid.*, 73.

Even the scenery seemed to change with one's digestive state. Army explorer John C. Frémont wrote from snowy northern California that "the days are sunny and bright, and even warm in the noon hours; and if we could be free from the many anxieties that oppress us, even now we would be delighted here; but our provisions are getting fearfully scant."³ If the land did not offer enough food, even its aesthetic beauty became underappreciated. Travelers always had food on their minds, more so when supplies diminished, making travelers' overall experiences of the American West contingent upon the presence or absence of satisfactory provisions.

To avoid desperate situations of privation, migrants altered their routes to seek new supplies, and occasionally sacrificed their own animals as food. They limited provisions to unspoilable and transportable staples, and when those ran out, new provisions had to be found either by hunting and gathering, purchasing, or trading. Yet, opportunities to replace or supplement supplies, especially when needed most, were inconsistent at best.

As time progressed and the West slowly developed, western travel improved. Stagecoaches rolled travelers along, and station stops arose with hot meals. Even more convenient, after the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, new railcars fed passengers as they rode through the countryside in relative ease or even luxury. New modes of transportation lessened food's critical influence over travelers and changed how

³ John C. Frémont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843-'44* (Washington, DC: Gales and Seaton, 1845), 233.

migrants viewed the western landscape once their needs no longer depended on which edible provisions it had to offer.

The history of mid-nineteenth-century overland westward migration has been recounted time and again by the migrants themselves, novelists, and historians. Historical works that actually addressed early travelers' and emigrants' foodways treat the topic in a variety of ways, but most historians have overlooked the significant role that food and provisions played in shaping migration. Basic lists or descriptions of foods, generally providing little analysis or interpretation of food's significance, were most commonly mentioned by trail historians. Others wrote culinary histories of the overlanders, usually focusing on the food and its preparation rather than a larger migration context. Some historians also attempted to interpret food's important function, but they limited their analysis to specific areas of the emigrant experience, rather than more comprehensively analyzing the larger transcontinental migration.

For example, in *The Great Platte River Road: The Covered Wagon Mainline Via Fort Kearny to Fort Laramie* (1969), Merrill Mattes described the emigrants' food and their need to camp near water, grass, and fuel.⁴ He provided a good overview of the provisions, but included no analysis or deeper interpretation of their greater significance. In *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60* (1979), John D. Unruh, Jr. gave a slightly more analytical look at food's importance, particularly its role in travelers' interactions with Native Americans, military personnel,

⁴ Merrill J. Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road: The Covered Wagon Mainline Via Fort Kearny to Fort Laramie* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1969).

and entrepreneurs.⁵ Historian John Mack Faragher's study of *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (1979) dealt with food and women's roles as cooks, but the focus remained on gender relations among migrating families rather than food's larger significance.⁶ Jill Howard and Glenda Riley provided possibly the most interpretive treatment of food in their article, "Thus You See I Have Not Much Rest" (1993). Similar to previous historians, the authors described and detailed food and its preparation, including cooking utensils and the need for fuel. They went a step further by arguing food's role as "physical nourishment," "psychological sustenance," and "establishing a pattern of success both on the trail and in their new home."⁷ Perhaps most notable remains Jacqueline Williams's *Wagon Wheel Kitchens: Food on the Overland Trail* (1993). In addition to travel diaries and journals by both men and women, Williams scoured contemporary magazine and newspaper advertisements to learn more specifically about the foods and cooking utensils used. *Wagon Wheel Kitchens* provided one of the best syntheses of the overlanders' food and cooking, but as a food history, its focus was on the food itself and not the broader role food played in westward migration. Most disappointing was that Williams admittedly concentrated "on the early months of travel, when supplies were adequate and cooks still had the energy to add a dash of creativity to

⁵ John D. Unruh, Jr., *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979).

⁶ John Mack Faragher, *Men and Women on the Overland Trail* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979).

⁷ N. Jill Howard and Glenda Riley, "Thus You See I Have Not Much Rest," *Idaho Yesterdays* 37:3 (fall 1993): 27.

the cookery pot,” because it was in large part the threat of hunger and poor health that made food so important.⁸

When all of the historical work concerning nineteenth-century emigrants’ foodways is considered, a more complete understanding of its significance in the westward movement can emerge. Some descriptive narrative is necessary to explain what the emigrants ate, how they procured their provisions (including water, grass, and fuel), and how they were able to prepare meals along the trail. In addition, food history adds to a greater understanding of food and its preparation. Without further interpretation and analysis of the importance of provisions, however, the many significant roles they played in the westward movement are left incomplete and underappreciated. I have not attempted to write a comprehensive history of the Oregon and California Trails or of the particular meals that migrants prepared and consumed. I have also tried to avoid skewing history by highlighting anecdotal stories of starvation and death, or of the unusual animals desperate travelers ate on rare occasions.

The importance of food for early trans-continental travelers is critical to understanding the westward course of American history. In an age of interstate highways and air travel, a journey that once took nineteenth-century migrants five to six months takes modern travelers only three days by automobile or a few hours by plane. In an era of fast-food drive-thrus and convenience stores, modern travelers do not have to rely on the particular land over which they speed for their sustenance. Early travelers experienced a much closer relationship to the land through their need for food; at a

⁸ Jacqueline B. Williams, *Wagon Wheel Kitchens: Food on the Oregon Trail* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1993), xxiii.

minimum, they daily sought out good grass, water, and fuel in order not only to survive but to maintain the energy necessary for their animals and themselves to continue across the continent.

By reading overlanders' narratives, diaries, journals, reports, and letters, one can experience the voices of the men and women who walked over the western landscape. Their writings tell of the provisions they ate and how they obtained them, and how those provisions influenced travel itself. It is my contention that, as one discovers in these sources, obtaining food remained perhaps the most critical concern for migrants. Before stagecoaches and trains removed the burden of finding and preparing food from the travelers, food connected travelers to the West and influenced their knowledge and experience of it more than any other factor. The environment's ability to sustain them, and the cooperation required by migrants in order to survive in difficult places, was the critical factor in the success of an overland journey.

The study of how food and provisions shaped westward migration is a study of environmental history, women's history, Native American history, and ultimately New Western History. That overlanders and their animals had to eat is nothing new or alarming, but their need for food did carry many unexpected implications. Food connected migrants to the land, and in turn the land connected people to each other through competition over resources such as water, grass, and timber. Through their primary role as cooks, women's experiences of the trail centered around the preparation of food. Native Americans and white migrants interacted peaceably by sharing or trading food, while competition over natural resources at the same time strained relations and

devastated many western tribes whose land was ravaged by the train of migrants. Food influenced the timing and routes of travel, the health and mood of travelers, and the economic and physical status of settlers upon arrival in the West. The overlanders' need for nourishment serves as the framework for understanding how provisions helped determine the overall experience of westward travel and reveals that food shaped mid-nineteenth century westward migration.

Chapter One

Jumping Off

The first decision that potential emigrants faced was whether or not to attempt the overland journey, particularly during the early 1840s before the Oregon and California Trails became well established. The United States remained a predominantly agrarian nation during the mid-nineteenth century, and while promises of gold lured thousands of men to the diggings of California after 1848, the majority of overlanders were families headed west in hopes of obtaining and cultivating farmland in the fertile Willamette and Sacramento Valleys.¹

Very practical matters had to be considered before picking up one's family and moving west. Arguments supporting and opposing the long trek abounded in books, magazines, and newspapers. Images of fierce Indians, dangerous animals, and thirst and starvation occupied the American imagination. One overly pessimistic writer warned that food could not be carried for extended periods, forcing travelers to rely on hunting which, he argued, even failed the Native Americans: "If the Indians suffer, how will the emigrants, who are not hunters, provide for themselves?"² Others touted the likelihood of a pleasant journey across the continent with "no obstruction in the whole route that any

¹ John Mack Faragher examined migrant families and calculated that 60.7 percent of the heads of household were farmers. See *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), Appendix 1: Table A1.2.

² W.J.S., "Oregon Territory," in *1830-1930 The Oregon Trail Centennial: The Documentary Background of the Days of the First Wagon Train on the Road to Oregon*, ed. Archer B. Hulbert (Missoula: State University of Montana, n.d.), 4.

person would dare to call a mountain.”³ Despite these polar and exaggerated judgments, the successful crossing of traders and missionaries to Oregon during the late 1830s—and especially of Joel P. Walker and his family in 1840, generally recognized as the first emigrant family of the overland migration—proved the journey could be accomplished safely. Within the next eight years, over 14,000 emigrants arrived in Oregon and California, and an additional 4,600 settled in Utah.⁴ By the end of the 1860s—the end of the trail era—over 350,000 Americans had traveled overland to the West.⁵

Upon making the decision to travel westward, migrants faced a great deal of preparation before “jumping off” from the Missouri River valley. What travelers did not bring from their hometowns farther east could be procured in a few cities and towns along the Missouri. Available for purchase were wagons, oxen and horses, provisions, clothing, tools, guns, and assorted other goods. Even experienced western travelers such as mountain men and traders could be hired from these towns as guides, a common practice during the first years of the westward migration.

Independence, Missouri, was one of the most popular and well-known outfitting locations for emigrants. At the head of the Santa Fe Trail, Independence had supplied traders and mountain men for several years, and trails pushing northward to the Platte River already existed for travelers to follow. Thus the majority of the emigrants initiated

³ *Missouri Gazette*, 15 May 1813, in John D. Unruh, Jr., *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 28.

⁴ Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 119: Table 1.

⁵ Thousands more Americans and foreign immigrants traveled to the West Coast by sea, particularly during the gold rush. Some sailed to Panama, crossed the isthmus, and sailed on to California, while others sailed all the way around Cape Horn. Forty-one thousand people are estimated to have entered California by sea in 1849 alone. See Joseph R. Conlin, *Bacon, Beans, and Galantines* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1986), 53.

their overland adventures in Independence during the 1840s. St. Joseph, Missouri, located farther west of Independence and closer to the Platte, was another popular jumping-off town. The profitable business of outfitting westbound emigrants at these towns inspired Missouri congressmen to rally for greater interest in Oregon during the border disputes with Great Britain before 1846.⁶ Even better than the Missouri towns, Council Bluffs, Iowa, sat near the head of the Platte, some two hundred miles north of Independence. For wagoners coming from northern Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, and Ohio, Council Bluffs proved much more practical and convenient, becoming the more popular jumping-off location by the early 1850s.⁷ The business of outfitting emigrants spurred the growth of these towns along the Missouri River, so that it was not merely the Pacific Coast that grew as a result of westward migration, but towns that provided provisions and other goods at the heads of the trails as well.

Attempting the long and dangerous journey required careful planning, and many emigrants consulted published guidebooks and letters written by successful westward migrants, several of which were printed in local newspapers. The St. Louis *Weekly Reveille*, *Liberty (Mo.) Tribune*, Independence's *Western Expositor*, and *The Gazette* of St. Joseph abounded with Western letters and news. In fact, such literature became so popular that John Ball, who traveled westward with the famed Wyeth expedition in 1832, wrote from northern Missouri that "the inhabitants of this region know more of the

⁶ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 717.

⁷ Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 98.

mountains and Santa Fe than of New York and New England.”⁸ Popular guidebooks included Lansford Hastings’s *The Emigrants’ Guide to Oregon and California* (1845), Joel Palmer’s *Journal of Travels Over the Rocky Mountains* (1847), Randolph B. Marcy’s *The Prairie Traveler: The 1859 Handbook for Westbound Pioneers* (1859), and Francis Parkman’s best-selling *The Oregon Trail* (1849).⁹ Though not technically a guide book, many trail diarists noted John C. Frémont’s books on his army explorations in the West, which sold more than any other government publications at the time.¹⁰ Just as the economies of the jumping-off towns along the Missouri benefited from emigrant business, so too did writers and publishers try to get a share of the profits to be made from westward migrants in need of advice concerning their journey (not to mention the innumerable easterners who read the guide books merely for literary entertainment).

By wagon, the average journey from the Missouri River to California or Oregon lasted between five and six months. Men traveling with horses or pack mules could cross in three months, but wagons and oxen took much longer, not only because they were bulkier and required constant supervision, but their presence implied that the men were traveling with wives and children. The mode of travel, as well as the number of persons in the party, determined the amount of provisions and utensils, clothing and bedding, tools, and various other goods that needed to be carried. John Bidwell, who made the journey in 1841 as one of the first overland emigrants to California, recommended that

⁸ John Ball to unknown, 29 April 1832, Lexington, Mo., in William A. Bowen, *The Willamette Valley: Migration and Settlement on the Oregon Frontier* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978), 20.

⁹ Nicholas Parson, “Early Bestsellers in America,” *The Book of Literary Lists: A Collection of Annotated Lists, Statistics, and Anecdotes Concerning Books* (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1987), 84.

¹⁰ Conlin, *Bacon, Beans, and Galantines*, 22.

travelers without wagons would “need in the provision line 100 lbs. of flour, 50 lbs. bacon, and if a coffee drinker 20 lbs. of sugar and coffee to his taste—a few other things, dried fruit, rice &c. would not come amiss A person will need one animal to pack his provision, one to carry his clothing and one to ride.”¹¹ Most advice given to emigrants, however, increased the amount of flour closer to two hundred pounds because travel time was extended with wagons or when traveling in very large companies. An article in the *Weekly Reveille* advised westward emigrants that “Every grown person . . . should be provided with at least two hundred pounds of provisions, as no *dependence* is to be placed upon the procuring of food on the route by hunting.”¹² Contemporary publications and guidebooks suggested otherwise, however, recommending that migrants pack two hundred pounds of *flour* for adults, as well as “thirty pounds of pilot bread, seventy-five pounds of bacon, ten pounds of rice, five pounds of coffee, two pounds of tea, twenty-five pounds of sugar, half a bushel of dried beans, one bushel of dried fruit, two pounds of saleratus [baking soda], ten pounds of salt, half a bushel of corn meal; and it is well to have half a bushel of corn, parched and ground; a small keg of vinegar should also be taken.”¹³

Necessary provisions for the long journey, then, were quite weighty. For example, a family of five who packed in all the suggested amounts would have had over

¹¹ John Bidwell, “A Journey to California, 1841,” in *The Bidwell-Bartelson Party: 1841 California Emigrant Adventure*, ed. Doyce B. Nunis, Jr. (Santa Cruz, CA: Western Tanager Press, 1991), 67.

¹² *Weekly Reveille*, 31 March 1846, in *Overland in 1846: Diaries and Letters of the California-Oregon Trail*, ed. Dale Morgan, 2 vols. (Georgetown, CA: The Talisman Press, 1963), 2: 493.

¹³ Joel Palmer, in Jacqueline Williams, *Wagon Wheel Kitchens: Food on the Oregon Trail* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 3.

two thousand pounds of food to carry across the West.¹⁴ Lansford Hastings suggested a simpler list of provisions in his 1845 guidebook, recommending only flour or meal, bacon, coffee, sugar, and salt, and concluding the list “with such other provisions as he may prefer, and can conveniently take.” Hastings continued, however, that “it would, perhaps, be advisable for emigrants, not to encumber themselves with any other, than those just enumerated; as it is impracticable for them, to take all the luxuries, to which they have been accustomed; and as it is found, by experience, that, when upon this kind of expedition, they are not desired, even by the most devoted epicurean.”¹⁵ He also pointed out that the physical labor required on the journey made for larger appetites, thereby requiring more food than what was typical at home.¹⁶

Though mid-nineteenth-century diets included less variety than American diets after the Civil War, the weight and space restrictions placed on what could be packed during an overland journey further restricted migrants’ diets on the trail. Most Americans were well fed in quantity, particularly in comparison to the rest of the world: Despite some regional differences, American staples included pork, corn, potatoes, bread, butter; and many supplemented diets with vegetables grown in their own gardens, eggs and dairy

¹⁴ Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*, 192: Table AI.8; William J. Martin’s letter, *The Gazette*, 23 Jan. 1846, in Morgan, ed., *Overland in 1846*, 2: 476; and Lansford W. Hastings, *The Emigrants’ Guide to Oregon and California* (1845; reprint New York: DaCaps Press, 1969), 143. This weight may be high. According to the amount of provisions suggested by William Martin and Lansford Hastings, both of whom wrote popular guides, total weights for five persons would have only been 1,805 or 1,950 pounds, respectively. My own computations may be too high because amounts would have been lessened for children. However, historian John Mack Faragher calculated that a family of four would need 1,885 lbs. of food.

¹⁵ Hastings, *The Emigrants’ Guide to Oregon and California*, 144.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

products, pickled foods and preserves, and coffee or tea.¹⁷ While trail meals often included some variety, staples were usually reduced to flour, bacon, and coffee. Flour replaced corn as the primary breadstuff during travel because coarse corn crumbs could not produce a hard crust and therefore proved less practical on the trail.¹⁸ Bacon was not unusual in the American diet—many only enjoyed fresh meat during slaughter season and were accustomed to preserved pork throughout the rest of the year.¹⁹ Some migrants consumed beans on the trail, but not nearly as much as modern readers might assume. Beans required too much time to prepare, and according to historian Joseph R. Conlin, “only on the Sabbath (for observant companies) and other layovers was there the time for the long, slow, subterranean baking that a decent bean dish required.”²⁰ Any fresh vegetables or fruits taken on the trail had to be consumed quickly before they spoiled, though pickled vegetables and preserves or relishes were packed to supplement monotonous meals. Ultimately, however, all supplements were constrained to available space and weight concessions.

In addition, preservation techniques further restricted which foods would last during the journey. Thomas Kennsett received a patent in 1825 for his airtight process of preserving food in “vessels of tin or glass,” but the tins were made by hand until 1849

¹⁷ Conlin, *Bacon, Beans, and Galantines*, 6; Elaine N. McIntosh, *American Food Habits in Historical Perspective* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995), 81.

¹⁸ Conlin, *Bacon, Beans, and Galantines*, 12.

¹⁹ Lorena S. Walsh has argued that beef was much more prevalent in the American diet during the early- to mid- nineteenth century but was consumed only when fresh, and therefore remains largely absent from inventories of provisions focused on preserved pork. See Lorena S. Walsh, “Consumer Behavior, Diet, and the Standard of Living in Late Colonial and Early Antebellum America, 1770-1840,” in *American Economic Growth and Standards of Living before the Civil War*, ed. Robert E. Gallman and John Joseph Wallis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 242.

²⁰ Conlin, *Bacon, Beans, and Galantines*, 14.

and remained too expensive for average consumers. Though some canned foods made their way onto the trail by the 1850s, their added weight proved impractical except for a few special items such as oysters or peaches that travelers reserved for special occasions.²¹ For most Americans during the first half of the nineteenth century, particularly those in rural areas, food preservation continued to pose the same problem it had for centuries. Migrants headed westward consumed much of the same provisions as their eastern counterparts who stayed put, but had fewer opportunities to supplement staples with seasonal or fresh foods.

The average antebellum diet contained many more calories than modern Americans are advised to consume, but the ubiquitous hard manual labor of the era required extra fuel. According to Conlin, Americans in 1849 consumed an average of four thousand calories daily.²² Heavy farm labor, comparable to the labor exerted by men and women on the trail, burned five to ten calories per minute.²³ The need for sufficient calories emphasized the importance of carefully planning the kind and quantity of provisions. The energy necessary to walk, herd livestock, ford rivers, maneuver wagons through mountain passes, hunt, cook outdoors, clean, and perform other tasks along the trail, required adequate sources of food to retain one's strength and health.

In addition to foodstuffs, travelers needed heavy utensils for cooking outdoors. Hastings advised potential migrants in his 1845 guide that "Very few cooking utensils should be taken, as they very much increase the load, to avoid which, is always a

²¹ Williams, *Wagon Wheel Kitchens*, 119-20; Conlin, *Bacon, Beans, and Galantines*, 16-17.

²² Conlin, *Bacon, Beans, and Galantines*, 6.

²³ *Ibid.*, 8.

consideration of paramount importance. A baking-kettle, frying-pan, tea-kettle, tea-pot, and coffee-pot are all the furniture of this kind, that is essential, which, together with tin plates, tin cups, ordinary knives, forks, spoons, and a coffee-mill, should constitute the entire kitchen apparatus.”²⁴ Guns were necessary as well, not only for security on the trail but for hunting along the way. “Each man should furnish himself with a good rifle or shot gun, six pounds of powder, and from twenty to twenty-five pounds of lead,” advised the St. Louis *Weekly Reveille*.²⁵ The overall weight of migrants’ provisions, including all the other items to be packed such as clothing, bedding, and tools, was a significant factor in calculating the move westward.

For this reason, one of the most important and necessary items for the trek was a well-constructed wagon that could safely bear the load of food and goods across the difficult terrain. Traveler William Martin’s letter in the St. Joseph *Gazette* advised that a wagon “should be sufficiently strong to carry from 2000 to 2500 lbs.”²⁶ Randolph B. Marcy wrote in his 1859 guidebook that it “should be of the simplest possible construction—strong, light, and made of well-seasoned timber.”²⁷ A family’s wagon served as transportation, cover, storage, and pantry, and some travelers outfitted them quite well. In his trail journal, Randall Hewitt described the wagon of a typical Iowa family in 1862: “On a projecting shelf or tail board would be lashed a large cast-iron cooking stove or range, with it being three or four pieces of stove pipe and an elbow; on a

²⁴ Hastings, *The Emigrants’ Guide to Oregon and California*, 144.

²⁵ *Weekly Reveille* (St. Louis), 31 March 1846, in Morgan, ed., *Overland in 1846*, 2: 493.

²⁶ William J. Martin to the St. Joseph *Gazette*, *The Gazette*, 23 Jan. 1846, in Morgan, ed., *Overland in 1846*, 2: 476.

²⁷ Randolph B. Marcy, *The Prairie Traveler: The 1859 Handbook for Westbound Pioneers* (1859; reprint, Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2006), 26.

side of the wagon box would be secured a water barrel and other needed things; on the other side a large churn and boxes of provisions, on outside shelves; under the wagon bed a coop of chickens.”²⁸ While some families found their cook stoves very useful, others discovered the extra weight too burdensome for their draft animals; abandoned stoves littered the road. Near Deer Creek in present-day Wyoming, Howard Stansbury remarked on how “The road has been literally strewn with articles that have been thrown away,” including “baking-ovens, [and] cooking-stoves without number.”²⁹

While migrants’ food and provisions exerted a great influence on the construction of the transportation vehicles employed to travel west, they also influenced many of the wagons’ accessories. The white coverings over the wagons, preferably made of India rubber, rainproof canvas, or oil cloth, proved important for keeping rain away from spoilable provisions. Varying in shape and size, each party carried a provisions box that they kept easily accessible for preparing the day’s meals. Some also used their provisions boxes as makeshift tables. If wagoners had access to milk—a luxury more common at the beginning of the journey before cows succumbed to fatigues of travel and stopped producing milk—they might also attach a churn to the wagon as Israel Shipman Pelton Lord’s party did, “so the motion from side to side throws the milk from one end of the churn to the other, making butter in the course of the day.”³⁰ Most importantly,

²⁸ Randall Hewitt, *Across the Plains and Over the Divide: A Mule Train Journey from East to West in 1862, and Incidents Connected Therewith* (1906; reprint, New York: Argosy-Antiquarian Ltd, 1964), 96.

²⁹ Howard Stansbury, in Unruh, *Across the Plains*, 150.

³⁰ Israel Shipman Pelton Lord, “*At the Extremity of Civilization*”: *A Meticulously Descriptive Diary of an Illinois Physician’s Journey in 1849 Along the Oregon Trail to the Goldmines and Cholera of California*, ed. Necia Dixon Liles (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1995), 21.

carrying and protecting food served as one of the migrants' vehicles' most important functions.

Since the weight of food and cooking utensils could slow down travel, and the threat of weather could spoil supplies, the timing of an overland journey centered upon food. Once travelers jumped off, it took at least five months to traverse the continent by wagon, hoping to reach the Pacific before winter snows fell. Given migrants' expectations about the richness of California and Oregon, it is ironic that among William Martin's advice in the *St. Joseph Gazette* was his warning that a successful westward journey depended upon ensuring food not only along the trail but at the final settlement as well: "a great deal depends on starting early in the spring, so as to reach Oregon early in the fall, and have time to erect cabins in the winter, and put in wheat crops in time to be able to raise their own bread stuffs."³¹ Farming a good plot of fertile land for foodstuffs motivated many of the overlanders, and the need to arrive in the Willamette or Sacramento Valleys in time to do so provided a very serious prod for completing the journey on time.

Travelers timed migration when prairie grasses grew sufficiently long in the spring, so that their livestock could forage. Hastings advised that "emigrants should . . . enter upon their journey, on, or before, the first day of May; after which time, they should never start, if it can, possibly, be avoided. The advantages to be derived, from setting out, at as early a day as that above suggested, are those of having an abundance of good

³¹ William J. Martin to the *St. Joseph Gazette*, *The Gazette*, 23 Jan. 1846, in Morgan, ed., *Overland in 1846*, 2: 477.

pasturage, in passing over those desolate and thirsty plains.”³² Fourteen years after the publication of Hasting’s guidebook, Randolph Marcy encouraged migrants to start earlier, writing in *The Prairie Traveler* that “many persons who have had much experience in prairie traveling prefer leaving the Missouri River in March or April, and feeding grain to their animals until the new grass appears. The roads become muddy and heavy after the spring rains set in, and by starting out early the worst part of the road will be passed over before the ground becomes wet and soft. This plan, however, should never be attempted unless the animals are well supplied with grain, and kept in good condition. They will eat the old grass in the spring, but it does not . . . afford them sufficient sustenance.”³³

Of course, fourteen years of migrant travel had begun to transform environments along the western trails, and Marcy’s warnings may have reflected the emerging difficulties of finding sufficient pasturage and competing with the swell of other travelers for it. As Marcy warned, setting out early should only be done with experienced travelers, conceivably to assist in seeking out necessary resources. It was not practical for most migrants to have to carry their animals’ feed with them; the extra weight was burdensome. A successful journey depended on timing travel as dictated by the environment—without sufficient grasses, livestock could not eat, potentially becoming too weak to carry riders or pull wagons and too sickly to consume.

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³² Hastings, *The Emigrants’ Guide to Oregon and California*, 147.

³³ Marcy, *The Prairie Traveler*, 21.

The westward migration of thousands of American men, women, and children over the Oregon and California Trails during the nineteenth century was part of a larger territorial expansion fueled by dreams of Manifest Destiny. On a very practical level, a great deal of the logistical details for achieving successful migrations and overall expansion focused around food. Farmers moved their families west to grow food. Bulk provisions and other goods that emigrants bought at jumping-off towns greatly benefited local economies and in turn encouraged congressmen to support the acquisition of Oregon for the United States. The very vehicles employed to carry Americans westward had to be sufficiently built in order to carry hundreds of pounds of food, while at the same time their sizes and carrying capacities limited the amount of provisions available to migrants on the trail, in turn forcing a temporary change in diets. Finally, the successful movement of thousands of Americans across the continent depended on a timing set by the environment itself, for summer—the hottest and in many ways most challenging months of the year but also the only months with sufficient prairie grasses—proved the only practical season in which to travel the Plains and cross western mountains. The environment would continue to shape travel in the hundreds of miles ahead.

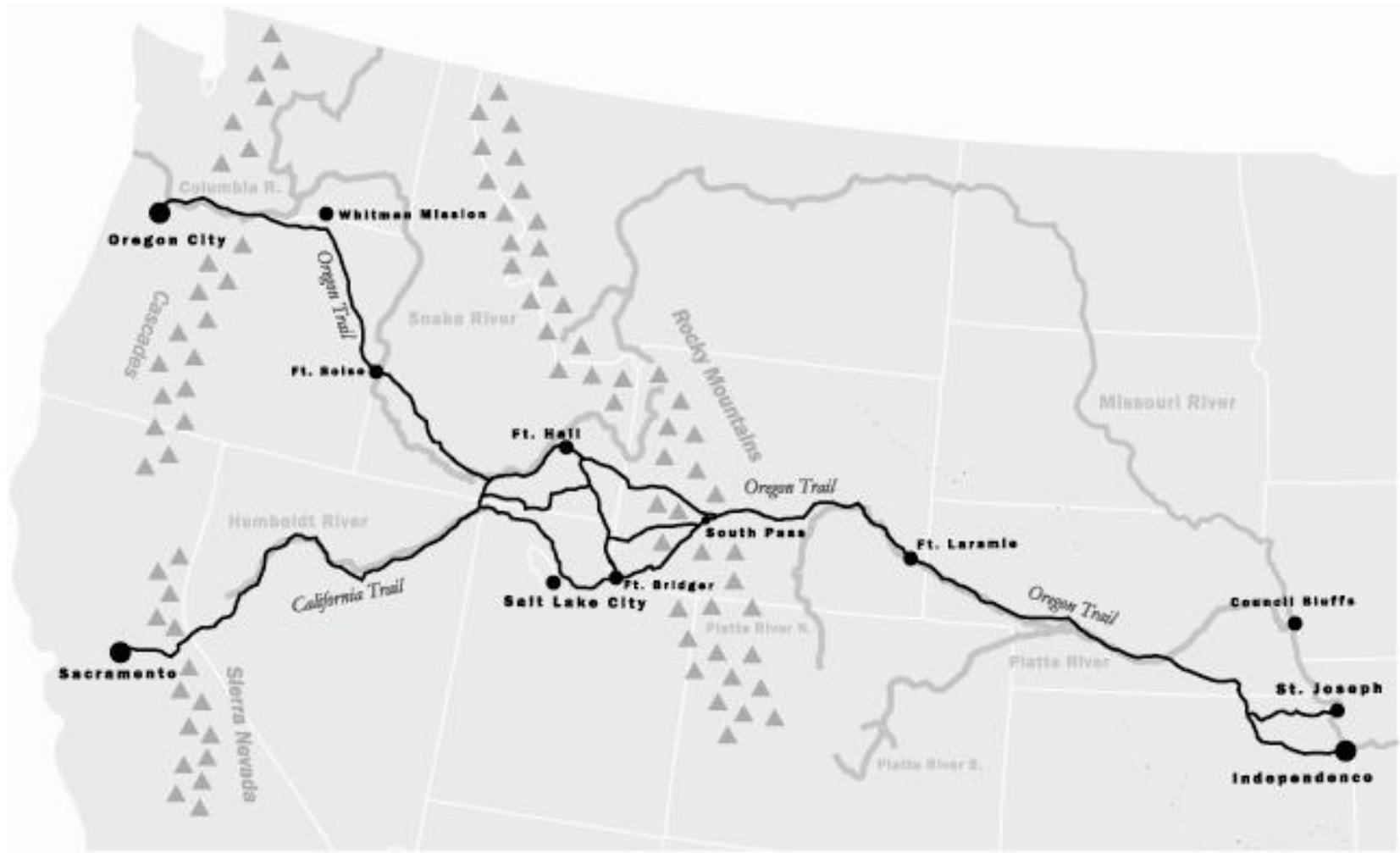


Figure 1. **Oregon-California Trail**
(Courtesy of Joshua O'Connor)

Chapter Two

Crossing the Plains

The trail westward from Independence, Missouri, followed the Kansas River and then the Blue River, which branched off to the north. Where the Blue River formed from the Big Blue and Little Blue, the trail followed toward the headwaters of the Little Blue and met up with the Platte River near Fort Kearney. From the jumping-off city of St. Joseph, Missouri, another trail left the Missouri River and headed west to meet up with the trail along the Little Blue. Here good prairie grass covered the rolling hills, and other than river crossings, migrants experienced relatively easy travel. From Council Bluffs, Iowa, the Oregon Trail simply followed along the Platte River.

Upon jumping off and beginning the long overland journey, migrants met the realities of trail life. All of a migrating family's possessions, including the necessary foodstuffs to sustain them, fit in a simple wagon. Single men might carry their possessions in packs on a horse or on their own backs. After setting off from Council Bluffs, Mary Rockwood Powers recorded in her diary "a memorandum of our outfit and eatables," as follows: "three sacks flour, 100 lbs. bacon, 50 lbs. sugar, 55 lbs. coffee, 7 lbs. tea, half bushel of dried apples, bottle pickles, two tin pans, two tea kettles, one dish kettle, one bake kettle, one coffee mill, 6 knives and forks, six tea spoons, three large table spoons, eight tin and iron cups, one candle stick, eight pounds candles, frying pan, tin and wooden pail, keg for water, nine bars soap, five woolen blankets, one large tent,

rifle and accoutrement.”¹ These items—the necessary foods and tools for a long overland journey, as well as clothing—made up the only possessions Powers’ family of five took with them from Illinois as they embarked on a new life in California. Though some migrants attempted to carry large family heirlooms or other comforts such as stoves, most often they abandoned those superfluous items along the trail. The difficult nature of travel to the West during the mid-nineteenth century dictated what migrants could carry. Foodstuffs necessarily took precedence, and in turn forced a greater separation between westward travelers and the physical or cultural comforts of the East.

Not only did migrants carry relatively little, but what little they had needed to be carefully guarded and protected. Randall Hewitt complained in 1862 about coyotes, “the sneaking pest of the plains and all prairie regions,” as a danger to guard against. He labeled the animals “inveterate thieves” that “will often slip into a camp when all is quiet and grab provisions and make off without attracting attention.”² Toward the very beginning of their expedition to the Rocky Mountains, one of the messes in Army explorer John C. Frémont’s company lost precious provisions while crossing the Kansas River. “All the sugar belonging to one of the messes wasted its sweets on the muddy waters; but our heaviest loss was a bag of coffee, which contained nearly all our provision,” Frémont lamented. “It was a loss which none but a traveller in a strange and inhospitable country can appreciate; and often afterward, when excessive toil and long

¹ Mary Rockwood Powers, *A Woman’s Overland Journal to California*, ed. W. B. Thorsen (Fairfield, WA: Ye Galleon Press, 1985), 22.

² Randall Hewitt, *Across the Plains and Over the Divide: A Mule Train Journey from East to West in 1862, and Incidents Connected Therewith* (1906; reprint, New York: Argosy-Antiquarian Ltd, 1964), 181.

marching had overcome us with fatigue and weariness, we remembered and mourned over our loss in the Kansas.”³ Coffee rose by the 1830s to replace tea as the “prime American beverage,” and the loss of coffee, like that of sugar, meant not merely a loss of provisions but of a familiar eastern comfort for those traveling through the West.⁴

Excepting such unfortunate incidences as losing valuable provisions so early in the journey, many found the novelty and excitement of the beginning of their voyage enjoyable. Having recently set off with a fresh stock of provisions, migrants’ diets generally had greater variety earlier in the trip. Less than eighty miles from St. Joseph Israel Shipman wrote in his journal, “today we had gooseberry pie. We have good bread, rice pudding, bread pudding, warm cakes (Indian and wheat), beans, baked and stewed, apples and peaches and make a moderate supply of butter.”⁵ Camp life could even be enlivening, as the “singular spectacle” Joel Palmer described during his 1845 journey. “The hunters returning with the spoil;” he wrote, “some erecting scaffolds and others drying the meat. Of the women, some were washing, some ironing, some baking. At two of the tents the fiddle was employed in uttering its voice . . . at one tent I heard singing; at others the occupants were engaged in reading While all this was going on, that nothing might be wanting to complete the harmony of the scene, a Campbellite preacher,

³ John C. Frémont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843-'44* (Washington, DC: Gales and Seaton, 1845), 11.

⁴ Elaine N. McIntosh, *American Food Habits in Historical Perspective* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995), 86.

⁵ Israel Shipman Pelton Lord, “*At the Extremity of Civilization*”: *A Meticulously Descriptive Diary of an Illinois Physician’s Journey in 1849 Along the Oregon Trail to the Goldmines and Cholera of California*, ed. Necia Dixon Liles (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1995), 21.

named Foster, was reading a hymn, preparatory to religious worship.”⁶ The entire migrant community sought stability through replicating the eastern past as closely as possible.

Diners also tried to replicate some semblance of domesticity and table manners by improvising with table settings. Narcissa Whitman wrote to eastern relatives that she remained “a very good housekeeper in the prairie” and described her eating arrangements cheerfully. “Our table is ground, our table cloth is an India rubber cloth,” she wrote, but continued, “let me assure you of this, we relish our food none the less for sitting on the ground while eating.”⁷ Similarly, forty-niner Elisha Perkins wrote, “our table was a board laid across two of our camp chests & as we squatted and knelt round it many were the jokes passed on the novelty and ludicrousness of our situation.”⁸ Despite the disruption of ordinary life by constant movement through an unknown environment for several months, the human need for food remained constant. No matter how seemingly “ludicrous,” attempting to retain these domestic formalities around mealtime helped to maintain a psychological connection with their former lives in eastern “civilization.” As historians N. Jill Howard and Glenda Riley explained it in their study of women on the

⁶ Joel Palmer, *Journal of Travels over the Rocky Mountains* (1847; reprint, Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, Inc., 1966), 23.

⁷ Narcissa Whitman, “Platte River, Just Above the Forks” 3 June 1836, in *First White Women Over the Rockies: Diaries, Letters, and Biographical Sketches of the Six Women of the Oregon Mission who made the Overland Journey in 1836 and 1838*, ed. Clifford Merrill Drury, 2 vols. (Glendale, CA: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1963), 1: 52-53.

⁸ Elisha Perkins, in Jacqueline Williams, *Wagon Wheel Kitchens: Food on the Oregon Trail* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 161.

trail, by performing these rites, migrants were thus able “to enjoy a continuity with their past that lent stability to a time of transition and uncertainty.”⁹

In traveling parties of mixed sexes, women labored primarily as cooks, rising before the rest of the party to prepare breakfast and often setting to work on meals at the end of a day’s travel just when the men sought rest. In his 1846 guidebook for westward emigrants, John M. Shively inadvertently pointed out the foolishness of clinging so tightly to the gender ways of the East. “However much help your wives and daughters have been to you at home,” he wrote, “they can do but little for you here—herding stock, through either dew, dust, or rain, breaking brush, swimming rivers, attacking grizzly bears or savage Indians, is all out of their line of business. All they can do, is to cook for camps, etceteras, &c.”¹⁰ Shively grossly underestimated the importance of women’s contributions and the power of food to ease the discomforts and uncertainty of travel. In 1862, Randall Hewitt acknowledged the vitalizing properties of a cooked meal after a hard day’s travel when he wrote, “After a good supper—and a meal to a hungry person will soften ill humor very quickly—a little time spent socially around a camp fire had a reviving influence.” And months of daily movement indeed left migrants tired and with little relief. Hewitt explained, “The realities of the situation out here call for forbearance

⁹ N. Jill Howard and Glenda Riley, “‘Thus You See I Have Not Much Rest,’” *Idaho Yesterdays* 37 (fall 1993): 31.

¹⁰ J. M. Shively, *Route and Distances to Oregon and California, with a Description of Watering-Places, Crossings, Dangerous Indians, &c. &c.* (Washington, DC: W. M. Greer, 1846), in *Overland in 1846: Diaries and Letters of the California-Oregon Trail*, ed. Dale Morgan, 2 vols. (Georgetown, CA: The Talisman Press, 1963), 2: 736.

and courage. No time for coddling stiff joints, sore muscles or tender feet Head pains or bones aching count for nothing.”¹¹

Thus women who rode the trail focused much of their energy on protecting and preserving provisions, striving to ration food while at the same time providing healthy meals and cleaning. In the description of her family’s travel across the Plains, Mary Powers wrote, “We start very early, have dinner sometimes earlier sometimes later Then with the mending and baking it takes all my time.”¹² Hewitt praised the women in his party who never complained about their work, despite “such mornings as this” when “it was very like an imposition to turn them out by 3:30 in the morning to get breakfast for twelve people, then have them wash and pack the dishes and utensils, and be on the road by 5 o’clock.”¹³ Preparing something as basic as a cup of coffee required one to find fuel for the fire, roast and grind the coffee beans, and procure water to boil.¹⁴ Many migrants were not accustomed to cooking over open fires, much less out of doors. Amelia Knight wrote in her diary of making the first meal of the day in the midst of a pending rain storm. “Got breakfast over after a fashion,” she wrote, “Sand all around ankle deep; wind blowing Them that eat the most breakfast eat the most sand.”¹⁵ And rarely did migrant women find rest from the labor of cooking and daily camp chores. Helen Carpenter wrote in 1849 that “although there is not much to cook, the difficulty and inconvenience in doing it amounts to a great deal. So by the time one has squatted

¹¹ Hewitt, *Across the Plains*, 129-30, 302.

¹² Powers, *A Woman’s Overland Journal to California*, 24.

¹³ Hewitt, *Across the Plains*, 296-97.

¹⁴ Williams, *Wagon Wheel Kitchens*, 50.

¹⁵ Amelia Stewart Knight, “Diary, 1853,” in *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, ed. Lillian Schlissel (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 205.

around the fire and cooked bread and bacon, made several trips to and from the wagon, washed the dishes (with no place to drain them) and gotten things ready for an early breakfast, some of the others already have their night caps on.”¹⁶ Cooking and cleaning had also been these women’s responsibilities in the East, and their duties extended into the much more inconvenient West. Nevertheless, the constant task of food preparation shaped the overall trail experience of migrating women.

For those parties that chose to remain in camp for a day, perhaps Sunday for the Sabbath, the extra time often led to even more work. Hewitt mused how “this day of ‘rest’ consisted of letting the animals do the resting, the company doing the repairing, laundry work, cooking and baking.”¹⁷ In addition, single male voyagers often sought out wagon parties with women in order to share in the hospitality of a cooked meal. Some men even hired themselves as extra hands to a family or wagon party in exchange for board. Amelia Stewart Knight’s family hired men in this fashion, but Knight revealed the extra burden it placed on her when she admitted in her diary, “Three of our hands got discontented and left this morning, to pack through. I am pleased, as we shall get along just as well without them and I shall have three less to wait on . . .”¹⁸ The day-to-day task of preparing meals, whether performed by women or not, illustrates the way the basic human act of consuming food took much more effort and time than modern travelers realize, particularly when exposed to the elements and inconveniences of travel.

¹⁶ Helen Carpenter, in Greg MacGregor, *Overland: The California Emigrant Trail of 1841-1870* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 46.

¹⁷ Hewitt, *Across the Plains*, 180.

¹⁸ Knight, “Diary, 1853,” 212.

Water, grass, and timber remained relatively plentiful in the prairies, but timber became scarce as the trail entered the Great Plains. Just beyond the Big Blue, Joel Palmer wrote in 1845, “our pilot notified us that this would be our last opportunity to procure timber for axle trees, wagon tongues, &c., and we provided a supply of this important material.”¹⁹ Israel Lord passed between the Missouri and Big Blue Rivers in 1849, where three Sac and Fox Indians allegedly “levied black mail” and “recommended that the emigrants pay them a small amount as compensation for the timber they used in crossing the country.” Lord and his party of twelve wagons paid three dollars, but he complained bitterly about doing so, calling it “a gross imposition” and proclaiming that “what the emigrants use can be of no possible use to the Indians.”²⁰ Though relieved that the white settlers were merely passing through to the Far West and had no intention of permanently encroaching on the Indians’ land (at least at that point in time), Native Americans nevertheless felt a great burden on their natural resources as thousands of migrants passed through using timber as fuel for fires. Without fire, neither overlanders nor natives could cook food. According to historian John D. Unruh, Jr., the Sac and Fox, Kickapoo, Pawnee, and Sioux Indians were the main tribes who demanded tribute payments, particularly during the gold rush years. Located closest to the Missouri River and eastern white settlements, those tribes felt “most keenly the pressures of white men increasingly impinging upon their domains.”²¹ Seeking wood for food preparation or for replacement parts for wagons did not constitute a solitary and inconsequential act

¹⁹ Palmer, *Journal of Travels over the Rocky Mountains*, 18.

²⁰ Lord, “*At the Extremity of Civilization*,” 22.

²¹ John D. Unruh, Jr., *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 169.

performed by whites passing empty western lands. Instead, it adversely affected the Native Americans' own access to natural resources; and in the case of Lord and what he termed "blackmail," competition over timber negatively affected relations between migrants and Indians.

Though wood could be found in ravines or when crossing rivers, once migrants reached the Platte River they faced four hundred miles of Plains with an undependable timber source. Multiple times a day fuel had to be found and gathered for their cooking fires, which were also used for light and warmth. Randall Hewitt described such "packing" of wood for the camp as "not a task to be ardently sought for above many other occupations" when it had to be carried from distant woods.²² On the Plains, wood was seldom available where travelers camped, as was the case for many in the more barren regions of the West. In traveling parties with families, the chore of collecting fuel usually fell upon women and children.

When wood was unavailable, other fuel sources had to be found. Sagebrush was a common alternative, but it could demand "a continuous performance to keep a fire going where the branches were small."²³ Though he was not personally fond of it, journalist Samuel Bowles wrote of the sagebrush's success at creating a "quick, hot fire," and added, "but think of savoring your food with soap and sage tea; think of putting a soap factory and an apothecary into one room, and that your kitchen!"²⁴ Travelers also

²² Hewitt, *Across the Plains*, 244-45.

²³ *Ibid.*, 439.

²⁴ Samuel Bowles, *Across the Continent* (1865; reprint, Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, Inc., 1966), 73.

used greasewood, but collecting it could be laborious.²⁵ Randall Hewitt wrote of using willows once, but found them “so green that it took some patient coaxing to get fire enough to cook supper.”²⁶

Another fuel alternative that travelers found and gathered was dried buffalo dung. Overlander William H. Russell and his party could not find wood when traversing the Plains and wrote, “consequently we are put mightily to our shifts for fuel to cook with, and are now relying chiefly on buffaloe *chips*, a resource that we hope will not fail us.”²⁷ Buffalo chips proved surprisingly efficient sources of fuel. Narcissa Whitman compared them as “similar to the kind of coal used in Pennsylvania.”²⁸ In a letter to family back east she addressed initial reactions to chips and mused to her mother of her sister, “I suppose Harriet will make up a face at this, but if she was here she would be glad to have her supper cooked at any rate, in this scarce timber country.”²⁹ As buffalo herds of the West dwindled in number, however, even this source became rare. When Hewitt’s party traveled west in 1862, they struggled to find fuel. “The matter of wood through this barren region was one of serious import this year,” wrote Hewitt; “‘Buffalo chips’—the anthracite of the plains—being out of the question, as the buffalo had gone, and timber was scarce and distant; it was quite necessary that everything that would burn be gathered and cared for; so when I saw a stick drifting in the river or lodged on the bank I was apt

²⁵ Hewitt, *Across the Plains*, 174.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

²⁷ William H. Russell to the *Missouri Statesman*, “Nebraska or Big Platte River, About 400 Miles West of Independence,” 13 June 1846, in Morgan, ed., *Overland in 1846*, 2: 558.

²⁸ Narcissa Whitman, “Platte River, Just Above the Forks. June 3, 1836 Friday eve, six o’clock,” in Drury, ed., *First White Women Over the Rockies*, 1: 50.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

to secure it promptly.”³⁰ The search for fuel was constant, and cooking on the trail in a barren land required flexibility and patience.

Where there were buffalo chips there were bison, and overland migrants hunted the animals in large number. Stories of vast herds of bison abounded in the East, and the prospects of seeing and hunting met both practical and entertainment needs. In 1834 William Marshall Anderson noted, “there are immense numbers of buffalo in sight,” though the height of tall tales became clear when he continued, “and yet they do not come up to my expectations, as I can see the ground in many places.”³¹ However, when John Bidwell went to California in 1841, he found near South Fork (where the Platte River begins to fork into the South Platte and North Platte) so many of the animals that he remembered, “we experienced a great danger at this point from the innumerable heads of buffalo. All the plains were literally black with them crowding to the river for water. The ground literally thundered We sat up all night shooting at them to keep them from running over us.”³² Fifteen years later, Mary Powers observed “thousands of buffalo” upon reaching the Platte.³³

Some tried to supplement provisions with bison meat. In large parties of traveling men, certain men were often designated as the hunters, riding several miles away from their main party in order to find fresh meat. The two basic methods for hunting included “running” up to the animals on horseback and shooting them, or “approaching” an animal

³⁰ Hewitt, *Across the Plains*, 142-43.

³¹ William Marshall Anderson, “Anderson’s Narrative of a Ride to the Rocky Mountains in 1834,” in *Sources of Northwest History No. 27* (Missoula: Montana State University, n.d.), 6.

³² John Bidwell, “California 1841: An Immigrant’s Recollections of a Trip Across the Plains,” in *The Bidwell-Bartelson Party: 1841 California Emigrant Adventure*, ed. Doyce B. Nunis, Jr. (Santa Cruz, CA: Western Tanager Press, 1991), 81.

³³ Powers, *A Woman’s Overland Journal to California*, 23.

slowly along the ground in concealment.³⁴ Of course upon the excitement of seeing their first bison, many grabbed their guns and took off in pursuit with little thought to technique. Some eager overlanders had little to no experience hunting and their shots proved in vain. Thomas Farnham wrote excitedly of “our first hunt,” which “was attended with no success . . . but was worth the effort” because, as he stated proudly, “we had begun to hunt our food.”³⁵ John Townsend, in contrast, successfully killed a bison but admitted, “like all inexperienced hunters, I had been particular to select the largest bull in the gang, supposing it to be the best, (and it proved, as usual, the poorest,) while more than a dozen fat cows were nearer me.”³⁶ Others did not have the time or skill to hunt at all. Even though Mary Rockwood Powers noted an abundance of buffalo, she continued to write in the same diary entry a description of her meals, which consisted of “coffee made from the waters of the muddy Platte, some very good biscuits made of shorts without shortening and some side bacon.”³⁷ Nowhere did she mention eating beef.

Travelers who did eat fresh bison meat often praised their fine meals. Anderson responded humorously to the query “is such meat really good?” when he answered, “What a question to ask a hungry man! Ask a Catholic if he loves or believes in the Virgin Mary.”³⁸ Dried buffalo proved a blessing to many migrants, particularly during the earlier years of migration. Eliza Spalding traveled in 1836, and her missionary party

³⁴ Francis Parkman, *The Oregon Trail* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Company, n.d. [1901]), 78.

³⁵ Thomas J. Farnham, *Travels in the Great Western Prairies, the Anahuac and Rocky Mountains, and in the Oregon Territory*, 2 vols. (1843; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1973), 1: 16.

³⁶ John Kirk Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey Across the Rocky Mountains to the Columbia* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), 59.

³⁷ Powers, *A Woman's Overland Journal to California*, 23.

³⁸ Anderson, “Anderson's Narrative of a Ride to the Rocky Mountains in 1834,” 6.

packed only enough provisions to feed the travelers “till we could depend on Buffalo,” which inevitably led to a desperately monotonous diet until they reached Fort Hall west of the Rocky Mountains.³⁹ To dry the bison flesh, diners erected scaffolds over low fires and laid thin strips of meat on them. “The heat and smoke completes the process in half a day,” wrote Joel Palmer, “and with an occasional sunning the meat will keep for months.”⁴⁰

Overlanders hunted other animals as well, including antelope, deer, and waterfowl. Again, however, not all were lucky. In 1862, Randall Hewitt found an “absence of all kinds of game, either bird or animal,” and his party suffered “a dull, unchanging menu” when they could not purchase meat from enterprising hunters or traders. In the latter years of the migration, men drove cattle northward to the emigrant trail along the Platte, and Hewitt recorded reluctantly that “beef from thirty to fifty cents a pound was an expensive luxury.”⁴¹ The ability of the migrants to add variety to their diet, therefore, or even to supply sufficient provisions at all if they ran low, came at a high monetary price when they could not procure natural edible resources on their own. Consequently the dietary needs of the overlanders also provided opportunities for traders and entrepreneurs to earn a quick profit along the trail.

Due primarily to overhunting by both whites and Native Americans, the destruction of the buffalo and the consequent effect their loss had on the Indians remains one of the great tragedies of westward expansion. Traditionally scholars blamed the

³⁹ Eliza Hart Spalding, diary, in Drury, ed., *First White Women Over the Rockies*, 1: 191-95.

⁴⁰ Palmer, *Journal of Travels over the Rocky Mountains*, 23.

⁴¹ Hewitt, *Across the Plains*, 233.

white migrants and hunters for arbitrarily killing thousands of the beasts. For example, Isaac Foster observed in his trail diary: “the valley of the Platte for 200 miles presents the aspect of the vicinity of a slaughter yard; dotted all over with skeletons of buffalos; such waste of the creatures that God has made for man seems wicked, but every emigrant seems to wish to signalize himself by killing a buffalo.”⁴² In addition, the skins demanded by white traders led native Plains peoples to overhunt the animals as well. In this view, the hunting of bison for meat, sport, and skins ultimately led to the loss of a crucial subsistence source for the Indians. However, while the destruction remains no less significant or tragic, historians’ understanding of the role played by the overlanders has changed.

Contemporary accounts indicate whites and Native Americans alike blamed the destruction of the buffalo on white migrants who both hunted the animals wastefully and scared them away. After passing rotting carcasses along the trail, John Steele wisely noted, “Such destruction of game doubtless enrages the Indians against whites.”⁴³ But the near-extinction developed through a complex tangle of environmental, economic, and even political factors. Historian Elliott West argued that bison did not have a clear migratory path from which to be scared, and even those who were “away” still declined in number for some reason other than hunting.⁴⁴ West showed how the Plains Indians’ own horses, which numbered in the many thousands, also led to an ecological depletion

⁴² Isaac Foster, in Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 386.

⁴³ John Steele, in Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 386.

⁴⁴ Elliott West, *The Way to the West: Essays on the Central Plains* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 56.

of the grass on which horses and bison alike depended.⁴⁵ In addition, inter-tribal peace between the Cheyenne and Arapaho and the Comanches and Kiowas in 1840 in the western Plains led to the closure of certain political buffer zones between the once-warring peoples where bison had been free to roam in a sort of natural preserve.⁴⁶

The seasonal movement of the white wagoners and their herds did, however, further destroy the environment along the Platte River valley. Bison lived on the Plains year round, but during the winter's freezing snow storms, they sought shelter in the river valleys. The grass in those valleys—the bison's only source of nourishment—had already been depleted by the white migrants' horses and cattle in previous summers, and by Native Americans' horses during the winters. West explained, "White and Indian newcomers were breaking into the buffaloes' annual cycle at its most vulnerable point, and the changes they brought destroyed the animals' most limited resource that supported them at the chanciest time of year."⁴⁷ Thus the natural forage resources consumed by the overlanders' animals—the resources that ultimately allowed for a successful voyage across the continent—also destroyed the very same forage required by the buffalo. And it was essentially the buffalo upon which the Plains Indians relied for food, clothing, shelter, and as a trade commodity.

Whether or not they fully understood the several inadvertent contributions to the decrease of the buffalo, whites and Indians alike had no question about the decline of the large mammals around them. Early historian Francis Parkman crossed the Plains in 1846

⁴⁵ Ibid., 32.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 61-65.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 78.

to observe the western Indians and prophesied quite accurately, “Great changes are at hand in that region. With the stream of emigration to Oregon and California, the buffalo will dwindle away, and the large wandering communities who depend on them for support must be broken and scattered.”⁴⁸ The Native Americans could only watch as white men and women marched through each summer with thousands of hooped animals, knowing that their foot and wagon prints would have much longer lasting effects.

Possibly because they too knew their traces were disrupting Native American life, white Americans grew increasingly fearful of the western tribes. While some violence inflicted by the Indians against American travelers did take place, such incidences never amounted to the exaggerated reports and stories in both eastern and western writings.⁴⁹ In fact, not until the 1850s did travel across Native American lands become genuinely dangerous, and the rise in violence was a response by Indians to growing hostilities and depredations instigated by the increasing numbers of westward-marching whites. Historian John D. Unruh, Jr. estimated that, between 1840 and 1860, Indians killed a total of 362 emigrants, compared to the 426 Indians killed by the emigrants.⁵⁰ Thefts occurred much more frequently than murder, however, so migrants had to be particularly careful in guarding their camps. Nevertheless, Unruh pointed out rightfully that “in spite of frequent thefts and scares, almost everyone did complete the trip safely.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ Parkman, *The Oregon Trail*, 210.

⁴⁹ Interestingly, tales of violent interactions with Indians were much more frequent in later recollections or in letters sent east than they were in the daily trail diaries and journals. See Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 175.

⁵⁰ Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 185.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 200.

Much more common than violent or hostile clashes on the trail, of course, were peaceful interchanges. Exchanges of food and tobacco frequently characterized such cultural interactions. Army explorer John C. Frémont recorded an incident in 1843 when Arapaho and Cheyenne Indians attempted to raid his men but stopped upon realizing that they mistook Frémont's party for another tribe of Indians. Frémont accepted this excuse and wrote, "the usual evidences of friendship interchanged. The pipe went round, provisions were spread, and the tobacco and goods furnished the customary presents."⁵² The Indians expected such treatment from a government party, but ordinary travelers used food to foster friendly relations, too. On the third day of her family's journey in 1852, Lydia Allen Rudd wrote in her diary, "We have had some calls this evening from the Indians. We gave them something to eat and they left."⁵³ The next year, Amelia Stewart Knight wrote from the Plains, "Indians came to our camp every day, begging money and something to eat."⁵⁴ More than simple sustenance, the food given to the Native Americans helped ensure friendly relations and a successful overland journey.

In addition to maintaining friendly relations, early travelers occasionally gained valuable information from nearby Indians about trails and watercourses. For example, Frémont came upon three Cheyenne Indians in the eastern Plains (the Cheyennes lived further west, but these three men were on a raiding party against the Pawnees in the east) and invited them to share a meal with him. After feeding them, Frémont learned from the men about the rivers in the western lands ahead. "After supper, we sat down on the

⁵² Frémont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition*, 127.

⁵³ Lydia Allen Rudd, "Notes by the Wayside En Route to Oregon, 1852," in Schlissel, ed., *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 188.

⁵⁴ Knight, "Diary, 1853," 203.

grass,” wrote Frémont in his *Report*, “and I placed a sheet of paper between us, on which they traced rudely, but with a certain degree of relative truth, the watercourses of the country which lay between us and their villages, and of which I desired to have some information.”⁵⁵ Sharing food with Indians could open up important “secrets” that proved valuable for westward travelers.

Beyond the gifts of food given to Native Americans, some overland migrants also traded with Indians for goods. Just past Fort Laramie, Amelia Stewart Knight’s party passed a Sioux Indian village. Several of the Native Americans went to the wagons, and women approached Knight to trade moccasins and beads for bread.⁵⁶ Almost a decade later, Jane Gould Tourtillott found Indians around her camp “very anxious to ‘swap’ moccasins and lariats for money, powder and whiskey.” Unable to trade for those goods, her husband instead “traded a little iron teakettle for a lariat.”⁵⁷

Travelers also traded for and purchased needed provisions and goods at Fort Laramie. Located where the Platte River and Laramie Creek meet in the western Plains, Fort Laramie originated as a fur trading post. The growing numbers of California- and Oregon-bound migrants benefited by the trade, not only with the fort but with the Indians who gathered nearby. In 1845, Joel Palmer noted in his trail journal from Fort Laramie, “Our camp is stationary to-day; part of the emigrants are shoeing their horses and oxen; others are trading at the fort and with the Indians. Flour, sugar, coffee, tea, tobacco,

⁵⁵ Frémont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition*, 18.

⁵⁶ Knight, “Diary, 1853,” 207.

⁵⁷ Jane Gould Tourtillott, “Touring From Mitchell, Iowa, to California, 1862,” in Schlissel, ed., *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 221.

powder and lead, sell readily at high prices.”⁵⁸ The next year, Francis Parkman found French Canadian traders and trappers at the fort with friendly Indians and wrote upon the arrival of a party of overlanders: “the men occupied themselves in procuring supplies for their onward journey; either buying them with money or giving in exchange superfluous articles of their own.”⁵⁹ Though trade could be expensive and the availability of particular provisions irregular, the fort nevertheless provided relief to migrants who ran low on foodstuffs after their first several hundred miles of travel across the Plains.

The commerce conducted at Fort Laramie is but one example of a common exchange of currency along the trail. J. S. Shepherd wrote, “It was generally assumed that after we left the frontier money would be of no use. It is the greatest mistake possible. I know of no part of the world where money is of more use than in crossing the plains, and where a man is more helpless without it.”⁶⁰ At the same time that travelers experienced an intimate relationship with the land through its provision of grass, water, fuel, and game animals, the line of migration west by no means existed outside of a system of commerce. As the trail continued to develop, private ferries and toll roads only added to the expenses of the journey, in addition to any provisions purchased along the way. Migrants’ need for food, goods, and services, therefore, also facilitated the expansion of American capitalism across the continent.

Past Fort Laramie, the Oregon Trail continued westward roughly following the North Platte River until it met with the Sweetwater River that flowed slowly down from

⁵⁸ Palmer, *Journal of Travels Over the Rocky Mountains*, 25.

⁵⁹ Parkman, *The Oregon Trail*, 119.

⁶⁰ J. S. Shepherd, in Joseph R. Conlin, *Bacon, Beans, and Galantines* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1986), 35.

the Wind River Mountains. The Sweetwater earned its name because its waters were, according to overlander George L. Curry, “indeed, sweet to the traveller.”⁶¹ For many, the Sweetwater was the first good water source after a very long journey, having relied for drinking water on what they could find in an era before knowledge of bacteria and the need for purification. Shortly after Francis Parkman entered the Plains, he complained of the difficulty of travel and how poor water only added to one’s discomfort. “When thirsty with a long ride in the scorching sun over some boundless reach of prairie,” Parkman wrote, “he comes at length to a pool of water, and alights to drink, he discovers a troop of young tadpoles sporting in the bottom of his cup.” Later in his trek across the Plains, Parkman found a fellow west-bound man “contemplating the contents of his cup, which he had just filled with water.” Taking a look himself, Parkman found that the cup “exhibited in fact an extraordinary variety and profusion of animal and vegetable life.”⁶² Naturally such water could lead to illness. Amelia Stewart Knight noted in her diary that her family had to stay in camp longer than expected due to both her and her husband’s illness, “caused, we suppose by drinking the river water, as it looks more like dirty suds than anything else.”⁶³

Opinions as to how best to make collected water both safe and palatable varied. Charles T. Stanton described his dislike of the North Platte water once it became clearer at the western end of the river. “The water was clear,” he explained, “but I did not like it as well as I did when mixed with sand and loam when we first struck the river. Thus

⁶¹ George L. Curry to the St. Louis *Reveille*, “Sweet Water,” 12 July 1846, in Morgan, ed., *Overland in 1846*, 2: 610.

⁶² Parkman, *The Oregon Trail*, 33, 61.

⁶³ Knight, “Diary, 1853,” 207.

being mixed has a tendency to purify it,” he reasoned, “and I also think that the dirt and sand you take in while drinking, is conducive to health.”⁶⁴ Randall Hewitt found that with “brackish and otherwise tainted” water, he needed to both boil it and add “a handful of meal to render it palatable.”⁶⁵ Randolph B. Marcy advised potential migrants in his 1859 guidebook to boil “water taken from stagnant pools, charged with putrid vegetable matter and animalculae,” and skim the scum off the surface. For muddy waters, as many travelers described the Platte in places, Marcy wrote that “travelers frequently drink muddy water by placing a cloth or handkerchief over the mouth of a cup to catch the large particles of dirt and animalculae.”⁶⁶ While unpalatable water due to mud or small animal life was one thing, water contaminated with bacteria was another. Bacteria easily spread among the thousands of migrants (and many more thousands of domestic animals) who followed the same watercourses and shared nearby camping grounds. Common symptoms of having consumed contaminated water included abdominal cramps, diarrhea, and dehydration.

The arid western landscape also contained occasional alkaline waters, such as the source Amelia Stewart Knight’s party found near the Sweetwater River. While travelers knew better than to drink from these pools, their animals were not always so wise.

Knight “had a great deal of trouble to keep the stock from drinking the poison or alkali

⁶⁴ Charles T. Stanton, “Emigrant’s Trail, on the Banks of the Sweet Water,” 12 July 1846, in Morgan, ed., *Overland in 1846*, 2: 612.

⁶⁵ Hewitt, *Across the Plains*, 135.

⁶⁶ Randolph B. Marcy, *The Prairie Traveler: The 1859 Handbook for Westbound Pioneers* (1859; reprint, Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2006), 49-50.

water,” and believed “It is almost sure to kill man or beast who drink it.”⁶⁷ The concern over safe drinking water added another burden to overlanders who relied so closely on their immediate environment for sustenance.

Near the point where the trail met the Sweetwater stood Independence Rock, a round 200-foot high granite rock so-called because many overlanders reached the landmark around the Fourth of July, or aimed to in order to stay on schedule. Though available provisions generally remained monotonous, travelers tried to celebrate Independence Day with a special meal. Lydia Allen Rudd wrote in her diary on July 4, 1852, “This is the day of our nations jubilee of liberty We had some gooseberry sauce for dinner gathered from the bluff Harry killed an antelope.”⁶⁸ While her description of the holiday meal may appear perfectly ordinary, the fact that she had not mentioned food in her diary at all since May 10th indicates the event truly provided the family with a sense of celebration. Likewise, Randall Hewitt wrote on July 4, 1862, “a fitting close of our patriotic demonstrations of the day was in having an addition to our bill of fare at supper, which almost raised that uniform meal to the dignity of a banquet.” Canned tomatoes, saved for just such a special occasion, were added to a stew and soup. The tomatoes’ celebratory affect succeeded, for Hewitt added, “taking surroundings into account with steady service of bacon and beans this simple vegetable came very near being the delightful change it was said to be, on that patriotic occasion.”⁶⁹ Food, therefore, continued to provide the westward migrants with a way to culturally connect to

⁶⁷ Knight, “Diary, 1853,” 207.

⁶⁸ Rudd, “Notes by the Wayside En Route to Oregon, 1852,” 192.

⁶⁹ Hewitt, *Across the Plains*, 141-42.

eastern traditions and maintain a sense of patriotism in the seemingly desolate American West.

* * * * *

From Independence Rock, the overlanders continued to follow the Sweetwater River toward the Continental Divide at South Pass. The vast Great Plains lay behind them, and they had nearly completed half of their trek across the continent. In many ways, the celebrations at Independence Rock were much more than patriotic. They marked travelers' success in seeking out daily grass, water, and fuel, and having crossed the Plains.

From the onset of the trip migrants found that their weighty provisions dictated how much they could carry in their wagons, forcing them to leave behind comforts of home and sever many cultural ties with the East. At the same time, efforts made at mealtime to replicate a sense of domesticity and to enliven holiday meals with special foods worked to maintain cultural identity. Women continued to labor over meals, but their primary role as cooks on the trail shaped their overall experience of the overland journey. Men also concerned themselves daily with food not only through consumption, but through the constant search for fuel to cook with, hunting, or trading for provisions. Hunting buffalo, in particular, eventually contributed to the near-extinction of that animal and negatively impacted the Plains Indians who depended on them. However, many migrants also found that sharing or trading food with Native Americans helped to maintain good relations and calm the fear and excitement of encountering Indians for the first time. Finally, through trade and purchase of provisions with natives and at Fort

Laramie, overlanders extended American commerce across the West. Serving as much more than mere sustenance, food influenced nearly every aspect of the westward movement across the Plains. As the difficulty of travel increased during the second half of the overland journey, food would only continue to play a serious role in the migration experience.

Chapter Three

Rockies to Oregon and California

By mid-July, migrants usually completed their long treks across the Great Plains and approached the Rocky Mountains. The steady ascent up to seven thousand feet culminated almost anticlimactically at South Pass, where the Overland Trail crossed the Continental Divide just south of the Wind River Range. “The ascent had been so gradual,” wrote explorer John C. Frémont in his *Report*, that “we were obliged to watch very closely to find the place at which we had reached the culminating point.”¹ Rather than a steep and rocky pass through two imposing cliff walls as many had imagined, the grassy pass spread twenty miles in width. Frémont compared the pass “to the ascent of the Capitol hill from the avenue, at Washington” and noted how “the traveller, without being reminded of any change by toilsome ascents, suddenly finds himself on the waters which flow to the Pacific ocean.”² While not as precipitous or impressive as expected, South Pass nevertheless marked an important milestone along the Oregon-California Trail—with the journey across the flat and barren Great Plains finished, migration was halfway complete, and travelers looked upon the Far West and noted to themselves, as Joel Palmer did in 1845, “Here, then, we hailed OREGON.”³

The green and fertile valleys of both Oregon’s Willamette Valley and California’s Sacramento Valley remained hundreds of miles in the distance, however, and the second

¹ John C. Frémont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843-’44* (Washington, DC: Gales and Seaton, 1845), 60.

² *Ibid.*

³ Joel Palmer, *Journal of Travels over the Rocky Mountains* (1847; reprint, Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, Inc., 1966), 33.

half of the Overland Trail often appeared just as barren as the first. Tired from the first few months of travel across the Plains and with provisions daily diminishing, migrants found that the second half of the Oregon-California Trail contained more mountainous ascents and rocky paths that proved hard on humans and domesticated animals alike.

Annual precipitation where migrants' paths traversed the West was very low, which naturally affected the amount and quality of water, grass, and timber.⁴ In the Rocky Mountains of present-day Wyoming, grasslands spread between mountains and resembled high deserts, but were really steppes or "cool, continental environments too dry for trees."⁵ Bunchgrasses carpeted these drier regions, growing in the late fall and with melting snow in the late winter and spring. To guard from summer drought, however, the grasses became dormant at the precise time when westbound travelers passed through the Rockies with forage-dependent oxen and horses.⁶ When heavily grazed, bunchgrasses also had difficulty recovering. During summers when literally thousands of migrants passed through with even more animals, competition for good grass ensued. In 1846, Charles Stanton traveled in a large migrant party that was delayed "owing to a 'difference of opinion' among our company." The men could not decide whether to stay another day on the Plains to let their animals rest while the men hunt buffalo—which some of the families needed because they did not have enough food to make it through the mountains—or to move on to ensure the availability of grasses for their animals before other migrant trains passed them. If they were passed, some

⁴ Richard Cannings, *The Rockies: A Natural History* (Vancouver, BC: Greystone Books, 2005), 74.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 198.

reasoned, “the grass would all be eat out by their cattle, and that consequently, when we came along our cattle would starve, as there would be nothing for them to subsist on.” The animals’ need for good grass dictated these migrants’ schedule, and the “go-ahead party” won.⁷

Other migrants altered their routes in order to find better grass and water. When Randall Hewitt’s party traveled across in 1862, they chose to leave the main emigrant trail and take the Lander cutoff from South Pass, in part because they “had reliable assurance that a more northern route meant good grass and abundance of water and wood—two things of absolute necessity.”⁸ In fact, a little farther on, the party chose another fork for the same reason, and this one meant leaving the more direct route to cover several more miles. As Hewitt recalled, “a longer line with abundant feed and water would in reality be shorter than one as badly supplied as that we had come over for the last three hundred miles.”⁹

The need for grasses even played a significant role in the ultimate destination of westbound travelers. After the discovery of gold in California in 1848 and the rush that ensued, 1852 witnessed a particularly large overland migration. Grass was scarce that season, and many who intended to go to California instead headed toward the plentiful

⁷ Charles T. Stanton to Sidney Stanton, “South Pass,” 19 July 1846, in *Overland in 1846: Diaries and Letters of the California-Oregon Trail*, ed. Dale Morgan, 2 vols. (Georgetown, CA: The Talisman Press, 1963), 2: 618.

⁸ Randall Hewitt, *Across the Plains and Over the Divide: A Mule Train Journey from East to West in 1862, and Incidents Connected Therewith* (1906; reprint, New York: Argosy-Antiquarian Ltd, 1964), 214.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 273.

meadows of Oregon.¹⁰ Travel relied on animals to carry the people and their belongings across the country, making the importance of food and the reliance on the land doubly significant. Even if travelers had enough provisions, their animals remained dependent on the country.

Often during this second half of the journey, travelers needed to find food to replenish diminishing stores of provisions. One possibility was hunting. Unlike the Great Plains where bison roamed in staggering numbers and provided many migrants with fresh meat, the Rocky Mountains signaled, for the most part, the end of “the range of the buffalo.”¹¹ A few bison could still be found in intermontane grasslands during the mid-nineteenth century, but other game animals were more abundant. In 1853, George Brewerton traveled through the Rocky Mountains with Kit Carson and wrote, “These valleys abounded in game, among which I noticed the black-tailed deer, elk, antelope, and the Rocky Mountain sheep or ‘big-horn,’ as they are sometimes called.”¹² Likewise, Palmer observed in 1845, “We daily see hundreds of antelope.”¹³ In addition, mountain streams provided opportunities for catching fish. On Ross’s Creek in the Rockies, John Kirk Townsend found “the stream contains an abundance of excellent trout. Some of these are enormous, and very fine eating.”¹⁴

¹⁰ John D. Unruh, Jr., *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 83.

¹¹ Palmer, *Journal of Travels*, 34.

¹² George D. Brewerton, “A Ride With Kit Carson Through the Great American Desert and the Rocky Mountains,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 7 (August 1853): 330-31.

¹³ Palmer, *Journal of Travels*, 34.

¹⁴ John Kirk Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey Across the Rocky Mountains to the Columbia River* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), 99.

Still, not all travelers low on provisions found game and supplemental foodstuffs as easily along the trail; they turned to regional natives to acquire sustenance. Though Brewerton noted a variety of game available in the Rocky Mountains, he continued, “this abundance, however, proved rather a matter of vexation than a real benefit; for the animals were so wild and unapproachable that our hunters were often disappointed in obtaining meat.” His party instead had to rely on game hunted by “the Indians, who were here better provided.”¹⁵ Various tribes of Shoshone Indians, also called Snake Indians in contemporary accounts, populated much of the Oregon Trail beginning in the Rockies and continuing down the Snake River toward the Columbia. In addition to trading with Indians for meat, some migrants learned of and traded for new foods from Native Americans while traveling through the West. John C. Frémont learned about yampah (or Indian carrot, a species of fennel) from a Snake woman whom he observed digging the plant from the bottom of a creek. Abundant in the Rocky Mountains, Frémont wrote of yampah: “this is considered the best among the roots used for food. To us, it was an interesting plant—a little link between the savage and civilized life. Here, among the Indians, its root is a common article of food, which they take pleasure in offering to strangers; while with us, in a considerable portion of America and Europe, the seeds are used to flavor soup.”¹⁶ Whatever prejudice Frémont may have had toward the “savage” root, he soon learned to eat it more substantially than as a mere flavoring, and its traditional role was reversed when he had for supper “*yampah*, the most agreeably

¹⁵ Brewerton, “A Ride With Kit Carson,” 331.

¹⁶ Frémont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition*, 124.

flavored of the roots, seasoned by a small fat duck.”¹⁷ In fact, the root became common enough in Frémont’s diet to discontinue writing the word *yampah* in italics in his *Report*.¹⁸ Just as sharing food with Native Americans on the Plains helped to ensure good relations, migrating whites and local natives continued to meet and exchange food in the Rocky Mountains and beyond.

The Shoshones were generally friendly toward migrants and trade relations proved mutually beneficial to Indians and traveling whites alike. In 1852, Lydia Allen Rudd traded with Shoshone Indians who approached her party’s camp, and in her diary she noted, “I swaped some hard bread with them for some good berries.”¹⁹ Shortly thereafter, she purchased a large salmon from an Indian and in exchange “gave him an old shirt some bread and a sewing needle.”²⁰ A decade later, Jane Gould Tourtillott wrote in her diary on the way to California of her first encounter with Indians. Apparently a wagon train ahead of hers had burned several Shoshone wigwams, and the chief demanded that Tourtillott’s party pay for them. Captain Walker, leader of the traveling party, assured the chief that the preceding train had burned them and to smooth relations, “they got quite a good deal of bread and bacon from different ones from our camp. After being in trouble with them for so long, we are glad to let them be friendly if

¹⁷ Ibid., 152.

¹⁸ Ibid., 158.

¹⁹ Lydia Allen Rudd, “Notes by the Wayside En Route to Oregon, 1852,” in *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, ed. Lillian Schlissel (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 192.

²⁰ Ibid., 193.

they will.”²¹ Food, then, provided not only simple sustenance on the overland trails, but acted as an important mechanism for maintaining good relations with Native Americans.

But competition over food resources also caused tension between natives and whites. While in the Rocky Mountains in 1834, John Kirk Townsend came across a Blackfoot Indian, whom Townsend believed posed possible trouble.²² Blackfeet lived in the Rockies and regularly hunted bison there or on the Plains to the east. Though Townsend acknowledged that the “determined hostility” of the Blackfeet towards “all white men . . . is fomented and kept alive from year to year by incessant provocatives on the part of white hunters, trappers, and traders, who are at best the intruders on the rightful domains of the red man of the wilderness,” he nevertheless labeled the Blackfoot “a sworn and determined foe to all white men.”²³ Blackfeet felt threatened and angry over the loss of game animals caused by white men in the region, for they depended on game for their own sustenance. Townsend wrote that the “Blackfoot . . . has often been heard to declare that he would rather hang the scalp of a ‘pale face’ to his girdle, than kill a buffalo to prevent his starving.”²⁴ Interestingly, Townsend later wrote of his own hungry situation that the absence of game in the area was only advantageous because Blackfoot hunters would not be in the vicinity. However, he continued, “this circumstance, convenient as it is, does not compensate for empty stomachs, and I believe

²¹ Jane Gould Tourtillott, “Touring from Mitchell, Iowa, to California, 1862,” in Schlissel, ed., *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 226.

²² Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey*, 98.

²³ *Ibid.*, 104-105.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

the men would rather fight for the privilege of obtaining food, than live without it.”²⁵

Whether or not a Blackfoot Indian ever said he preferred to scalp a white man than to hunt we cannot say, but the juxtaposition of food in each of the above scenarios remains interesting. They illuminate the competition over food in certain areas of the West, but they also show how food served as a cultural symbol for expressing hostility when it was the life-supporting item one was willing to forego in order to fight an enemy, while that enemy would rather fight than starve. Competition over natural resources further underlines the importance of finding new provisions in the West and the powerful role food played in shaping Indian-White relations.

After South Pass, some travelers chose to detour southward to Fort Bridger. Louis Vasquez and Jim Bridger established the trading fort in 1841 in order to profit from the needs of overland migrants. Unlike most other forts that began as fur trading or military posts, Fort Bridger developed as a direct response to the growing numbers of needy travelers. Located on a tributary of the Green River called Black’s Fork, the site featured good grass and woods—a respite from the surrounding desert. Bridger wrote of his trading business to his supplier, “I have established a small store with a Black Smith Shop, and a supply of iron in the road of the Emigrants . . . which promises fairly. They, in coming out are generally well supplied with money, but by the time they get there, are in want of all kinds of supplies. Horses, Provisions, Smith work, &c, bring ready cash from them.”²⁶ Migrating Americans’ need to procure new provisions along the trail supported not merely traveling entrepreneurs and traders, like the men selling beef to

²⁵ Ibid., 125.

²⁶ Jim Bridger to P. Chouteau & Company, 10 Dec. 1843, in Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 245.

travelers along the Platte River, but a permanent establishment erected expressly for the purpose of commercial exchanges with migrants.

The main trail from South Pass and the Rocky Mountains followed “the only possible routes,” as “determined by small streams and small patches of grass” through an otherwise barren landscape.²⁷ It followed Bear River and passed Soda Springs, then headed toward the Snake River. The next place with the possibility of procuring new provisions by means other than hunting and fishing or trading with Indians was at Fort Hall, near present-day Pocatello, Idaho. Established in 1834 by Nathaniel Wyeth but turned over to the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1837, Fort Hall was the last major landmark before the California and Oregon Trails split.²⁸ In 1836, the missionary Narcissa Whitman and her party stopped at Fort Hall, where Captain Thing provided a dinner of “dry buffalo meat, turnips & fried bread, which was a luxury.” Whitman proclaimed that “to one who has had nothing but meat for a long time this relishes (very) well.”²⁹ In 1845, Joel Palmer found Fort Hall “supplied with flour, which had been procured from the settlements in Oregon . . . They sold it to the emigrants for twenty dollars per cwt., taking cattle in exchange; and as many of the emigrants were nearly out of flour, and had a few lame cattle, a brisk trade was carried on between them and the inhabitants of the fort.”³⁰ However, two years previous, John C. Frémont and his party discovered “provisions were very scarce, and difficult to be had at Fort Hall, which had

²⁷ Bernard DeVoto, *The Year of Decision: 1846* (1942; reprint, New York: Book-of-the-Month Club, Inc., 1984), 191.

²⁸ Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 474.

²⁹ Narcissa Whitman, diary, in *First White Women Over the Rockies: Diaries, Letters, and Biographical Sketches of the Six Women of the Oregon Mission who made the Overland Journey in 1836 and 1838*, ed. Clifford Merrill Drury, 2 vols. (Glendale, CA: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1963), 1: 78.

³⁰ Palmer, *Journal of Travels*, 42.

been entirely exhausted by the necessities of the emigrants.”³¹ Nearly two decades later in 1862, Randall Hewitt noted “the stock of merchandise seemed to be about equally divided between staple provisions and liquors, the balance, if anything, being on the liquor side.” Like many other travelers passing Fort Hall, Hewitt’s party found themselves low on flour, so “an additional supply to carry us over a few days was obtained here, costing twelve dollars per hundred pounds.”³² Once again, the ability to purchase provisions en route, as well as the ability to hire guides during the early years of migration or to pay for tolls and ferries during the later years, required a substantial amount of cash or trade goods.

Beyond Fort Hall, California-bound travelers turned off the Oregon Trail and headed southwest through barren country that, according to Joel Palmer, was “mostly destitute of vegetation—nothing growing but the wild sage and wormwood.”³³ The Oregon Trail continued west along the Snake River and eventually crossed north on its way to the Boise River. Bunchgrass and other dry shrubs remained the only vegetation through much of this land. John Kirk Townsend described the region in 1834 as “the most arid plains we have seen, covered thickly with jagged masses of lava, and twisted wormwood bushes.” He related the effects of such a landscape on those traveling through: “Both horses and men were jaded to the last degree; the former from the rough,

³¹ Frémont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition*, 149.

³² Hewitt, *Across the Plains and Over the Divide*, 452.

³³ Palmer, *Journal of Travels*, 45.

and at times almost impassable nature of the track, and the latter from excessive heat and parching thirst.”³⁴

The same environment that sustained travelers and their animals also posed dangerous threats. In certain areas, water became alkaline and non-potable as a result of both the chemical makeup of the soil and quick evaporation of water by the powerful sun.³⁵ The alkaline water served as an unwanted laxative for travelers with no other sources of potable water, leading inevitably to dehydration. Other springs were “strongly impregnated with salt.”³⁶ Poor water quality not only afflicted migrants, but their stock animals suffered as well. In particularly dangerous areas, owners had difficulty preventing thirsty and hungry oxen, cattle, horses, and mules from drinking the alkaline water and eating toxic weeds. Amelia Stewart Knight lamented the effects on her own animals from what she assumed to be a poisonous environment. “This evening another of our best milk cows died,” she wrote in her diary; “cattle are dying off very fast all along this road. We are hardly ever out of sight of dead cattle, on this side of Snake River. This cow was well and fat an hour before she died.”³⁷

Low on provisions and reliant on meat for sustenance, travelers often found the last stretch of the Oregon Trail into the salmon-rich Pacific Northwest equally problematic. John Kirk Townsend and his men suffered through “the sudden and entire change from flesh exclusively, to fish, ditto, has affected us all more or less, with

³⁴ Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey*, 122.

³⁵ Susan Schwartz, *Nature in the Northwest: An Introduction to the Natural History and Ecology of the Northwestern United States from the Rockies to the Pacific* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1983), 138.

³⁶ James Mathers, “Diary of James Mathers,” in Morgan, ed., *Overland in 1846*, 1: 230.

³⁷ Amelia Stewart Knight, “Diary, 1853,” in Schlissel, ed., *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 211.

diarrhoea [*sic*] and pain in the abdomen; several of the men have been so extremely sick, as scarcely to be able to travel.”³⁸ Migrants frequently encountered Shoshone Indians ready to trade fresh or dried salmon. Townsend found the Boise River “literally *crowded* with salmon, which are springing from the water almost constantly,” but also realized that he and his men were “not provided with suitable implements for taking any, and must therefore depend for a supply on the Indians.”³⁹ Yet, profit was a secondary consideration for Indians, and when they had their own difficulty fishing they were less willing to part with food. Townsend’s party could only procure “*three* small salmon” from the Shoshones who “had been unsuccessful in fishing, not having caught enough for themselves, and even the offer of exorbitant sums was not sufficient to induce them to part with more.”⁴⁰ Unless travelers retained a sufficient store of provisions with them at this stage of the journey, their reliance on the immediate environment became painfully highlighted, particularly when that land produced little even for the native residents in the area.

Migrants’ animals, wholly dependent on the land for their sustenance, suffered as well. As Joel Palmer neared Fort Boise, he wrote of the scarcity of good grass, noting “this day we found several head of cattle that had given out from fatigue of traveling.” More than blaming the deficient land, however, Palmer blamed fellow migrants, pointing out how some refused to accommodate their travel to the demands of the landscape. “Some of the companies had been racing, endeavoring to pass each other,” he wrote,

³⁸ Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey*, 154.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 142.

“and now they have reached a region where but little grass is found—are beginning to reap the reward of their folly.”⁴¹ By pushing oxen and horses faster or harder than their foraged diets could sustain, migrants risked ill or injured animals that would ultimately only slow travel down. Not only did the environment provide the animals’ food, but it in turn dictated the allowable speed of travel as migrants journeyed across.

Next on the main trail came Fort Boise, another Hudson’s Bay trading post located where the Snake and Boise Rivers meet in present-day western Idaho. Here travelers purchased provisions before heading toward the Blue Mountains. Joel Palmer found “a quantity of flour in store, brought from OREGON CITY,” but at a steep price. “A few of our company being in extreme want,” he wrote, “were obliged to purchase at this exorbitant price.”⁴² Here also John C. Frémont received from the Hudson Bay Company’s Mr. Payette a supply of “comestibles,” including “the dairy, which was abundantly supplied, stock appearing to thrive extremely well; and we had an unusual luxury in a present of fresh butter.”⁴³ Though still arid, the Boise area contained carpets of bunchgrasses, a welcome source of feed after the deserts along the Snake River.⁴⁴

Continuing northwestward on the Oregon Trail, travelers headed toward the valley of the Grande Ronde and the Blue Mountains. In the Grande Ronde valley of present-day western Idaho and northeastern Oregon, they came upon a prairie “with good water and excellent pasture” and “streams . . . generally lined with timber.”⁴⁵ Here, too,

⁴¹ Palmer, *Journal of Travels*, 46.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴³ Frémont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition*, 173.

⁴⁴ Schwartz, *Nature in the Northwest*, 140-41.

⁴⁵ Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey*, 161; Palmer, *Journal of Travels*, 53.

was found the camas root, a staple of regional Indian diets. Indian women “dug, dried, roasted, and pounded camas,” a star-like blue flower with a starchy bulb.⁴⁶ John Kirk Townsend encountered Cayuse Indians, including two women who presented the white men with “some large kamas cakes and fermented roots” for purchase.⁴⁷

The Blue Mountains contained “grassy slopes and piney stream valleys,” a respite to travel-weary overlanders, but Townsend also described them as, “with one exception perhaps the most difficult of passage” due to the dense pine trees and shrubs, and a path “strewed, to a very inconvenient degree, with volcanic rocks.”⁴⁸ Water occasionally proved difficult to find or at the least to reach in ravines. Frémont’s party rested on a ridge in the Blue Mountains and agreed “it was quite a pretty spot, had there been water near.” Later that night his men carefully climbed down into a ravine with India rubber buckets to find water, finding the side trip “a very difficult way in the darkness down the slippery side of a steep mountain, and harder still to climb about half a mile up again.” The men appreciated their water and coffee more as a result of the difficulty of the chore.⁴⁹

Just as Native Americans often provided edible goods for purchase or trade to migrants along the trail, they also purposefully manipulated the grass available for forage in certain areas. When Townsend passed through the Blue Mountains in 1834 he found the grass “lately consumed, and many of the trees blasted by the ravaging fires of the

⁴⁶ Schwartz, *Nature in the Northwest*, 108.

⁴⁷ Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey*, 161.

⁴⁸ Schwartz, *Nature in the Northwest*, 69; Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey*, 163.

⁴⁹ Frémont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition*, 180.

Indians.”⁵⁰ Indians throughout Oregon used fire to shape and cultivate the landscape, encouraging growth of particular agricultural plants and enriching grasslands. While some white travelers found the charred area “a difficult, food-deprived, and scarred landscape,” historian William G. Robbins has described it as “a culturally nurtured and productive environment for its native inhabitants.”⁵¹ Unfortunately for Townsend, his party arrived in the Blue Mountains at just the wrong time—in the wake of Indian burnings of the land. For more fortunate migrants like Frémont who traversed the region earlier in the year, “the grass [was] very green and good; the old grass having been burnt off in the autumn.”⁵² Once again, Native Americans and white migrants intersected in the West around an aspect of food—in this case forage for travelers’ animals.

In the river valleys between the Blue and Cascade Mountains, Native Americans traded foodstuffs with overlanders headed toward the Columbia River. Joel Palmer noted how Indians along the Umatilla River raised “wheat, corn, potatoes, peas, and a variety of vegetables,” wanting clothing in return. For migrants seeking more provisions, the Whitman Mission and Fort Walla Walla lay north of the Oregon Trail on the southern border of present-day Washington. Palmer’s party received “a plentiful supply of flour, meal and potatoes” from the mission.⁵³ Townsend gratefully purchased Indian meal from the fort. Being without any kind of bread for a long time, Townsend mixed the flour into a mush with horse tallow and salt, declaring the concoction “one of the best meals I ever

⁵⁰ Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey*, 163.

⁵¹ William G. Robbins, *Landscapes of Promise: The Oregon Story, 1800-1940* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 36.

⁵² John C. Frémont, in Robbins, ed., *Landscapes of Promise*, 42.

⁵³ Palmer, *Journal of Travels*, 57.

made...and pronounced it princely food.”⁵⁴ When Frémont approached the Whitman Mission in late October of 1843, however, the mill had recently burned and had no corn meal or flour for trade. Luckily for Frémont and his men, “an abundant supply of excellent potatoes banished regrets, and furnished a grateful substitute for bread.”⁵⁵ While the presence of a mission or fort with food to trade with migrants proved a blessing for many, the scarcity of such establishments in the undeveloped West dictated that when misfortune struck, new provisions for sale could not be easily restocked.

In the dry sage desert of the Columbia Plateau, Indians often went to the main trails to trade with migrants. After Townsend procured the aforementioned flour at Walla Walla, he relied for meat on the local natives, having “little doubt of meeting Indians daily, with whom we can trade for fish.”⁵⁶ While camped near the Columbia River, Amelia Stewart Knight noted that “Quite a number of Indians were camped around us, for the purpose of selling salmon to the emigrants.”⁵⁷ Likewise, Joel Palmer experienced frequent visits from Indians along the Columbia offering the travelers much appreciated vegetables. In exchange, the Indians demanded, and the migrants were willing to part with, clothing. Palmer and his party found themselves “left with but one suit.”⁵⁸ Palmer warned also of an unwanted ancillary trade that occasionally took place with the Native Americans: “We were compelled to keep a sharp look out over our kitchen furniture, as during these visits it was liable to diminish in quantity by forming an attachment towards

⁵⁴ Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey*, 170.

⁵⁵ Frémont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition*, 183.

⁵⁶ Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey*, 173.

⁵⁷ Knight, “Diary, 1853,” 213.

⁵⁸ Palmer, *Journal of Travels*, 59.

these children of the forest, and following them off.”⁵⁹ Despite such pilfering, migrants were fortunate to have access to fresh provisions, particularly so late in their journey.

Though overlanders had access to more food along the Columbia, travel remained hard. Palmer’s caravan “suffered great inconvenience from the want of fuel, as there is none to be found along the Columbia; we collected a few dry sticks of driftwood and weeds, which enabled us to partially cook our food.”⁶⁰ All along the overland trails, fuel remained necessary for cooking the foodstuffs purchased or collected along the way.

While technically already in the Oregon Territory and very close to their final destinations in the settlements of the Willamette Valley, the last leg of the trip posed some of the greatest challenges for travelers. According to historian William A. Bowen, after the Rocky Mountains “discipline slackened, and progress slowed. Parties loitered through miscalculation or wore themselves out. In the end, most emigrants reached the Columbia exhausted and unequipped to face the rigors of the last several miles. The passage down the river canyon or over the mountains left nearly all as destitute as those who had preceded them.”⁶¹ Some who took a boat or ferry down the Columbia found long lines of travelers awaiting passage. Elizabeth Dixon Smith Greer and her family took six months to travel from Indiana to the Columbia River in 1847, and then took at least another twenty days to arrive in Portland. She wrote in her diary, “Here was some hundreds camped, waiting for boats to come and take them down the Columbia to

⁵⁹ Ibid., 59.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 60.

⁶¹ William A. Bowen, *The Willamette Valley: Migration and Settlement on the Oregon Frontier* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978), 12.

Vancouver or Portland or Oregon City.”⁶² While waiting, they consumed those provisions originally intended to see them to their final destinations. Moving down the Columbia, Greer noted, “November 9 Finds us still in trouble. Waves dashing over our raft and we already stinting ourselves in provisions,” and three days later her diary entry stated only: “Rain all day. We are living entirely on beef.”⁶³

Travel by raft or boat down the Columbia often proved dangerous and expensive, so others chose instead to take the Barlow Road over the Cascade Mountains, an equally difficult journey. Amelia Stewart Knight wrote of her party’s preparations in her diary in September of 1853: “Still in camp, washing and overhauling the wagons to make them as light as possible to cross the mountains. Evening—After throwing away a good many things and burning up most of the deck boards of our wagons so as to lighten them, got my washing and cooking done and started on again.”⁶⁴ Eliminating extra weight also relieved the burden on weary animals pulling the wagons over the mountains. At the same time, however, it only worsened overlanders’ poverty just as they entered a foreign land, establish homes, and prepared agricultural fields before winter. Virgil Pringle spent five days getting through a pass in the Umpqua Mountains in 1846, experiencing “a series of hardships, break-downs and being constantly wet and laboring hard and very little to eat, the provisions being exhausted in the whole company.” In his diary he continued, “We ate our last the evening we got through. . . . There is great loss of

⁶² “Diary of Mrs. Elizabeth Dixon Smith Greer,” in *Enduring Voices Volume 1: To 1877*, ed. James J. Lorence (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 276.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 275.

⁶⁴ “Diary of Amelia Stewart Knight, an Oregon Pioneer of 1853,” in Lorence, ed., *Enduring Voices*, 278.

property and suffering, no bread, live altogether on beef. Leave one wagon.”⁶⁵ Not all overlanders arrived in the Willamette Valley quite so destitute, but they nevertheless expressed a great sigh of relief at having finally completed their continental crossings.

For those migrants headed to California, the main California Trail cut off from the Oregon Trail at the Snake River shortly after Fort Hall. Some travelers chose to make a detour toward the Great Salt Lake and Salt Lake City. Established as a Mormon settlement by Brigham Young in 1847, the Saints in Salt Lake City provided many travel-weary overlanders with a place to rest, restock, and re-outfit before the long trek ahead through deserts and the Sierra Nevada. However, the Mormons usually traded or sold goods only in years of plentiful harvest, and even then they raised the prices for Gentiles much higher than for fellow Mormons.⁶⁶ Mary Powers of Illinois passed through the Mormon settlements in 1856 and described in her trail diary how the settlers mistook her and her family for Mormons—a mistake the Powers family took care not to correct. In addition to the much-relished fresh vegetables and dairy products her family enjoyed, she wrote, “we bought flour at \$6 a barrel, if they had supposed us gentiles it would have cost us five times as much.”⁶⁷

After cutting southwest from the Oregon Trail, the main California Trail entered the Great Basin. Encompassing a vast expanse of arid sagebrush country that covered nearly all of present-day Nevada, the migrants faced a journey through “500 miles of dry

⁶⁵ Virgil Pringle, “Diary of Virgil Pringle,” in Morgan, ed., *Overland in 1846*, 1: 185.

⁶⁶ Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 307.

⁶⁷ Mary Rockwood Powers, *A Woman’s Overland Journal to California*, ed. W. B. Thorsen (Fairfield, WA: Ye Galleon Press, 1985), 45.

basins and rugged ranges.”⁶⁸ This final leg of the overland crossing contained some of the hardest challenges for travelers, especially for their animals. Very little grass and water could be found along certain segments of the trail, and humans and animals alike were wearied from the previous months of travel over a distance of more than one thousand miles.

It was essential that water, when found, be collected and stored. Forty-niner Israel Shipman Pelton Lord described from Hudspeth’s Cutoff north of the Great Salt Lake the desperate situation posed by the landscape: “men and teams suffered a great deal for want of water on this route as they always do when neglecting to take a supply. . . . Men frequently lie down by the road side, with black parched lips and dry swollen tongue and wait till some passing team can spare a cup of water or till the sun goes down.”⁶⁹ In fact, without the Humboldt River (also called Mary’s River in contemporary accounts) running diagonally across the central portion of Nevada for approximately 350 miles, this desert crossing would not have been possible for migrants. Still, the river left much to be desired. Though decent at its source near present-day Wells, Nevada, the Humboldt progressively grew more shallow, alkaline, and warm as it wined slowly into the Humboldt Sink. While his characterization of the river is exaggerated, forty-niner Reuben Shaw captured the disappointment it held for expectant travelers when he wrote, “. . . the Humboldt is not good for man nor beast. With the exception of a short distance from its source, it has the least perceptible current. There is not a fish nor any other

⁶⁸ Donald Dale Jackson, *Sagebrush Country* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1975), 31.

⁶⁹ Israel Shipman Pelton Lord, “*At the Extremity of Civilization*”: *A Meticulously Descriptive Diary of an Illinois Physician’s Journey in 1849 Along the Oregon Trail to the Goldmines and Cholera of California*, ed. Necia Dixon Liles (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1995), 75.

living thing to be found in its waters, and there is not timber enough in three hundred miles of its desolate valley to make a snuff-box, or sufficient vegetation along its bank to shade a rabbit, while its waters contain the alkali to make soap for a nation, and, after winding its sluggish way through a desert within a desert, it sinks, disappears, and leaves inquisitive man to ask how, why, when and where.”⁷⁰

Such scant natural resources led inevitably to competition both among migrant trains and between white travelers and the Native Americans. When Wakeman Bryarly passed along the Humboldt in late July of 1849 with seventy other men in the Charlestown Company he wrote emotionally in his journal, “One can be struck with sorrow for those coming behind us. Already the grass is so scarce that we will be enabled to get through, if at all, by merely the skin of our teeth, & what the seven thousand teams behind us are to do *God Almighty only knows*.”⁷¹ Some parties took to laying over in order to cut what grass there was and dry it, thereby storing up hay to carry with them through stretches with unreliable forage.⁷² The carcasses of dead oxen and other animals littered the barren desert trail, testimony to the fact that not all migrants were as fortunate. On September 16, 1849, Lord recorded in his journal, “We have passed 130 [oxen] this morning (by count in six miles and here are 40 lying dead on a quarter of an acre),” and mused, “nothing but ravens and crawling worms are here from choice.”⁷³ Migrants and

⁷⁰ Reuben Shaw, in Greg MacGregor, *Overland: The California Emigrant Trail of 1841-1870* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 102.

⁷¹ Vincent Geiger and Wakeman Bryarly, *Trail to California: The Overland Journal of Vincent Geiger and Wakeman Bryarly*, ed. David Morris Potter (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1945), 170.

⁷² Lord, “*At the Extremity of Civilization*,” 107-08.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 117.

their animals relied most keenly on the feeble environment in this dangerous desert, while at the same time struggling to hurry across as quickly as possible.

In addition to competition for grass, the large number of hunting migrants in any given season might lead to a scarcity of game animals and fresh meat as well. On July 30, 1849, the Charlestown Company hunters secured five antelope and “numerous sage hens & ducks,” which Bryarly noted “furnished us all with fresh meat, which was relished greatly.”⁷⁴ However, a week later Israel Lord wrote morosely in his trail journal, “Who says ‘hurrah for California?’ Not many here, for most are heartily tired of the journey. If there was game it would be much pleasanter, but the constant chasing by thousands has driven them so far, or rendered them so shy, that it is not worth the trouble to hunt, as you can seldom or never get a shot.”⁷⁵ While Lord attributed the scarcity of game animals to the constant chasing by traveling hunters, the related truth was that native animals could not compete for grass and water with the thousands of domesticated animals driven by the overlanders along the Humboldt, and therefore had to leave and seek out alternate resources.

This precise competition for natural resources in a delicate environment that depended on the tenuous Humboldt River greatly affected relations between white California-bound sojourners and the desert’s Native Americans. White traders and migrants had long referred derisively to native inhabitants as “Digger Indians,” because much of their subsistence came from digging for roots and small animals with sticks. More precisely, the Diggers were made up of various bands of Goshiutes, Paiutes,

⁷⁴ Geiger and Bryarly, *Trail to California*, 172.

⁷⁵ Lord, “*At the Extremity of Civilization*,” 105.

Washoes, and Western Shoshones. Using only bows and arrows and possessing few, if any, horses, the Digger Indians relied more intimately on their immediate environment for survival than the mobile and well-armed peoples of the Great Plains. This also meant they had more to lose when thousands of white men and women began to pass along the Humboldt, “using up the precious resources, using the same campsites, and spoiling the water by careless livestock control.”⁷⁶

Part of the derisive nature of their classification by whites came from the Diggers’ propensity for thievery and killing migrants’ draught animals at night, making this desert crossing one of the most dangerous portions of the entire Oregon-California Trail. For struggling migrants in a harsh environment who ran low on provisions and whose animals already strained under their heavy burdens, all the while consuming little food and water, the loss of draught animals posed a serious threat. Wakeman Bryarly noted in 1849 having seen “signs of the Digger Indians,” and passed “a placard set by an emigrant stating they [the Digger Indians] had attempted to kill some of their cattle.” Thus Bryarly also wrote, somewhat justifiably, “These Diggers are considered the meanest Indians in existence.”⁷⁷

Not to be forgotten or ignored, however, was the fact that these various desert Indians employed such “mean” tactics as their own survival techniques against the waves of threatening migrants marching through a delicate environment. When the Diggers shot oxen or mules, they often ate the meat left after the travelers moved on, thus using their violence and theft to sustain their own lives. Some parties refused to let the Indians

⁷⁶ MacGregor, *Overland*, 97.

⁷⁷ Geiger and Bryarly, *Trail to California*, 167.

enjoy their stolen feast and instead packed and ate the meat of their fallen animals themselves. Elijah Farnham boasted, “We packed up the cattle that had been killed by the Indians & between us & the hungry packers that came along we used up the flesh of the dead cattle so clean that the diggers did not get a morsel for their pains.”⁷⁸ Even as fear of Native Americans in the West grew to mythical proportions, nineteenth-century Americans too often ignored or failed to realize that some of the actual violence that took place stemmed not from mere malice, but from the Indians’ efforts to obtain or protect life-sustaining food in a harsh and unforgiving environment.

At the end of the Humboldt River, the already dubious waterway disappeared into the salt marsh of the Humboldt Sink. Here the migrants found water and good grass—a godsend before entering the so-called Forty-Mile Desert between the Humboldt and the Carson or Truckee Rivers. Many camped for extended periods along the marshes in order to rest and feed their animals. Wakeman Bryarly wrote from the Humboldt Sink, “This marsh for three miles is certainly the liveliest place that one could witness in a lifetime. There is some two hundred and fifty wagons here all the time. Trains going out & others coming in & taking their places, is the constant order of the day.” While the animals enjoyed abundant feed, the men made various preparations, “some mowing, some reaping, some carrying, some packing the grass, others spreading it out to dry, [or] collecting that already dry & fixing it for transportation.”⁷⁹ Others stored what water they could. Mary Rockwood Powers’s wagon party “found a great iron bound sixteen

⁷⁸ Elijah Farnham, in Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 183.

⁷⁹ Geiger and Bryarly, *Trail to California*, 185.

gallon keg” left behind by previous campers, a welcome addition for the journey ahead. Powers also “baked up a lot of bread to last across the desert.”⁸⁰

Rested and prepared, travelers usually began the *jornada*, or desert crossing, in the evening in order to travel through the night and avoid the harsh heat of the sun. The trails split on their way to the Sierra Nevada, one headed for the Carson River and the other for the Truckee River. Many animals perished in the desert from lack of water and grass, not to mention fatigue from months of travel. The migrants also forfeited a great deal of possessions to the desert. Franklin Langworthy commented on this portion of the trail in 1850, “The destruction of property upon this part of the road is beyond all computation. Abandoned wagons literally crowded the way for twenty miles, and the dead animals are so numerous, that I have counted 50 carcasses within a distance of 40 rods. The desert from side to side is strewn with goods of every name.”⁸¹ While necessary to leave behind burdensome weight—perhaps even whole wagons—in the difficult desert, the loss of property only added to the increasing destitution of the California-bound overlanders.

And yet the most difficult passage of the journey still remained—the Sierra Nevada mountains. While grass, water, and timber for fuel were not wanting, the steep and rocky mountains posed quite a challenge for migrants and their animals, particularly if they still had their wagons. In fact, no one had even successfully crossed the Sierra with wagons until 1844. Israel Lord captured the intimidation many felt upon encountering the eastern slopes of the mountains when he wrote, “We thought that we

⁸⁰ Powers, *A Woman’s Overland Journal to California*, 54.

⁸¹ Franklin Langworthy, in MacGregor, *Overland*, 124.

had seen mountains before. Nothing of the kind. They were only mole hills.”⁸² It was not uncommon for those who set off into the Sierra Nevada to be low on provisions (particularly scurvy-reducing vegetables), to be worn out from the previous tens of hundreds of miles of travel, and to need to hurry over the mountain range before snows began to fall. For overlanders who found themselves so close to the green valleys and gold diggings of California, this was the last and greatest test. Mary Rockwood Powers wrote of the Sierra, “We had great difficulty in crossing streams, climbing the rugged mountains and descending the steep declivities. No pen can describe the dangers and difficulties of these days of fatigue and suspense.”⁸³

While traversing the steep mountains, some sought to replace dwindling food supplies by hunting. Forty-niner Wakeman Bryarly was able to share in the spoils when his messmate killed “two very fine bucks;” he made sure to salt and save some of the meat, “remembering our scarcity of provisions.”⁸⁴ But as usual, migrants’ ability to find fresh provisions depended on the ever-changing environment. In 1841, the Bartleson-Bidwell party found the Sierra extremely dry and, having been recently burned over, unable to provide grass for game animals. John Bidwell later recalled, “the only thing in the shape of game killed by our whole party during our passage of the Sierra Nevada Mountains from Walker River till we reached the San Joaquin Valley consisted, so far as I can now remember, of a wild cat, a crow, and a few squirrels.”⁸⁵ Instead Bidwell’s

⁸² Lord, “*At the Extremity of Civilization*,” 135.

⁸³ Powers, *A Woman’s Overland Journal to California*, 59.

⁸⁴ Geiger and Bryarly, *Trail to California*, 206.

⁸⁵ John Bidwell, “California 1841: An Immigrant’s Recollections of a Trip Across

party relied on their own oxen and mules for food, in addition to the plentiful acorns found in the mountains. Lord mentioned gathering acorns to feed the cattle along ridges where grass was scarce, and Bryarly's party at one point had nothing to feed their animals but oak leaves.⁸⁶

Disease caused by poor diets only compounded the difficulties of the migrants at this pivotal point in the journey. Though Bryarly's traveling party found fresh meat, that fortune carried the weakening accompaniment of "considerable diarrhea in camp produced by the great quantities of fresh meat we have had of late."⁸⁷ Acorns, too, proved a mixed blessing. While the Bartleson-Bidwell roasted or boiled the nuts for food, Bidwell explained, "the bitter acid contained in them soon made us sick. So much so we could not bear to see an acorn, and weak as we were, as far as possible avoided passing under oak trees."⁸⁸ Illness proved unpleasant, inconvenient, and slowed travel.

After struggling down the steep Sierra Nevada, sometimes letting wagons down only inches at a time, the migrants finally arrived in California's Sacramento Valley. Some travelers eked out their provisions enough to see them through, such as Mary Powers and her family. She wrote of the day they arrived in the valley, October 8, 1856, as the day she "boiled the last of the venison, baked the last of the flour, and used up the last of the coffee." Gratefully her party acquired new provisions from the settlers that

the Plains," written by the author's dictation by S. S. Boyton, 1877, in *The Bidwell-Bartleson Party: 1841 California Emigrant Adventure: The Documents and Memoirs of the Overland Pioneers*, ed. Doyce B. Nunis, Jr. (Santa Cruz, CA: Western Tanager Press, 1991), 92.

⁸⁶ Lord, "At the Extremity of Civilization," 164; Geiger and Bryarly, *Trail to California*, 210.

⁸⁷ Geiger and Bryarly, *Trail to California*, 208.

⁸⁸ Bidwell, "California 1841," 93.

same day, including fresh vegetables.⁸⁹ Californians' generosity proved extremely beneficial to incoming overlanders who arrived poor in health, bereft of possessions, and lacking foodstuffs. Though no bread was available due to the drought of 1841, Bidwell's party received a hog upon arrival at a Californian's home, and Powers noted how her "children had plenty of watermelons given them while we were passing through the settlements." In fact, she continued, "one woman made them come into the house and have some warm bread and butter and a big piece of sweet cake."⁹⁰ In 1844, explorer John C. Frémont welcomed to California a small group of his party who had been separated in the Sierra and who "had been made sick by the strange and unwholesome food which the preservation of life compelled them to use." Frémont fed them beef, bread, and salmon, "their first relief from the sufferings of the Sierra, and their first introductions to the luxuries of the Sacramento." This welcome reversal of dietary fortunes, wrote Frémont, "required all our philosophy and forbearance to prevent *plenty* from becoming as hurtful to us now, as *scarcity* had been before."⁹¹

Nor did the Californians forget those immigrants still struggling through the mountains, particularly in the early 1850s as unprecedented waves of migrants entered California. What began as civic aid promoted by local newspapers later shifted toward government-sponsored aid.⁹² In 1849, Israel Lord wrote in his travel diary after arriving in the Sacramento Valley in early November that "reports are rife this evening of extreme

⁸⁹ Powers, *A Woman's Overland Journal to California*, 63.

⁹⁰ John Bidwell, "A Journey to California, 1841," in Nunis, ed., *The Bidwell-Bartleson*, 53; Powers, *A Woman's Overland Journal to California*, 63.

⁹¹ Frémont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition*, 245-46.

⁹² Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 79-84.

destitution and horrible suffering, among the emigrants in the mountains. The government relief party has come in, leaving mules and horses and everything for the sufferers.”⁹³ Without the aid provided by settlers, many hungry and desperate overlanders would not have made it through the Sierra Nevada, particularly through the snowy winter.

* * * * *

Overall, the second half of the overland journey generally proved much more difficult than the first. Westward travelers experienced an extremely close relationship with the environments they passed through, and sections of the terrain posed sizeable obstacles. Rocky and steep paths through mountain passes as well as stretches through barren deserts required extra energy on the part of both migrants and their animals. Overlanders searched daily for adequate grasses for their animals to forage, and in turn the presence or absence of grass dictated the pace of travel and maybe even the route itself if a detour became necessary in order to seek out better resources. Finding potable water also presented serious concerns for travelers, particularly in the stretch of desert on the way to California. Hunting game depended largely on the environment as well, for where migrants’ own animals had little to eat game animals would most likely be scarce, seeking better grass away from the crowded and over-foraged trails. Successful travel depended on carefully cooperating with the environment in order to find water to drink, grass for animals to eat, fuel to cook, and game animals to hunt.

⁹³ Lord, “*At the Extremity of Civilization*,” 172.

For many overlanders, successful travel also depended on interacting cooperatively with Native Americans. By this second half of the journey migrants' provisions began to run low, and Indians provided meat, fish, and vegetables for trade or purchase. While trade with Native Americans on the Great Plains had largely centered around maintaining friendly relations, trade past the Rocky Mountains often had more to do with procuring needed food. At the same time that the United States enacted policies to move eastern tribes west and push Native Americans away from white settlements, thousands of migrating Americans found themselves in close contact with western tribes and some even became dependent on foods provided by the Indians. As white travelers sought relief from hunger or monotonous meals with natives, Indians simultaneously gained access to American currency or other valuable trade goods by providing food. At the same time, however, competition over natural resources also led to conflicts. Both environmental and economic concerns intersected between overlanders and Native Americans over issues of food.

Finally, the tangled result of toilsome travel, depletion of provisions, and expensive prices for a variety of goods or services provided along the trails, was that many overlanders arrived in Oregon or California weak and poor. Wagoners with heavy loads left possessions along the trail, and some even abandoned their wagons in order to travel across the Cascades or Sierra. Oxen or horses that died meant not only a loss of possible transportation or even meat if necessary, but a loss of work animals that would help to clear new farmlands or provide monetary value when sold. Migrants seeping into California during the 1850s even proved so desperate for food and aid that the

government had to organize relief parties to ensure their safe arrival into the Sacramento Valley, in turn ensuring the continued growth and development of the region.

Epilogue

As time progressed and traffic through the West increased, overland travel became easier. By the late 1850s and early 1860s, stagecoaches carried passengers from station to station, and though the bumpy ride may not have been comfortable, paying travelers no longer struggled personally with procuring means for their survival. Stations arose at frequent intervals along the popular trails, and according to Samuel Bowles “every ten or fifteen miles is a stable of the stage proprietor, and every other ten or fifteen miles an eating-house.”¹

Food became less of a defining factor of westward migration. Migrants no longer found it necessary to carry, hunt, gather, trade, or even cook their own provisions. Neither did they have to eat strange and occasionally unhealthy foods. Stations still had to be located near water and grass, but the burden of finding the water and grass was no longer the travelers’ responsibility. Towns and stations, rather than a personal search for natural food resources, came to determine routes. In a sense, migrants’ relationship to the environment through which they traveled became increasingly distant and disconnected.

Even more advanced was the railway travel that emerged toward the end of the nineteenth century, with the transcontinental railroad completed in 1869. Though expensive, trains carried passengers in relative comfort and ease. In Pullman luxury cars, “passengers lolled in cars ‘fitted up with oiled walnut, carved, gilded, etched, and stained plate glass, metal trappings heavily silver plated, seats cushioned with thick plushes,

¹ Samuel Bowles, *Across the Continent: A Summer’s Journey to the Rocky Mountains, the Mormons and the Pacific States* (1865; reprint, Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, Inc., 1966), 20-21.

washstands of marble and walnut,' and ate in dining cars appointed with snowy linen, fine china, and silver flatware."² No longer were bacon and coffee considered travelers' staples, and no longer did overlanders have to cook and eat out-of-doors after first procuring water and fuel. The price of traveling westward was measured in currency rather than currency compounded by physical toil, hunger, exposure, and loss of property. Iron rails across the continent also added the more hopeful potential of reuniting with eastern loved ones, thereby softening the pains of continental separation.

Travelers sat comfortably and enjoyed the West for its beautiful landscape. On his overland mail coach ride, Mark Twain quipped "nothing helps scenery like ham and eggs."³ Back in 1844, Frémont observed, "The country had now become very beautiful—rich in water, grass, and game; and to these were added the charm of scenery and pleasant weather."⁴ For early travelers western beauty had been partially measured by the food it provided; its charming scenery was merely an added bonus. From a stagecoach or railcar, however, the landscape provided something to appreciate, not something on which to depend.

In the excitement of the railroad and the development it ushered into the United States, however, historians must not take for granted or forget the significant role food played for those who traveled west by horseback, wagon, and on foot. The numerous mentions of food in these narrative reports, letters, and journals show that food

² Robert E. Strahorn, in Anne Farrar Hyde, *An American Vision: Far Western Landscape and National Culture, 1820-1920* (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 117.

³ Samuel Clemens [Mark Twain], *Roughing It* (1872; paperback ed., New York, 1962), 114.

⁴ John C. Frémont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843-'44* (Washington, DC: Gales and Seaton, 1845), 282.

acquisition and consumption were truly defining characteristics of early travel. John C. Frémont wrote in the introduction to his *Report* that what he included in the publication was “strictly confined to what was seen, and to what is necessary to show the face and character of the country.”⁵ If we are to take him at his word, although he had been sent by the United States government to explore unknown western regions and take notes on the land, flora and fauna, and meteorological measurements, it was food about which he so often wrote: it was food (or the lack thereof) that showed the “face and character of the country.” Likewise, Randall Hewitt wrote that he had “little time for literary exercise,” so the frequent mentioning of food in his travel writing evidences its primacy in the mind of the westward migrant. Hewitt “hoped that the rising generation will find something of interest in perusing this story, and so obtain some idea of the hardships endured by the generations passed in opening up and pioneering the way to the magnificent country they inhabit to-day.”⁶ Writing for the rising generation that had new means of travel and more reliable sources of nourishment along the way, Hewitt reminded his readers of the difficulties experienced during the journey over one of humans’ most basic acts—eating.

Dependent on the sustenance the environment provided for them and their animals, nineteenth-century travelers prior to the transportation revolution experienced an intimate relationship with the landscape, much more so than any subsequent travelers across the American West. Not only did migrants rely on the environment for grass, water, fuel, and game animals, but they performed nearly all of their daily activities—

⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁶ Randall Hewitt, *Across the Plains and Over the Divide: A Mule Train Journey from East to West in 1862, and Incidents Connected Therewith* (1906; reprint, New York: Argosy-Antiquarian Ltd, 1964), i-ii.

including cooking and for some, even sleeping—outside and exposed to every variation in the weather. Scarcity of those necessities needed for survival could not be assuaged by simply heading to a general store; at times migrants had to endure traveling through an unaccommodating landscape. Through the overlanders' need for food, Americans gained a better knowledge of the western lands acquired by the United States during the mid-nineteenth century.

Simultaneously, food provided an important impetus for interacting with the native inhabitants of the West. White migrants and Native Americans shared and traded food, which helped maintain peaceful relations, facilitate commerce, and gain desired or even desperately needed sustenance. The idea that Indians and whites voluntarily sought each other out to swap provisions or other goods may be contrary to our mythical memory of the American West, but reinforces the significance of food. Other Indian-White interactions were less direct or friendly, but still centered on food. Digger Indians in California reacted to competition over natural resources by stealing horses and oxen. Competition over game animals on the Plains and in the Rocky Mountains, as well as the growing scarcity of fuel on the Plains, occasionally led to hostilities. While many white travelers gained a better understanding and respect for the Indians they encountered along the trails, in occasional hostilities and accusations of thievery other migrants found reason to uphold and fuel the mythically-proportioned prejudice they held against Native Americans. Without acknowledging the role of food in creating both allies and enemies, we cannot satisfactorily understand the complexities of Indian-White relations during westward migration.

The study of food and its influence on the Oregon and California Trails adds to the rich histories of the infamous trails. Many daily activities and struggles stemmed from overlanders' need for food. Food significantly shaped the personal experiences of westward travel. But food shaped westward migration in more universal ways, too. Using food and provisions as an historical framework, we see how food influenced motivations for travel; dictated practical details such as what could be carried, when and where migrants could travel and how fast they could go; spurred economic transactions; shaped Americans' interaction with the environment; defined relations with Native Americans; and influenced the health and wealth of migrants upon arrival in the West. Economic success, territorial expansion, and even western adventure motivated the migration movement of the nineteenth century, but food shaped pursuance of those goals.

Migrants left an impact on the western lands they passed through in the name of finding food. Overgrazing, over-hunting, stripping certain regions of timber—these were direct results of travelers' needs for food and reliance on the environment in order to successfully move west. But the environment and the individual experiences of surviving on a daily basis during overland travel had a lasting impact on the new settlers in Oregon and California as well. Having endured such a long and toilsome journey across the expansive continent, settlers approached their new western homes in ways that did not resonate in the East. Farming families had to begin clearing their new lands and planting almost immediately in order to ensure food in the coming months. The competition settlers had experienced over natural resources during their overland journeys did not end upon arrival in California or Oregon, and westerners defended their land and water rights

with marked vigor because they knew firsthand the possible privations caused by relying solely on the western environment for survival. Western regions have also tended to demand more federal aid than their eastern counterparts. Part of this reliance stems from federal troops who manned several western trading forts, selling provisions to migrants and intimidating Indians in the name of protecting American citizens. In addition, government aid rescued many desperate migrants who struggled to make it through the Sierra Nevada by sending relief parties with food. It becomes no wonder then, as journalist Samuel Bowles concluded, that “the seat of empire, in its travel westward, change[d] its base from soul to stomach, from brains to bowels.”⁷

⁷ Bowles, *Across the Continent*, 202.

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