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*The Prairie
Traveller, a Hand-
book for Overland
Expeditions*

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Burton**

The Prairie Traveller, a Handbook for Overland Expeditions



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Preface](#)

[CHAPTER I.](#)

[CHAPTER II.](#)

[CHAPTER III.](#)

[CHAPTER IV.](#)

[CHAPTER V.](#)

[CHAPTER VI.](#)

[CHAPTER VII.](#)

Preface

Table of Contents

A QUARTER of a century's experience in frontier life, a great portion of which has been occupied in exploring the interior of our continent, and in long marches where I have been thrown exclusively upon my own resources, far beyond the bounds of the populated districts, and where the traveler must vary his expedients to surmount the numerous obstacles which the nature of the country continually reproduces, has shown me under what great disadvantages the "voyageur" labors for want of a timely initiation into those minor details of prairie-craft, which, however apparently unimportant in the abstract, are sure, upon the plains, to turn the balance of success for or against an enterprise.

This information is so varied, and is derived from so many different sources, that I still find every new expedition adds substantially to my practical knowledge, and am satisfied that a good Prairie Manual will be for the young traveler an addition to his equipment of inappreciable value.

With such a book in his hand, he will be able, in difficult circumstances, to avail himself of the matured experience of veteran travelers, and thereby avoid many otherwise unforeseen disasters; while, during the ordinary routine of marching, he will greatly augment the sum of his comfort, avoid many serious losses, and enjoy a comparative exemption from doubts and anxieties. He will feel himself a master spirit in the wilderness he traverses, and not the victim of every new combination of circumstances which nature affords or fate allots, as if to try his skill and prowess.

I have waited for several years, with the confident expectation that some one more competent than myself would assume the task, and give the public the desired information;

but it seems that no one has taken sufficient interest in the subject to disseminate the benefits of his experience in this way. Our frontier-men, although brave in council and action, and possessing an intelligence that quickens in the face of danger, are apt to feel shy of the pen. They shun the atmosphere of the student's closet; their sphere is in the free and open wilderness. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that to our veteran borderer the field of literature should remain a "terra incognita." It is our army that unites the chasm between the culture of civilization in the aspect of science, art, and social refinement, and the powerful simplicity of nature. On leaving the Military Academy, a majority of our officers are attached to the line of the army, and forthwith assigned to duty upon our remote and extended frontier, where the restless and warlike habits of the nomadic tribes render the soldier's life almost as unsettled as that of the savages themselves.

A regiment is stationed to-day on the borders of tropical Mexico; to-morrow, the war- whoop, borne on a gale from the northwest, compels its presence in the frozen latitudes of Puget's Sound. The very limited numerical strength of our army, scattered as it is over a vast area of territory, necessitates constant changes of stations, long and toilsome marches, a promptitude of action, and a tireless energy and self-reliance, that can only be acquired through an intimate acquaintance with the sphere in which we act and move.

The education of our officers at the Military Academy is doubtless well adapted to the art of civilized warfare, but can not familiarize them with the diversified details of border service; and they often, at the outset of their military career, find themselves compelled to improvise new expedients to meet novel emergencies.

The life of the wilderness is an art as well as that of the city or court, and every art subjects the votaries to discipline in preparing them for a successful career in its pursuit. The Military Art, as enlarged to meet all the requirements of border service, the savage in his wiles or the elements in their caprices, embraces many other special arts which have hitherto been almost ignored, and results which experience and calculation should have guaranteed have been improvidently staked upon favorable chances.

The main object at which I have aimed in the following pages has been to explain and illustrate, as clearly and succinctly as possible, the best methods of performing the duties devolving upon the prairie traveler, so as to meet their contingencies under all circumstances, and thereby to endeavor to establish a more uniform system of marching and campaigning in the Indian Country.

I have also furnished itineraries of most of the principal routes that have been traveled across the plains, taken from the best and most reliable authorities; and I have given some information concerning the habits of the Indians and wild animals that frequent the prairies, with the secrets of the hunter's and warrior's strategy, which I have endeavored to impress more forcibly upon the reader by introducing illustrative anecdote.

I take great pleasure in acknowledging my indebtedness to several officers of the Topographical Engineers and of other corps of the army for the valuable information I have obtained from their official reports regarding the different routes embraced in the itineraries, and to these gentlemen I beg leave very respectfully to dedicate my book.

CHAPTER I.

Table of Contents

ROUTES TO CALIFORNIA AND OREGON.

EMIGRANTS or others desiring to make the overland journey to the Pacific should bear in mind that there are several different routes which may be traveled with wagons, each having its advocates in persons directly or indirectly interested in attracting the tide of emigration and travel over them.

Information concerning these routes coming from strangers living or owning property near them, from agents of steam-boats or railways, or from other persons connected with transportation companies, should be received with great caution, and never without corroborating evidence from disinterested sources.

There is no doubt that each one of these roads has its advantages and disadvantages, but a judicious selection must depend chiefly upon the following considerations, namely, the locality from whence the individual is to take his departure, the season of the year when he desires to commence his journey, the character of his means of transportation, and the point upon the Pacific coast that he wishes to reach.

Persons living in the Northeastern States can, with about equal facility and dispatch, reach the eastern terminus of any one of the routes they may select by means of public transport. And, as animals are much cheaper upon the frontier than in the Eastern States, they should purchase their teams at or near the point where the overland journey is to commence.

Those living in the Northwestern States, having their own teams, and wishing to go to any point north of San Francisco, will of course make choice of the route which takes its departure from the Missouri River.

Those who live in the middle Western States, having their own means of transportation, and going to any point upon the Pacific coast, should take one of the middle routes.

Others, who reside in the extreme Southwest, and whose destination is south of San Francisco, should travel the southern road running through Texas, which is the only one practicable for comfortable winter travel. The grass upon a great portion of this route is green during the entire winter, and snow seldom covers it. This road leaves the Gulf coast at Powder-horn, on Matagorda Bay, which point is difficult of access by land from the north, but may be reached by steamers from New Orleans five times a week.

There are stores at Powder-horn and Indianola where the traveler can obtain most of the articles necessary for his journey, but I would recommend him to supply himself before leaving New Orleans with every thing he requires with the exception of animals, which he will find cheaper in Texas.

This road has received a large amount of travel since 1849, is well tracked and defined, and, excepting about twenty miles of "hog wallow prairie" near Powder-horn, it is an excellent road for carriages and wagons. It passes through a settled country for 250 miles, and within this section supplies can be had at reasonable rates.

At Victoria and San Antonio many fine stores will be found, well supplied with large stocks of goods, embracing all the articles the traveler will require.

The next route to the north is that over which the semi-weekly mail to California passes, and which for a great portion of the way to New Mexico, I traveled and recommended in 1849. This road leaves the Arkansas River at Fort Smith, to which point steamers run during the seasons of high water in the winter and spring.

Supplies of all descriptions necessary for the overland journey may be procured at Fort Smith, or at Van Buren on the opposite side of the Arkansas. Horses and cattle are cheap here. The road, on leaving Fort Smith, passes through the Choctaw and Chickasaw country for 180 miles, then crosses Red River by ferry-boat at Preston, and runs through the border settlements of northern Texas for 150 miles, within which distances supplies may be procured at moderate prices.

This road is accessible to persons desiring to make the entire journey with their own transportation from Tennessee or Mississippi, by crossing the Mississippi River at Little Rock,

and thence through Washington County, intersecting the road at Preston. It may also be reached by taking steamers up Red River to Shreveport or Jefferson, from either of which places there are roads running through a populated country, and intersecting the Fort Smith road near Preston.

This road also unites with the San Antonio road at El Paso, and from that point they pass together over the mountains to Fort Yuma and to San Francisco in California.

Another road leaves Fort Smith and runs up the south side of the Canadian River to Santa Fe and Albuquerque in New Mexico.

This route is set down upon most of the maps of the present day as having been discovered and explored by various persons, but my own name seems to have been carefully excluded from the list. Whether this omission has been intentional or not, I leave for the authors to determine. I shall merely remark that I had the command and entire direction of an expedition which in 1849 discovered, explored, located, and marked out this identical wagon road from Fort Smith, Arkansas, to Santa Fe, New Mexico, and that this road for the greater portion of the distance, is the same that has been since recommended for a Pacific railway.

This road, near Albuquerque, unites with Captain Whipple's and Lieutenant Beall's roads to California.

Another road, which takes its departure from Fort Smith and passes through the Cherokee country, is called the "Cherokee Trail." It crosses Grand River at Fort Gibson, and runs a little north of west to the Verdigris River, thence up the valley of this stream on the north side for 80 miles, when it crosses the river, and, taking a northwest course, strikes the Arkansas River near old Fort Mann, on the Santa Fe trace; thence it passes near the base of Pike's Peak, and follows down Cherry Creek from its source to its confluence with the South Platte, and from these over the mountains into Utah, and on to California via Fort Bridger and Salt Lake City.

For persons who desire to go from the Southern States to the gold diggings in the vicinity of Cherry Creek, this route is shorter by some 300 miles than that from Fort Smith via Fort Leavenworth. It is said to be an excellent road, and well supplied with the requisites for encamping. It has been

traveled by large parties of California emigrants for several years, and is well tracked and defined.

The grass upon all the roads leaving Fort Smith is sufficiently advanced to afford sustenance to animals by the first of April, and from this time until winter sets in it is abundant. The next route on the north leaves the Missouri River at Westport, Leavenworth City, Atcheson, or from other towns above, between either of which points and St. Louis steamers ply during the entire summer season.

The necessary outfit of supplies can always be procured at any of the starting-points on the Missouri River at moderate rates.

This is the great emigrant route from Missouri to California and Oregon, over which so many thousands have traveled within the past few years. The track is broad, well worn, and can not be mistaken. It has received the major part of the Mormon emigration, and was traversed by the army in its march to Utah in 1857.

At the point where this road crosses the South Platte River, Lieutenant Bryan's road branches off to the left, leading through Bridger's Pass, and thence to Fort Bridger. The Fort Kearney route to the gold region near Pike's Peak also leaves the emigrant road at this place and runs up the South Platte.

From Fort Bridger there are two roads that may be traveled with wagons in the direction of California; one passing Salt Lake City, and the other running down Bear River to Soda Springs, intersecting the Salt Lake City road at the City of Rocks. Near Soda Springs the Oregon road turns to the right, passing Fort Hall, and thence down Snake River to Fort Wallah-Wallah. Unless travelers have business in Salt Lake Valley, I would advise them to take the Bear River route, as it is much shorter, and better in every respect. The road, on leaving the Missouri River, passes for 150 miles through a settled country where grain can be purchased cheap, and there are several stores in this section where most of the articles required by travelers can be obtained.

Many persons who have had much experience in prairie traveling prefer leaving the Missouri River in March or April, and feeding grain to their animals until the new grass appears.

The roads become muddy and heavy after the spring rains set in, and by starting out early the worst part of the road will be passed over before the ground becomes wet and soft. This plan, however, should never be attempted unless the animals are well supplied with grain, and kept in good condition. They will eat the old grass in the spring, but it does not, in this climate, as in Utah and New Mexico, afford them sufficient sustenance.

The grass, after the 1st of May, is good and abundant upon this road as far as the South Pass, from whence there is a section of about 50 miles where it is scarce; there is also a scarcity upon the desert beyond the sink of the Humboldt. As large numbers of cattle pass over the road annually, they soon consume all the grass in these barren localities, and such as pass late in the season are likely to suffer greatly, and oftentimes perish from starvation. When I came over the road in August, 1858, I seldom found myself out of sight of dead cattle for 500 miles along the road, and this was an unusually favorable year for grass, and before the main body of animals had passed for that season.

Upon the head of the Sweetwater River, and west of the South Pass, alkaline springs are met with, which are exceedingly poisonous to cattle and horses. They can readily be detected by the yellowish-red color of the grass growing around them. Animals should never be allowed to graze near them or to drink the water.

ORGANIZATION OF COMPANIES.

After a particular route has been selected to make the journey across the plains, and the requisite number have arrived at the eastern terminus, their first business should be to organize themselves into a company and elect a commander. The company should be of sufficient magnitude to herd and guard animals, and for protection against Indians.

From 50 to 70 men, properly armed and equipped, will be enough for these purposes, and any greater number only makes the movements of the party more cumbersome and tardy.

In the selection of the captain, good judgment, integrity of purpose, and practical experience are the essential requisites, and these are indispensable to the harmony and

consolidation of the association. His duty should be to direct the order of march, the time of starting and halting, to select the camps, detail and give orders to guards, and, indeed, to control and superintend all movements of the company.

An obligation should then be drawn up and signed by all the members of the association, wherein each one should bind himself to abide in all cases by the orders and decisions of the captain, and to aid him by every means in his power in the execution of his duties; and they should also obligate themselves to aid each other, so as to make the individual interests of each member the common concern of the whole company. To insure this, a fund should be raised for the purchase of extra animals to supply the places of those which may give out or die on the road; and if the wagon or team of a particular member should fail and have to be abandoned, the company should obligate themselves to transport his luggage, and the captain should see that he has his share of transportation equal with any other member. Thus it will be made the interest of every member of the company to watch over and protect the property of others as well as his own.

In case of failure on the part of any one to comply with the obligations imposed by the articles of agreement after they have been duly executed, the company should of course have the power to punish the delinquent member, and, if necessary, to exclude him from all the benefits of the association.

On such a journey as this, there is much to interest and amuse one who is fond of picturesque scenery, and of wild life in its most primitive aspect, yet no one should attempt it without anticipating many rough knocks and much hard labor; every one must expect to do his share of duty faithfully and without a murmur.

On long and arduous expeditions men are apt to become irritable and ill-natured, and oftentimes fancy they have more labor imposed upon them than their comrades, and that the person who directs the march is partial toward his favorites, etc. That man who exercises the greatest forbearance under such circumstances, who is cheerful, slow to take up quarrels, and endeavors to reconcile difficulties among his companions is deserving of all praise, and will, without doubt, contribute largely to the success and comfort of an expedition.

The advantages of an association such as I have mentioned are manifestly numerous. The animals can be herded together and guarded by the different members of the company in rotation, thereby securing to all the opportunities of sleep and rest. Besides, this is the only way to resist depredations of the Indians, and to prevent their stampeding and driving off animals; and much more efficiency is secured in every respect, especially in crossing streams, repairing roads, etc., etc.

Unless a systematic organization be adopted, it is impossible for a party of any magnitude to travel in company for any great length of time, and for all the members to agree upon the same arrangements in marching, camping, etc. I have several times observed, where this has been attempted, that discords and dissensions sooner or later arose which invariably resulted in breaking up and separating the company.

When a captain has once been chosen, he should be sustained in all his decisions unless he commit some manifest outrage, when a majority of the company can always remove him, and put a more competent man in his place. Sometimes men may be selected who, upon trial, do not come up to the anticipations of those who have placed them in power, and other men will exhibit, during the course of the march, more capacity. Under these circumstances it will not be unwise to make a change, the first election having been distinctly provisional.

WAGONS AND TEAMS.

A company having been organized, the first interest is to procure a proper outfit of transportation and supplies for the contemplated journey.

Wagons should be of the simplest possible construction -- strong, light, and made of well-seasoned timber, especially the wheels, as the atmosphere, in the elevated and arid region over which they have to pass, is so exceedingly dry during the summer months that unless the wood-work is thoroughly seasoned, they will require constant repairs to prevent them from falling to pieces.

Wheels made of the bois-d'arc, or Osage orangewood, are the best for the plains, as they shrink but little, and seldom want repairing. As, however, this wood is not easily procured in the