Emigrants on the Overland Trail
THE WAGON TRAINS OF 1848

Michael E. LaSalle

Truman State University Press
Kirkville, Missouri
For Yvonne, my wife and colleague
Contents

Illustrations, Tables, and Maps .......................................................... viii
Acknowledgments .............................................................................. xi
Introduction .......................................................................................... xiii
  1 Just Five Months to Get There .......................................................... 1
  2 St. Joseph, a Rising Star ................................................................. 14
  3 Load the Wagons ............................................................................ 22
  4 The Talk Before the Walk ............................................................... 31
  5 A Vast Green Sea ........................................................................... 40
  6 Indian Troubles .............................................................................. 58
  7 Independence, a Star in Decline .................................................... 73
  8 Through the Tallgrass Prairie .......................................................... 86
  9 Black Beasts, Black Faces .............................................................. 110
 10 Come, Come Ye Saints ................................................................. 136
 11 The Babylon of the West ............................................................... 151
 12 The Sweetness of the Sweetwater .................................................. 193
 13 Les Mauvaises Terres ..................................................................... 226
 14 The Great Trail Forked .................................................................. 261
 15 Snaking Through Vulcan’s Workshop .......................................... 296
 16 Glory, Hallelujah, I Shall Die a Rich Man Yet! .............................. 326
 17 The Heavenly Scent of Oregon Pine ............................................. 351
 18 Time to Pay the Gatekeeper .......................................................... 388
 19 The End of the Journey ................................................................. 429
Epilogue ............................................................................................... 458
Notes ................................................................................................. 469
Works Cited ....................................................................................... 487
Index .................................................................................................. 493
# Illustrations, Tables, and Maps

**Introduction**

Table 1: Number of emigrants per year, 1840–1850 .......................... xv
Table 2: The wagon companies of 1848 ........................................ xvii
Map 1 ..................................................................................... xviii

**Chapter 1**

Map 2 ................................................................. 2
Portrait of Thomas Corcoran (1825–1904), ca. 1876 .......................... 3
Daguerreotype portrait of Pierre Barlow (P. B.) Cornwall (1821–1904), ca. 1851 ................................................................. 4

**Chapter 2**

Portrait of James Clyman (1792–1881), ca. 1870s .......................... 15
Portrait of Joseph Robidoux (1783–1868) ....................................... 17

**Chapter 3**

Portrait of Riley Root (1795–1870) .................................................. 26

**Chapter 4**

Table 3: Wagon companies leaving St. Joseph area by May 7, 1848 .. 39

**Chapter 5**

Map 3 ................................................................. 42
Table 4: Companies known to have departed from St. Joseph in 1848 .. 57

**Chapter 6**

Map 4 ..................................................................................... 60

**Chapter 7**

Map 5 ..................................................................................... 74
First page of “Edward Smith Diary, A Journal of Scenes and incidents on a Journey from Missouri to California in 1848” .......... 78
Portrait of Joseph Ballinger Chiles (1810–85) .................................. 83
Table 5: Companies leaving from Independence in 1848 ............... 85

**Chapter 8**

Map 6 ..................................................................................... 88
Table 6: Location of each known company as of May 27, 1848 .......... 109
Chapter 9
Map 7 ................................................................. 112
John Mix Stanley (1814–72), Prairie Indian Encampment ............... 114
William Henry Jackson (1843–1942), Approaching Chimney Rock ........ 117
William Henry Jackson (1843–1942), Crossing the South Platte .......... 123
Table 7: Location of companies on the evening of June 3, 1848 ............ 135

Chapter 11
James F. Wilkins (gold rusher), drawing of Fort Laramie, 1849 .......... 153
Map 8 .................................................................. 160
William Henry Jackson (1843–1942), La Bonte Creek ..................... 164
Table 8: Order of known companies and location as of June 15, 1848 .... 192

Chapter 12
Map 9 .................................................................. 194
William Henry Jackson (1843–1942), Independence Rock ............... 199
William Henry Jackson (1843–1942), Devil’s Gate ......................... 201
Table 9: Arrival at Fort Laramie and location of companies on June 27, 1848 ... 225

Chapter 13
Map 10 .................................................................. 228
Table 10: Location of companies on July 15, 1848 ......................... 260

Chapter 14
Map 11 .................................................................. 262
Table 11: Wagon companies at Fort Hall on July 15, 1848 ............... 264
William Tappan, sketch of Fort Hall, probably 1849 ................. 265
Early photograph of Thousand Springs ................................. 272
William Henry Jackson (1843–1942), Three Island Crossing .......... 276
Modern photograph of Three Island Crossing ......................... 277
Table 12: Order of companies as of July 31, 1848, with arrival
and departure dates at Fort Hall ........................................... 295

Chapter 15
Map 12 .................................................................. 297
Map 13 .................................................................. 321
Jim Olsen, photograph of City of Rocks, Idaho .......................... 324
Table 13: Progress of wagon companies as of August 15, 1848 ......... 325

Chapter 16
Map 14 .................................................................. 332
Chapter 17
Map 15 ................................................................. 352
William Henry Jackson (1843–1942), Blue Mountains ................. 355
Map 16 ..................................................................... 374
Map 17 ..................................................................... 379
Table 14: Location of companies as of August 31, 1848 ................. 387

Chapter 18
Map 18 ..................................................................... 389
William Henry Jackson (1843–1942), Barlow Cutoff ..................... 392
The end of the trail. Oregon City, Oregon Territory ....................... 395
Map 19 ..................................................................... 417
Charles Nahl (1818–78), Crossing the Plains .............................. 425
Table 15: Status of companies as of September 16, 1848 ............... 428

Chapter 19
Map 20 ..................................................................... 444
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I thank my children for their encouragement when rough spots in the trail seemed to bog me down, and my wife, Yvonne, to whom this book is dedicated, for being my indefatigable traveling companion, navigator, and overall sounding board and sympathizer.

Michael E. LaSalle
Hanford, California
September 10, 2011
This book tells the story of the men, women, and children who loaded up their covered wagons and went west in 1848. There have been many books dealing with the Oregon and California Trails and the California gold rush, but until now, no book has been exclusively devoted to the wagon trains of 1848. Prominent trail historians regarded that year as “lost” because few diaries, journals, or other narratives had surfaced, and no book devoted more than a chapter to the year. Recently, a number of additional diaries, journals, and other narratives have come to light, including a long letter written by my great-great-great-uncle Thomas Corcoran that recounted some of his experiences during his 1848 overland trip to California. A copy of his letter has been in my family’s possession for years and is what inspired me to learn more about the year Thomas made his great journey.

There were eighteen distinct wagon companies in 1848, traveling like knots in a long rope that stretched over three hundred miles from front to back. This book relies predominantly on seven diarists, each of whom traveled with a different wagon company. Their diaries and journals are an invaluable gift to the American people. The diarists ranged from a college-educated teacher to a barely literate ox driver. One was a young mother and another, the most entertaining of all, was a French priest on his way to Oregon to become an Indian missionary. These diaries and journals are far from masterpieces of writing. The travelers wrote with simple voices and in the language of ordinary folks, recording events with a quiet absence of boastfulness and exaggeration. They rarely expressed emotion, although a discerning reader can sense what was going on in their minds and hearts. I have included many of their daily entries, unedited and in full, to let the reader hear each writer’s voice and experience their wide-ranging differences in tone and style, including their erratic spellings, odd punctuation (or the complete lack thereof), and often nonexistent sentence structure.

It is easy to underestimate the difficulty of the trail, to undervalue the emigrants’ struggles, and to underappreciate their courage. The West could not be settled by the weak, the squeamish, or the fainthearted; the sensible and cautious tended to stay home. Of those who did set out for the West, few fully grasped what lay ahead, having little conception of the distance, the difficulties, and the dangers.

These ordinary people demonstrated that the human spirit, under the influence of good leadership, could surmount unprecedented hardships and obstacles. They
may have been slowed from time to time, but they never faltered. They showed that hardship and privation were not barriers; they were just annoying challenges.

These men, women, and children were pioneers in the true sense of the word, venturing where most were unwilling to go. But somebody had to go first. Somebody had to put down roots and establish the rudiments of American civilization so others could follow. In 1845, an eastern newspaper editor concocted the term “manifest destiny” to describe the popular notion that America was destined to spread into adjacent territories and bring its superior institutions to these far-flung lands.¹ Many historians have asserted that this phrase explained westward emigration, that it was what uncorked all that bottled-up energy and rallied Americans to leave their homes, but I say “buffalo chips.” Consider that for each person who headed west in 1848, another seven thousand Americans stayed home. The decision to go west had little to do with devotion to manifest destiny or with responding to a patriotic call to duty and everything to do with people deciding to do something for themselves.

The reasons for this westering urge were numerous, but most could be assigned to a few broad categories: Some were inherently restless, perpetually dissatisfied by nature, those who thought they would always find something better somewhere else. These people tended to remain discontented no matter where they alighted; if they had been content, they would have stayed home. Others were adventurers, thrilled at the prospect of going somewhere—anywhere—to escape the drudgery of their present state. Still others went west because of their health. Large numbers had lived in the Ohio, Mississippi, and Missouri River valleys, where mosquito-borne illnesses such as malaria spread their misery. They heard that Oregon and California were free of the “fever and ague” (malaria) that plagued the Midwest. Some had contracted “lung fever,” for which California’s dry climate was reputed to be one’s best chance for a cure.

It is a misconception that the overland emigrants were a poor, landless people seeking free land. Most already had land. They were farmers from Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri who sold their farms and reinvested most of the proceeds in outfitting themselves for the trip. It took a considerable sum in those days—about $1,000—to buy a wagon, yokes of oxen, and provisions to support a family on the five-month journey.

As of 1848, emigrants had been traveling by covered wagon to Oregon and California for about eight years. People had expected 1848 to be a boom year for emigration, but instead numbers were down. The war with Mexico and the fate of the Donner party in 1846 may have had a chilling effect. There were also men who had gone to Oregon in earlier years and returned east in ’46 and ’47. Often disillusioned, they spread the word that the trip was a killer and Oregon a land of incessant rains. The Whitman massacre and the ensuing Cayuse war in the Oregon Territory occurred at the end of 1847, but word of those events did not arrive in St. Joseph until the emigrants of 1848 were well along the trail.
Table 1: Number of emigrants per year, 1840–1850

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>To Oregon</th>
<th>To California</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1841</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1842</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1843</td>
<td>875</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>913</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1844</td>
<td>1,475</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>1,528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1845</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>2,760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1846</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>2,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1847</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>4,450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1848</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,300</strong></td>
<td><strong>400</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,700</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1849</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td>25,450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>6,000</td>
<td>44,000</td>
<td>50,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The California-bound emigrants of 1848 did not leave their homes to become gold miners. Even though James Marshall had discovered gold at Sutter’s Mill in January 1848, word of that discovery did not reach the California-bound wagons until they were almost there. What set 1848 apart was that it was the last year the trail was uncrowded. In 1849, the gold rush changed everything.

I have traveled where our diarists traveled, and have seen what they saw. We should travel the trail—all or part of it—and see where the covered wagons once rumbled through dense clouds of dust. Much of the route is still vast, open, and unspoiled. Anyone with a sense of history will be moved by it. They will be inspired by those who trod it. It will promote a sense of pride in those leather-tough people who traversed it 160 years ago.

I urge the reader to acquire Gregory M. Franzwa’s *Maps of the Oregon Trail* (1990) and *Maps of the California Trail* (1999). I also recommend *Emigrant Trails West: A Guide to the California Trail to the Humboldt River* (2007) and *A Guide to the California Trail along the Humboldt River* (2007), both published by Trails West, Inc. These books contain superb maps that show the precise location of the trails, mile by mile, and are a valuable supplement in following our diarists’ progress. We are indebted to an earlier generation of trail scholars, people like Dale Morgan, Charles Camp, Irene Paden, Aubrey L. Haines, Merrill Mattes, Gregory M. Franzwa, the people connected with Trails West, and countless other volunteers who have pored over trail journals, interviewed local ranchers and “old timers,” and walked the landscape looking for swales, ruts, and other evidence of the roads. Organizations like the Oregon-California Trails Association and Trails West have promoted the trails and fought to preserve them. To these people and organizations the nation owes a great debt, but only continued vigilance will preserve what remains.
The Oregon and California Trails are some of America’s greatest treasures, and the overland emigration of 1848 is one of the great stories of America, a story as great and as big as the West itself. The covered wagon will always be a symbol of America and the era when the nation began settling the Far West. These emigrants came to represent the American spirit and character, and this book is a heartfelt tribute to what they accomplished.
Table 2: The wagon companies of 1848

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Narrators*</th>
<th>Departed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allsopp</td>
<td>J. P. C. Allsopp (R)</td>
<td>April 10, from Independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenwood</td>
<td></td>
<td>early April, from Bellevue (Council Bluffs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cornwall</td>
<td>P. B. Cornwall (B)</td>
<td>April 12 (est.), from Bellevue (Council Bluffs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thomas Corcoran (L)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adams</td>
<td>W. L. Adams (L)</td>
<td>April 26 (est.), from Bellevue (Council Bluffs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inez Parker (R)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith</td>
<td>Edward Smith (D)</td>
<td>April 28, from Independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wambaugh</td>
<td>Riley Root (D)</td>
<td>April 28, from St. Joseph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John McPherson (D)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rufus Burrows (R)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John Trullinger (R)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gates</td>
<td></td>
<td>April 29 (est.), from St. Joseph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>R. Kelly (R)</td>
<td>April 29 (est.), from Independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miller</td>
<td>William Anderson (D)</td>
<td>April 30, from St. Joseph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walker</td>
<td></td>
<td>May 5 (est.), from St. Joseph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bristow</td>
<td></td>
<td>May 5 (est.), from St. Joseph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purvine</td>
<td>William Porter (D)</td>
<td>May 6, from St. Joseph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Richard Cheadle (L)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watt</td>
<td>Keturah Belknap (D)</td>
<td>May 7, from St. Joseph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanna</td>
<td></td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaney</td>
<td></td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chiles</td>
<td>Richard May (D)</td>
<td>May 10, from Independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stone</td>
<td>Father Lempfrit (D)</td>
<td>May 13, from St. Joseph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>James D. Miller (R)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hensley</td>
<td></td>
<td>May 20 (est.), from Independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lassen</td>
<td></td>
<td>May 13 or 20, from Independence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* (D) = diary/journal; (L) = letter; (R) = reminiscence; (B) = biography
Chapter 1

Just Five Months to Get There
April 1848

Second week of April 1848

Thomas Corcoran and P. B. Cornwall, at Sarpy’s Ferry, Council Bluffs area, along the Missouri River

Just as the sun was about to slide behind the bluffs, two young men stood on the east bank of the Missouri River. They were at Sarpy’s Ferry, nine miles north of the mouth of the Platte River. Their wagon party had already ferried across the roiling, quarter-mile-wide Missouri, and they were waiting for the flat-bottomed boat to return for them.

Thomas Corcoran fidgeted nervously with the reins of his jet-black mare and began a deep, breath-sucking, uncontrollable cough that doubled him up. His companion, P. B. (Pierre Barlow) Cornwall, looked at him with concern and asked if he was going to be all right. Thomas nodded uncertainly, trying to recover his breath, and wiped the bloody spittle from his mouth. The promise of a life-saving climate in California had drawn him away from his family and put him on the trail west. He suffered from an especially severe case of what he called “lung fever.” Judging from his symptoms, it was probably what is now called histoplasmosis, caused by spores from a fungus (*Histoplasma capsulatum*) released when farmers turned the virgin prairie soils. Inhaled into the lungs, the spores could become a yeast and produce a moderate to severe lung affliction, which in its most serious form, could resemble the late stages of tuberculosis.¹ A doctor had warned Thomas that he would soon fill a grave beside his father unless he left immediately for a drier climate. Much of what we know about Thomas’ journey comes from an evocative letter he sent to his sister, Elizabeth Lonergan.² Thomas was illiterate and had to dictate his letters.

As the ferry was nearing the east bank, two sober-faced men approached. According to Thomas, a man by the name of Doc Hann handed him a paper. Hann was suing Thomas, claiming his trespassing cattle had damaged Hann’s land. The summons
ordered Thomas to appear in court in sixty days or forfeit sixty-five dollars. The other man, Hann's son-in-law, grabbed Thomas’ mare, intending to take her as restitution.

P. B. Cornwall pulled out his six-shooter and knife, and told Thomas to climb on his mare and get on the ferry. Doc Hann stepped back, nervously clearing his throat. Just who did he think he was, Hann asked Cornwall. “A better man than ever made you,” P. B. answered coldly, fixing him with a withering stare. He joined Thomas on the ferry, and the two young men were safely deposited on the far bank.3

A few days earlier, P. B. Cornwall had attended a going-away party hosted by Thomas’ sister. When Thomas left his family’s sod cabin in northwest Missouri to join Cornwall and his small party, he was so sick that Elizabeth had to saddle his mare, Slipper, and help him mount. His mother “could hardly shake hands with” him, certain her twenty-three-year-old son would die along the trail with no friend to bury him. The separation was heart-wrenching, but if Thomas was to survive, he had to go.

The youngest of ten children, Thomas Corcoran was born in Kilcoltrim, County Carlow, Ireland in 1825. His family immigrated to Quebec in 1828. Then in 1841, Thomas, his parents, an older brother, and his sister, Elizabeth, heard of better opportunities in Missouri.4 After arriving at a small trading post that would become St. Joseph, the Corcorans traveled sixty miles north to an area that would soon be organized as Atchison County. They came to rest at Irish Grove, where other Irish immigrant families had also come to settle. It was a picturesque place on bluffs overlooking the Missouri River. But as pretty as it was, Irish Grove had problems. The place was gaining a reputation for unhealthfulness—a country where swarms of mosquitoes infested the stagnant pools along the river. The settlers were plagued with malaria—what they called “fever and ague”—which they thought was caused by “bad air” and was an inescapable part of life.5 But the Corcorans’ neighbor, Martin Murphy Sr., did not feel the disease was inescapable. After losing a wife and granddaughter to malaria, he concluded that Irish Grove was an unhealthy place to live.6 Father Christian Hoecken, a Jesuit missionary with the nearby Pottawattamie tribe, had heard that California was a Catholic country and a healthful place to raise a family. On his urging, the Murphys and some neighbors left for California in 1844.7
Lung fever could also be a problem, and the Corcoran family had come down with it. At one time, they were so sick that Father Hoecken had to come and nurse the family back to health. In 1844, Thomas’ father, Francis, died at age sixty. While the cause of his death is unknown, the prevalence of malaria and lung fever in the area suggests some possible causes.8

Money was scarce in Missouri in those years. The economy was largely one of subsistence and barter, and most settlers lacked the cash to purchase the government land on which they settled. In 1846, word reached Irish Grove that war had been declared against Mexico and President Polk had ordered the raising of a volunteer Missouri regiment to be trained at Fort Leavenworth. Thomas crossed the Missouri River and traveled to the fort, where he worked as a teamster, driving freight wagons for Colonel Stephen W. Kearny’s Army of the West as it marched to Santa Fe. At the end of his tour of duty, he returned to the humid air of Irish Grove and his lung fever returned with a vengeance.9

P. B. Cornwall was born in Delaware County, New York, in 1821. When he was fifteen, he left home to work as a cook on a Lake Ontario steamer. At eighteen, he traveled to the Wisconsin Territories to try his luck at fur trapping. The following year, in 1840, his father died and left him a mercantile store in Manchester, Ohio. After operating the store for seven years, P. B. sold it, but the proceeds were insufficient to pay his creditors. At the beginning of 1848, P. B. was twenty-six and mired in debt.10

P. B. had read John C. Fremont’s Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains. It told of his experiences in 1842 as a captain in the U.S. Corps of Topographical Engineers, when he and his team of engineers and voyageurs were sent to explore the Rocky Mountains, Oregon, and California. Fremont’s sobriquet, the Great Pathfinder, was misleading; he mostly followed trails already used by Indians, trappers, and mountain men. The Great Publicist would have been more accurate. His superbly written book, published in 1845, was produced with the

Daguerreotype portrait of Pierre Barlow (P. B.) Cornwall (1821–1904), ca. 1851. From Life Sketch of Pierre Barlow Cornwall (San Francisco: A. M. Robinson, 1906).
assistance of Jessie, his learned wife and the daughter of Senator Thomas Hart Benton. A curious, hungry public read this gallant, epic adventure and many a reader was moved by its romanticized description of the West, including Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who wrote: “[H]ighly entertaining and exciting. . . . What a wild life and what a fresh existence! But, ah, the discomfort!”11

Like many others, P. B. credited Fremont’s Report with inspiring him and his sixteen-year-old brother, Arthur, to leave Ohio early in the spring of 1848. They had decided to go to Oregon to make their new start.

Much of the information about P. B.’s 1848 journey west comes from a biography written by his son in 1906, after P. B.’s death.12 According to that account, it was early April when the Cornwall brothers arrived in St. Joseph, then a settlement of about 1,800 year-round residents.

For many years, Independence, Missouri, had been the most prominent jumping-off point for travelers to the Far West. Beginning in the early 1820s, traders and merchants set out from Independence with their huge, lumbering, wide-wheeled freight wagons, and rumbled down the Santa Fe Trail for Taos and Santa Fe. The first parties to head for the Oregon Territories departed from Independence in 1838, and the first wagon party bound for California left from there in 1841.13

But nothing stays the same for long. The fledgling settlement of St. Joseph also sat along the Missouri River, where it could be supplied by steamboats coming up from St. Louis. It was also sixty miles farther north than Independence, making it a shorter overland route to Oregon and California. All it needed was merchants to outfit wagon companies.

The shops and stores came, and the first westward-bound wagons departed from St. Joseph in 1844. By the following year, its reputation as a jumping-off place had been established. Its just-founded newspaper, the St. Joseph Gazette, reported on May 2, 1845, that a company of Oregon emigrants, consisting “of one thousand persons, one hundred wagons and about two thousand cattle,” were camped just outside of town.

The eager merchants of St. Joseph published an “article” in the Gazette’s issue of March 6, 1846. The lengthy promotion, directed to “all those who are desirous of emigrating to Oregon or California,” invited people to select “St. Joseph as the place to which they should direct their course, possessing as it does, all the facilities for furnishing such necessities as may be required for the journey.” The article boasted that St. Joseph possessed “13 large mercantile establishments, which are capable of furnishing every article in the Grocery and Dry Goods line that may be required for the outfit, at prices as cheap as the emigrant can bring them from St. Louis.” It had a “large Flour Mill, . . . large Beef and Pork packing establishments,” and “a sufficient number of Blacksmiths, Wagon Makers, Saddlers and other mechanics, who are always prepared . . . to make or repair any article in their line . . . and at prices that will give satisfaction.” As if that wasn’t enough, readers were assured that St. Joseph
Index

**bold** indicates map or image

A
abandoned possessions, 169–70, 214, 258, 273, 274, 285, 432
Abernathy, George, 361
Accolti, Father (priest), 435
Across the Wide Missouri (DeVoto), 238
Adams, Helen, 460
Adams, Inez Eugenia, 10, 213–14, 431, 460
Adams, Thomas, 33
Adams company, 205, 212–15, 261–62, 373, 431
A Guide to the California Trail to the Humboldt River (Trails West), xv
Alcove Springs, KS, 100, 107
Alder Creek, OR, 302, 355, 394
Alexandria, NE, 51
Alkali Lake, NE, 98
Alkali Slough, WY, 209
Allen, James, 142, 145
Allen County, Ohio, 22
Allsopp, J. P. C., 8, 121, 159
Allsopp company
Adams company and, 261–62, 373
formation of, 8
at Fort Laramie, 62, 157
member departures of, 373
progress of, 43, 62, 72, 77, 100, 121, 169, 204–5
American Falls, ID, 265, 266–67, 271, 310, 320
American Fur Company
buffalo robe shipments of, 130–31
Fort Laramie purchase of, 154, 223–24
and Joseph Robidoux, 17
and Lucien Fontenelle, 231
Rocky Mountain Fur Company purchase, 50
Sioux Indians trade of, 71
and William O. Fallon, 7
and William Sublette, 76
American Indian Mission Association (Baptist), 72, 79, 354
American Indians. See Plains Indians
Anderson, William Wright (Miller company)
on bad weather, 48–49, 209
on Barlow’s Gate, 389–90, 391
on the Blue Mountains, 361–62
buffalo hunting, 121–23, 171, 208–9
on the Burnt River Canyon, 306–7
on Cayuse territory travel, 261
on Chimney Rock, 128
on disturbed graves, 253–54, 274
epilogue, 458–59
experience of, 168–69
on the Indian Chief of Mosquito Creek, 37
on Indians in Bear River Valley, 242–43
on Laurel Hill, 392
on livestock confinement, 46
on load lightening, 169–70, 276–77
on Miller company progress, 36–37, 45, 47, 51, 97, 168, 170–72, 209–10, 211–12, 240, 266, 358, 359, 360–66, 392–95
on Miller company split, 394–95
on Miller company wagon numbers, 264
at the Mormon crossing, 207–8, 241–42
on Pawnee encounter, 94–95
on river crossings, 123–24
at Rock Creek, 269–70
at Scott’s Bluff, 167
on sheep, 241
on Sioux Indian encounters, 125–27, 185, 221
on the Snake River area, 273–74, 275, 304–5
on tainted water, 209
on Tygh Valley, 388–89
animals, domestic
behavior of, 203, 204, 245, 286
collapse of, 386, 425–26
confining and corraling, 45–47, 49, 214
death of, 45, 49, 194, 213, 214, 259, 287, 308, 340, 390–91, 393, 421–22, 430
difficult river crossings of, 208, 216
dogs, 32, 126, 173, 182, 340, 379
food scarcity for, 217, 252, 298–99, 393
illnesses of, 323, 386, 424–26
Indian kills of, 421–22, 426
animals, domestic, continued
injuries of, 27, 203–4, 445
lost, 253, 256, 259, 286, 287, 308, 323
sheep, 24, 241, 246, 270, 307–8, 399
stampede of, 46, 173–74, 217
straying of, 47, 100, 108, 179, 253, 256,
278, 286, 379
and tainted water, 162, 182, 197, 208, 209,
256–57, 386, 424–25
theft of, 26, 67, 70, 71, 128, 144, 222,
233, 235, 306, 338, 376, 380,
444–45, 446–47
trading, 21, 74, 242, 282, 294, 319, 331,
360, 369, 411–12
weed poisoning, 27
wolf attack, 438
animals, Indian
dogs, 126–27, 270
horses, 232–33, 362, 369, 410, 411, 412
animals, wild
antelope, 96
bighorn sheep, 162
goose, 96
grayling fish, 166
grizzly bear, 162
mountain lion, 162
owls, 98
prairie dogs, 98
quail, 135
salmon, 271, 272–73, 274, 279, 294, 300,
313–14, 369, 371, 388, 394,
406, 435, 436, 441
snakes, 82, 87, 96, 98, 125, 184, 218, 232,
242, 248, 249, 368, 420, 421
wolves, 96, 98, 181, 182, 202, 218, 438,
458
See also buffalo; insects
Antoine [Antwine] (Chiles company interpreter), 377, 380, 421
Apache Indians, 70
Applegate company, 420
Applegate, Jesse, 420
Applegate Trail, NV, 420
Approaching Chimney Rock (Jackson; watercolor), 117
Arapaho Indians, 70, 120, 230–31
Arikara Indians, 16, 70
Armbrust, Mr., 28
Army of the West, 4
Ash Creek, NE, 125
Ash Hollow, NE, 110, 116, 125, 132, 172–73,
183, 191, 221
Ashley, William, 67, 70, 231
Ashley brigade, 230, 231
Ashley Expedition, 207
Ashley-Henry expeditions, 6, 7, 16, 67
Ashley’s Fork, WY, 231
Assiniboine Indians, 70
Atchison County, MO, 3, 8
Atkinson, Dr., 101
Atlantic City, WY, 203
Austin, J. C., 33, 328

B
Bad Wound/Badwoon (Sioux Indian chief), 112, 116, 173, 185, 220–21
Baker, D. C., 33
Baker, D. S. (doctor), 122, 265
Baldock Slough, OR, 302, 307, 359
Ball, Isaac, 30, 173, 174
Banbury Springs, ID, 270, 313
Bancroft, Hubert Howe, 179, 432
Bannock Indians, 50, 51, 269
Baptist missionaries, 72, 79, 354
Barlow, Samuel K., 390
Barlow Cutoff (Jackson; watercolor), 392
Barlow’s Gate, OR, 389–91, 400–402
Barlow’s Road, OR, 358, 366, 430–31
Barnett, Joseph, 206, 212, 240
Barney, Lewis, 194–95
Barns, George A., 56
Bartleson, John, 76
Bartleson-Bidwell company, 83, 384
Bartleson company, 76
Batchicka (Crow Indian), 67–68
Bateman, Thomas, 33
Battle Mountain, NV, 415
Bayley, Thomas S., 83
Beard, Mr. (Chiles company), 317, 323, 445
Bear Flag Revolt, 84
Bear Lake, CO, 76
Bear River, CA, 344
Bear River/Bear River Valley, ID, 50, 149
Bear River Range, ID, 238
Bear River Valley, WY, 227, 233–36, 242–43,
293–94, 316
Beaver (La Bonte) Creek, WY, 164
Becknell, William, 75
Beer Springs, ID, 236
Belknap, George, 22–23, 245, 459
Belknap, Hannah, 22
Belknap, Jane, 22, 24
Belknap, Jesse, 22, 24, 245, 459
Belknap, John, 22, 24
Belknap, Keturah (Watt company)
arriving at Oregon City, 399
birth of son, 360
on buffalo and buffalo hunting, 122, 129
deaths of three children, 22
departure of, 22–24
diary silence, 99, 128, 278, 429
epilogue, 459
on Green River ferry, 244
on Indian encounters, 172–73
on Jacksons and Watt company, 359–60
meeting Joe Meek, 53
on MO River crossing, 27–28
on the Mosquito Creek Resolution, 38
pregnancy of, 244
travel preparations of, 23–24
on Watt company progress, 26, 269
on white bandits, 128
See also Watt company
Belknap, Lorenzo Walker, 360, 459
Belknap, Martha, 22
Bellevue (La Belle Vue), MO, 10, 11, 62, 143
Bellevue Indian Agency, 68, 71, 72
Belvidere, NE, 44, 101
Benicia, CA, 345, 464
Bennet, Mr., 445
Benson, Charles ("Charlie"), 30, 98
Benton, Thomas Hart, 5
Bernett, Mr., 447
Bernett infant, 447
Bessemer Bend, 256
Bethers, George W., 24
Bidwell, John, 76, 92, 121
Big Blue River, KS, 43, 44, 76, 100, 106
Big Elk (chief of the Omaha Indians), 143, 144–45
Big Nemaha River, NE, 28
Big Papillion Creek, NE, 58
Big Sandy Creek, NE, 101
Big Sandy Creek, WY, 227, 228, 229, 287
Big Sandy River, WY, 245
Big Timber (La Bonte) Creek, WY, 164, 171, 215
Big Vermilion River, KS, 99
Birch Creek, ID, 372, 375
Birch Creek, OR, 300, 306, 367
Bishop Creek, NV, 377–78
Bishop Flats, NV, 377
Bitter Cottonwood Creek, WY, 162, 163, 170, 223, 251
Blackerby, Cassandra Coffey, 29
Blackerby, Joseph, 29
Blackfoot Indians, 405
Black Hawk War of 1832, 158
Black Hills, WY, 161, 164–65, 221
Black Hills Gap, WY, 161, 162
blacksmith shops, importance of, 157, 169, 222, 240
Blacksnake Hills, MO, 17
Blain, L. L., 25
Blanchet, A. M. A. (Bishop), 392, 396, 435, 437, 439–40
Blanchet, F. N. (Reverend), 406, 437
Blue Mountains (Jackson; watercolor), 355
Blue Mountains, OR, 351–52, 361, 391, 403–13
Blue River, MO, 73
Boardman, John, 240
Boise River, ID, 299, 309, 366, 369
Bonneville expedition, 227
Bordeaux, James, 155, 219, 222, 223
Borrowman, John, 341–42, 349, 422
Box Elder Creek, WY, 253, 253–54
Brady, NE, 96, 130
Brady Hot Springs, NV, 338, 340
Branley Pass, WY, 232, 242
Brannan, Sam, 149, 331–33, 334, 339
Bray, Edmond, 467
Breen family, 343–44
Bridger, Jim ("Old Gabe"), 6, 14, 51, 149, 207, 230
Bright (Belknap ox), 24, 245
Bristow [Bristoe], William, 29, 38, 53, 131, 396–99
Bristow company, 29, 38
See also Walker-Bristow company
Broadhurst, George, 36, 159, 327
Broadhurst, Rebecca McCombs, 34, 36
Broadhurst, Stephen, 33, 34, 36, 327
Brock (Belknap ox), 27
Brock, E. E., 32, 33, 200, 328
Brock, Robert, 33
Brock, Tarlton, 33
Brooklyn (ship), 331
Brouillet, Father (priest), 406
Brown, Mr. (Kelly company), 77
Brown, Ebenezer, 341, 421
Brown, James (captain), 333
Bruff, J. Goldsborough, 30, 235
Brule, NE, 93, 124, 191
Brule Sioux Indians, 115, 222
Bruneau Dunes State Park, ID, 278
Bruneau River, ID, 277–78, 296, 304
Brunswicker (newspaper), 85, 285
Bryant, Edwin
on buffalo, 92, 117, 129
experience with Snake Indians, 226
on Fort Laramie, 155
Bryant, Edwin, continued
on Caleb Greenwood, 67
on Greenwood’s Cutoff, 227
on insects, 122
on the Kansa Indians, 81–82
on John Richard, 127
on insects, 115
trail descriptions of, 44, 162
on wagon train oxen, 204

Buck (Belknap ox), 24
Buckhorn Canyons, WY, 229–30

buffalo

captured calf, 180, 181, 182, 186
chips, 117
hunting, 96, 98, 122–23, 129–30, 171–72, 189, 190, 208–9, 249, 253–54
jerky, 254
robes, as clothing, 64, 125, 389
robe trade, 65, 90, 98, 108, 111, 116, 126, 130, 146, 154, 185, 232, 272
sightings, 121–22, 129, 180–81, 190
slaughter of, 92, 117, 129–30, 234

Butter Creek, OR, 355, 357, 363, 433

Bull Bear/Mahto-Tatonka (Oglala Sioux Indian chief), 71, 114–15

Bullock child death, 360
Bureau of Land Management, 229
Burley, ID, 268, 279, 311
Burns, Lawrence (“the Irishman”), 56, 104–5
Burnt River/Burnt River Canyon, OR, 301–2, 306–7, 367, 403–4

Burrows, Rufus (Wambaugh company)
arrival at Sutter’s Fort, 350
on meeting Mormon companies, 348
on Pawnee Indian encounter, 90–91
on Sioux and Pawnee Indian encounter, 65–67
on James [Henry] Shields accident, 345–47
at Snake Indian village, 232–33
in the Wambaugh company, 33, 36, 159, 327–28, 349

Butter Creek, OR, 355, 357, 363, 433

C

Cache Valley, UT, 149
Caldwell County, MO, 136
California gold rush. See gold rush
California Hill, NE, 125
Californiaian (newspaper), 34, 152, 238, 346, 463
California Star (newspaper), 334
California Trail (Fort Hall Road), 328

The California Trail (Stewart), 327–28
Camp, Charles L., xv, 327
Campbell, Margaret, 293–94
Campbell, Robert, 70–71, 84, 153–54, 239
Canadians (at Fort Laramie), 156
Carlin Canyon, 381
Carroll, Mr., 257
Carroll County, MO, 85, 189, 284
Carson Canyon, CA, 337, 341–42, 448
Carson Pass/Carson Road, CA, 336–37, 339, 341, 427, 450–52
Carson River, NV, 424, 426, 446
Cascade Creek (Fall Creek), ID, 267
Case, James, 68
Casper, WY, 191, 196, 197, 256
Cassia Creek, ID, 322–23
Castle Creek, ID, 296, 304
Castle Rock, NE, 127, 167
Catholic missionaries, 217–18, 406
Catlin, Mr. (Kelly company), 79
cattle. See animals, domestic
Cayuse, OR, 354
Cayuse Indians
converts to Catholicism, 50, 53, 212, 405–6
and Father Lempfrit, 407–12, 440
and Gates company, 353–54
in Grand Round, OR, 303, 407–12
and Miller company, 360–61
relationship with emigrants, 360–61
relationship with French, 310
warnings about, 244, 261, 269, 306, 353–54, 370–71
Cayuse Indian War, 244, 261, 354–56, 362–64, 408
Cecil, OR, 357, 364
Cedar Springs, OR, 357
Chamberlin, Aaron, 25–26
Chamberlin, Adeline Cheadle, 25–26
Chariton County, MO, 84–85, 189, 284
Cheadle, Richard (Purvine company), 25–26, 28, 38, 129, 132, 399
Cheadle, Sarah, 25–26
Chesterfield, ID, 238, 239
Chesterfield Reservoir, ID, 318
Cheyenne Indians, 70, 119, 188
children
deaths along the trail, 26, 50, 99, 147, 360, 447
illness along the trail, 245, 359–60
Indian children kidnapped into slavery, 235
trail life of, 82, 88, 102, 107, 117, 230
Chiles, Christopher (“Kit”), 83
Chiles, Elizabeth, 83
Chiles, Fannie, 83
Chiles, James, 83
Chiles, Joseph Ballinger (Chiles company), 83
  buffalo hunting of, 254
  early years of, 82–83
  extortion attempts of, 451, 454–55
  family of, 83, 259
  and Robert Stockton, 322
  wagon circling routine of, 188
  and Joseph R. Walker, 158
Chiles, Mary, 83
Chiles, Polly Ann, 83
Chiles company
  joining Hensley company, 218
  progress of, 107–8, 182, 188–91, 220–22
Chiles-Hensley company
  birth and death of Bernett infant, 447
  at Bishop Creek, NV, 378–80
  buffalo hunts, 259
  crossing Forty Mile Desert, 423–27
  at Emigrant Canyon, NV, 416–18
  encounters with Paiute Indians, 418, 421–22, 444–47
  at Fort Hall, 319–20
  at Green River, 255–56, 288
  at Humboldt Sink, NV, 423–26
  as last company on trail (1848), 255, 259
  livestock condition, 386, 425–26
  member departures, 448
  missing oxen, 253, 256, 285–86
  news of gold, 379–80, 421–22
  and Isaac Pettijohn, 253
  shooting accident, 418–19
  and John S. Shaw, 65
  Smith party left behind, 450–51
  and Thompson company, 383–85
  wagon losses, 449–50
  and Joseph Walker, 290–91, 384, 427
Chippewa Indians, 70
Cinq Corbeaux, Le grand chef (Five Crows), 407
City of Rocks, ID, 324, 324–25, 329, 372
C. J. Strike Reservoir, ID, 278
Clackamus River, OR, 394
Clark, William, 120
Clayman, James, 15
  about, 15–16, 17
  and Applegate company members, 420
  arrival in St. Joseph of, 18–19
  arrival in Willamette Valley of, 23
  and Joseph Barnett, 205–6
  and Jim Bridger, 149
  on buffalo, 121, 234
  and Clyman’s Fork River, 231
  death of dog, 340
  and the Donner company, 158
  epilogue, 462
  William Fallon’s relationship to, 238
  on Fort Laramie, 154
  and Thomas Fitzpatrick, 51
  on Grand Round, 303
  and Caleb Greenwood, 157
  on Humboldt River/Humboldt Sink, 329, 330
  Indian experience of, 90, 111, 176, 230–31, 233
  letter to Fred Ross, 349–50
  on Lone Pine stump, 302
  on James Marshall gold discovery, 348
  and Hannah McCombs, 119, 198
  and Lambert McCombs, 34
  North Platte crossings of, 193
  on the prairie, 80
  on the Raft River Valley, 268
  on the Red Buttes area, 196
  on Rock Creek soil, 86
  Snake River crossing, 299
  for Truckee route over Sierras, 348–49
  on wagon train size, 326
  in the Wambaugh company, 34–35, 36, 43, 327–28, 350
  wilderness experience of, 6, 21, 36, 51, 70, 76, 89–90, 159
Clyman party, 80
Clyman Creek, 242, 279, 289
Clyman’s Fork, WY, 231
Coffey, Cassandra, 29
Coffey, N., 29
Coffey, Sarah, 29
Cokeville, WY, 233, 234, 242
Coloma, CA, 334
Columbia River, The Dalles, OR, 25, 365–66
Emigrants on the Overland Trail

Comanche Indians, 70
Commissary Ridge, WY, 232, 242
Conser, Jacob, 30, 56
Continental Divide, 148, 205, 206
Cooke, Philip St. George, 331, 421
Cooke’s Battalion. See Mormon Battalion
Corcoran, Bridget, 467–68
Corcoran, Francis, 4
Corcoran, Thomas (Cornwall company), 3
and Breen family, 344
on buffalo hunting, 122–23
on P. B. Cornwall, 327
departure of, 8–9, 12
and Donner Pass, 343–44
early years of, 3
epilogue, 462–63, 466–68
William O. Fallon and, 63, 236–38
and Britton Greenwood, 343–45
and Caleb Greenwood, 69, 151–52
and Guthrie, Mr., 236–38
illness, 1, 9, 13, 59–60, 79, 163, 238
Indian encounters, 62–63
and Joseph Kellogg, 59
letters, xiii, 62–63
and David Parks, 158, 237, 466
Slipper (horse), 3, 344, 466
and Wambaugh company, 349
Cornwall, Arthur, 6
Cornwall, Bruce, 466
Cornwall, P. B. (Pierre Barlow) (Cornwall company), 4
arrival in St. Joseph, 6
biography of, 63–64, 237, 265
California plans, 266
claimed captaincy of company, 327
and Thomas Corcoran, 1, 3, 9, 327
departure of, 8–9, 12
eyears, 4
epilogue, 465–66
and William O. Fallon, 60–61
and Caleb Greenwood, 68–69
Indian encounters, 66
personality of, 8, 213
on the Sioux Indians, 110
transfer of Masonic charter, 265–66
Cornwall company
California arrival of, 349–50
and California gold discovery, 343
camping on Truckee River, 372
departure of William Fallon, 238
at Fort Laramie, 64, 151–52, 157
gold rush and, 329
path of, 58–64
progress of, 65, 91, 95, 108, 121, 205, 329, 330
and the Wambaugh company, 158
See also Greenwood company
Corral Springs, OR, 363
Costello, Charles, 56
Costello, James, 56
Cottonwood Creek, KS, 44, 98, 100
Cottonwood Creek, WY, 162
Cottonwood Valley, NV, 447
Council Bluffs, MO, 8, 9, 10, 136, 140, 144, 149–50
Council Bluffs Indian Agency, 11
Courthouse Rock, NE, 116, 118, 127, 174, 177, 187
Cox, Mr., 77
Coyote Rock, NE, 167
Cozad, NE, 96, 179
Craig, Jim, 371
Cree Indians, 70
Crook, John J., 33
Crooks, John, 265, 398
Crossing the Plains (Nahl; oil on canvas), 425
Crossing the South Platte (Jackson; watercolor), 123
Crow Indians
at the 1851 Plains Indian Convention, 120
and the buffalo trade, 116
and Caleb Greenwood, 159
Father Lempfrit on, 220
Joe Meek’s view of, 51
and Pawnee Indians, 70
raiding parties of, 162
Crystal Springs, ID, 270
Curry, George L., 112, 115

D
The Dalles, OR, 366, 437, 439, 440
Dalles Indians, 356
Davidson, James, 386
Daviess County, MO, 136
Davis, Jerome, 84
Deadman Pass, OR, 354
Deep Creek, ID, 270
Deep Sand Route (WY), 203, 210
Deer Creek, WY, 165, 172, 196, 254, 266
Deeth, NV, 379
Delaney company
first diarist mention of, 179
progress of, 205, 217, 219
rebellion within, 436
with Stone company, 249, 309–11, 315–16, 367
Délivaut, Father (priest), 443
Demers, Father (priest), 406
Dempsey Ridge, WY, 233, 242, 280, 292–93
Denton, Mr., 98
Des Chutes Indians, 356, 439
De Smet, Pierre-Jean, 76, 147–48, 198, 249
Devil’s Backbone (Rock Avenue), WY, 196, 197, 209, 394, 432
Devil’s Gate (Jackson; watercolor), 201
Devil’s Gate, WY, 199, 200–201, 201, 209–10, 257
DeVoto, Bernard, 7, 238, 350, 462
Dewees, NE, 85, 94
diarists
  misconceptions about, xix
  personal qualities of, xiii–xix, 43
  table of, xvii
  voice of, xiii
Dick (Belknap ox), 24
Dickens, Annie, 33, 119
Dickens, Ella, 33
Dickens, Jehu, 33
Dickens, Jerimiah, 33
Dickens, Jesse, 33
Dickens, John, 33
Dickens, Jordan, 33
Dickens, Joshua, 33
Dickens, Nancy, 33
Dickens, Reuben (Reverend), 33, 119
Dickens family, 265
Digger Indians
  Northern Paiute, 346, 416, 421–22
  Western Shoshone, 323, 376, 380–82, 416
  See also Northern Paiute Indians, Paiute Indians, Shoshone [Shoshoni] Indians
Dog Creek, CA, 344
dogs. See animals, domestic
Donner, Mrs. George, 343
Donner company
  abandoned shanties of, 331
  buried by Wambaugh company members, 349
  chilling effect of story of, xiv, 19, 69
  and James Clyman, 158
  description of ill-fated camp, 343–44
  and Lansford Hastings, 158, 341
  and Sarah Keys’ death, 99
  rescue / relief parties, 7, 68
  and James Reed, 158, 416
  and John Snyder, 416
Donner Lake, CA, 331, 344
Donner Pass, CA, 331, 340, 349, 466
doubling (two teams per wagon), practice of, 289, 296–97, 352–53
Douglas, James, 443
Douglas, WY, 164
Drab (Belknap ox), 24
Dry Creek, ID, 308
Dry Sandy Creek, WY, 226–27
Durkee, OR, 302, 307, 367
dust pneumonia, 290, 321
E
Ebbert, George, 51, 55
Echo, OR, 354
Echo Bridge, OR, 355
eclipse, lunar, 422
Edgar, NE, 44, 94
Edson, Ambler, 12
Edwards Creek, ID, 323
Eighmile Creek, OR, 366, 388, 429–30
Elburz Siding, NV, 380
Elkhorn Creek, WY, 170
Elkhorn River, NE, 58
Elko, NV, 157, 381
Emerick, Eunice, 293
Emigrant Canyon, NV, 416–18
Emigrant Hill, OR, 362, 413–15
Emigrant Pass, NV, 382
emigrants
  deaths of, 139, 146–47, 171–72, 177, 206, 253, 281, 293
  family names, 397
  meneaska (Sioux Indian word for emigrants), 111
  motivations of, xiii–xiv, 23, 34, 35–36
  personalities of, 19, 23, 35
  provisions and preparations of, 19–21, 23–24, 35–36, 56, 86–87, 214
  returnees, 23, 54
  on springs, distinguishing good from bad, 421
  on steamboat travel, 16
  trail plant life as food source, 282, 323
  trail routines of, 38, 47, 82, 87–88, 188, 191, 202
  view of gifts to Indians, 111–12
  See also diarists; Mosquito Creek Resolution; wagon trains
Emigrants Guide to Oregon and California
(Hastings), 157
“Emigrants’ Laundry Tub,” 161
Emigrants Springs, OR, 354
Emigrant Trails West (Trails West), xv
Ervin, S. M., 41
Evans, Israel, 334

F
Fairbury, NE, 44, 51, 98, 101
Fall Creek (Cascade Creek), ID, 267
Fallon, William O. (“Big Fallon”/“Le Gros”)
and James Clyman, 238
and Thomas Corcoran, 63, 236–38
death of, 236–37
and Caleb Greenwood, 68, 238
and O’Fallon’s Bluff, 97
on Sublette’s Trace, 76
and Wambaugh company, 237–38
wilderness experience of, 7, 159
Farewell Bend, Snake River, OR, 300–301, 306, 372, 404
Fernley, NV, 338, 340, 372
“fever and ague” (malaria), 3
Fifteenmile Creek, OR, 365–66, 403, 437
First Missouri Volunteers (Oregon Battalion), 135, 187
Fisher Creek, 232
Fitzpatrick, Thomas (“Broken Hand”)
and Jim Bridger, 149
and James Clyman, 14, 51, 205
and the first wagon train, 76
and the Sioux Indians, 111
as Upper Platte Indian agent, 205
wilderness experience of, 6
Five Crows [Le grand chef Cinq Corbeaux], 407–8, 410
Flagstaff Hill, OR, 302, 307
flax, polypetalous, 282
Fontenelle, Lucien, 231
Fontenelle Creek, WY, 231, 289
food poisoning, 235
Ford, Nathaniel, 157, 420
Ford company, 157, 158
Fort Atkinson (Fort Mann), KS, 21, 71, 77
Fort Bernard, WY, 127, 168
Fort Boise, ID, 274, 299–300, 305, 308, 309, 360, 367, 371, 399, 404, 443, 459
Fort Bridger, WY, 50, 149, 158, 227, 234
Fort Casper, WY, 196, 216
Fort Childs. See Fort Kearny
Fort Churchill, 446
Fort Hall (Tappan; sketch), 265
Fort Hall, ID
and the Chiles company, 319–20
and Fort Laramie, 159
and the Gates company, 239
and Caleb Greenwood, 68, 157
history of, 239
news of gold discovery, 339
parties at, 261–64
as start of journey’s last leg, 244
Stone company at, 309
traders at, 319–20
Fort Hall Bottoms, ID, 240
Fort Hall Indian Agency, 239, 240
Fort Hall Indian Reservation, 239, 240, 319
Fort Hall Road (California Trail), 328
Fort John. See Fort Laramie
Fort Kearny (Fort Childs), NE, 61, 64, 90, 135, 187, 223
Fort Laramie (Fort John/Fort William), WY, 153
about, 72, 153–56, 159
and the Allsopp company, 62, 157
James Clyman on, 154
and the Cornwall party, 64, 151–52, 157
John Fremont on, 154
and Fort Hall, 159
and Greenwood company, 108, 121, 151, 157, 238
and Stephen W. Kearney, 156
and the Miller company, 169
John McPherson on, 152, 156
Richard May on, 221, 222
naming of, 71
and Francis Parkman, 154–55, 219
and the Purvine company, 175
Riley Root on, 152, 155–56, 158, 160, 175
sale of, 223–24, 246
1845 Sioux Indian meeting, 111
and the Smith party, 178, 217–18
and the Stone company, 218–19
Fort Leavenworth, KS, 4, 7, 16, 141, 146, 330
Fort Lee, OR, 439
Fort Mann, KS, 21, 71, 77
Fort Platte, WY, 120–21, 169, 178, 222
Fort Vancouver, OR, 440–43
Fort Victoria, OR, 460
Fort Walla Walla, WA, 354, 357, 413, 414
Fort William. See Fort Laramie
Forty Mile Desert, NV, 330, 340, 423–25
Foster, Philip, 402, 431, 432
Fourche Boise, WY, 166, 253, 255
Fowler, Jacob, 75
Fox Indians, 18, 40
Franklin, MO, 75
Franzwa, Gregory M., xv
Fredrick, Dr. (Chiles company), 452–55
Fremont, Jessie, 5
Fremont, John C. (“the Great Pathfinder”), 4–5, 44, 48, 111, 154, 299–300, 377
Fremont expedition, 121
French Canadians, 156
French traders, 243
frostbite, 343

G
Galesburg, IL, 10
Garden Grove, IA, 139
Gates, Thomas, 37, 397
Gates company
at Barlow’s Gate, 400–401
and Cayuse Indians, 353–54
diminished size of, 39, 87, 93, 97
family names, 397, 398
fear of Indian attack, 301
at Fort Hall, 264
and Thomas Gates, 37
and Black Harris, 48
journey’s end, 402
and John McPherson, 97
Miller company rivalry, 239–40, 259, 275, 365, 401
progress of, 45, 166, 205, 259, 296, 298–300, 304, 351, 402
and Riley Root, 275–76, 351, 398
Geiger, Vincent, 38
Georgetown Creek, ID, 316
Gering, NE, 174
Gifford’s Point, MO, 10
Gillespie, Mr., 48
Gilliam, Cornelius, 356–57, 361, 363–64
Gilliam, Neal, 55
Givens Hot Springs, ID, 298, 305
Glendo, WY, 163, 170, 251
Glendo Reservoir, WY, 170
Glenn, Hugh, 75
Glenns Ferry, ID, 274–75
Glenrock, WY, 166
gold rush
  effect on migration, 43
  effect on Plains Indians, 186, 222–23, 224
  Father Lemppfrit’s report of, 310
  first reports east of, 343
  and the Mormon Battalion, 142
Mormon Island discovery, 334, 342, 379–80, 421
news of, xv, 329, 339, 343, 380, 421–22
Sutter’s Mill discovery, xv, 334
trail split during, 227
Goose Creek, ID, 268, 279, 372–75, 386
Goose River, NV, 329
Gordon, William, 461
Grand Island, NE, 60
Grand Round (Grande Ronde), OR, 303, 351–52, 360–61, 407, 412, 440
Grand View, ID, 296, 304
Grant, Mr. (son of Richard), 284
Grant, Richard, 240, 319–20
Grass Valley Canyon, OR, 359
Grattan, John L., 186
Grattan massacre, 186, 224
Gravelly Ford, NV, 382, 385
Graves, Mrs., 344
grave sites
  Margaret Campbell, 293
  at Devil’s Gate, 257
  disturbed, 253, 274
  efforts to obscure, 346, 360
  Eunice Emerick, 293
  grave-robbing thwarted, 346
  Indian graves, 37–38, 168, 188, 232
  Hiram Malik, 254, 265
  near Fontenelle Creek, 289
  Henry Shields, 346
  Mrs. Stone, 293
  Trimbles son, 318
Great Nemaha Indian Subagency (NE), 40, 52
Great Salt Desert, 157
Great Salt Lake Valley, UT, 149, 196
Great Sandy [Big Sandy] Creek, WY, 227
Green, Ephraim, 338, 339, 348, 383, 384, 449
Green River, WY, 227, 230, 241–42, 244, 246, 251, 255–56, 288
Green River Fourth of July celebration, 246
Greenwood, Mr. (Captain; Kelly and Watt company), 25, 399
Greenwood, Angeline, 68
Greenwood, Batchicka, 67–68
Greenwood, Britton, 68, 343, 349, 464–65
Greenwood, Caleb (“Old Greenwood”) appearance of, 151
and James Clyman, 157
  as Cornwall company guide, 68–69, 327–28
  and Crow Indians, 159
  and Thomas Corcoran, 69, 151–52
description of, 67
Greenwood, Caleb, continued
epilogue, 464–65
experience of, 159
family life of, 67–68
and Fort Hall, ID, 68, 157
and William Fallon, 38, 238
Pawnee Indian encounter, 66, 69–70
Sierras route choice, 342–43
at Snake Indian village, 232–33
and Robert Stockton, 83, 322
as Stephens-Townsend-Murphy company leader, 227
trail guide experience of, 68–69
and the Wambaugh company, 159
and M. N. Wambaugh, 158
Greenwood, Governor Boggs, 68
Greenwood, James Case, 68
Greenwood, John, 68
Greenwood, Sarah, 68
Greenwood, William Sublette, 68
Greenwood company
at Fort Laramie, 108, 121, 151, 157, 238
learned of California gold discovery, 329
Pawnee Indian encounters, 72
progress of, 91, 205, 329, 330
See also Cornwall company
Greenwood family, 342
Greenwood's Cutoff, 227, 228, 245, 287
Guernsey, WY, 161, 162
Guthrie, Mr., 236–38

H
Haines, Aubrey L., xv
Halleck, NV, 380
Ham, Zacharias, 231
Hams Fork, WY, 231–32, 233, 242, 291
Hann, Doc, 1, 3
Hanna, S., 432
Hannah (Hanna) company, 178–79, 182, 205, 217, 218, 254
Hanover, KS, 44, 98, 100, 108
Hardman, Levi, 33, 34, 163, 328
Hardman, Martha McCombs, 34
Harney, W. S., 112
Harper, W. W., 33, 328
Harris, Moses “Black”
in the Applegate company, 420
death of, 48
and the Mormon company, 148–49
as trail guide, 6, 7, 75–76
wilderness experience of, 6, 48, 51, 74–75
Harvey, Thomas, 145
Hastings, Lansford, 35, 68, 76, 157–58, 341
Hastings company, 157
Hasting’s Cutoff, 157, 384
Hathaway, Charlotte Kellogg, 12
Hathaway, Daniel, 12
Hathaway, Sylvester, 12
Hathaway family, 265
Hawley, Chatman, 24, 246
Haystack Butte, WY, 228, 288
Hedger, George, 56
Henry’s Fork, WY, 158
Hensley, Samuel J., 84, 134, 221, 257, 322, 372–73, 378, 383–84
Hensley’s Cutoff, 373, 384
Hershey, NE, 93, 97, 132
Hiawatha, KS, 45
Highland, KS, 40
Hilgard, OR, 361, 367, 412
histoplasmosis (“lung fever”), 1, 4, 79
History of Oregon (Bancroft), 179, 432
History of Santa Cruz County (Corcoran), 327
Hitchcock, Isaac, 227
Hitchcock, Rufus, 33, 328
Hoecken, Christian, 3, 4, 79, 81
Holden Hill, WY, 231, 242
Holdridge, Mr., 28
Hollenberg, KS, 98, 100
Holmes, H. N. V., 29
Holmes, Jonathon Harriman, 348
Homestead, ID, 305
Hooker, Mr., 30
Hooper Spring, ID, 317
Hope Valley, CA, 449–52
Horse Creek, NE, 113–14, 116, 120, 168, 174, 177, 187, 198, 209, 221, 257
Horse Creek Indian Council of 1851, 120, 186 horses. See animals, domestic
Horseshoe Creek, WY, 163, 170, 175, 215, 251
hot springs
Brady, 338, 340
Deep Creek, 270–71
Givens, 298, 305
Mary’s River, 381
near Mountain Home, ID, 369
Purvine company and, 309
Steamboat Springs, 236, 243, 317
Valley’s, 448
Houston, James, 33
Houston, Milton, 33
Houston, Newton, 33
Houston, Robert, 31, 33
Houston family, 265
Hudson’s Bay Company
  Columbia Dalles location, 366
  Fort Boise location, 299, 371
  Fort Vancouver location, 443
  and Black Harris, 7
  and John McLoughlin, 25
  and the Mormon company, 141
Hudspeth, Benoni, 237
Hudspeth Cutoff, ID, 237
Humphreys, Norris, 30
Hunsacker, Daniel, 33
Hunsacker, David, 328
Hunsacker, Nicholas, 345
Huntington, OR, 300–301, 306, 367
Huntley, William, 77, 318
Huntsucker, Mr., 65
Husband, Bruce, 223–24
Hutt, Mr., 257

Ice Slough, WY, 203, 211, 246, 249, 259
Independence, MO, 5, 48, 74–75, 76–77
Independence Rock (Jackson; watercolor), 199
Indian Chief of Mosquito Creek, 37–38
Indian Creek, MO, 77
Indian Creek, WY, 164
Indian Intercourse Act of 1834, 18, 140, 145
Indians. See Plains Indians
insects, 121–22, 201, 235, 242, 251, 282, 294, 411
Iowa Indians, 18, 40
Irish Grove, MO, 3, 4, 8

Jackson, Andrew, 26, 27, 38
Jackson, Benjamin, 26, 27, 38
Jackson, George, 26, 38, 246, 269, 359–60
Jackson company
  departure of, 26
  family names in, 397
  horse theft from, 306
  members, 397
  Missouri River crossing, 27
  Oregon City arrival, 399
  progress of, 359, 360
  Jail Rock, NE, 118
James, Thomas, 75
Jeff Cabin Creek, ID, 319
Jeffrey City, WY, 203
Jesuit missionaries, 3, 76, 79, 434
John Day River, OR, 357, 358, 364, 400
John’s Creek, CA, 344
Johnson, John, 460
Johnson’s Ranch, CA, 345
Johnston, William, 334
Julesberg, CO, 124

K
Kanaka Rapids, 270
Kane, Thomas, 141
Kansa Indians, 70, 79, 81
Kansas River, KS, 76
Kearney, Stephen W., 4, 7, 111, 135, 141–42, 156, 330
Kellogg, Charles, 12
Kellogg, Charlotte, 12
Kellogg, Edward, 12
Kellogg, Elijah, 12
Kellogg, Estella, 12
Kellogg, George, 12
Kellogg, Jason, 12
Kellogg, John, 398
Kellogg, Joseph, 12, 59, 158
Kellogg, Margaret, 12
Kellogg, Orrin, 12, 59, 62, 158, 265–66, 398
Kellogg, Phoebe, 12
Kellogg family, 265, 398
Kelly, William, 155
Kelly (Kelley), Clinton, 77, 79, 397, 432, 440
Kelly company
  at Ash Hollow, NE, 132
  departure of, 77
  family names in, 397
  members of, 77, 79
  Oregon City arrival, 400–401
  progress of, 81, 99, 100, 178, 205, 215, 217, 246, 432
Kenesaw, NE, 102
Keys, Sarah, 99–100
Kimball, Hazen, 263, 327–28, 341, 342–43
Kincaid, Mr. (trader), 287
Kinney, Edward, 12
Kiowa Indians, 70
Knob Hill, WY, 165
Knox County, IL, 10
Knox Intelligencer (newspaper), 212, 213
Kurz, Rudolph Friedreich, 16, 17, 18, 54
L
La Barge, Joseph, 230
La Barge Creek, WY, 230
La Barge's Fork, WY, 231
La Belle Vue (Bellevue), MO, 10, 11, 62
La Bonte Creek (Jackson; watercolor), 164
La Bonte (Big Timber) Creek, WY, 164, 171, 215, 252
Ladd Canyon Hill, OR, 360
Ladd Creek/Canyon, OR, 303–4
Lafflair, Levi, 328
La Grande, OR, 351
La Grande Thuoté [Taitowele], 407
Lake Bigler, CA, 345
Lake Valley, CA, 451–52
Lanterette, D. C., 33
Lanterette, L., 265
La Prele (Mike's Head) Creek, WY, 165, 171, 215, 253
Laramie Peak, WY, 119, 161, 164, 165, 167
Laramie Range, WY, 161
Laramie River Fork, WY, 120, 152–53, 160, 178
Lassen, Peter, 84–85, 284–85, 322, 420–21
Lassen company, 189, 284–85, 310, 420–21
Lassen Meadows, NV, 420–21
Latter-Day Saints' Emigrants Guide (Clayton), 196
Laurel Hill, OR, 391–93, 392–93
Lawrence, KS, 79
Lawrence Creek, OR, 302
Leabo, Mr., 55
Lee, Colonel (colonel in Cayuse War), 364
Lee, Daniel, 354
Lee, Jason, 354
Lee, John D., 147, 148
Lee's Encampment, OR, 354, 362, 367
Le grand chef Cinq Corbeaux [Five Crows], 407
Lempfrit, Honoré-Timothée (Stone company) and Lawrence Burns, 104–5
buffalo calf shooting by, 249
Cayuse Indian encounters, 407–12, 440
on Crow Indians, 220
as defender of Indian character, 371
and Delaney company, 249, 309–11, 315–16, 367
on Desolation Camp, 315
at Fort Laramie, 218–19
on grotesque rocks, 369
Indian village visit, 314
lost on trail, 437–39
medical duties of, 250, 283, 369–70
and Mr. Montaland, 179–80
and David O'Neil, 55, 368, 440, 442
Pawnee encounters of, 103, 105–6
personal history of, 54
priestly duties of, 281, 283
Sioux Indian encounters, 184–86
Snake Indian encounters, 281–82, 310
trail descriptions of, 103–4, 106–7
traveling with Father Lionnet, 54, 182, 434, 437
on water shortage, 433–34
See also Stone company
Lence, Captain, 283–84
Lewfleur, Levi, 33
Lewis and Clark expedition, 9–10, 92
Lexington, NE, 96
the Liberty Pole, 59
Lilly Creek, KS, 49
Lincoln, Abraham, 158
Lindsey, Mr., 101
Linn, Lewis, 24
Lionnet, Father (priest)
at Fort Vancouver, 443
illness of, 107
personality of, 250
on trail funeral, 281
traveling with Father Lempfrit, 55, 182, 434, 437
Lisco, NE, 117, 184
Little, Jessie C., 141
Little Blue River, NE, 44, 62, 86, 94, 107, 132, 134
Little Box Elder Creek, WY, 166, 171–72
Little Colorado Desert, WY, 228
Little Goose Creek Canyon, ID, 375
Little Nemaha River, NE, 28
Little Sandy Creek, NE, 44, 51, 94, 98, 149
Little Sandy Creek, WY, 227
Little Truckee River, CA, 344
livestock. See animals, domestic
Lone Pine stump, OR (landmark), 302, 307
Lonergan, Elizabeth, 1, 3, 468
Lone Tree, MO, 73
Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth, 4
Loring, Colonel, 63, 64
Lost Stone of Missouri, 252–53
Louisiana, MS, 29
Loup River, NE, 59, 68, 111
Lower California crossing of the South Platte, 123–24
lunar eclipse, 422
“lung fever” (histoplasmosis), xiv, 1, 4, 22, 79, 468
Lupton, Lancaster P., 120–21
Lytle Pass, OR, 371

M
Mahto-Tatonka (Oglala Sioux Indian chief), 71, 114–15
malaria ("fever and ague"), 3
Male Crow (Oglala Sioux Indian), 115
Malheur River, OR, 300, 306, 367, 371
Malik, Hiram, 254
"manifest destiny," xix

maps
one (California/Oregon trail), xviii–xix
two (MO/KS), 2
three (NE), 60–61
four (NE), 74–75
five (MO/KS), 88–89
seven (NE/WY), 112–13
eight (WY), 160
nine (WY), 194–95
ten (WY, ID), 228–29
eleven (ID), 262–63
twelve (ID), 297
thirteen (ID), 321
fourteen (CA/NV), 332–33
fifteen (OR), 352–53
sixteen (ID/NV/UT), 374
seventeen (NV), 379
eighteen (WA/OR), 389
nineteen (NV), 417
twenty (NV/CA), 444–45

Maps of the California Trail (Franzwa), xv
Maps of the Oregon Trail (Franzwa), xv

Marcy, W. L., 141
Markham, Colonel, 195
"Marry Springs," 79
Marshall, James, x, 334, 348, 464
Marsh Creek, ID, 268
Marsig, ID, 305
Martin, Patrick, 9
Marti Valley, CA, 344
Mary's River, NV, 347, 377–80, 381, 415, 421
Mary's River Sink, NV, 422–26
Marysville, KS, 43, 49, 98, 100, 106
Mason, Governor, 350
Masonic order, 189, 265, 398
Massacre Rocks, ID, 267
Mates, Merrill, xv
Maxwell, Mrs., 319
Maxwell, NE, 179
May, Mrs. Richard, 319

May, Richard M. (Chiles company)
in Bear River Valley, 316
on City of Rocks, 324–25
don Digger Indians, 380
epilogue, 463–64
on Fort Hall, 319
on Fort Laramie, 221, 222
and Samuel Hensley, 372–74
illness of, 449, 456
Indian burial discovery, 188
on Indian livestock theft, 444–45, 446
journey's end, 455–57
on Mormon ferry, 255
on Mormon gold, 379–80, 385
on oxen, care of, 323
physical condition of, 289–90
on Edward Smith, 418
on John Shaw, 107–8
on Soda Springs, 317
on Joseph Walker, 290–91
See also Chiles company
McClellan, Frank, 158, 159, 256, 291, 328, 445, 463
McClellan, Mike, 83, 256, 291, 445, 456
McCombs, Eva, 34
McCombs, Frank, 34
McCombs, Hannah, 34, 119, 198, 462
McCombs, Israel, 34
McCombs, Lambert, 34, 328, 462
McCombs, Martha, 34
McCombs, Rebecca, 34
McFarlan's Castle, NE, 127
McLoughlin [McLaughlin], John, 25, 443
McPherson, John (Wambaugh company)
about, 34
California arrival of, 350
on Chimney Rock, 118
and the combined Wambaugh, Cornwell, and Greenwood parties, 159
epilogue, 463
on Fort Laramie, 152, 156
on Gates company, 97
on Independence Rock, 199–200
lost journal, 326, 350
and the Mosquito Creek Resolution, 32, 33
poem on Henry Shields' death, 347
on Scott's Bluff, 119
in Wambaugh company, 328
Medill, William, 145
Meek, Helen, 50
Meek, Joe
and Bannock Indians, 269
description of, 49–50
on Indian encounters, 176, 404
journey to Washington, 62, 65
on the Sioux Indians, 110, 173
and Peg Leg Smith, 235
and the Whitman massacre, 50–51, 55–56, 356
Meek company, 49–51
meneaska (Sioux Indian word for emigrants), 111
Mengarini, Father (priest), 249
Merrill, Moses, 11–12
Methodist mission and missionaries, 77, 366, 439
Mexican-American War, xix, 4, 141, 330
Mexican Revolution, 75
Meyers, J. J., 237
Miami County, IN, 29
Middle Missouri River, 67
Mike's Head Creek, WY, 165, 171, 215
militiamen, 434, 439
Miller, Captain, 240
Miller, Annie, 56
Miller, Betty, 395
Miller, Charles, 37, 56
Miller, Christian, 29
Miller, Christopher, 395
Miller, Isaac (Miller company), 29, 36, 45, 169, 393, 395, 397
Miller, James D. (Stone company), 56, 104, 106, 284
Miller, Jefferson, 56
Miller, John, 33
Miller, John B., 71, 145
Miller, Joseph A., 56
Miller, Mary Ann, 393
Miller, Moses, 94
Miller company
and Cayuse Indians, 360–61
death of child, 360
and the Deschutes River ferry, 365–66
at Emigrant Hill, OR, 362
family names in, 397, 398
at Fort Hall, 244, 261
at Fort Laramie, 169
and Gates company, 239–40, 259, 264, 275, 365, 401
at the Green River, 241–42, 246
at Horse Creek, 168
Indian dog running sheep, 270
and Jackson company, 359, 360
lightening their load, 169–70
at Little Box Elder Creek, 171–72
livestock handling practices of, 45–47
members leaving company, 394–95
Oregon arrival of, 394–96, 403
at Poison Springs, 208–9
progress of, 29, 36–37, 48–50, 94–98,
124–25, 166–67, 170–71, 205,
243, 259, 268–72, 304–8, 359,
361–63, 364–65
and Riley Root, 265, 365, 398
separated and rejoined, 264, 394, 395
size of, 39
at Peg Leg Smith's trading post, 242–43
at Snake Indian village, 242
at Snake River, 275
at the South Platte River, 123
trading for dried salmon, 272
and Wambaugh company, 239–40, 242–43
weather descriptions of, 209, 242
See also Anderson, William Wright
Millet Island, ID, 271
Mineral Springs, WY, 196
Miniconjous Sioux Indians, 115
Misner, Isaac, 418
missions and missionaries
Baptist, 72, 79, 354
Catholic, 218, 406
Jesuit, 3, 76, 79, 435
Methodist, 77, 366, 439
nonspecific, 282
Oblates of Mary Immaculate, 54, 406, 414,
435, 443, 460, 461
Presbyterian, 351, 356–57
St. Anne mission, OR, 406, 414
St. Joseph mission, WA, 443
St. Paul mission, OR, 437, 443
St. Peter mission, OR, 392, 437
St. Rose mission, WA, 406, 414
San Luis Rey mission, CA, 331
Santa Ynez mission, CA, 461
Whitman mission, WA, 351, 354, 356–57, 406
See also Presbyterian Board of Missions;
specific missionaries
Mississippi River, 29, 30, 138–39
Missouri Fur Company, 10
Missouri Indian tribe, 11
Missouri River, 1, 9, 11, 16, 27, 28, 140
Mitchell, R. B., 145
Montaland (“Monthalon”), Mr., 179
Montpelier, ID, 236
Moore, Mr. (Chiles company), 323
Morgan, Dale, xv
Morgan County, IL, 30
Mormon Battalion (Cooke’s Battalion), 141–42, 146, 326–28, 330–31, 421
Mormon Island, CA, 334
Mormons
and Sam Brannan, 331–33
creation of Carson road, 336–37, 341–43
disaffected Mormons, 263
eastbound packers, 329, 379, 421, 422
gold, discovery of, 379–80, 385
and Black Harris, 148–49
and the Hudson’s Bay Company, 141
Indian encounters, 59, 140, 142
Liberty Pole, 59
migration of, 138, 205, 253, 256
Mississippi River crossing of, 138–39
the Mormon Zion, 136, 137–38, 147–50
and the practice of polygamy, 137
provisions and preparations of, 138
Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, 137, 138, 142
relationship with non-Mormon whites, 11, 26, 136–37, 144–45
relationship with Omaha Indians, 143–44
river ferries, 11, 58–59, 181–82, 192–96
road gangs, 164–65
search for a leader of, 137–38
Thompson company of, 383–85
Mormon Winter Quarters (Mormon encampment), 59, 143–46, 146–47, 149
Mosquito Creek (Spider Creek), MO, 10, 11, 29, 30, 31, 37–38, 40
Mosquito Creek Resolution, 32–33, 34, 38, 398
mosquitos, 249
Mountain Fever, 245, 459
Mount Hood, OR, 353
Mount Prospect, OR, 354
Mt. Pisgah, IA, 139
Muddy Creek, WY, 196
Mullen, G., 328
Mullen, G. W., 33
Murphy, Daniel, 151
Murphy, Ellen, 9, 152, 467
Murphy, ID, 297, 305
Murphy, Martin, 467
Murphy, Martin, Sr., 3, 9, 79
Murphy's Flat, 467
Murtaugh, ID, 268, 308, 311
Muskatoe Creek, MO, 31
myositis, 298–99
N
Names Cliff, WY, 203, 210–11, 259, 289
Names Hill, WY, 230, 231, 242
Napa Valley, CA, 34, 462
Native Americans. See Plains Indians
Nauvoo, MO, 11, 136–37, 138, 143–44
Neff, John, 383
Nelson, Staten Coryell, 446
Nemaha Creek, KS, 49, 104
Nemaha Indian Subagency, 40, 52
Nemaha River, KS, 53
New Hope Farm, 331
Newton, Abraham, 24
Nez Percé Indians, 356, 364, 370
Niagara Springs, 270
Niles Register (newspaper), 207
Niobrara River, MO, 144
Nishnabotna, MO, 345
Nishnabotna River, 28
Nodaway River, MO, 28
See also Paiute Indians
North Platte, NE, 62, 92
North Platte River
and the Black Hills Gap, 162
crossing descriptions, 193–96, 197, 213–14, 217
and Indian burials, 168
and La Bonte Creek, 164
near Ash Hollow, NE, 173, 175
and Scott’s Bluff, 118
North Powder, OR, 303, 359
O
Oak, NE, 44
Oakley, ID, 375
Oakland Transcript (newspaper), 463
Oblates of Mary Immaculate, 54, 406, 414, 435, 443, 460, 461
O’Fallon, Benjamin, 97
O’Fallon’s Bluff, 97
Office of Indian Affairs, 40, 79, 120, 140, 145
Ogden’s Lake (Humboldt Sink), 330
Oglala, NE, 181
Oglala Sioux Indians
Chief Bad Wound band of, 112
Chief Bull Bear band of, 71, 114–15
Chief Smoke band of, 114–15
and Crow Indians, 70
Oglala Sioux Indians, continued
cultural disruption of, 186
descriptions of, 113
and Fort Laramie, 70, 111, 156
and William Fallon, 7
Grattan massacre and, 186–87, 224
growth of, 114
influence of alcohol on, 114–15, 116
and Kiowa Indians, 70
numbers of, 114
See also Sioux Indians
Old Stone Face, WY, 203
Omaha Indians, 11, 59, 70, 143–44
O’Neil, David
and the buffalo calf, 180, 186
crossing Deschutes River, 436–37
and Father Lempfrit, 55, 367–68, 440, 442
during Indian encounter, 410
and Stone company, 56
Oregon, California parties separate, 266, 267
Oregon Battalion (First Missouri Volunteers),
135, 187
Oregon-California Trails Association, xv
Oregon City, OR, 25, 394–96, 395, 402
Oregonians, eastbound, 204, 212, 235, 254
Oregon Provisional Government, 50, 361, 364,
402
Oregon Spectator (newspaper), 37, 53, 366, 396,
430, 443, 460
Oregon Trail (Sublette’s Trace), 60, 76, 108
Oregon Volunteers (militia), 434, 439
Orin, WY, 163, 171, 215, 252
Osage Indians, 70
Oscalosa company, 177
Oshkosh, NE, 116, 127, 174, 177, 183–84, 191
Osino Canyon, 380–81
Otoe Indians, 9, 11, 68, 70
Ottumwa, IA, 25
overgrazed pasture land, 252
Overton, NE, 96
Owens, Isaac, 37, 94
Owyhee River, ID, 298–99, 305
oxen. See animals, domestic
P
Pacific Springs, WY, 206–7, 226, 240, 245, 246
Paden, Irene, xv
Paiute Indians, 338–39, 373, 416, , 421, 426,
444–46, 462. See also Northern Paiute Indians
Palmer’s Cabin, OR, 390, 391, 401
Palouse Indians, 356
Papin, Pierre, 80, 219, 223
parfleche (carrying bag), 16, 51
Parker’s Castle, NE, 127
Parkman, Francis
on buffalo, 121–22
on Fort Bernard, 168
on Fort Laramie, 154–55, 219
on the future of the Plains Indian, 222–23
on Indian encounters, 176
on John Richard, 127
on Sioux Indians, 113–14, 115, 116, 126
Parks, Absalom, 33
Parks, Catherine, 33
Parks, Charles, 33
Parks, Daniel, 33
Parks, David, 158
and Thomas Corcoran, 158, 237, 466
epilogue, 462–63
family members of, 33
in Wambaugh company, 328
at Yuba River goldfields, 350
Parks, David Jr., 33
Parks, Isaac, 33
Parks, John, 33
Parks, William, 33
Parma, ID, 366
Parting of the Ways, ID, 267
Parting of the Ways, WY, 227, 262, 287
Patterson, Ira, 33
Patterson, Samuel, 33
Patterson family, 265
Patton, Thomas, 32, 33, 119, 265
Pauline, NE, 102
Pawnee Indians
William Wright Anderson on, 94–95
buffalo hunting, 188
Crow Indians and, 70
dealings with white people, 61, 62, 89–90,
90–91, 103, 105–6
Fort Kearny land sale, 135
history of, 70, 71–72
missions to, 11
Omaha Indians and, 143
and the Plains Indians convention of 1851,
120
population loss, 72
Sioux Indians and, 62, 65–67, 71–72, 90,
95, 110, 176
wagon train encounters, 50, 51, 59, 63–64,
65, 71–72, 94–95, 102
Paxton, NE, 98, 181, 190
Payette, Francois, 299–300
Peg Leg Smith’s trading post, 234, 242
Pelican Creek, OR, 352
Pendleton, OR, 354
Pervine, John, 397
Petersburg, OR, 366
Peter’s Creek, MO, 29, 30, 37
Peterson, Mr., 191
Pettijohn, Isaac
and Chiles-Henley company, 253, 255
eastbound journey of, 248
wagon train count of, 204–5, 212, 224,
246, 248, 253, 260, 261, 262,
284, 373, 396
Picot[te], Mr., 218
Pigman, Walter, 112
Pike County, IL, 29
“Pike & Scott Co.” See Purvine company
Pine Grove campground, 290
Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, South Dakota,
186
Pinnacle Pass, ID, 372–73
Plains Indian Convention of 1851, 120, 186
Plains Indians
animals, 126, 127, 182, 232–33, 270, 362,
369–70, 410, 411, 412
attacks on wagon trains, 59, 94–95, 111,
275
burial practices of, 37–38, 168, 188, 232
children kidnapped into slavery, 235
converts to Catholicism, 50, 53, 212, 406
cultural disruption of, 186, 222–23, 224
eating insects, 242, 251, 282, 411
ferries, 365–66
grave sites, 37–38, 168, 188, 232
horse trading, 369, 411
influence of alcohol on, 10–11, 115, 116,
143, 184–85, 223
intertribal fighting of, 63, 66, 69, 70, 71,
90, 95, 110, 112, 115–16, 143,
144, 226, 272
kills of emigrants’ livestock, 421–22, 426
and the Mormon migration, 59, 140, 142
Francis Parkman on the future of, 223
Plains Indians Convention of 1851, 120,
186
soliciting tribute from wagon trains, 45,
71–72, 81–82, 90–91, 102
See also specific Indian tribes
Platte Purchase of 1836, 18, 40
Platte River, 28, 90, 93, 95, 98–99, 102, 163–66
See also North Platte River; South Platte River
Platte River Valley, 91, 92, 188
Plemmons (Plummons), David H., 189
Plemmons (Plummons), John, 189
Plum Creek, NE, 92, 103
Plume Rocks, WY, 226
Point, Father (priest), 249
Poison Spider Creek, WY, 197, 256
Poison Spring Creek, WY, 197, 198, 208–9
Polk, James K., 4, 141, 142, 145
Pollack family, 263, 328
polygamy, 137
polypetalous flax, 282
Pomeroy Basin, WY, 232, 242
Ponca Indians, 70
Porter, Elizabeth Winkle, 37
Porter, Isaac, 37
Porter, McCauley, 37
Porter, Sarah Coffey, 29
Porter, Stephen, 29, 30
Porter, William (Purvine company)
on buffalo, 129–30
on domestic animals, 173
epilogue, 459
family members of, 29–30
and the Indian Chief of Mosquito Creek,
37–38
on the Purvine company, 52, 131, 174–75,
215–17, 429–30
on Purvine company progress, 104, 247,
308–9, 366–67, 403, 429–30
on straying animals, 278–79
trail descriptions of, 98–99
on wagon repair, 87
on Whitman massacre, 53
wife ill with mountain fever, 459
Porter, William Grayson (Miller company), 37
Portneuf Hills, ID, 239, 243
Portneuf River Valley, ID, 238–39, 243–44,
264–65, 318, 320
Pottawattamie Indians, 3, 79, 81, 140, 145
Powder River Valley, OR, 302–3, 307, 353, 359,
367
Powell, Ludwell E., 90, 135, 188
Prairie Indian Encampment (Stanley), 114
Prather, Mr., 24
Pratt, Parley, 142, 146
Presbyterian Board of Missions, 11, 12, 40, 41,
45, 52
Presbyterian missionaries, 351, 356
Presley, David, 37, 126
Presley, Ransome, 126
Preston, John, 83, 448
Pritchard, James, 43–44
Prospect Hill, WY, 197, 209, 257
Prosser Creek, CA, 344
Pueblo de los Angelos, CA, 235, 331
Pueblo de San Luis Obispo, CA, 235
Pumpkin Creek, NE, 118, 126, 174
Purduau, L. D., 56
Purvine, Jackson, 175
Purvine, John, 30
Purvine company

cattle stampede, 173–74, 217
departure of, 29–30
at Fort Laramie, 175, 246
and the Indian Chief of Mosquito Creek, 37–38
oxen death, 308
at the Platte River, 99
size of, 39
and Walker-Bristow company, 396, 400
and Joe Watt, 129

Q
Quakenasp Canyon, WY, 233, 242
Quesnell’s Creek (Willow Creek), OR, 357

R
Raft River, WY, 159
Raft River (Cassia Creek), ID, 267, 279, 310, 321, 322, 328, 329, 383, 386
Ramsey (Ramsay), John, 37, 394, 397
Ransom, William, 37, 394
Rattlesnake Pass, WY, 200–201
rattlesnakes/rattlesnake bites, 87, 96, 98, 125, 232, 248–49
Rawhide Creek, NE, 59
Record Bluff, ID, 375
Red Buttes, WY, 196, 248, 256
Red Cloud (Ogala Sioux Indian), 115
Red Vermillion River/Big Vermillion River, KS, 81, 82, 99
Reed, James R., 99–100, 158, 416, 467
Reed, Virginia, 467
Register Cliff, WY, 161
Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains (Fremont), 4–6, 44, 130, 258
Rhoads, Daniel, 289
Rhoads, John, 289
rhyolite tuff dust, 298
Ricard, Pascal, 435, 440, 443, 460, 461
Rice, Street, 33, 328
Richard (Reshaw), John, 111, 115, 127, 167–69, 178, 222
Richardson, Mr., 77
Right, Jesse, 177
Riter, Levi E., 383
Robason, Mr., 94
Roberts, Mr., 26
Robidoux, Joseph, 17, 17–18, 21, 119
Robidoux Pass, NE, 119, 167–68, 174, 177, 187
Rock Avenue, WY, 196, 197, 198, 209
Rock Creek/Rocky Creek, ID, 308
Rock Creek, NE, 44, 86, 98, 108
Rock Creek, OR, 357–58, 364
Rock Creek, WY, 233, 242, 269–70, 280
Rock Springs, ID, 375
Rocky Gap, WY, 232, 242, 291
Rocky Mountain Fur Company, 50, 70
Rocky Mountain herring, 166
Rocky Mountain spotted fever, 235, 256
Rocky Mountain whitefish, 166
Rocky Ridge, WY, 204, 211–12, 225, 246, 259, 260, 285–86
Rodgers, Andrew, 53
Rogers, Samuel, 337–39, 348, 383
Rogers family, 328
Root, Riley (Wambaugh company), 26
on abandoned possessions, 273
on American Falls, 266–77, 271
on Barlow Road cutoff (John Day River area), 358
Bear River description, 233–34, 236
on E. E. Brock, 200
on buffalo, 117, 130
on company configuration, 87–88
diary entries, 26–27, 47, 65, 202, 415
epilogue, 458
on Fort Laramie, 152, 155–56, 158, 160, 175
and the Gates company, 275–76, 351, 398
Ham’s Fork Plateau description, 233
Ham’s Fork Valley description, 232
Little Sandy Creek description, 227
and the Miller company, 265, 365, 398
on the Mormon ferries, 196
at Mosquito Creek, 31, 40
with Oregon company, 326
on Pacific Springs, WY, 206–7
on Ross Fork, 239
on sickness and death in company, 235
on the Sioux Indians, 110, 111–12
on Slate Creek, 231
on Snake River, 271
on St. Joseph, 6
and the Wambaugh company, 33, 45, 97, 198, 202–3
on Wambaugh company progress, 42, 44, 161–62, 264–65
on Wambaugh company size, 36
Wind River Mountains description, 228
Roscoe, NE, 191
Ross, Fred, 349
Ross Creek/Ross Fork, ID, 239, 319
Rossville, KS, 80
Rothwell, William R., 385
Rousseau, Father (priest), 406, 437
Rudolph, Harvey, 30

S
Sabetha, KS, 49
Sac Indians, 18, 40, 45, 103
Saffran, Dr. (doctor), 432
Sage, Rufus, 198–99
St. Anne Mission, OR, 406, 414
St. Clair, Henry C., 385
St. Joseph Mission, WA, 443
St. Paul Mission, OR, 437, 443
St. Peter Mission, OR, 392, 437
St. Rose Mission, WA, 406, 414
saleratus lakes, 259
salmon. See animals/wild
Salmon Falls Creek, ID, 270–71, 308, 313–14
Salmon Trout branch, Fontenelle Creek, 231
Salmon Trout River, NV. See Carson River
Salt Lake Valley, UT, 149–50, 329–32, 380
salt marshes near Snake River, 310–12
Sanderson, W. F., 223
Sand Hollow battleground, OR, 356–57, 408, 433
San Diego, CA, 331
Sandy River, OR, 393–94, 402
San Joaquin Valley, CA, 331
San Luis Rey, CA, 331
Santa Clara Valley, CA, 35
Santa Fe, NM, 4, 5, 7, 5
Santa Fe Trail, 5, 75–76, 330
Santa Ynez mission (CA), 461
Sapling Grove, MO, 76, 83
Sarpy, Peter A., 10, 147, 219
Sarpy’s Ferry, Council Bluffs, MO, 1, 10–11, 140
Scanlon, Father (priest), 55
Schallenger, Moses, 227
Schuyler, NE, 59
Scott, Hiram, 167
Scott Springs, KS, 82
Scotts Bluff, NE, 118, 119, 135, 167, 174, 177, 182, 187, 192, 221
Scovil, Lucious M., 142
Sevier Valley, UT, 149
Shannon, Wesley, 30
Sharp, H., 328
Sharp, Hamilton, 33
Shaw, John S., 64–65, 68–69, 72, 98, 102, 107–8, 130, 159
Shaw company, 102, 107, 108
Shawnee Indians, 70
sheep. See animals, domestic
Sheep Creek, ID, 231, 242, 294
Sheep Mountain, WY, 165
Sheep Rock, 238
Shell, Creek, NE, 59
Shields, Henry, 33, 328, 346–48, 350
Shoshone (Snake) Indians, 51, 115, 116, 119, 162, 233, 323. See also Snake Indians
Shoshone Point, NV, 385
Shoshone [Shoshoni] Indians, 323, 376, 378–82, 416, 421, 447
Shoshone Valley, NV, 447
Shunganunga Creek, KS, 79
Shurt, Isaac, 395
Shutler, OR, 364
Simmons, Mr., 222
Simonds, Daniel, 26, 399
Sinker Creek, ID, 304–5
Sioux Indians
appearance of, 64, 113–14, 115–16, 185–86
cultural disruption of, 186, 222–23, 224
encounters with whites, 110–12, 113–14, 115–16, 125–26, 127, 172–73, 185, 220–21, 282
John Fremont on, 111
and Fort Laramie, 70, 111, 156
and Thomas Fitzpatrick, 111
and William Fallon, 63–64
history of, 70
horse theft, 222
numbers of, 115
and Omaha Indians, 143
and Pawnee Indians, 62, 65–67, 71–72, 90, 95, 110, 176
at the Plains Indians convention of 1851, 120
Riley Root on, 110, 111–12
and Snake Indians, 226
Sioux Indians, continued
trade with American Fur Company, 71
wagon train encounters, 222
Sisely Creek, OR, 301–2, 307, 367
Slate Creek, WY, 231, 242
Slipper (Thomas Corcoran’s horse), 3, 123, 344, 466
Smith, Alicia, 74
Smith, Azariah, 334, 336, 338–39, 348, 384
Smith, Edward (Smith company)
in Bear River Valley, 316
and Chiles extortion attempt, 451
on City of Rocks, 325
completion of journey, 456–57
diary of, 78
on Digger Indians, 380–81
epilogue, 464
found disturbed graves, 253–54
on the Hannah company, 217
on insects, 132
on Kelly company, 399
Richard May on, 418
Sioux Indian encounter of, 176, 184
on John S. Shaw, 65
on Smith company progress, 77–82, 99–103, 287, 386
trail descriptions of, 73–74, 320–21, 373, 377, 378–79, 380–82
Smith, George, 56
Smith, Jane, 74
Smith, Jedediah, 6, 14, 51, 149, 207, 231, 234
Smith, John, 74
Smith, Joseph Jr., 136, 137
Smith, Mary A., 74
Smith, Mary S., 74
Smith, “Peg Leg,” 50, 234–35, 282, 294
Smith, William, 56
Smith company
at Fort Laramie, 217–18
Indian encounters of, 176
left by Chiles company, 451
Smitty’s Butte, WY, 288
Smiths Fork, WY, 231, 234, 242
Smoke (Oglala Sioux Indian chief), 113, 114–15
Smokestack Rock, NE, 167
smoky air from forest fires, 353
Snake Indians, 232–33
attack at Castle Creek (1860), 304
attack at Massacre Rocks, 267
Edwin Bryant on, 226
behavior to Fr. Lempfrit, 310
Rufus Burrows on, 232–33
as Cayuse allies, 364, 370
eating insects, 242, 282
jackrabbit entrails for dinner, 316
Father Lempfrit on, 237
ponies, 232–33
salmon capture and preservation methods, 272–73, 313–14
at war near Hams Fork, 279–80
woman with hungry infant, 280
See also Shoshone Indians
Snake (Shoshone) Indians, 51, 115, 116, 119, 162. See also Shoshone Indians
Snake River, 239, 265, 268, 270, 272, 276, 277, 279, 298, 300, 371–72
Snyder, John, 416
Soda Creek, ID, 236
Soda Lake, WY, 202, 210
Soda Point Reservoir, ID, 236
Soda Springs, ID, 76, 107–8, 236, 283, 317, 327
Soda Springs Hills, ID, 238
South Pass, WY, 205, 226, 250, 286–87
South Platte River, 120–24, 129, 131–32, 190–91, 208
Split Rock, WY, 203, 210, 258
Spokane Indians, 364
Spring Creek, WY, 164, 171, 215, 252
springs, 140, 193, 197, 226, 236, 248, 270, 271, 272, 313, 358, 363, 377, 434, 469
of American Falls, 279
Beer Springs, 243
Brady Hope springs, 338
cold, 82, 125, 376
Givens Hot Springs, 298
Hooper Spring, 317
hot, 243, 298, 309, 369, 375, 376, 378, 381, 382; see also hot springs
Hot Springs Road, 369
location of, 118, 161, 197, 208, 226, 238, 338, 340, 376, 377
mineral, 196, 208, 283, 317, 376, 382
Pacific Springs, 206, 240
Poison Springs, 208
Soda Springs, 236, 238
Steamboat Spring, 243, 317
Thousand Springs, 271
warm, 161, 305, 317, 376, 378
Willow Springs, 209
Index

Stanley, John Mix, 114
Starr, John W., 24
Steamboat Springs, ID, 236, 243, 317
Stephens, Adam, 37
Stephens, Elisha, 68
Stephens, Sanford, 37
Stephens, William, 37
Stephens-Townsend-Murphy company, 9, 68, 157, 227
Stewart, Mrs., 319
St. Joseph, MO, 5–6, 17, 18, 30
St. Joseph County, IN, 34
St. Joseph Gazette (newspaper)
  beginnings of, 18
  emigrant provisions list, 19–21
  on Black Harris, 7
  on Indian encounters, 64–65
  on Joe Meek, 55
  Mosquito Creek Resolution, 32
  on St. Joseph, MO, 5–6
  on wagon numbers, 57, 76–77, 159
  on wagon train numbers, 39
  on wagon train progress, 47–48
St. Mary’s Mission, KS, 81
Stockton, Robert F., 6, 68, 83, 84, 322, 380, 461
Stone, David (Captain), 56, 104, 217–20, 283
Stone, Mrs., 293
Stone company
  at Blue Mountains, OR, 404, 407–13
  and the Delaney company, 249, 309–11, 315–16, 367
  departure of, 56–57
  disagreement within, 368
  at Emigrant Hill, OR, 413–15
  at Fort Hall, 309
  funeral at Rock Creek, 281
  Indian encounters, 184–86, 251, 280, 404–5, 405–6, 407–12, 435
  joins unidentified company, 284
  member departures, 414
  night travel, 251
  and David O’Neil, 56
  Presbyterian minister’s illness, 250
  progress of, 100, 179–87, 205, 218–20, 248, 249, 250–51, 259, 279–80, 284
  rebellion within, 436
  in Rock Creek Valley, 280–81
  size, 182
  water shortages, 433–34
See also Lempfrit, Honoré-Timothée
Stone/Delaney company, 310–11
Stout, Hosea, 142
Strang, James J., 137, 147
Stuart, Robert, 153, 198, 207
Sublette, William
  and Jim Bridger, 149
  built Fort William stockade, 239
  and James Clyman, 14, 51
  and Robert Campbell, 70–71
  and Fort Laramie, 153–54
  and Joe Meek, 50
  wilderness experience of, 75–76
Sublette’s Cutoff, 227
Sublette’s Fork, 231
Sublette’s Trace (Oregon Trail), 60, 76, 108
Succor Creek, ID, 305
Sugar Creek, IA, 138–39
Sullivan, John, 9
Sutherland, Jacob, 37, 395
Sutherland, NE, 97, 181, 190
Sutter, Captain, 335, 343
Sutter, John, 84, 333–34
Sutter’s Fort, CA, 35, 83, 84, 331, 333, 334, 339, 456
Sutter’s Mill, CA, xv, 333–34, 342
Sweetwater River, WY, 198, 200–201, 202, 209, 240, 259
Sweetwater Valley, WY, 21, 209, 249, 285

T

tabibo (Cayuse word for French), 371, 404
Table Rock, NE, 167
Tamerlane (sternwheeler), 14, 15, 16, 54
Taos, New Mexico, 5, 74–75
Tappan, William, 265
Tarkio River, MO, 28
tarragon, wild, 282
Tejon Pass, CA, 331
temperature variant, day to night, 290
Thirty-Two-Mile Creek, NE, 102
Thomas Fork, 234, 235, 242
Thompson, Samuel, 329
Thompson company, 336, 337, 338, 339, 342, 348, 383–84
Thornton, J. Quinn, 201
Thousand Springs/Thousand Springs Creek/
  Thousand Springs Valley, ID, 271–72, 272, 313, 376, 384
Three Crossings, WY, 203, 210, 249, 259
Three Island Crossing (Jackson; watercolor), 276
Three Island Crossing, ID, 273–276, 277, 278, 308, 316, 366–69, 399
ticks, 235
Tobacco Plant (sternwheeler), 108
Topeka, KS, 79–80
Torrington, WY, 120
Trader’s Point, MO, 10
Trimble, boy, 318
Trimble, Edward, 72
Trout River, 249
Truckee Pass (Donner Pass), CA, 68, 331, 339–41, 343–44, 349, 415, 462
Truckee River, NV, 332, 335, 340, 343, 344, 348–49, 446
Trullinger, Amanda, 33
Trullinger, Daniel, 33
Trullinger, Eliza, 33
Trullinger, Elizabeth, 33
Trullinger, Evangeline, 33
Trullinger, Frances, 33
Trullinger, Gabriel, 33
Trullinger, John C. (Wambaugh company), 32, 33, 51, 202, 327, 398
Trullinger, Mary Jane, 33
Trullinger, Nathan H., 33
Trullinger, N. H., 33
Trullinger, Sarah, 33
Tucker, Samuel, 30
Twin Falls, ID, 269
Twin Sisters, ID, 372
Tygh Valley, OR, 388–89, 400

U
Umatilla River, OR, 354, 362, 413
Umphet, Mr., 255
Upper California crossing of the South Platte, 124
Upper Meadows, NV (Winnemucca Mountains), 419
U.S. Corps of Topographical Engineers, 4
Ute Indians, 235

V
Vale, OR, 300, 305, 371
Vallejo, General, 83
Valley Mysterious (Lempfrit), 312
Van Cott, John, 383
Verdi, CA, 344
Vieux, Louis, 81
Vliet, Van (Captain), 188
volcanoes, extinct, 236

W
Wagon Hound Creek, WY, 165, 171
wagon trains
California, Oregon parties separate, 266–67
California company divides, 326
departures of, 39, 57, 85
doubling, practice of, 289, 296–97, 352–53
of eastbound Oregonians, 247, 251–52, 254–55
equipment failure and repairs, 87, 175, 181, 221, 254, 317–18
fragmenting into smaller segments, 398
Indian territory practices of, 45–46, 87, 89
lightening loads, 169–70, 214, 258, 273, 274, 276–77, 432
list of companies, xvii
location of companies, 109, 135, 192, 225, 260, 264, 387, 428
mountain travel methods, 450
night travel, dangers of, 229–30
numbers, xiv, xv, 30, 57, 76, 85, 443
order of companies, 295
Oregon immigrants diverted to California, 326–27
parties switching companies, 263–65
progress of companies, 325
rain forest travel, 391
red earth country travel, 252–53
routes of, 41–42, 157–58, 160–61. See also maps
size of companies, 191, 326
traveling abreast, 228
traveling together for protection, 244
wagon circling routine of, 188
wagon losses, 440–51
See also diarists; emigrants; specific companies
Wakarusa River, KS, 79, 81
Walker, Dr. (doctor), 24
Walker, Claiborne, 29
Walker, James (Jeeves), 158, 159, 291, 463
Walker, Joseph R.
and Jim Bridger, 149
and Chiles company, 158, 290–91, 384, 427
and John McPherson, 463
and Frank McClellan, 158
and Mike McClellan, 84
and Joe Meek, 50
as mountain man, 256
Richard May on, 290–91
Walker, Sam, 158, 159, 291
Walker, W. Bolivar, 29, 396, 397
Walker, W. M., 397
Walker-Bristow company
departure of, 29
family names in, 397
left Fort Laramie with other parties, 246
size of, 39
traveling with Purvine company, 396, 400
Walker's Pass, CA, 331
Wallace, George, 56
Walla Walla bishop, 439–40
Walla Walla Indians, 356, 364
Walley's hot springs, Genoa, NV, 448
Walmart Creek, KS, 45, 47
Walters Ferry Bridge, ID, 298
Wambaugh, M. N. (“Captain Wambo”)
as California landowner, 327
epilogue, 463–64
and Caleb Greenwood, 158
and Black Harris, 76
on Indian encounters, 176
and the Mosquito Creek Resolution, 31–33
and Henry Shields burial, 346
in Snake Indian village, 232
and Robert Stockton, 322, 461
Wambaugh company
California arrival, 349–50
and James Clyman, 34–35, 36, 43, 76, 327–28, 350
and the Cornwall company, 158
epidemic illness in, 235
experience of, 159
at Fort Hall, 263–64
at Fort Laramie, 156–57, 169–70
and Forty Mile Desert, 348
William Fallon and Guthrie leave, 237–38
and William O. Fallon, 237–38
and Caleb Greenwood, 159
and Black Harris, 76
at Humboldt River, 345–49, 372
Hunsaker family in, 345
and hunting along the trail, 162
and the Miller company, 239–40, 242–43
and John McPherson, 328
and the Mosquito Creek Resolution, 31–35, 398
night travel of, 229
Pawnee Indian encounters, 90–91
and David Parks, 328
at Plum Creek, 92
at the Presbyterian Mission School, 40–41
river crossings of, 193
route of, 161–62
Sioux Indian encounters, 110, 111, 116, 125
and Smith camp, 235
in Snake Indian village, 232
Warm Springs Creek, WY, 161, 162
water
scarcity of, 45, 52, 53, 59, 79, 80, 98, 101, 133, 134, 160, 189, 190, 204, 206, 208, 214, 228, 231, 240
tainted, 133, 162, 182, 197, 208, 209, 256–57, 386, 425
Watt, Mrs. (matriarch of Watt company), 246
Watt, Joe, 24–25, 51, 129, 216
Watt company
death of child, 99
Fourth of July celebration, 246
Indian encounters, 172–73
left Fort Laramie with other parties, 246
meeting Joe Meek, 53
probable travel schedule, 246
separation of members from, 399
size of, 39
Wayne City, MO, 14, 74
Weatherby Rest Area, OR, 301
Weatherford Monument, OR, 364
Weber, Charles M., 76, 456, 467
Welch, Mr., 77
Wells, Mr., 77
Well Springs, OR, 357, 363–64
West Carson Canyon, 448
Western Shoshone (Digger) Indians, 323, 376, 379–81, 416
Weston, MO, 16
Whirlwind/Tunika (Sioux Indian chief)
death of, 126
description of, 112
encounters with wagon trains, 116, 125–26, 173, 174, 185–86, 220–21
and Fort Laramie, 173
and Snake Indians, 115, 116
Whiskey Gulch, WY, 163
White, Elijah, 76
White company, 76, 110
White River, 391, 401
Whitman, Marcus, 356, 406
Whitman mission, WA, 354, 406
Whitman’s cutoff, 355
Wilcox, N. C., 33, 265
Wilkins, James F., 153
Willamette Valley, OR, 25, 394–96
Williams, Bill, 235
Williams, Mrs., 256
Williamson’s whitefish, 166
Willow Creek, OR, 231, 242, 357, 364
Willow Creek, WY, 203
Willow Springs, WY, 196, 209, 257
Windlass Hill, NE, 124
Wind River Mountains, WY, 106, 203, 206, 228, 249
Winkle, Elizabeth, 37
Winkle, Isaac, 37, 391, 394
Wolf River, KS, 45
Wolf River Valley, 40
women, trail life of, 47, 88–89, 91, 102, 107
Woodbury, Daniel, 223
Wood County, OH, 12
Wyatt, Isaac, 37, 395
Wyatt, Thomas, 37, 395
Wyeth, Nathaniel J., 239

Y
Yakima Indians, 356
The Year of Decision: 1846 (DeVoto), 350
Yerba Buena, CA, 149, 331
Young, Mr. (resident of Hayes Grove), 12, 63
Young, Brigham
   address to Mormon wagon train, 139
   and the Mormon Battalion, 142–44, 146, 330
   and the Mormon ferries, 11, 58–59, 140–41, 181–82, 194–95
   and the Mormon Zion, 137–38, 147–49
   in Salt Lake Valley, 331
See also Mormons; Mormon Winter Quarters
Young, Charles, 287
Yuba River, CA, 344–45, 350