

Reading #2: William G. Johnston accompanies the first wagon train into California.

On Sunday, March 11th, 1849, we left St. Louis and were soon steaming up the great Missouri. Four days later we reached Independence. It soon became evident that it would be several weeks before we could proceed on the long journey westward. We had yet to purchase mules and numerous things needed on the plains, and time would be required for the grass to grow upon which the animals must live.

April 28th. At ten o'clock the first two wagons of our train took the lead, and we got started about an hour later. Our mules bothered us greatly. A short distance from the camp they came to a dead halt. Neither mild persuasion nor severe drubbing had the effect of making them pull together, but when our patience had oozed out and our strength was about gone, they started off as though nothing had happened. At six o'clock we reached the frontier line of Missouri, which marks the separation of civilized from uncivilized life. Beyond us are the vast plains as yet but little known to the white man.

May 14th. A word as to our meals. All are alike, or at least there is scarce any variety, and we rarely have more than two in a day. The dishes comprise oatmeal mush, bacon sides with pilot bread fried in the fat, and coffee. We had for a brief time sugar and molasses but these were luxuries of which but a limited supply could be carried and we soon ran out.

June 21st. The real troubles of mountain climbing began with this day.

June 23rd. Shortly after sunrise we made camp a mile from Salt Lake, where, in addition to having much needed repairs done to our wagons, both men and mules were to enjoy two days of relaxation from our recent severe toils and to recruit strength for others yet in store.

July 16th. At four we were moving along nicely. The early air was pleasant but by nine o'clock the sun blazed fiercely upon us. Salty as it was, we drank water gratefully from our canteens. At every step we sank in the deep sand and were compelled often to seek rest by sitting down on the desolate wayside.

July 20th. Entering a valley between high mountains we began the ascent of the Sierras. The road was frightfully steep, quite narrow and beset with rocks. Within this gap the sun never enters and the air had the chill of an ice house. Grass for the mules was scarce.

July 21st. We continued climbing upwards. Some large trees, uprooted by storms, lay across the path which we had to go over, lifting the wheels of the wagons, for the doing of which all our energies were pressed into service. To make the climb with loaded wagons was not to be thought of. It was difficult enough by the doubling of teams in addition to the use of ropes, to lift empty wagons. Packs had to be made for the backs of the mules to carry up the contents of the wagons.

July 23rd. A succession of mountain ridges. Again we passed over beds of hard packed snow whose surfaces, sheltered from the sun, never melt.

July 24th. A short way from camp we realized that we no longer had mountains to climb. Our route lay over the foothills at the western base of the Sierra. We had reached California, the first train with wagons to enter California. Our journey had reached its end, having been accomplished in 88 days a total of nineteen hundred and seventy-four miles.