The San Joaquin Historian

Overland to San Joaquin County in 1859
Selections from the California Trail Diaries of S. Eveline “Eva” Elliott Morse and Maria J. Elliott

Selected, Edited, and Annotated by David R. Stuart Executive Director

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Historical Society, Inc.

The Historical Society operates the San Joaquin County Historical Museum in Micke Grove Regional Park in partnership with the County of San Joaquin.

The Historical Society meets quarterly. Membership includes subscriptions to the San Joaquin Historian and the monthly newsletter, as well as free admission to the Museum and waiver of the parking fee for Micke Grove Regional Park.

Well-researched manuscripts on the history of San Joaquin County are welcome. The editor reserves the right to shorten and edit submitted material. Inquiry should be made through the Museum Office.

Copies of the Historian can be purchased at the Museum.
Foreword

An exhibit at the San Joaquin County Historical Museum, developed around a farm wagon that traveled from Illinois to the County in 1859, is enlivened with quotes from the diaries of two sisters. The gallery in which the exhibit sits has been named the Morse-Bewley Gallery in honor of Marilyn Bewley and one of the diarists, Marilyn’s great grandmother, Sarah Eveline “Eva” Elliott Morse. The exhibit reveals the spirit of the early settlers.

Could it be genetic? The spirit of inquisitiveness and enterprise is alive and well in Marilyn Morse Roberts Bewley’s family. After a courtship at the University of California, Marilyn and her husband, Ross, chose Stockton as their residence. Their active lives have enriched our community.

Ross established a busy and cutting edge dental practice in the area, whereas Marilyn took an active interest in the community and its arts. She served as the first woman foreman of the San Joaquin County Grand Jury, but her real love was the preservation of local history. As an active member of the Nineteenth Century Club and PEO, she thrived on researching and giving talks throughout the community.

Ross and Marilyn’s four children, Rosilyn, Kirk, Stuart, and Keith, have inherited the family spirit of creativity, entrepreneurship, and adventure. Business acumen and subsequent successes are a common trait.

As is philanthropy. The Bewley family generosity is noteworthy, especially toward the preservation of local history. The San Joaquin County Historical Museum has a treasure in these diaries and artifacts from the Elliott, Morse, and Bewley families.

We are happy to underwrite this historical keepsake for your enjoyment and edification.

Judi and Tim Hachman
January 2015
Introduction
Across the Continent to the California Heartland

By David R. Stuart

The Americans who traveled overland in the mid- and late-1800s to settle the rich farmlands of San Joaquin County are the subject of an exhibit at the San Joaquin County Historical Museum. The exhibit is based on two diary accounts of the Elliott family’s journey west on the California Trail in 1859. It features one of the six wagons they used on their five-month, 2,500-mile trek across North America.

Only about 2,000 American settlers had moved to California before the Gold Rush. The first overland emigrants to California were the members of the Bartleson-Bidwell party, which turned off the Oregon Trail in 1841, crossed the Sierra Nevada, and passed through what is now San Joaquin County. Charles Weber, the founder of Stockton, was a member of that group. A few early settlers came on ships; included among them were the Mormon pioneers aboard the Brooklyn, who in 1846 founded New Hope, the first farming community in the area that is presently San Joaquin County.

In 1848, word of the California gold discovery spread and the Gold Rush ignited. As many as 50,000 gold seekers came overland each year in 1849 and the early 1850s. Similar numbers came by sea to San Francisco, then traveled upriver to Stockton or Sacramento City. The Gold Rush “Argonauts” were mostly young men hoping to strike it rich in the gold fields and quickly return to the United States or their home countries; they weren’t families moving to the California heartland to build farms and futures.

California became the thirty-first state in 1850. After 1853, gold fever started dying down as gold extraction became industrialized. Through the late 1850s, an average of about 8,000 American settlers per year followed the California Trail to Central California. After the discovery of the Nevada Comstock Lode in 1859, there was another surge of fortune seekers and new wagon roads were built over the Sierra. Not until 1869 did the Transcontinental Railroad give emigrants a significantly faster and easier overland travel option.

Stockton’s San Joaquin Republican (November 5, 1853) summed up the early settlers that came to the California heartland seeking non-mineral riches:

*When we consider the character of this great body of people—men who have their wives, their children, their horses, oxen, cows, and in some instances even pigs and chickens, with their farming utensils, prepared to turn up our rich lands—who can estimate the benefit it will be to this part of the State? They, as a general thing, are no mere adventurers, who are bent upon making a little and then returning to the old States. No; they are men who have taken everything with them which they hold dear upon earth; and, the question first asked by...*
nine-tenths of them was, where could be found a good farm? The men are such as have been used to handle the plough and scythe; and the women are well acquainted with the butter churn and cheese press; people who are neither ashamed nor afraid of labor.

The members of the Elliott family wagon train were just this sort.

Wilson Elliott was the eldest son of a New Hampshire family that had moved west to homestead the Illinois tallgrass prairie in 1838. Wilson came to California in 1853 when he was twenty-one years old. He may have tried his hand at gold mining, but he soon began farming in San Joaquin County.

Wilson’s father, Edmund Elliott, suffered from a lung ailment and Wilson wrote to him suggesting that the healthful California climate would be rehabilitating. Edmund traveled by sea to join his son in San Joaquin County in 1858. Edmund’s breathing—which was likely affected by a widespread “lung fever” caused by fungus spores in the prairie soils of Illinois—improved dramatically. He wrote to his wife, Sarah, and asked her to sell their land and most of their belongings in Illinois and bring the family to San Joaquin County. Wilson traveled back to Illinois in November 1858 to lead the Elliott family’s wagon train.

Twenty-seven comrades are mentioned in the Elliott sisters’ California Trail diaries. Roughly half of the wagon party was teenagers or young adults, and about a third was children. The Elliott family members and their approximate ages on the trail were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Elliott (mother)</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L. Marion Morse (Eva’s husband)</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilson Elliott</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva Elliott Morse (diary author)</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maria Elliott (diary author)</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>William Elliott</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td>Edwin Elliott</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Charles Elliott</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emma Elliott</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clara Elliott</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred Morse (Eva and Marion’s son)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Friends and neighbors who traveled with the Elliott family included: newlyweds Samuel and Carrie (Hatch) Mathewson, John and Mary Fletcher and their infant son, Delly (who died on the trail), Jerry Hubbard, Harriet Whitmarsh, Mr. Bollard and his sons, John and James, Mr. Quigley, Henry Elliott (a cousin), and individuals identified in the diaries only by their first names: Lew, Jud, Wallace, and Seth.

Although the diaries say little about what was packed in the Elliott party’s six wagons, most settlers heading to California packed each wagon with 1,600 to 2,500 pounds of supplies—enough for four or five people. Food stuffs were critical cargo. A wagon might begin the trek with 400 to 600 pounds of flour, 200 to 300 pounds of smoked or salted bacon, 100 to 200 pounds of dried beans, 100 pounds of hardtack biscuits or pilot bread,
100 pounds of sugar, fifty to 100 pounds of cornmeal, fifty pounds of coffee, ten to twenty pounds of salt, and ten or fifteen pounds of baking soda. Eggs, pickles, and dried fruit were often added, as was dried rice, especially by Southerners.

The minimal cooking and eating equipment included iron and tin cookware, tin plates and cups, and simple utensils. Small water kegs (ten gallons or less), canteens, and water bags were packed, along with about twenty-five pounds of soap. Candles provided light—they were less expensive and lighter in weight than oil lanterns. Canvas tents, oilcloth or India rubber groundsheets, wool blankets, and quilts were used for sleeping. Emigrants took a couple sets of practical, sturdy clothing of wool and linen, repaired along the trail as needed. Hats or bonnets and two or three pairs of shoes or boots per person were required—the emigrants walked in the sun most of the way. Many underestimated the toll on shoe leather and had to trade with Indians along the trail for moccasins.

Rifles, handguns, shotguns, powder, lead, bullet molds, and shot were packed for defense and hunting. Basic tools such as shovels, axes, ropes, wagon jacks, chains, and wagon repair equipment were essential.

Some families loaded furniture, stoves, books, farm implements, and other personal items, but those items usually ended up abandoned along the trail to lighten the load. Randolph Marcy’s 1859 *The Prairie Traveler: A Handbook for Overland Expeditions* said, “Men are very prone to overload their team with a great variety of useless articles. It is a good rule to carry nothing more than absolutely necessary for use upon the journey. Articles for use in California can be purchased there at less cost than that of overland transport.”

The women and children of the Elliott wagon train left their homes in Illinois in early May 1859. They rode in railroad trains and stagecoaches south to Eddyville, Iowa. The Elliott party men had left earlier and traveled with the wagons to Missouri, where they purchased oxen (neutered male cattle trained as draft animals), mules, and cattle for the trip. The men and women assembled in southeast Iowa, and in late May the wagon train headed west for San Joaquin County. Five months and more than 2,500 miles later, their journey ended near Stockton in October 1859.

The Elliott family’s experiences on the California Trail are vividly revealed in the following selections from the sisters’ diaries.

In assembling the diary selections, the editor has inserted some punctuation and pronouns that are often deleted in handwritten notes. The editor has not included ellipses (…) where words in the original diaries have been omitted. This approach makes the compilation more readable. Readers wanting to see all the diary entries in their entirety may review the transcripts in the Museum research library. The editor has supplied clarifying words of his own, shown in italics, bold, and brackets, and explanatory notes.

If you’d like to follow the Elliott family’s journey on a map of the California Trail, go to this URL (you will need Adobe reader):
Journey Milestones and Incidents
Excerpts from the 1859 California Trail Diaries of S. Eveline “Eva” Elliott Morse and Maria J. Elliott

May 5  The women and children of the Elliott party traveled by rail from Campton Township, Kane County, in northeast Illinois. They departed from Blackberry Station, west of Elgin. The men had left a few weeks earlier with the wagons to buy livestock in Missouri.

(Eva) Today we start, a little band of us, for an overland journey to California, distant 2,500 miles. Bidding adieu to many near and dear friends, breaking away from all loved and cherished associations, and turning our faces westward toward the Pacific shore. God only knows who of us will be spared through His mercy, to reach the end of the journey.

1. In 1838, the same year the Elliott family moved from New Hampshire to the tallgrass prairie of Campton Township, Illinois, the family of Charles Ingalls also came to the township from New York. Ingalls was the father of Laura Ingalls Wilder, author of the Little House on the Prairie series of books. Although the books were based primarily on her family’s life in Indian Territory that is now Kansas, they give a sense of homesteading on the prairie of Illinois.

2. Blackberry Station was a branch stop of the Galena and Chicago Union Railroad, which went west from Chicago to the lead mines at Galena. Blackberry was about forty miles from Chicago. The 1859 Kane County Directory described the village around the station as containing “about 300 inhabitants, two churches—one Baptist and the other open to all denominations—two general stores, two blacksmith shops, two wagon shops, two saloons, one paint shop, one grain elevating warehouse, and an excellent hotel. There are no [fraternal or women’s] societies here yet, the village having only been up within the last three years.”

May 6  Aurora, Kane County, Illinois

May 9  The women continued on the Illinois Central Railroad, crossed the Mississippi River (into Iowa) by boat, and continued by rail to Agency City, Iowa (end of the railroad line).

May 10  The women took stage coaches twenty-two miles to Eddyville, Iowa, on the Des Moines River in the southeast portion of the state, where they waited for the men.

(Eva) To our disappointment we found that we were a little ahead of our men folk who had started three weeks previous and we would be detained at Eddyville much longer than we had expected.

May 15  The men arrived in Eddyville after purchasing livestock in Missouri.

(Maria) The boys had been on the road about four weeks, and had not proceeded very rapidly on account of the bad roads. At last, after we had been in Eddyville about a week the men came to town, and I can tell you there was great rejoicing on the part of those that had husbands. But as I had none I stood a silent spectator. Oh, that meeting! Such hugging and kissing I guess had
never been done before. And do you believe it, the men came in dreadful rain, so anxious were they to see their better halves, as it had been all of five weeks since they had seen them, and some had just enlisted in the bonds of matrimony.

**May 25**  
The wagon train departed from Eddyville, heading west parallel to the southern border of Iowa. Baby Fred Morse was very ill, so his parents Eva and Marion, his grandmother Sarah, and his young cousins Emma and Clara stayed behind with him.

*(Eva)* Our little Freddie who had a cold for a day or two was taken quite suddenly much worse with a high fever. Freddie was so sick that we were obliged to stay behind with him. This is the day that our little band start on their journey.

**May 26**  
*(Eva)* Found little Freddie very sick and all have gone but his father, our Mother, Emma and Clara.

*(Maria)* We at last got started again, and it is awfully muddy, but we could not stop for that, so we left the town of Eddyville about three in the afternoon. Our friends came to bid us good-bye and we left them in tears. Mother, Eveline, Emma, Clara, and Marion did not start with us as Freddie was quite sick; but with the intention of joining us in a few days.

**May 27**  
*(Eva)* Doctor Buck thought Freddie’s recovery doubtful and came to see him three times.

*(Maria)* Had a very nice ride, the first time I had taken on my new saddle, which, by the way, was one that brother Wilson had purchased. I rode on for about six or eight miles and then let Carrie have a ride to rest her. We went on a little way and then stopped for the night, where we pitched our tent for the first time. We had it dedicated by playing the violin, tin pan, etc. Hat [Harriet Whitmarsh] and I slept in the “house.”

**May 31**  
*(Maria)* Mr. Fletcher’s child [nine-month-old Delly] is quite sick; has been for several days.

**June 1 Osceola, seat of Clarke County, Iowa**

*(Maria)* The little village called Osceola in Clarke County is quite a pretty place situated on a piece of high land. There are some quite large buildings including two hotels, a large store, and some dwellings minus sidewalks, which are rather scarce in the towns of Iowa. There were none in Eddyville, nor churches either. They were building one in Osceola, which speaks well for the enterprise of the inhabitants.

Baby Delly was much worse and after stopping I went to see him. I thought he would never be any better, he looked so very sick. As soon as we could get some water hot, we put him in a warm bath which made him feel a little easier. They had stopped in the last town and had seen a doctor who had not given any encouragement. The doctor told them that his brain and lungs were very
much affected and that he was very sick. We had all retired when Mary gave a scream and all rushed to their wagon. We found him as we thought in the agonies of death. This was about eleven o’clock. We immediately went to rubbing him in brandy and gave him some to take. We applied warm clothes to his body, which was growing cold. He revived and breathed a little easier.

June 2  Baby Fred Morse was well enough to travel, so the second group departed from Eddyville, Iowa. It was Wilson Elliott’s twenty-seventh birthday.

(Eva) Brother Wilson is 27 today. We left Eddyville and travelled 36 miles, our little boy stood it very well.

(Maria) Our camp was made the scene of sorrow this morning. Little Delly is no more. He died at seven; died very easily in Carrie’s arms. His parents took his death very hard. We would have a coffin made and one of the boys went to the nearest house, where he was informed that there was a graveyard about five miles away so Jud went thither to dig the grave. We dressed Delly in his little white dress and he did indeed look beautiful, with a wreath of flowers on his head. He looked as though he was sleeping. It was a very solemn day to us all. We stopped at a little distance from the graveyard. Then we all proceeded by twos to the grave. We had the 90th Psalm, sang a hymn, and had a prayer. We all took a last look at his beautiful face and then consigned him to heaven. We went a little way and then camped.

June 4  The two groups reunited at 27-mile Prairie, west of Afton, Iowa.

(Eva) We came 41 miles and overtook our company whom we found camped on 27 mile Prairie, named for the distance between houses. It seemed quite lonely and more so after sister Maria told us that Mr. Fletcher’s folks had buried their babe, a sweet child of nine months—buried him among strangers. How very lonely for his parents. Little Freddie stood the journey well, much better than we expected, but has a hard cough.

(Maria) We traveled through a prairie twenty miles in length, where we could not see a fence, house or tree. It is a very level and pretty prairie. Wilson and I took our horses ahead of the wagon train about four miles and found water, which is rather scarce on this prairie. Here we waited for the wagon train to come up, when we camped. While getting supper, our carriage came up with the rest of our family, entertaining everyone, as Freddie was better but still had a bad cough. We were greatly rejoiced at seeing them.

June 5  (Eva) It has not seemed at all like Sunday as we travelled all day, lost our way, found bad [muddy] roads, and after travelling all day made about six miles

(Maria) We came to another slough, where one team got stuck and we had to double-teams. As I had a safe passage over, I’ll just state the facts of the case. As I was trying to find a place to cross, Jud came and took me in his arms and
carried me safely to the other side. Who could have wished for better passage? Not I, indeed!

June 6  Fontanelle, seat of  Adair County, Iowa

June 8  Lewis, seat of  Cass County, and the East Nishnabotna River

(Maria) We did not start as early as we had intended, as some of the cattle strayed away. We at last started and went through the village of Lewis, county seat of Cass County. After passing through town, we were on the banks of the Nishnabotna River, which is about four rods\(^1\) wide, and twelve feet deep. We had to ferry across it. It was quite a sight to see the cattle and horses swim across. In the first place, they drove a team and wagon down to the ferry and ferried it across, then returned after another. As we had six wagons, it took quite a while for them all to get across. The cows and horses did not like to go in the water; the horses would not swim at first, but would go back on the shore, after the boys had driven them into the water. So the boys got into the boat, took hold of the horses’ halters and made them swim behind the ferry. But one horse was quite too cunning. Just as they were starting, he jumped on the ferry, and had a ride over without wetting his back.

1. A rod is 5.5 yards, 16.5 feet, or 5.03 meters. Four rods would be 66 feet or 22 yards.

June 9  It was Charles Elliott’s eleventh birthday.

June 10  Council Bluffs\(^2\), Iowa

(Eva) We got along nicely this morning until we came to a miserable bridge. One yoke of Henry’s cattle, some wild ones which had not been used until that day, ran off the side of the bridge, into the mud and water and we were fearful for a moment that they would draw all of the cattle and wagon after them. But the men succeeded in unhitching the chain and drove them out without difficulty and we all crossed safely.\(^3\)

(Maria) Council Bluffs is quite a city in a valley between bluffs. It is by far the largest place we have seen in Iowa, containing about 3,000 inhabitants. I saw quite a number of large buildings; I also saw some nice-looking gents on the street. Not having seen any for some time, we took particular notice of them.

2. The dramatic modern Gateway Arch and the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial are in St. Louis, Missouri, but Council Bluffs, Iowa, on the east bank of the Missouri River, has also been called the Gateway to the American West. Lewis and Clark passed through in 1804, as did more than 30,000 Mormons in the mid-1800s on their way to the Great Salt Lake Valley. The town incorporated in 1853, flush with the business of thousands of travelers on their way to the California gold fields. (Before incorporation it was known as Kanesville.) In the year the Elliott family passed through Council Bluffs, Abraham Lincoln visited; later as president he chose this route for the Transcontinental Railroad.

3. As many as three-fourths of the settlers’ wagons on the California Trail were pulled by oxen, rather than mules or horses. Oxen were neutered male cattle trained to pull wagons. Today, they are rarely used as draft animals but are raised for beef and are usually called steers. Oxen were slow, but also cheap, tough, strong, easy to catch, and easy to train. They required no expensive and complicated harness; they were less likely to be stolen; and they were better able to survive on poor feed along the trail. The typical light farm or freight wagons used by emigrants were pulled by two or three pairs or “yokes” of oxen.
We passed through the city and camped a short distance from it. On the same camping grounds were Indians, the first we had seen.¹

(Éva) Before we got out of our wagons, we were surrounded by Indians, the first we had seen. Some of us felt rather afraid of them, with their faces painted, feathers in their hair, and one fellow had lots of little brass rings all up and down through the rim of his ears and great circular rings in the bottom. I suppose that this is only a foretaste of what we are to see.

¹ The Elliott wagon train’s first encounter with Indians would have been noteworthy. Although the Elliott family had moved west to homestead the tallgrass prairie of Illinois, they probably had not lived among American Indians. The federal government had moved Native tribes west of the Missouri River and defined the present-day plains states as “Indian Country.” (Kansas and Nebraska were designated as territories in 1854).

June 11  *The wagon train crossed the Missouri River into Nebraska Territory*

(Maria) We crossed the Missouri River in a boat by the name of “Nebraska.” We had to go three times to take all the cattle and wagons. The Missouri River is about a half mile across. As the boat started I bade farewell to Iowa, thinking we were going farther and farther away from home and loved ones.

Omaha is the capital of Nebraska and contains a nice capitol building, not yet completed.

June 12  *Omaha City, Nebraska*

(Éva) It is the holy Sabbath but still does not appear much like it to us, but memory reminds me of a pleasant home in Illinois, where every Sabbath morn, we would hear the bells inviting us to the house of God to worship. But those scenes will never return and we must not dwell upon them or sadness will come creeping over our hearts.

(Maria) We had some nice baked beans and pork, warm bread, peaches and some very good pumpkin pie for a rarity. All thought it “tip top.”

June 14  *The wagon party crossed the Elk Horn River and camped near the Platte River outside Fremont, seat of Dodge County, Nebraska.*

June 15  *The group followed the Council Bluffs Road or Mormon Road² on the north side of the Platte River.*

(Éva) The Platte River is a muddy, dirty stream, very similar to the Missouri and Wilson says that we will have to use it for the next month.³

². The trail on the north side of the Platte River was called the Mormon Road because it was the favored route of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or Mormons, on their exodus west from 1846 to 1868. They stuck to the north side because it separated them from many of their detractors, including emigrants from Missouri, Illinois, and Ohio. Many non-Mormon emigrants, including the Elliott family, who left from Council Bluffs also followed the route. Some thought the south side had been overused and that the north side was healthier.

³. Although emigrants often joked about the Platte River—“too thick to drink, too thin to plow”—because it was so different from rivers back east, it was their lifeline for 800 miles from the Missouri River to the east slope of the Rocky Mountains (now Wyoming). The Otoe Indians called this region “nebrathka,” meaning “flat water,” and the French word “platte” had the same meaning. To emigrants on the California Trail this broad valley provided water, livestock feed, and good wheeling for their wagons. The Great Platte River Road was one of the easiest sections of the overland journey to California and the settlers routinely made twenty-five miles per day.
June 16  **Shell Creek, Loup River Route, north of the Platte River**

(Maria) We came up to the Mormon wagon train and passed it. It is the greatest sight I ever saw. There were 60 carts with some [240?] in all, of whom I should think 175 were women and children. There were three or four to a cart. All seemed to take hold of their work in earnest. They are old-country folks, some of them Dutch.¹

1. Beginning in 1856, thousands of European converts to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—most from England, Wales, and Scandinavia—sailed into New York or Boston, then traveled by train to Iowa. From 1856 to 1860 about 3,000 people in ten companies pulled two-wheeled handcarts from the railheads to the Mormon Zion in the Great Salt Lake Valley. Although these handcart pioneers constituted only about ten percent of the early Mormon emigrants, they have become an important symbol in the culture of the Church.

June 17  **Loup Forks Ferry, Nebraska** *(layover)*

(Eva) Oh what a night! The mosquitoes! The mosquitoes! I never saw anything like them. I believe there are more here on one acre than in the whole state of Illinois. We can scarcely live at all.

We shall have to sit for about 24 hours on account of a drove [flock] of about 5,000 sheep.

We came past a large Mormon wagon train of seventy wagons and five hundred men, women, and children and four or five hundred head of cattle.

June 18  **Loups Forks Ferry** *(crossing)*, **Lower Loup River Road**

(Eva) It was a very rainy morning—more so than any time since we started, and continued so until just as we got ready to cross the fork. We all got over at last, though I think it was by far the worst stream we have crossed. It was rather hard drawing owing to the washing of the sand under the wheels and our wagon stopped until two men came to the wheels and one at the head and they started and carried us safely over. We came about fourteen miles and found a nice camping ground and stopped for the night.

(Maria) While eating breakfast it commenced raining, which made the boys take their plates and victuals and run for the tent. It continued to rain until ten o’clock. We were about an hour crossing the river. The way we had to do, we drove the wagons onto the ferryboat and were escorted about twenty rods [110 yards], then we had to drive off the ferry into the river, which is full of quicksand. The river where we crossed is about sixty rods [330 yards] wide and four feet deep. We all passed over in safety and landed in a grove. The most of the boys got pretty wet, having to wade through and drive cattle.

June 19  **Lower Loup River Road to the Platte River** *(north bank)*

(Eva) Another Sabbath and yet how unlike one it seems, camped here beside the Platte River, cooking our breakfast out of doors, children asleep in the wagons, jokes and laughing going on around us, and the boys getting their cattle yoked and ready for starting. The boys think that we must travel Sundays.

dislike to and think that it is quite as well for the boys to be washing their shirts, etc. O, that I could be back in Illinois today to attend church and then feel as though I could go forward towards California with a good face and heart.

We came a few miles and had to double teams to get across a long, low marshy place. It has been rather unpleasant all day but although we had a very severe thunder shower it didn’t wet though the most of our wagon covers.

(Maria) The mosquitos are very thick indeed tonight, probably on account of the rain. We have built plenty of smoke fires and they are disappearing.

June 20  **Platte River** (*near present-day Grand Island, Nebraska*)

(Eva) About twenty Indians came along and we learned from them that they had been out to fight but they had settled their difficulties and now were going home. They were wonderfully gewgawed up with feathers, beads, and rings.¹

(Maria) There are a few Indians here this morning and the most respectable that we have seen, as they are dressed with pants and cape, etc. They had been making a treaty of peace with the Sioux. They had their pipe of peace. They had a great many ornaments. Some had beads on their necks, brass earrings, and finger rings on every finger. Some had tin ornaments for a sash; the tin was round and about two inches in diameter. They also had feathers on their heads. Some came up to the carriage and shook hands with us. They said they were Pawnees.

¹. The Pawnee were village-dwelling farmers from what is now northern Kansas and eastern Nebraska. In 1833, they were forced by the U.S. Army to move into the territory of the Lakota Sioux and the two Indian nations immediately began ongoing warfare. Sioux allies in this war included the Cheyenne and the Arapaho nations. The fighting continued through the 1860s and ended only after these Indian nations were forced onto reservations in the 1870s.

June 21  **Platte River**, *near Murdock site.*

(Eva) Eddy lost his journal this morning that he has kept ever since we left home.

June 22  **Platte River** (*north bank, forty miles from Fort Kearney*)

(Eva) We’re staying here all day and washed, dried bedding, doctored cattle, baked, etc., etc.

(Maria) We have been stopped all day to fix up. We have all been very busy doing various things. Some have been unloading the wagons to air the things, some sifting cornmeal, others doctoring lame cattle, getting wood cut and water, washing, mending, packing and unpacking trunks, and other things too numerous to mention. For my own part, I have been washing, cooking, and helping in various ways.

June 23  **Wood River**, *about twenty miles from Fort Kearney*

June 24  **Fort Kearney, Nebraska** (*across the Platte River*)
As-Sau-Taw-Ka (White Horse), Pawnee. Courtesy of First People of America
(Eva) We passed Fort Kearney today and a train of five surreys, forty horses, besides wagons, cattle, men, women and children. The owner of the horses and carriages intends to set up a livery in California.

June 26  Elm Creek (on the north bank of the Platte River). It was Edwin Elliott’s eighteenth birthday.

(Eva) The boys went out this morning, six of them, and killed three buffalo. One of the boys was riding one of Marion’s horses when she stepped into a hole going full speed and fell and broke her neck and threw the rider 17 paces off. So although they got 3 buffaloes, they lost a horse.

(Maria) We have had quite exciting times this forenoon about buffaloes. Six of the boys rose quite early, each took a horse, and went on a buffalo hunt. They gave chase to some, and after running several miles, Wallace shot one. About seven, Edwin and Wallace came in, took breakfast, and then went with four or five yoke of oxen and two or three hands and brought it into camp. It was quite a large one, weighing, the boys thought, fifteen hundred pounds. In the meantime, the other boys came in from the hunt with the news that Marion had killed two buffalos about five miles from camp. But it was not to be all good luck, for the horse that another boy rode stepped in a hole and broke its neck. After dinner, Marion took the carriage and got the best part of one of the buffaloes; the other one went into the Platte River.

1. American buffalo, or bison, had long been hunted to extinction farther east, so most emigrants first saw buffalo in the Platte River Valley. In earlier years, herds along the California Trail numbered in the tens of thousands. By the time the Elliott party passed through in 1859, professional hunters and emigrants had reduced them to much smaller groups—one of the reasons that the Indians along the trail had become much more aggressive stealing livestock. By the mid-1860s, almost no buffalo remained.

June 27  Buffalo Creek (on the north bank of the Platte River)

(Eva) The boys have got our buffalo meat drying. I think it must be excellent dried, it is so tender and nice, much better than any beef steak that I ever saw. The boys are busy getting breakfast, greasing wagons, fetching water, etc. etc. We for the first time have used buffalo chips for fuel— as I sit here writing I can see 20 buffalo not far off. Since writing this morning we have seen at least 200 buffalo and upwards of one hundred in one drove, but our boys got enough of hunting yesterday and did not give them chase.

We are now camped where we can get no water and if we had not brought some in a keg, I do not know what we should have done. As it is we are limited and have none to cook with, with the exception of coffee and we are obliged to go without washing, not only ourselves, but our dishes, so you see this renders our work quite light.

2. Wood was extremely scarce in western Nebraska and eastern Wyoming, so buffalo chips were gathered and used as cooking fuel. It took up to three bushels of dried buffalo droppings to cook a small meal.

July 1  Wide Creek, Nebraska (on the north bank of the Platte River)
Our guide book tells us that this is the last timber we'll see for 200 miles. We passed through a Sioux village today. Their wigwams [tipis] consisted of sticks stuck up in the ground meeting at the top and slanting towards the bottom and covered with cloth or buffalo robes. There was probably 80 [tipis] and it was quite a new and novel sight to see.

It does not seem possible that it is the first of July. We have now been out from Eddyville five weeks and are 300 miles from Council Bluffs and about 200 from Fort Laramie.

1. Emigrants planned their trips using information in newspapers, letters from family and friends who had already gone to California (like Wilson Elliott), and trail guide books. The Elliotts used Hosea B. Horn's Overland Guide (1852) for information about the best routes and where to find water, firewood, and feed for the animals.

**July 3**  
_Duck Creek, Nebraska (on the north bank of the Platte River)_

There is a Sioux village near us and now while I write they are peeping in our wagons and we have to keep our eyes open to prevent their taking what we would prefer keeping ourselves.

The sun shines very pleasantly this morning and reminds me of the very many Sabbath mornings that I have attended church at home. Oh, how I wish I could be with my loved friends today and hear the truths proclaimed from the lips of our beloved pastor. While I write tears fill my eyes to think of days that are passed never more to return.

The cattle were very uneasy last night, as they started up and ran three times, but the boys managed to stop them after running about a mile and a half. The mosquitos were so troublesome that the boys had to build smoke fires to have any peace at all.

There is a Sioux Indian village a short distance from our camp. It is a small one with only about twenty wigwams [tipis]. We had been here but a short time when a goodly number of Indians called upon us. I thought that they were most too fashionable, calling upon us before we had gotten settled. They kept coming thicker and faster until we thought there was no end to them. They were very much amused at our singing, and when we would stop they would motion for us to sing more. We gave them crackers and bread, which they wanted. As I was writing on the ground, by the side of a wagon, a great number came around me and stood looking at my writing for a long time. I suppose it was a great novelty to them.

**July 4**  
_Cedar Bluffs (across the Platte River, near present-day North Platte, Nebraska)_

Independence Day, but we can scarcely realize it is a holiday for everything appears the same as on other days. We hear no cannon and are not preparing for any great celebration and declaration, but all are making preparations for starting. We would like very well to be home in Illinois today, but as that cannot be we must content ourselves by looking forward to the future for a

Moving camp. Courtesy of First People of America.
double portion if we are spared until next 4th.

We have just seen quite a sight—the Indians are moving from here to Laramie. Yesterday there was quite a village and this morning when we arose, it was gone. Their appearance was quite novel as they passed along with their tent poles one end attached to the sides of their ponies and the other end trailing on the ground and their papooses and whatever they wished to carry put on those poles. There were over 30 on horses, besides dogs which were likewise loaded but with shorter sticks fastened to them.

The plains seem to be alive with people. Today there were at least 50 teams of us in a train and some two or three hundred people.

(Maria) I had an invitation to stop with a company for a Fourth of July dance, but did not accept the invitation. After supper Jack played his violin and some of the boys sang before retiring.

Four men have joined our company. They have one wagon and three yoke [pairs] of oxen. They said they would stand guard with the rest of the men and they seem to be very good men.1

1. It was common for groups on the California Trail to join together or split. Groups combined primarily for safety when entering regions in which they perceived threats from hostile Indians. Groups split up for a variety of reasons: because some traveled at faster or slower speeds; to spread out where grass (feed) and fire wood (fuel) were limited; due to disagreements and incompatibilities; and to take different routes.

July 5  Sand Hill Ruts, Nebraska

July 6  Castle River and Ash Hollow (across the North Platte River)

(Eva) We have passed a lone grave, the first we have seen—it was hard to see, to think that he should die and be buried away from friends, in this savage country where naught but the elk, buffalo and Indians to travel over his grave. It made me sick at heart to see it. It was in a beautiful valley, with bluffs rising at one side of it and the Platte rolling on the other. A humble monument composed of board bore this inscription, “W.W. Payne, Died June 19th 1859. Aged 20 yrs.”2

2. Five to ten percent of the settlers on the California Trail died on their way west—during this era of the trail, about the same percentage as would have died back home. Ninety percent of those who died on the trail died of illnesses, especially cholera, a deadly intestinal disease spread by contaminated water.

July 7  Ancient Bluff Ruins

(Maria) We came to some high bluff ruins. They looked as I imagined ancient ruins do. It is quite a picturesque looking place.

July 8  Courthouse Rock and Jail Rock (across the North Platte River), near present-day Bridgeport, Nebraska

(Eva) We stopped this forenoon to doctor cattle and some of us improved the time by washing. We came about 15 miles this afternoon and are now camped on a branch of the Platte, nearly opposite Court House Rock. In the distance can be discerned Chimney Rock, which looks from here like a steeple.
July 9  (Eva) The country through here is rough and sandy and if the white man ever ventures here to settle, in my judgment, he is robbing the Indian and buffalo of their rights.

July 10  Chimney Rock *(across the North Platte River)*, now Chimney Rock National Historic Site, Nebraska  

(Eva) We have come about eleven miles and have passed Chimney Rock, which is really a great natural curiosity—it looks very much like a fireplace and chimney upon the top. Court house rock about ten miles east resembles very nearly a large court house, besides these are a number of bluffs along here resembling forts. They are all on the south of the river.

July 11  Capital Hills or Scott’s Bluffs *(across the North Platte River)*, now Scotts Bluff National Monument, Nebraska  

(Maria) We had traveled quite some distance when Henry stopped to wet his wheels¹ and while stopping the boys drove the loose cattle into the river to drink. While they were thus engaged the cattle became frightened and started on the run, which frightened three of the yoked ox teams and they also started as fast as they could go. They ran about eighty rods [a quarter mile], the wagon wheels bounding some three feet high. Emma and I were in Jerry’s wagon. We were very much afraid that the wagon would upset as the team ran out of the road over where it was quite rough. Jerry kept up with his team and after a while succeeded in stopping them. The cause of the cattle becoming alarmed, we suppose, was some blackbirds which flew over their heads while the cattle were in the water.

¹. Wagon maintenance was a constant concern on the California Trail. The dry conditions caused wooden wheels to shrink and the iron tires to loosen. Immigrants soaked the wood wheels in creeks and drove wood shims between the iron tires and the wood. The wagon king pin and axles were regularly lubricated from a grease bucket containing animal fats and pine tar.

July 13  Horse Creek Treaty Grounds *(across the North Platte River)*, eighteen miles from Fort Laramie  

(Eva) One of the men shot an antelope [pronghorn]. I expect we shall get a taste of it for supper.² They are beautiful creatures and look pretty when running. They are very nimble and fleet. We have seen our first alkali water today, the cattle would not drink of it. The boys have killed two rattlesnakes today.

². Fresh-caught fish and game hunted along the California Trail supplemented the primary food staples carried in the wagons—flour, corn meal, bacon, coffee, sugar, and dried beans. Native nations were tolerant of such trespassing in the early years, but became increasingly resentful as the impacts accrued and fish and game disappeared. Indians had begun to demand reparations—usually livestock—and to regularly raid the settlers' animals and foodstuffs by the time the Elliott party traveled the California Trail in 1859.

July 14  Fort Laramie, Wyoming *(across the North Platte River)*  

(Eva) Our boys were expecting to get their wagon tires set, but they found out that people do not work for nothing as they ask for $12 for setting a tire. The
boys concluded to set their own.

**July 15**  
(Eva) The boys, some of them, have gone over to the Post Office for letters as all are expecting news from home. They have returned and brought most of us letters. We’re glad to hear from friends at home. We stayed here all day, washed etc. etc.

(Maria) A short distance away we can see the fort and yesterday morning I went to visit it. I saw several large white houses, which made me think of home, as it has been a long time since we had seen any. Everything is expensive at the fort; whiskey, two and a half dollars a pint; flour, 17 dollars a hundred pounds; alum, one dollar a pound; tacks, two shillings a paper; and other things accordingly.

**July 17**  
**Child’s Cutoff or Route**, Wyoming

(Eva) It is very cold this morning, cold enough for fall weather, but I suppose that it is more likely to be cold here among the Black Hills.  

1. Before 1850, this portion of the north bank of the Platte River was thought to be impassable, so emigrants traveling on the north side through Nebraska—like the Elliott wagon party—had to make a dangerous crossing of the river at a ford near Fort Laramie, only to cross again 100 miles upstream. By the early 1850s, ferry operators were overcharging emigrants at these crossings. The Child’s Cutoff (shortcut) eliminated the two hazardous crossings and the ferry expense by staying on the north bank. It became the preferred route and was named after Andrew Child, who described it in an 1852 guidebook.

2. “Black Hills” was the emigrants’ name for the Laramie Range of the Rocky Mountains, in present-day Wyoming—“black” because of the dark foliage of the conifer trees. Emigrants got their first glimpse of the Rocky Mountains between Scott’s Bluff and Fort Laramie when they spotted Laramie Peak on the horizon. The peak continued to function as a landmark as they wended their way through the Laramie Range.

(Maria) We hitched up one yoke apiece and went a quarter of a mile to a beautiful shady spot, where we remained to fix the tires, which were loose and coming off. I improved part of the time washing, mending, and doing various other things. The grass is not very good, but much better than none. I very often think of the goodness of God, in giving wood and water to weary, thirsty travelers on their journey to California. When we cannot find wood, we have buffalo chips to burn, and when we cannot find spring water, we have the Platte River to go to, with an abundance for man and beast.

(Eva) We made all previous calculation last night to be up bright and early and ready for an early start—but how shortsighted is man! For just as we were all nearly ready to start, the boys went out to catch a steer that needed some medicine. The steer, no doubt thinking that he should prefer the homeopathy treatment, took to the river and took a cold water bath, crossed over and thus thought to elude his pursuers. But they not wishing to be baffled thus, followed suit, three or four of them and spent an hour or two endeavoring to persuade him to take a second bath, but he, probably thinking one sufficient to commence with, would not be persuaded. Accordingly Wilson took a horse, swam over and rode dexterously after him for some time longer, when they finally
succeeded in getting him over once more on the near side, where he was at last obliged to go through the doctoring as at first intended, as he had been lassoed and could not get away. The summing up of the whole matter is that the dial pointed to the halfway place between 10 and 11 a.m. before we left our camping ground.

July 22  Rocky Mountains, Laramie Range, Wyoming

(Eva) It has been raining considerably today. We have been for several days crossing the Rocky Mountains and they are rightly named, for they are indeed rocky. We are now about one hundred miles from the summit and the weather, with the exception of the middle of the day, is as cool as November in Illinois. We passed today large villages of the prairie dog. They are about the size of a cat and make a short barking sound. Often as we approach their village we will see many of them standing by their dwellings and barking at us, but upon our nearer approach they will instantly disappear into their holes. There are hundreds of them in one village.

(Maria) We have passed several graves today. On one there was the name of a boy, ten years old, who was killed in a stampede.\(^1\)

1. Stampedes were the third-leading cause of accidental death on the California Trail, preceded by being run over by wagons and firearms accidents. Emigrants walked alongside the wagons and many women were injured or killed when their long skirts got caught and they were dragged under draft animals or wagon wheels. Careless children also often fell under the animals or wagons.

July 23  Renshaw Bridge (to the south)

(Eva) Our home tonight is a lovely spot, far the loveliest that we have found, I think, with the Platte on one side and high bluffs on the other. The space between on which are our wagons, is covered with cottonwood and other trees, which almost seem to have been planted by man, so regularly are they placed. It would almost seem as though we had got home once more, could we see in the center a white house with a garden fence in front, also painted white—but I shall not dwell upon the past, as it fills my mind too full of near and dear memories and sadness creeps over my mind. Our boys killed some sage hens (which very much resemble the prairie hen) and some rabbits, so we are to have a change in our diets.

July 25  Louis Guinard’s trading post (later Fort Caspar), now the Fort Caspar Museum in Casper, Wyoming, and Red Buttes (across the North Platte River)

(Eva) We see the last of the Platte River tonight, and we are now going to camp, as the next fifteen miles is without water. We have passed a great number of dead cattle and some horses, for the last two or three days, an average more than one a mile, and it renders the air very impure.

(Maria) We found plenty of alkali water along the road today and had to hurry the cattle by as fast as possible so they could not get any. We passed fifteen dead creatures the first four miles we traveled this morning. We found some
very high hills, also some very sandy roads and plenty of prickly pear and sage.

**July 26**  
**Willow Springs, Wyoming**  
*(Eva)* We bid farewell to the Platte River this morning. It seems like leaving an old and tried friend, as we have so often camped upon its banks and used its waters. We have become so habituated to it that we relish it better than any other water. At first we found it a large and wide stream but it has now dwindled down almost to nothing and yet the current is very swift. There was a man belonging to a wagon train ahead who drowned in it yesterday. His affectionate company went on without trying to recover his body and I suppose it is still going down stream.¹

*(Maria)* We took our farewell drink of the Platte River. We have followed it for 650 miles and have left it to see it no more. It seems as though we have parted with a friend, as we have used the water for so long a time, and when we came to it we always knew there was always plenty of healthy water for man and beast. The water out of the springs is good and cold. We filled our empty canteens and kegs, and watered the oxen out of them, which took a long time.

1. Drowning was frequent during the early years on the California Trail, because there were few ferries or bridges. Drowning probably peaked during the Gold Rush years of 1849 and the early 1850s, when many young, impatient men hurried west. Drowning remained common even in later years when ferries and bridges were numerous, because surprisingly few people knew how to swim in the 1850s and 1860s.

**July 27**  
**Prospect Hill,**² Wyoming  
*(Eva)* This morning we find ourselves upon a beautiful elevation from which we have a beautiful and distant view of the adjacent country. Consulting our guide book, we learn that it bears the appropriate name of Prospect Hill.

² After Willow Springs, emigrants climbed four hundred feet in about a mile—a long, steady pull that was hard on the oxen. They crested a ridge known as Prospect Hill, from which they caught their first glimpse of the Sweetwater Valley, their “prospect.”

**July 28**  
**Saleratus Lake³, Independence Rock⁴, Devil’s Gate⁵**  
*(Eva)* We have just returned from ascending and exploring Independence Rock. We found it well repaid our toil and trouble. Upon the summit it is a

³. A couple miles before reaching Independence Rock, emigrants reached Saleratus Lake. “Saleratus” is a naturally occurring sodium or potassium bicarbonate. The emigrants used it as a raw form of baking soda. Horn’s *Overland Guide* said of this stretch: “There are many alkali springs and lakes; the land is swampy and smells bad; the water is entirely unfit for man or beast.”

⁴. After leaving the Platte River, emigrants had to pass a thirty-mile stretch with bad alkali water and dust, hills, and poor feed (see previous note). At whale-shaped Independence Rock, one of the main landmarks on the California Trail, they found relief in the river that French trappers had named *Eau Sucre*, the Sweetwater. Trail lore said that groups reaching the rock by July fourth (Independence Day) would make it over the Sierra Nevada before snow fall, but the name actually came from a party of fur trappers who camped there on July 4, 1824. It is now within Wyoming’s Independence Rock State Historic Site off State Highway 220.

⁵. The emigrants considered Devil’s Gate a major natural wonder; Horn’s *Overland Guide* called it “a curiosity worthy of the traveler’s notice.” The very narrow split in the Rattlesnake Range, through which the Sweetwater River squeezed, was also important to the Shoshone and Arapahoe Indians. They attributed Devil’s Gate to the actions of an evil beast with enormous tusks that once roamed the area, preventing the Indians from hunting and camping nearby. The Indians decided to kill the beast and shot it with a multitude of arrows. But the enraged beast tore this hole in the mountains with his large tusks and escaped.
natural basin in which we bathed our faces, and the water was cool and soft. Many names and dates are written upon it, one around the inside of the basin written in 1849. Passing on we came to Devil’s Gate. From the road it does not appear to be anything uncommon, but Mother, Marion, and I took the pains to enter it and marvelous as it may seem we made our escape in safety, before the old fellow got hold of us. But joking aside, it is as great if not the greatest natural curiosity that I ever beheld, Niagara Falls not excepted. I thought that Independence Rock was quite a sight but the Gate throws it into nothingness. The rocks are 400 feet high and perpendicular, through which the Sweetwater River forces its way. There are thousands of names written upon the rocks and we noticed two, I should judge 200 or 300 feet high, and the rocks underneath them nearly smooth. How they ever climbed them and engraved their names is a mystery to me. The beauty and grandeur we beheld filled our minds with the greatness and goodness and wonderful works and powers of God and were I to cross these plains a score times I would never pass them without a brief visit.

(Maria) On Independence Rock we wrote our names on a piece of paper and put it under the edge of a large rock on the top. It is the greatest sight we have seen yet. There were very many large crevices in the rock and we found near the top a large natural basin of water where we bathed our heads and washed our faces and hands. The water was quite cool. After viewing it for some time and collecting small pieces of rock we returned to camp, fully satisfied with our morning’s walk.

July 29  

**Sage Creek and Sweetwater River, Wyoming**

(Eva) I came across a large quantity of wild currants, many of them ripe and waiting to be eaten. I went back to camp and got some dishes and help to pick them and went back and picked a ten quart pan full and tonight we expect to have a rarity for supper.\(^1\)

1. It was recommended that emigrants pick and eat currants and berries, as available along the trail, to help prevent scurvy (caused by lack of vitamin C). Many settlers had symptoms of scurvy when they arrived in California after five months or more of “trail food.”

July 30  

**Three Crossings, Sweetwater River**

(Eva) We crossed the Sweetwater River 3 times today within two miles and the road winds between rocky ridges. We camped in a forest of sage, which appears to be the only representative of the vegetable kingdom on these vast domains. We pass by hundreds of acres of it almost every day and it has been our only fuel for some time. We like the sage very much better than the buffalo chips. It makes a lighter fire and is less offensive. We are now more than halfway to California from home, but I do not expect that we have experienced half of the hardship.

(Maria) We traveled some twenty miles and camped near Ice Springs. Some of the company dug down a few feet, but did not find any ice, as our guide
July 31  Ice Slough, Sweetwater River

August 2  South Pass\textsuperscript{1} and Pacific Springs and Creek, Wyoming

\textit{(Eva)} It is cold, cold this morning. We had a thundershower last night and yet it was cold enough for two or three quilts. I think they have curious weather, for August, up here on the summit of the Rocky Mountains.\textsuperscript{2}

\textit{(Maria)} We went through South Pass, altitude 7,400 feet. This is the dividing ridge between the Atlantic and the Pacific. The ascent to the pass was so gradual that the traveler would scarcely know it, if he were not looking for it.

1. Inconspicuous South Pass, the twenty-mile wide, 7,490 feet high passage over the Continental Divide, has been called the gateway to the Far West. Without it there may have been no Oregon or California Trails, and perhaps no United States spanning “from sea to shining sea.” The pass is about forty miles southwest of present-day Lander, Wyoming, near State Route 28.

2. Three years earlier (1856), two groups of Mormons pulling handcarts, the Willie and Martin Companies, got late starts from the railheads in Iowa. They reached this section of the combined Mormon, Oregon, and California Trails—between Devil’s Gate and South Pass—in October and were trapped by heavy snowfall. Rescuers came from Salt Lake City, but more than 200 people died. The Mormon Handcart Historic Site at Martin’s Cove (near Alcova, Wyoming) now commemorates one of the worst tragedies on all the overland trails.

August 3  Dry Sandy Crossing, Parting of the Ways, and Little Sandy Crossing

\textit{(Eva)} A short time after we started two of our cattle died. We came 25 miles and camped on Little Sandy River. A stage line going to Stockton passed us and camped on the other side of the river. There are 15 each, wagons and busses, and six horses on each. On the opposite side of the river we can count 67 wagons and carriages, so that we have plenty of company.

August 4  Big Sandy River (present-day Farson, Wyoming) to Sublette Cutoff\textsuperscript{3}

\textit{(Eva)} We have two or three sick oxen tonight. For two days the dust has been almost intolerable. I really fear that we shall be obliged to eat more than our peck of dirt.

3. The Sublette Cutoff was one of the earliest shortcuts on the California Trail. It was discovered in 1844 when the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy wagon train, guided by mountain man Caleb Greenwood, decided to go due west from the Little Sandy River and cross the forty-five-mile desert directly to the Green River. Thus what was initially known as the Greenwood Cutoff bypassed Fort Bridger and the route to the Bear River, which saved fifty to seventy miles and as much as three to five days of travel. This cutoff—which became known as the Sublette Cutoff after it was incorrectly labeled in an 1849 trail guide book by Joseph E. Ware—became the preferred route. The Elliott family in 1859 apparently took a later variant, the Slate Creek Cutoff.

The Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party that blazed the Sublette Cutoff in 1844 was the first group of settlers to cross the Sierra Nevada into California with their wagons intact. The Murphy family was prominent in the early history of San Joaquin County and the Southern Mines. Helen Murphy (called “Ellen” in some early accounts) was a member of this party; in 1850, she married Charles M. Weber, the founder of Stockton.

August 5  It was S. Eveline “Eva” Elliott Morse’s twenty-fifth birthday.

\textit{(Maria)} Samuel’s ox, which had been sick for quite a while, died last night. One of Pa’s was sick too and the boys thought it would die, but they doctor ed him well and put a blanket on him and this morning he is much better.

John Fletcher’s heifer died this morning, also.

**August 6**  **Green River** *(south of present-day LaBarge, Wyoming)*

*(Maria)* We came to the Green River, and it is rightly named, as the water looks green. It has a very swift current, but we forded it without much trouble. The water came up to the wagon boxes so the boys raised them up some.¹

¹. Emigrants often cut timber along the California Trail with which to fashion spacers between the wagon frame and the box, raising the cargo to help keep it dry during the frequent river and creek crossings.

**August 7**  **Slate Creek**

*(Eva)* O horrible! Most horrible!! The dust! The dust! My eyes are almost filled with it and I think if the remainder of the journey is to be like the last few days, it will hardly be as pleasant as it has been thus far.

*(Maria)* I have been having the toothache today, therefore I do not know much about what has been going on; but I do know that the road has been awfully rough and there are some very steep stony hills to pass over. Some of the time I scarcely knew whether I was “in the body or out of the body,” it jolted so.

**August 8**  **Slate Creek**

*(Eva)* It was decidedly the coldest night last night that we have seen since last winter. There were icicles an inch through hanging from the water kegs this morning.

**August 9**  **Ham’s Fork** *(near present-day Granger, Wyoming)*

*(Eva)* Hills! Hills! High hills!! And steep almost perpendicular descents today. We arrived at Hams Fork this afternoon. Some of us stayed to pick berries while the rest went on and we caught up with them about two miles away camped on the topmost pinnacles of the highest mountain that we have yet had to ascend.

**August 12**  **Stony Creek**

*(Eva)* We sallied forth afoot this morning and knew not where to stop as the road lay over the steepest, roughest and most sidling hills that mortal man ever conceived to visit, but we ascended and descended with great care in safety.²

². Horn’s *Overland Guide* advised: "You have a rough road to ascend and descend. Great care is required to prevent wagons from being broken."
August 13  Smith’s Fork of Bear River and junction with road from Fort Bridger

August 14  Near Smith’s Trading Post

August 15  Thomas Fork Crossing, Idaho, and Big Hill

(Eva) We get late starts mornings as the boys have so many cattle to doctor. We lost a good many along here which have been alkalized. We passed Thomas Fork soon after starting then climbed, yes that’s the word, climbed to the summit of a mountain which is a long and steep ascent. The guide book describes the descent as a long, steep and dangerous one and must be gone over with great care. We found the description a correct one.

August 18  Soda Springs, Steamboat Springs/Bear River, Sheep Rock,¹ and Hudspeth’s Cutoff²

(Eva) The Soda Springs are a great “curiosity.” They do not like most springs run out of the sides of hills, but rather they boil directly from a level place. The water tastes like very strong soda water and we could not drink it. We stopped for dinner near Steamboat Springs, which is a large rock with a large hole through it, through which the Bear River, when at high water, rushes, causing a sound resembling a steamboat.

1. Sheep Rock is where the Bartleson-Bidwell group in 1841 was the first to split off the Oregon Trail and head for California (before there was a California Trail). The group of thirty-two young men, an eighteen-year-old woman, and her baby daughter made it over Sonora Pass—albeit on foot and with no remaining supplies. They trudged down the Stanislaus River through what is now San Joaquin County. They were the first American settlers to cross the Sierra Nevada into Central California. One member of the group, a young German immigrant named Charles Weber (often spelled “Weaver” in early accounts), would later establish Stockton.

2. The Elliott family, like most emigrants on the California Trail, and as advised by Horn’s Overland Guide, followed Hudspeth’s shortcut, which bypassed Fort Hall and saved about twenty-five miles of travel. The cutoff was initiated in 1849 by a large wagon train of Missourians, led by Benoni M. Hudspeth and John J. Meyers. Five years prior, in 1844, both Hudspeth and Myers had been members of John Frémont’s mapping expedition to California and had passed through what six years later became San Joaquin County.

August 19  Cady’s Creek and Shoshone Creek, Idaho

(Eva) We had to leave poor Dick today, an ox that has worked most of the time, but failed two or three days ago. We hate to leave him, he has been so kind.

(Maria) After dinner we found very rough roads and in some places gullied out so that it was very hard on the wagons. We girls walked nearly all afternoon. Marion’s ox Dick has been sick for several days and he lay down as we stopped at noon and would not rise again. Eddy stayed awhile with him, to see if he got any better, as they had been giving him some brandy, but after a while Eddy left him to die.

August 20  Shoshone Creek and Denison’s River

(Eva) We traveled until nearly dark and were just going to camp when two men came up and gave us the unwelcome and stunning intelligence that the
Indians, some 7 miles ahead, had today between 11 and 12 attacked them while they were passing through a deep ravine. The Shoshone Indians killed two of their men and took their stock, provisions, wagons and everything. They escaped by flight and came back here, where they had camped the night before. There were also two women and a child who escaped, by all riding on a pony. Oh, it makes my blood run cold to think too that we have got to go through the same place and through a hundred miles of the same wild country.¹

(Maria) We started in good season, and soon crossed Shoshone Creek, which was thirty feet wide and three feet deep; the banks are very step and not good to cross. A man came from another wagon train and swapped sugar for coffee, pound for pound. We had not gone more than two miles before Sam Mathewson’s wagon, coming down a little hill, tipped over, smashing the bows all in, breaking the bolster and tongue, and spilling the contents.

We were about to camp when two men came up with the awful news that their wagon train, consisting of twenty men, six wagons, and two women, had been attacked by Indians. The Indians killed two men and had taken all their cattle, wagons, everything they had. They had to run for their lives and had come back seven miles.

¹ In contrast to the relationship between Indians and wagon trains portrayed by Hollywood and popular American culture, in the thirty years between 1840 and 1870 there were only eight documented major attacks by Indians on all the overland trails. The Elliott family witnessed a rare, but terrifying event.

This portion of the California Trail—now in the southeastern corner of Idaho—had the most Indian attacks, almost all apparently motivated by the theft of livestock. There were also eyewitness reports of white “land pirates” disguising themselves as Indians in this vicinity.

The seven Shoshone-speaking Indian nations, and their Paiute-speaking friends, the Bannocks, had relied on salmon-fishing on the Snake River for centuries. They had often offered assistance to and traded with earlier emigrants on the California and Oregon Trails. But in the early 1850s, they began stealing emigrants’ horses, mules, and cattle. The raids caused the Hudson’s Bay Company to abandon its posts on the Snake River in 1856. The frequency of the raids was near its peak in 1859, precisely when the Elliott family wagon train passed through.

August 21 Near Denison’s River, Idaho

(Eva) Last night was the longest night that I have ever experienced. I lay in constant fear of being aroused by a volley of bullets and the hideous yells of the Indians. But we were not troubled by them, just the loud and wild howling of the coyotes that deceived us a number of times. But thanks to God, we are all well this morning. The boys went to the site of the attack and found one of the men still living and sensible. Some of the boys stayed there and the rest came back, got two carriages and have now returned with the corpse and the wounded man. We cannot yet determine how badly he is hurt, only that his leg and arm are both broken. They both have families in Muscatine, Iowa. The living man says the Indians left about sun an hour high, after setting fire to the wagons and nearly all that they did not want.
Some of their cattle came back in the night and others today, about 30. Our boys are now digging the grave. We are dressing the wounded and preparing the dead for burial.

(Maria) About noon some men came back with the awful news that one poor man was still alive, although badly wounded. He said he would give a thousand dollars for a drink of water. He told the men that the Indians left about sundown and supposed he was dead. They rifled his pockets and took his belt and knife, hit him two or three blows on the head, and left him. Another man was dead but dreadfully mutilated. Some of the boys took two light wagons and went for the two men, which they brought in about four o'clock. Then they proceeded to dress the wounds of the injured man and prepared the other for his grave. I never imagined anything so terrible. The poor dead man was washed, a white shirt put upon him, then he was laid upon a board and consigned to the silent tomb with not a relative to follow him to his last resting place. He leaves a wife and two children in Iowa to morn his loss. The wounded man is very full of courage, although his arm is very badly shot and his leg is badly swollen. They took a ball from the wound and he says he is faring better than he expected this morning.

August 22  Near Branch of Panack River, Idaho

(Eva) We are now preparing to start to go through that fearful place, but as there are 70 or 75 men, they don’t believe we are in too much danger. But we poor weak defenseless women can’t rest so easy. They are going with their eyes open and hands ready for action, but I hope and pray that they will not be called to action. I have been talking to the wounded man, his courage is good, but yet he considers his recovery doubtful, under the circumstances. Some of our men are going to carry him to Salt Lake, the nearest place for relief. His arm from his elbow to his shoulder seems to be completely shattered and his leg is broken. Our folks took a ring from the dead man’s finger and a lock of his hair to send to his wife. What heart-rending news!

August 23  (Eva) We have gotten through that fearful place and it is indeed a fitting place for such a terrible deed.1 We have seen none better. It is a deep ravine

1. A year later (1860), Bannock and Shoshone Indians—often collectively called the Snake Indians by early European and American trappers—carried out a two-day siege of the forty-four-member Utter-Van Ornum wagon train near Salmon Falls (present-day Grand View, Idaho). This was one of the few times when the settlers “circled the wagons” while under attack, as in Hollywood movies, and eleven emigrants were killed.

In 1862, near what is now Massacre Rocks State Park, about 150 Shoshone and Bannock warriors, led by Northwestern Shoshone War Chief Pocateello, attacked several wagon trains. In response, the United States sent in about 200 troops of the Third Regiment of California Volunteers from Stockton, under the command of Colonel Patrick Edward Connor. A year earlier, the infamous Third Regiment had been killing Indians on the northern coast of California. The troops attacked a sleeping winter village of Shoshones on January 29, 1863, murdering 250 (some accounts say as many as 300) men, women, and children, leaving only 120 alive. This massacre was one of the worst mass killings of Indians in U.S. history. It is commemorated by 1,200-acre Bear River Massacre National Historic Landmark, near the modern town of Preston, Idaho.
with very high bluffs on each side. We saw the blackened ruins of the fine wagons and the small pools of blood. It is a sad and gloomy spectacle and I breathed much more freely when we scaled the top.

**August 24**  
*It was Fred Morse’s second birthday.*

(Eva) We traveled till near 10 o’clock to reach water, making 25 miles today, but we find water scarce and no feed so the stock have eaten nothing since this morning. We have camped in the same place where the Indians killed a man the 26th of last month. His name was Hall and his grave is only a few rods from camp. This is our little Freddie’s birthday and he is now a two year old and a great fat boy.

(Maria) We were awakened this morning by one of the men playing on his violin before daylight. It seemed to me that music never sounded so sweet as it did this morning. We got a very early start, as we intended going twenty-five miles today.

**August 25**  
*Sinking Creek, Idaho*

(Eva) Our company presents quite the military appearance—from 12 to 13 men, some on horseback and some afoot, all with guns over their shoulders and revolvers and knives in their belts, and shot pouches and powder flasks slung over their shoulders. They really look ready for war.

**August 26**  
*West branch of Raft River, Idaho*

(Maria) Wood is quite scarce here, but I hope we can get enough to bake biscuits for 27, the number of our family.\(^1\) We have fine feed for the cattle, for which I am glad indeed, for they have fared rather hard for several days.

1. After walking most of the day, women could not rest when the wagon train stopped for the night. Women made campfires, cooked dinner and prepared food for the next day, pitched tents, mended clothes, and cared for the children, sick, and injured.

**August 27**  
*Junction of the Fort Hall and California Roads*

**August 28**  
*Rock Creek and White Creek (near present-day Almo, Idaho)*

(Maria) The boys had quite a joyful time last night. A man from another camp came over and played on the violin and some sang. He is a first-rate player. There were 51 sitting around to hear the music until quite late.

**August 29**  
*Pyramid Circle (City of Rocks)\(^2\) and Junction of the Great Salt Lake and California Roads*

(Eva) We passed through Pyramid Circle [City of Rocks] soon after starting. It is about 5 miles long and 3 wide with a great variety of tall, white and green stones, of every conceivable shape and magnitude, with thousands of names written and painted upon them.

2. Horn’s *Overland Guide* said City of Rocks or “Pyramid Circle is a delightful place, altogether a beautiful and picturesque scene.” It is now preserved by City of Rocks National Reserve, near Almo, Idaho.
Shoshone camp, 1868. Courtesy of First People of America.

Humbolt River. Courtesy of University of Nevada-Reno Library.
August 30  
Granite Pass and Goose Creek, Nevada

(Eva) We started very early this morning as there was no feed where we stopped. We have now, after climbing and descending some horrid hills, arrived at last to Goose Creek, where we are now stopping for breakfast and for the cattle to feed.

September 2  
Thousand Springs Valley, Nevada

(Eva) Evening finds us camped near the western border of this valley of a thousand springs and the ground all around us has the appearance of alkali. I wish that we might never see any more alkali water again, but I suppose that we shall see much more for two or three weeks to come than we have seen thus far.

(Maria) Seth is quite sick today and has not sat up any. He has lain in the carriage on the bed all day.

September 4  
Humboldt Wells ¹ (near the present-day town of Wells, Nevada, and the junction of Interstate 80 and Highway 93)

(Eva) The weeks pass very quickly and soon I hope, we shall find the end of our journey. We have an eight mile canyon to go through today. I feel afraid of canyons and I wish that we were through it.

(Maria) Wilson went to bed with a high fever, and was quite sick all night.

¹. At Humboldt Wells (now Wells, Nevada) emigrants camped at the headwaters of the Humboldt River, also called Mary’s River. The 330-mile river provided the only natural travel corridor across the Great Basin. West of Elko, the Bureau of Land Management now maintains the California Trail National Historic Trail Interpretive Center.

September 7  
Humboldt River

(Maria) It grew colder and some snow fell. It has been like winter weather today, and nearly everyone is complaining of the cold.

September 8  
Springs and the Humboldt River (near present-day Elko, Nevada)

(Maria) Marion is, and has been, very much afflicted with sore eyes from the alkali dust.

September 9  
Humboldt River, Nevada

(Eva) It is very cold this morning. Wherever there was left a small quantity of water, it was found covered with ice and there was a heavy frost. It is decidedly the coldest weather that I ever saw at this season of the year.

(Maria) We traveled some five or six miles, and as there was no water for the next seventeen miles, we went off the road some distance and laid up the remainder of the day. The sick folks are all about today. All others are at work; some washing, some mending, others fishing, all
engaged at something. The feed is first rate across the river where they drove the cattle. The cattle look much better than I expected they would at this distance from home.

**September 10** Humboldt River, Nevada

(Eva) I think that we shall know how to appreciate a good warm house if we are ever permitted to live in one again. This afternoon we passed through a short canyon and found the roads very rough and the dust almost intolerable. It was truly so dense that we some of the time could not see our driver, only the wheel cattle.

**September 11** Gravelly Ford (east of present-day Beowawe, Nevada)

**September 13** Humboldt River

(Maria) The wagon trains are going to separate this morning, in the hope it will be better for the cattle. We hate to separate, as we have been together for more than three weeks and it seems like one family.

Just before we came up to camp we heard the report of a gun and saw the flash, near where some of the boys were. Immediately after stopping we learned that Jerry’s gun had burst and the powder had flashed in his face, hurting his eyes very badly.¹

¹ Men on the California Trail were heavily armed. The settlers were very worried about attacks by Indians and they hunted along the trail. It was recommended that every man and boy carry a revolver and a rifle or double-barreled shotgun. Many emigrants were not experienced in handling weapons, so firearms accidents were the leading cause of accidental deaths and injuries. Far more emigrants were killed by their own firearms or those of fellow settlers than by Indians or outlaws.

**September 15** Humboldt River (northwest of present-day Battle Mountain, Nevada)

(Eva) Today about 11 while Charley was on horseback he was bitten by a little animal whose bite is very poisonous, even worse than a rattlesnake, and it affected him very seriously. We gave him brandy to counteract the poison and bound tobacco upon the spots,² and after he was raving for about an hour, but we succeeded in quieting him and he has been sleeping now for a number of hours.

(Maria) Charley went on ahead of the wagon train with some horses and lay on the ground to let the horses feed. After getting on his horse again he felt something biting his back. Johnny, who was standing by, saw that something was the matter—said he thought Charley was crazy—so he looked on Charley’s back and found a scorpion, which was very poisonous indeed. It did not bite him but once, but the poison went all over him in an instant. They helped Charley to Henry’s wagon and gave him a pint of brandy and put tobacco poultice on the bite. Charley was very crazy for three or four hours and then fell asleep.

² Crude medicines such as brandy, tobacco poultices, and liniments were used on the California Trail. There were no doctors; emigrants did their best to apply these simple remedies.
September 16  **Humboldt River** *(near present-day Winnemucca, Nevada)*

*(Eva)* We are now in the Paiute nation\(^1\) and I sincerely hope that we may never more behold a Shoshone. These Paiutes are pretty civilized and I feel a greater degree of safety than for the last 4 weeks.

1. The Northern Paiute Indians occupied the northwestern portion of the present state of Nevada. In earlier years, they were the most-feared Natives along the California Trail. Motivated by hunger, Paiutes continued to drive off emigrants’ livestock or cripple the animals with poisoned arrows so that they would be left behind when the wagon train moved out in the morning. After the Elliott party’s experience with the Shoshones, the Paiutes apparently seemed “pretty civilized.”

September 18  **Humboldt River** *(near present-day Imlay, Nevada)*

*(Eva)* This forenoon, amid the dust and rock, we saw two men approaching and my eyes were certainly open a little wider than at any previous time since we left home. I thought at first sight that it was Pa and Crane [Wilson Elliott’s business partner from San Joaquin County], but upon nearer view it proved to be Crane and another man, both of whom we were truly glad to see. They informed us that they left Pa and three other men 17 miles the other side of the Forty-mile Desert, 150 miles away, with a wagon waiting for us. We feel as though we would like to hasten forward as fast as possible.

September 21  **Humboldt River**

*(Eva)* Still this terrible dust. It is truly almost suffocating and it appears to me that if long continued it would certainly be fatal to man and beast, in addition to the alkali water. This afternoon Major, one of our best horses, was taken very sick and we all stopped while the boys doctored him, and Wilson, Mr. Crane, and others stayed back with him. But soon they came up saying that Major had died. He was a noble animal and after coming this far it seems hard that he should die.

*(Maria)* Major was sick and the boys went to doctoring him, but it did no good as he died in less than an hour. He had not been well for several days and the boys had bled him, but it did no good. We traveled until dark, having made some twenty-five miles, and camped near the river.

September 22  **Willow Springs** *(at the base of Lone Mountain)*

*(Eva)* We camped on the Humboldt River for the last time last night and truly I for one am not loathe to leave it, as I dislike the water very much.\(^2\)

2. Like the Platte River earlier in the journey, the Humboldt River provided a critical lifeline; in this case, through 300 miles of the Great Basin Desert. Yet unlike the Platte, it was not held in high esteem by the settlers. It was crooked, and it had bitter water and stinking mud, biting insects, deep muddy sloughs and oxbows that trapped thirsty oxen, and willow thickets that might conceal hostile Indian archers.
(Maria) There is a nice cow dead this morning, which we brought from home. We stopped about two at Willow Springs for dinner. The water tastes very strongly of sulfur. We took some in our kegs to use while crossing the desert. We went about seventeen miles and camped on a meadow.

**September 23 Big Meadows, Nevada (present-day Lovelock)**

(Eva) We came some eight or ten miles and stopped to mow and take on grass for the desert. Soon after stopping more than half of our cattle were taken sick. We started out a little before sunset and arrived at the Humboldt Sink about 4 o'clock a.m.

(Maria) We traveled several miles and turned off the road to cut grass for the horses in crossing the desert. It indeed looked like haying, to see the men come in with bundles on their backs, which they deposited in the wagons.

1. Before crossing the infamous Forty-mile Desert, it was standard practice to rest the animals and cut grass for them, which was stashed aboard the wagons along with extra water. Big Meadows (now Lovelock) was an important stop at which to cut grass. Emigrants also “recruited” or replenished forty miles back at Lassen’s Meadow, now the site of Rye Patch Reservoir.

**September 24 Humboldt Sink and Forty-mile Desert**

(Eva) Eleven o’clock a.m. found us once more upon the road, and we traveled until 2 p.m. We took dinner and sallied forth again and stopped near 11 p.m. at the Boiling Springs, where we stayed a couple of hours. The next time we stopped we had arrived at the heavy sandy roads within eight miles of the Truckee River.

(Maria) They have left three or four head today. Mr. Quigley’s ox, that he has driven a good many hundreds of miles, died, which seems rather hard after traveling so far.

We cooked supper at Boiling Springs and did not get ready to go on until three in the morning. The horses ate the grass as though they were nearly starved. We took a lantern and went to see the springs. They were indeed worth going to see. Some were boiling up out of the ground; others scalding hot; and from one very large one the steam spurted up.

2. Most emigrants crossed the Forty-mile Desert at night to avoid the extreme heat. They and their animals were weakened by the prior 300 dusty miles with poor water and feed. Although it was typical for emigrants using the Carson Route (see below) to follow the southern route through the Desert to reach the Carson River, the Elliott wagon train chose to take the older northern route to reach the Truckee River. The Truckee route was somewhat easier because it was less sandy on the first leg. Boiling Springs (now called Brady’s Hot Springs, just west of the junction of Interstate 80 and U.S. 95) was at the mid-point and provided poor, but drinkable, water. Near the end of the second leg, near present-day Fernley, Nevada, the trail turned to deep sand causing the loss of many draft animals and the abandonment of many wagons.

3. This was the last entry in Maria Elliott’s diary.
September 25  **Forty-mile Desert**¹ (near present-day Fernley and, on the Truckee River, near present-day Wadsworth, Nevada)

(Eva) We breakfasted and started once more with our poor tired and hungry cattle and arrived at the Truckee River about noon. We are safely across the Great American Desert. The Desert is much as I expected: the first part was entirely barren, but as we advanced, occasionally a stunted bunch of greasewood was visible, which afforded relief to the eye. This greasewood was all the fuel that we found and it is almost impossible to bake with. Many others who proceeded us, judging from the broken wagon fragments that remained, had had a different fuel from us, wood from their broken wagons, but we were very glad to be spared that privilege. The most of our cattle stood it well. There were but five that tired out, but the boys expect to drive them all or part in. There were three that died, not as many as the boys expected. When we arrived at some bluffs which overlooked the river and saw for the first time the green trees which grew upon its banks, it really did our hearts good. Yet it gave us greater pleasure to see the poor hungry and thirsty cattle and horses slaking their thirst and once more nibbling the grass.

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1. The Forty-mile Desert was dreaded by emigrants because of its lack of feed, water, and fuel. In 1858, William A. Wallace described this stretch of trail in San Francisco's *Alta California* newspaper: “The plain around for thousands of acres is leafless and lifeless, white arid plains without water, upon which the sun glares. And here, too, over this whole forty miles, are signs of wrack and ruin which has fallen upon unfortunate emigrants in past years. Heaps of bones lie everywhere, and everywhere are the iron remnants of wagons. This forty miles is the terror of the whole route, and no wonder. I never saw a desert before, and I do not wish to see another.”

September 27  **Truckee River, Nevada**

(Eva) We have forded the Truckee River this morning six times and the fords are the roughest that we have ever crossed. This afternoon we came over the roughest road entirely. The men had to hold up the wagons coming over the steep and sidling places but we all came over safely until we arrived at the river, where in going in the cattle turned too quick and nearly succeeded in overthrowing the wagon. They quite succeeded in breaking the reach to it, while in the middle of the river.

September 28  **Truckee River, Nevada**

(Eva) Last night just after dark two men rode up, which proved to be Pa and Mr. Norton,² which we did not expect to see until today. We were very glad to see them. They had been anxiously expecting to see us for some time.

². Oscar O. Norton travelled from Illinois to California by ship (crossing the Panama isthmus) at the same time the Elliott family journeyed overland. He accompanied patriarch Edmund Elliott from San Joaquin County to meet the wagon train. A year after the Elliott family arrived in San Joaquin County (1860), Norton married diary author Maria J. Elliott.

September 29  **Truckee River**
Forty-mile Desert. Painting by Harold H. Betts. Courtesy of History Colorado, Denver, CO.

East Slope of Sierra Nevada from Nevada desert. © N. Mrigh, Shutterstock.
(Eva) We have ice this morning an inch thick and a good many of us laid cold, but I suppose we might as well get used to it, for I expect that we will have it much colder before we get over the mountains. We have come to Truckee Big Meadows and are now camped on the Truckee River.

September 30   Truckee Meadows, Nevada (near present-day Sparks). The Truckee Route and Carson Route groups parted.¹

(Eva) Some of our company now leave us to go to Grass Valley, taking the Truckee Route over Donner Pass, while we go the Carson and Big Tree Route.

1. The Elliott family and others of the party bound for San Joaquin County turned south along Steamboat Creek and picked up the Carson Route in the Carson Valley. The Carson Route is now also known as the Carson Pass Wagon Road or the Mormon Emigrant Trail. It was initially laid out in 1848 by Mormon pioneers heading east to the Great Salt Lake Valley and the new center of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Many of the road builders had recovered gold at Mormon Island on the American River. Some had been aboard the Brooklyn when it sailed into San Francisco Bay in 1846, and some probably had helped found New Hope on the lower Stanislaus River, the first farming community in San Joaquin County. Modern Highway 50 follows some of this route near Carson City, Nevada, and Highway 88, the Carson Pass National Scenic Byway, follows the route into California.

October 1   Steamboat Valley and Washoe Valley (between present-day Reno and Carson City, Nevada)

October 2   Carson Valley and Carson River

October 3   Genoa (pronounced with an accented, long “O”; earlier called Mormon Station)

October 4   Six or eight miles from Genoa, Nevada

(Eva) We had for supper a taste of fresh fish which we bought off an Indian.

October 5   Carson Canyon to Hope Valley, California. The Carson Pass Wagon Road or Mormon Emigrant Trail

(Eva) We have passed over the Carson Canyon, the roughest road, I should think, ever passed by mortal man, saying nothing of the unaccountable bridges which the cattle were very much afraid of and it was almost impossible to get them over.²

2. The seven miles leading into Hope Valley were among the most difficult of the entire California Trail. The route was in the narrow, steep, boulder-filled West Carson River canyon. Many wrecked wagons littered the way.

October 6   Hope Valley (about twenty miles south of present-day South Lake Tahoe, California)

(Eva) Today we are laying over in this beautiful Hope Valley, which I should think was rightly named, as I guess that everyone upon arriving here has some faint hope of reaching California, if such be their destination, after traversing such a boundless territory and getting to this side
of the awful, most awful and horrible Carson Canyon, must have some faint reviving hope of reaching somewhere, sometime. We have been improving this nice running water by toiling, in lieu of a washtub, over pails and pans, but nevertheless our clothes are washed and on the bushes drying.

October 7  **The Big Tree Wagon Road**, California

*(Eva)* We have come today some 15 miles, leaving 8 cattle dead and dying in Hope Valley. We found the roads good some of the way, but rough and hilly. High mountains and rock, huge rocks, predominate on either side and the scene is wild and picturesque and to me exceedingly beautiful, for I love the wild and terrible of nature when not fearing an Indian arrow from behind the hidden places.

1. The Elliott family group split off the Carson Route to follow the Big Tree Wagon Road, which ended at Stockton. Major John Ebbetts (for whom the Highway 4 pass is named) had surveyed a similar route in 1850 for a proposed trans-Sierra railroad. Survey and construction of the wagon road in 1856 was privately funded, including several hundred dollars from Stockton merchants hoping to divert traffic from Placerville and Sacramento. The Big Tree Road was well-used when the Elliott family came through in 1859, but soon thereafter fell out of favor and became almost impassable. A major road was later built over Ebbetts Pass to serve the silver mines of the Comstock Lode in Nevada.

The Big Tree Road left Hope Valley and went south over Border Ruffian Pass near the Blue Lakes and the current Mokelumne Wilderness in Alpine County. The Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail now crosses the old wagon route. The Big Tree Road passed through Charity and Faith Valleys to Hermit Valley (between the present Lake Alpine and Ebbetts Pass), where it turned southwest to follow the route of present-day Highway 4.

October 9  **The Big Tree Wagon Road**

*(Eva)* It is very cloudy this morning with strong indications of a storm. I hope that it will not storm for a week yet, and then I hope that our long and tedious journey will be completed and forever concluded. Days now seem as long as weeks when we started. They tell us it is Sunday, but we have been so long where there is nothing to remind us of that day, that all the difference we know is that our hands rest from their labor, although the boys do not, for we must travel almost every Sunday.

This forenoon we came down some long steep hills and we took dinner down in the valley. After dinner we started up, up, up, over very rough and steep hills until at last we reached the summit of the Sierra Nevada.

October 11  *(Eva)* We climbed very steep, high hills, which were very hard to ascend. We had to double teams again and did not stop until the moon was up a ways. We stopped on the top of a high hill where there was just about room for our wagons and stock to stand and not much to spare. It was clear of trees and there was no feed or water; so a drink of water from our canteens was considered quite a rarity and a slice of bread apiece was all that we could muster.
October 12  Woodruff’s\(^1\)  (present-day Dorrington, California)

(Eva) We camped for the day at Woodruff’s, whereby paying nine cents per head we can have the privilege of turning our stock to graze upon their ranch. Our stock were without feed last night and have to travel 18 miles tomorrow before they can get a bite. We have also been luxuriating upon cabbage and potatoes, which is really a rarity, as we have not tasted of cabbage since we left home.

1 In 1853, G. H. Woodruff purchased 160 acres here. In the 1890s, the property was owned by John Gardner and was known as Gardner’s Station, a toll station on the Big Tree(s)-Carson Valley Turnpike. In 1902, the Post Office was named Dorrington (the maiden name of the first post master’s wife), the name still used for the area.

October 13  Big Trees (now Calaveras Big Trees State Park)

(Eva) We have just come from the large tree called the Mother of the Forest which is by far the largest tree that I ever beheld. Now we are going over a bypath to the Big Tree. Next comes the Father of the Forest, upon the top of which I am now sitting as it is felled to the earth. Next we find Hercules, General Scott, the Mother and Son, Old Bachelor, Old Kentucky, the Siamese twins, Young American, Granite State, the Large Hollow Tree, Vermont, The Empire State, Old Dominion, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, The Beauty of the Forest, and last of all, the Mammoth Grove House, where we find what is called the Big Tree. We emerged from the Grove fully satisfied.

October 14  Murphys,\(^2\) California

(Eva) The road this forenoon wound around bluffs and was very narrow, almost impossible to turn out when we met a team. We arrived at Murphys about 11 a.m. It is a very businesslike place and quite a little village. It is a mining town and the soil is very red. We are now through the heavy timber and over the high mountains.

2 In 1852, Augustus T. Dowd discovered the grove of giant sequoia trees east of Murphys; within a year there was a “good” road from Murphys to the grove. In 1857, Calaveras County established a road from Big Trees to Murphys; the Elliott party apparently used that route.

October 15  (Eva) We received from an American lady an invitation to “call.” Mother, Carrie, and I did so and walked in the garden, in which was concentrated all sorts of vegetables and which the lady kindly told us that we were welcome to pick anything we wished. She assisted us in getting some beets, onions, tomatoes, and cabbages. We came back to camp well satisfied with our first call in California, and with that lady in particular.

October 16  Hawkeye (about six miles northwest of Angels Camp, California)

(Eva) The cattle, about forty head of them, got away last night and it took the boys all of the forenoon to hunt them up; consequently we did not leave here until late, and have come but four or five miles. We passed though Hawkeye, a small mining village. We also passed two or three Chinese men,
which was our first view of that nationality.

October 18  Central San Joaquin County (near Farmington, California)

(Eva) Samuel Mathewson’s ox gave out this afternoon. He has worked every day since we left Illinois, now over five months, poor creature. I am thankful our oxen’s labors will soon end.

The 19th of October 1859 will long be remembered by me and doubtless many of our company as the day that our long and tedious journey came to an end. We have now travelled near 3000 miles by land, from the Atlantic [watershed] to the Pacific shore. We have passed through dangers seen and unseen and ever been preserved by an Over-ruling Power. And now, as my journey has ended, so also will my journal. Until, if I ever do, I shall once more commence another trip to some far off country and then my dottings may be continued. Til then, adieu, my journal.
Conclusion
Building Farms and Futures in the California Heartland

By David R. Stuart

What became of the members of the Elliott family after they arrived in San Joaquin County? Like most early settlers, they first cleared and farmed the rich lands of the region. They married and had children. They were active in their communities. Some moved elsewhere in California, but most of them continued to feel rooted in San Joaquin County.

The patriarch of the Elliott family, Edmund Elliott (1804–1884), started a farm in healthful San Joaquin County. His wife Sarah S. Elliott (1811–1881), was, like him, a native of Thornton, Grafton County, New Hampshire. Both rest in the pioneer section of Lodi Memorial Park and Cemetery with many other family members.

Wilson E. Elliott (1832–1911), their eldest son and leader of the wagon train, married in 1876 and farmed in San Joaquin and Merced Counties. He also logged on the east slope of the Sierra Nevada. In 1895, he and his family moved to a dairy farm on the Eel River near Loleta, Humboldt County, California.

The second Elliott child, diarist S. Eveline “Eva” Elliott Morse (1834–1915), and her husband, L. Marion Morse (1830–1899)—a native of Maine who met and married Eva in Illinois—initially farmed on Bear Creek, northeast of Stockton. In 1867, the Morses purchased land a few miles south of Mokelumne Station (now Lodi), and Marion cleared it of oak trees and planted initial crops of grain and watermelons. Later, he planted fruit trees and dried and shipped apricots and peaches. Morse and his son Edmund (below) are credited with planting the first Tokay grapes in the area in 1892; for decades, Flame Tokays were the signature crop of the Lodi district.

In 1869, the Morse family built a Greek Revival-style ranch house on Cherokee Lane south of Mokelumne Station (now on the west frontage road of Highway 99, south of Harney Lane, on the south edge of the city of Lodi). The Morse home was occupied by three generations of Elliott family descendants and in 1986 was listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Marion Morse had a passion for pacing and trotting horses. He and a partner owned and operated a harness racing track. In 1893, Morse was listed as president of the Lodi Trotting Park Association.

Eva and several of her relatives were charter members of the First Congregational Church in Lodi, established in 1872. In 1887, Eva helped organize the First Congregational Society, a women’s group.
Eva and Marion’s son, **Edmund Elliott Morse** (1861–1945), sometimes called E. E., also farmed in the area, initially with his elder brother **Fred Marion Morse** (1857–1881)—“Freddie,” who turned two years old on the California Trail, but tragically died at age twenty-three. Edmund and his family lived in the original Morse home after Marion died and Eva left to live with their daughter, Hattie.

Edmund E. Morse was not only an important agriculturalist, but also a business and community leader. He was a founder of Farmer’s Mutual Fire Insurance Company of Stockton, the First National Bank of Lodi, and the Lodi Investment Company. The latter was formed to build the Lodi Hotel and the Lodi Theater. He served on the Board of Trustees for Lodi Union High School and helped lead the 1910 bond issue for the high school building.

Eva and Marion Morse also had two daughters born in Lodi: **Hattie Morse Ryan** (1864–1921) and **Cora Eveline Morse**, who died in infancy in 1869.

Diarist **Maria J. Elliott Norton** (1836–1912) was twenty-two when she recorded her experiences on the California Trail. In Illinois she had known **Oscar O. Norton** (1832–1909), a native of New York. Norton visited his family in New York, then traveled to California overseas (via Panama) at the same time the Elliott family journeyed overland. He accompanied Maria’s father from San Joaquin County to meet the wagon train in western Nevada. Maria and Norton were married in San Joaquin County in 1860 and lived in the Live Oak district. Their children were **Charles W. Norton** (1861–1918), who was elected public administrator of the County of San Joaquin, district attorney, and Superior Court judge in Stockton; **Arthur L. Norton** (1863–1930), a school teacher; and **Alice E. Norton Lasell Hurd** (1864–1938). The family was active in the Lodi Grange and the Congregational Church.

Second brother **William T. Elliott** (1838–1917), left this area in 1862 for Big Mead-ows, California, where he raised livestock. There he was a county supervisor and was largely responsible for establishing Bridgeport as the Mono County seat. William frequently returned to San Joaquin County and he married a young Lodi woman.

Third brother **Edwin R. Elliott** (1841–1923)—“Eddy” in the trail diaries—farmed east of Lodi. By 1890, he had 380 acres of choice farming land.

The youngest brother, **Charles T. Elliott** (1848–1920)—eleven-year-old “Charley” who was stung by a scorpion on the trail—also farmed nearby. In addition, he taught school in Stockton, became the auditor and county recorder of San Joaquin County, and may have played a major role in naming the city of Lodi.

Lodi was originally called Mokelumne Station. Because of confusion with nearby Mokelumne Hill, a new name was needed. Although there are at least three other stories about the origin of the name Lodi, one version says that Charles Elliott called a meeting of the townspeople and strongly advocated for Lodi, after a town in Illinois. We do know that the California Legislature endorsed the name “Lodi” in March 1874. Charles went on to be a respected U.S. marshall in the San Francisco Bay Area from 1907 to 1914.
The youngest Elliott children to make the trip west were Emma, who was six years old on the California Trail, and Clara, who was four. **Emma S. Elliott Pardee Karns Dixon** (1853–1940) at age twenty-six married Dr. E. H. Pardee and lived in Palo Alto. She married at least two additional times and was the “black sheep” of the family. **Clara “Cal” E. Elliott Rudy** (1855–1952) married Wayne Rudy and lived a long, happy life in neighboring Stanislaus County.
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