

Diary of a Settler going West

SUMMARY

Herman Scharmann left Germany as head of a company of gold-seekers bound for California in 1849. Scharmann's overland journey to California (1918) describes his family's journey from New York to their wagon train in Independence, Missouri, and the trip across the Plains via Fort Kearny and Fort Laramie. When his wife and daughter die shortly after reaching California, Scharmann and two sons push ahead to the gold fields at Feather River and Middle Fork, and the American River and Negro Bar. He offers a brutal picture of the exploitation of emigrant parties and of the drudgery of prospecting and of towns like Marysville, Sacramento, and San Francisco, 1849-1851.

At Fort Laramie we remained for three days, caring for the cattle and repairing our wagons. As I wished to hurry ahead as much as possible, I felt that it was advisable for me to leave the company which was making far too slow a progress. I had to drive along the right bank of the Platte River for about 150 miles before I came to a place where the Mormons had constructed a ferry which carried me across the river. From Fort Laramie to the South Pass the land is only sparsely covered with grass, in altogether insufficient quantity for the countless crowds of emigrants that must pass over it. In addition to this, the road is rough and rocky, although it passes between the mountains instead of over them. Finally, without any climbing, the South Pass is reached. There a brook splashes merrily over the rocks and a good-sized grassy expanse greets the traveler's weary eyes. The brook is called Pacific Creek. On my arrival I found five thousand oxen and numerous mules and wagons, besides their human owners. These separated here, some to go to the Mormon City, others to join the California travelers. I attached myself to this latter division and so had plenty of company.

At the Big Santee River we rested for a day. Then we went on over a forty-mile desert to the Green River. Here pieces of shattered wagons were scattered all around; but several in good condition were among them, so we had a good chance to replenish our stock. After this I drove on over steep mountains and through deep valleys, continually wondering whether it would be possible to climb over them.

The mountains in this region are called Peak Basement and form a dome in a circle of about one hundred square miles. All are covered by low brushwood and grass, and present a very pleasant aspect. The most curious thing in this region is the fact that flax grows everywhere in among the grass. I examined a stalk and discovered that it was very like the European flax in quality. Thus the soil proclaimed its own fertility. The only drawback is that it does not rain here during the Indian summer.

This is the only region during this part of the voyage that seems worthy of a farmer's notice. The land for the rest of the way from Fort Laramie to California is not worth a cent, I think. It consists of nothing but desert-land and bare mountains covered with boulders and red soil which make them resemble volcanoes. The best thing the traveller can do is to hurry on as fast as possible from one river to the other.

At the Bear River, in a valley from three to four miles wide, we gave our cattle a two days' rest. Here there was no lack of grass, but such grazing places are quickly traversed, and it is not

possible to remain near them for any length of time. In a beautiful valley along the Snake River I met Snake Indians, who are closely related to the Sioux.

Their chief occupations are bunting and fishing. They came up to us and begged, but we discovered that if you give something to one of them all the others come running to you. Their intellectual faculties are probably of the very lowest, as their language consists of an extremely limited vocabulary. They wore feathers behind their ears, and many also used them to decorate their heads. We did not bother very much with them, simply giving them something and then going on.

All of us most earnestly desired to reach the Humboldt River as soon as possible, and then to follow its course for about three hundred miles. Truly, many of our longings were now satisfied; for in some parts this valley is very beautiful. On the north and south it is enclosed by mountains, and for the most part it is overgrown by a wild, useless mass of brushwood which looks and smells very much like the wormwood plant. The mountains here are apparently volcanic, reddish in color, bare and covered with boulders and rocks which have been burned by the heat of the sun. This gives the region a desolate, uncanny appearance. The winds hereabout form such clouds of dust on an already dusty road that the wayfarer is soon as black as a negro.

The poor oxen suffered intensely on this journey as we plodded on and on. We were still five hundred miles from California; two hundred and forty of these were to take us along the Humboldt River. Until we reached the spot where the road turns off toward Oregon our slogan was, "Fifteen miles a day!" At the crossroads many signs told us to take a new road, because it was one hundred and fifty miles nearer. For the sake of a handful of gold one man will oft cause another man's misfortune. That was the case here.

As soon as we left the Humboldt River we came into a new desert, seventy miles wide, although it had been represented to us as only thirty. Wells had been dug in the midst of this desert, but nowhere was there any grass for the cattle. During the day we rested, and at night, when it became a little cooler, we drove on. Even though we exerted all our strength, we took a day and two nights to cross the first part of the desert, where nothing but volcanic mountains on all sides could be seen. We had to travel thirty-three miles more before we could regard our cattle as saved. The heat was oppressive and clouds of alkaline dust enveloped us. I examined the soil and found it to consist of a mixture of salt, chalk and ashes. Both in front and in back of us was a long train of wagons, so that at least I had company in my misery. Now we came to a place where we saw a neatly arranged row of wagons. All of them were empty and abandoned. In order to save as much as possible, the owners had unharnessed the cattle and had driven them on rapidly. Those who had no families took their bundles on their shoulders and proceeded on foot. The families were all the more to be pitied.

I covered seventeen miles from eleven in the morning until eight in the evening, then I rested. My whole water supply barely sufficed to make a cup of tea or coffee for my wife. This was our whole supper. On the road over which I had travelled during the day I had counted eighty-one shattered and abandoned wagons, and 1,663 oxen, either dead or dying, but no mules.

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