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Article Summary: Foster was a teacher in Michigan until he caught "the California fever." He traveled west by wagon train, following the Platte across Nebraska. His letter recounts both the difficulties and the beautiful sights of that trip.

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Gold Rush Journey: A Letter by William C. Foster, 1850

EDITED BY DWAYNE BOLLING¹

INTRODUCTION

In April of 1850 William C. Foster left his home in Bellevue, Michigan, bound for the gold fields of California. So severely infected with "that fatal epidemic, the Cal. [California] Fever" that he left his school teaching job in midterm, Foster and nine companions followed the Great Platte River Road across Nebraska in May and June before facing hot, dry Wyoming and Nevada in July and August. The party reached Sacramento on August 23.

In October of 1850, Foster addressed a letter to his "Dear Friends" in Michigan in which he concisely reported his California-bound route and experiences. With wry humor he described not only the danger and privation but the scenic wonders encountered by his small party as they struggled across half a continent.

Little is known about Foster before he made that monumental trip. He was teaching school at the time he left Michigan. In closing his letter, he confided to his friends, "I expect to make my pile this winter and be back in season to go to N. Y. I have kept a voluminous Journal which I shall publish on my return." Foster eventually did return to his home state (he is listed as a member of the Eaton County, Michigan, Pioneer Society in 1880), but no further details of his life have come to light. No trace of his "voluminous journal" has yet been found. His letter was purchased by the editor in a Petoskey, Michigan, coin shop in 1974. Some punctuation has been altered to separate run-on sentences but the spelling and punctuation are essentially those of the writer, William C. Foster.

THE LETTER

Rock Springs Canon

40 Miles East of Sacramento

Oct. 9th, 1850

Dear Friends, One and all,

My best wishes to you, and hearty desire for your prosperity. Please take my right hand and after one hearty shake in remembrance of "Auld Lang Syne" let us take a seat, and if you are not in too much of a hurry, or too eager for Lucre, we will spend a few hours in conversation as we have done in days long ago. Times change, and men change also, and this natural desire in man for change has been seen so frequently that we should not be surprised at changes, nor angry with men for changing. Change, and variety, form the very essence of life.

Therefore, be not surprised at finding even in me, a change, not only of homes, but of conduct too, and wonder not that you receive a letter so contrary to all former precedent. No one thought one year ago, to receive a letter from me, postmarked "California" any more than I thought to write one, yet strange as it is tis even so. And being here, the evenings long, and no other employment, I purpose to give you, in as concise, yet perfect a manner as possible, an outline of my adventures, and leave the filling in to be told verbally some cold stormy night in January, 1852, beside your kitchen fire, by your humble servant, the writer.

Things passed on in that old monotonous way after your departure from our place last fall. Winter came, and so did School time. I had a large School and, as usual an excellent one, till in the month of February our country was visited with that fatal epidemic, the Cal. [California] Fever.² I had tried often to cure those who were attacked with it, but now the Physician could not heal himself. Before my time in School had expired, I obtained leave to dismiss, and soon my preparations were completed and on the morning of the 10th day of April I started north. 3 others as joint partners and co-laborers for the great "*Golden Bison*"³ [and] 6 other men also left for one place at the same time, and nine of the 10 men who started entered California together; one left the co.

We had an assortment of all things necessary on board. Our route lay through Bellevue, Battle Creek, Leonidas, Centerville, Constantine, Mottville in Mich. Bristol, Elkhart, South Bend,

Mishawaka & Valparaiso & LaPorte in Indiana. Blue Island, Chicago, Brush Hill, Naperville, Little Rock, Pawpaw, Dixon, Unionville & New Albany, Ill. This brought us to the bank of the Mississippi, one mile and a quarter wide. We crossed Sat., April 27th, landed at Camanche in Iowa. Then came the towns of DeWitt, Tipton, Iowa City, Marengo, Dudley, Winterset, Indian Town a morman settlement on the E. fork of the Nishnabotana [Nishnabotna] & Council Bluffs, Iowa, which brought us to the Missouri River.⁴ What I saw of Ind. is so nice and beautiful; part of Ill. is good and part of it is almost worthless; a small part of Iowa is beautiful as day and the rest is indifferent. Mind I speak only of what I saw, the whole Pottawattamie country is good but almost destitute of timber.

We crossed the Missouri River the 20th day of May and bade adieu to the U.S. Our route lay through a rolling prairie country lightly timbered about the Streams, and rich as nature could make it, till we reached the Loup Fork of the Nebraska [Platte] River.⁵ Our Train was composed of 29 wagons, 96 men, 3 women & several children & about 400 horses and mules. They were from the States of Ohio, Ind., Ill, Iowa, Wis., Missouri, Ky., and Mich. Here at the Loup we were in the country of the Pawnees,⁶ a warlike savage, thievish race. The greatest vigilance was used sure to prevent them from Stealing our teams, 21 men being on guard each night. The night was divided into 3 watches of 3 hours each comencing at 9 O'Clock. The camp was roused at 5 and the teams let loose from the Caral [corral] to feed. The train was divided into 3 divisions with Capt., Lieut, and all complete, a perfect military organization kept up.

We traveled near seven hundred miles up the valley of the Platte.⁷ It is a shallow, wide rapid stream, its waters the color of well creamed coffee. Its valley is from 15 to 40 miles wide, level as a floor, bounded in the distance by bluffs of sand which the wind and rain had worked into fantastic shapes, and very little imagination was needed to make cities, castels, temples and ruined edifices of all kinds stand forth in bold relief. Buffaloe bones, wallows & paths were thickly scattered in every direction. The ground in places is just like a barnyard, for the quantity of manure.⁸

Some of the train killed buffaloe nearly every day and their flesh was to be found always in our camp. Many a fine chase have I had after droves that darkened the plain with their numbers.

Elk, Antelope, and Prairie dogs were the only other eatable game. Wolves, and Panthers & dogs and horses or Mustangs, as they are called, were plenty but shy. We had frost nearly every night and a hot sun at day, the Thermometer at noon ranging from 81° to 96°. Ever the same wheather with occasionally an awful thunderstorm until we were beyond the Rocky Mountains.

About the first of June the objects about us were full of interest. "Ancient Bluffs Ruins,"⁹ "The Castle,"¹⁰ "Courthouse Rock,"¹¹ and Chimney Rock¹² were visited and admired in a thousand different ways. So grand, bold, romantic, or wonderful, every feeling was roused in turn, from the summit of "Bluff Ruins," Chimney Rock, & Laramie's Peak¹³ among the black hills were visible, one 40 miles, the other 150 miles distant, the peak white with snow. Chimney Rock is a spire or needle of 250 feet in hight fixed on a pyramidal base containing near three acres.¹⁴ The Spire is square facing the four cardinal points, and strangest of all occurs in a plain where there are no rocks at all, a perfect "Freak" of nature.

We reached Fort Laramie¹⁵ the 13th of June, were on the north side [of] the Platte and wished if possible to stay there to avoid the rush of teams and Black Hills [Traffic] on the other. In crossing the river (now swollen by rains which fell every afternoon in the mountains) to obtain information at the Fort, the boat in which I was capsized and Foster had his jacket wet at once, and had to swim about 30 rods to save his bacon [life]. Nine were drowned; I suffered no damage save breaking the crystal of my watch.

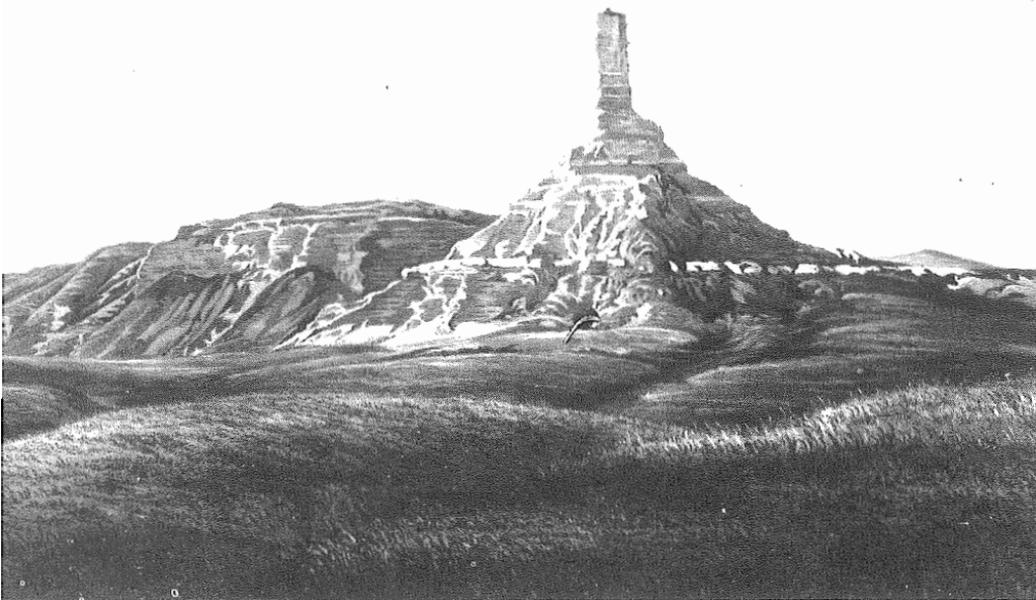
From the fort we took a route through the hills north of the River little known and dangerous from the presence of the Indians, who were all at war,¹⁶ the Pawnee with the Sioux, the Blackfeet with the Crows.¹⁷ They often came into our caral but 2 or 300 bullets were always ready and they kept watch for their ears, as we did for our scalps, and many lost both. The Blackfeet did not trouble us, and we on the 21st reached the Sweet Water a branch of the Platte, gathered specimens of flowers from the vast volcanic plain; also from a Lake of 5 acres plenty of *Saleratus*,¹⁸ clear as crystal. It was from 4 inches to 20 in thickness. We had rain, hail and snow storms half the time and traveled over drifts of snow 40 feet deep on the head of this river.

June 23rd saw Independence Rock 1200 feet long one vast boulder of granite 400 feet high almost without a seam or crevice, oval on top.¹⁹ Next the "Devils Gate" a breech 100 feet wide and

400 high solid granite through which the Sweet Water forces its passage.²⁰ June 28th at 12 O'Clock we stood on the Summit of the Rocky Mountains, the air chill and Keen, the atmosphere pure and bracing. Fremonts Peak²¹ bearing n.w. by n, white from bottom to top with snow save where the gloomy cedars, pines & firs cast a darkened shadow. We began our descent and at dark reached the Dry Sandy. Feed had been getting shorter since leaving the Platte and here there was none; no water, no wood save the Everlasting Sagebrush.

The next day we reached the forks of the Road, one leading to Fort Bridger²² and the other called Sublet[e]'s Cutoff. Here the Company divided, part going to Bridger & Salt Lake to be [illegible]. We took the cutoff straight ahead for California,²³ at dark reached the Big Sandy 40 rods wide 8 feet deep. Not a mouthful of grass and a desert ahead of 35 miles with not a drop of water.²⁴ Filled up casks & canteens & pulled on, fed some flour & water to our teams at 12 o'clock midnight and at daybreak got some breakfast. With blankets outside of coats, it looked and felt like cold weather, ground covered with frost. Breakfast soon done, on we went expecting to be to Green River by nine O'clock certain. The Wind River chain of Mountains²⁵ in full sight, on the right, extending away in to Oregon.

The sun came hot as fire and by 8 O'clock the ox teams along the road had their tongues out, and before noon the road was lined with cattle dying of fatigue and thirst. The poor creatures with open mouths and extended necks moaning for water. Scores of them could be saved by a bucket full of ice, but there was no water near. Like a phantom it seemed to elude our grasp. O! It was an awful, awful, fearful, and unholy sight—the air as hot as an oven, not a tree, or rock, or bluff, for shade, nothing but barren sand plains. The small wild sage, the only vestige of vegetation, the blue cloudless sky mocking us with its holy beauty. The distant mountains, white as winter with snow, the columns of dust whirled aloft, as counter currents of air met, the mirage looking so perfectly like a lake, that stones and sagebrush, and even the columns of dust, casting a shadow was reflected from its bosom, many times deceived us all, the poor beasts, dead, dying, and giving out, many lying in the road, because they could not get out, and men getting as near reduced as the teams, we reached the River at 4 O'clock P.M. That 35 miles beats all my going a fishing. It has since been measured with a viameter and



Sketch of Chimney Rock by Frederick Piercy, 1853.

found to be 56 insted of 35 [miles].

This was the first day of July. We now climed the Bear River Mountains [in southwest Wyoming] and in their bosom, in as lovely a little valley as the sun ever shone on, spent the 4th of July, 1850. A grand supper, a grand celebration, a grand dance after it, too. "Laugh today if tomorrow we die" We mounted the cloud-capped hills, and away in the dizzy distance lay Bear River [in southeast Idaho] like a Silver thread. We camped on its banks the evening of the 7th after sliding down a hill a mile in length, both wheels locked, and 4 or 5 men holding back. This was the principal tributary of Salt Lake. The 10th found us at the Soda Springs Beer Springs, Steam Boat Springs, Ancient Crater,²⁶ and here we took Fleyers [Meyer's] Cutoff²⁷ which unites after 123 miles with the Fort Hall & Salt Lake road.

July 21st reached the head of the Humbolt River,²⁸ the most infernal stream on Earth: Salt, Saleratus, Poison water, Boiling hot springs, naked rusty plains, "volcanic" hills and hunger, sickness, disease, death, Indians and every other evil, with the stench of 50,000 dead animals, the sight of 60 abandoned wagons to the mile, the piles of clothing, tools, utensils,—everything but food, strowed like madness over the plain, with the grave by the roadside bearing the inscription "Killed by an

Indian," "Shot on Guard," "Found with his throat cut" & with the pleasant consciousness that yourself might be the next victim.

After traveling 300 miles on this stream and cursing it every step, we reached the Sink²⁹ where its noisome waters go to the bottomless pit. Here we made hay to last us over a desert of 70 miles which we passed in one day, one night & till 9 O'clock the next day, through sights and sense that can not be equaled on Earth, the road in places actually blocked with animals, so the living had to turn aside and form a new track. Sand in places half the length of this wagon spoke in depth, and no living thing inhabiting it save horned toads and streaked lizards. Not a tree, not a bush, save a few willows on its head, is to be seen. And never was a sight greeted with more heartfelt gratitude by poor mortals, than was the line of dark green cotton woods which fringed the banks of Carson River³⁰ and a thousand times wish myself in its waters.

It was, after drinking the washing and rinsing of 20,000 dead animals, like heaven to take one draught of pure water. We drink just out of spite, as it were, and washed to get off the Humbolt dust and cleaned our clothes, and lay in the luxurious shade, and recruited. Our teams fairly laughed in our joy to see the pure sparkling water dashing over into beds[s] of golden sand. We were out of provisions of all kinds and none to be had save of the traders who has [have] established themselves at points along the road from here onward. Flour at 3.00 pr. lb., Bacon 1.50, Beef fresh .50, & c., & c.

We traveled up this river till noon of Aug. 16th, when the snow and cloud capped summit of the Sierra Nevada rose before us, towering to the very heavens, and pierced by a canon or narrow gulch through which the crystal waters of Carson River ran, dashed all to foam over the rocks. We entered this canon and through passed the First ridge of the Sierra over rocks where nought but necessity or love of gold could have induced a man to go, the almost vertical wall of rocks towering almost out of sight in the twilight of evening seemed actually to reach the stars and be above the reach of man, and so nearly vertical were they that the branches of one would touch the body of the one that grew next above. I counted Eleven tall pines that rose whole length: one above another and that carried me only half way up the fearful steep. I suppose its absolute perpendicular highth to be 5

or 6,000 feet above the canon's bottom.

About nine o'clock at night we emerged from the rocks into a beautiful level valley. The Second and tallest ridge of the Sierras [illegible] Californian Elephant³¹ was now before us, we travelled to the [illegible], keeping the ridge on our right till the afternoon of the 11th of August, when our further progress was stopped and nothing left for us to do but retreat or climb. Daylight of the 18th found us climbing and at ¼ to 10 found us on the first crag. All day it was climb, climb, down a little valley to get strength to climb again. At sunset the entire Snow crowned summit of the Sierra destitute of the last particle of vegetation and peering into the barren waste of air in the region of perpetual snow was immediately before us.

We kindled a rousing fire against the face of a rock, struck our tent and slept 17,000 feet above the sea. Many a time during the evening did we look up and calculate the time it would require to take us to the summit and as the last rays of light were fading and I saw a company of pack mules sliding down the glaciers and snow fields towards us. They camped for the night near us. It was like mid-winter, and by midnight the noisy mouths of the babbling brooks were bound in the icy fetters, and the pale cold moon in the farthest depths of the Southern heaven looked calmly and carelessly over the hungry, the destitute, and way-worn gold hunter and cast her silver beam upon the snowfields, the rocky bluffs, the glittering streams till they reached the dense forest of pines and balsams far below us, which bid defiance to the farthest progress of her light.

12 o'clock, 19th Aug., 1850 I stood on the very summit of No. America's highest ridge with the land of Gold at my feet, Mexico on my left, Oregon on my right, and home-sweet-home behind me. I soon turned toward the land of my birth, but all was void, misty uncertainty; nothing but a sea of rolling vapor, glittering peaks, glaciers and snow fields met my sight. Away to the westward of the Shadowy distance was a Streak of livid light which one of our company (a sailor) said was the broad Pacific Ocean. Down the mountains nothing could be seen with certainly save for a few miles. Our descent was easy and rapid and at dark August 23rd, 1850, we drew up our teams in an enterprising, noisy villige, once more in the heart of civilization.

It took us about 3 weeks to recruit [recover] so we were like ourselves again, and had many little temporary sick spells by way

of variety. We have all lost flesh, and who would not when reduced to eat anything one could get I have refrained from saying anything about Starvation but that and all the other sufferings of the Emigrants you will [hear] beside that kitchen fire you know. We lost but one horse and him I shot to keep from dying, on the Humbolt. I am a heartier, healthier, fatter, richer man than ever before. Cal [California] is good country for an industrious man but a grave for the indolent and drunken. I have seen enough to pay me for my jaunt if I never carry home any gold. It would give me great pleasure to hear from you, and should you by way of retaliation write me, fill your letters as I do mine, and let uncles, aunts, & cousins write me at least one line each. I hope to see you all soon and pray the Author of life to save me to complete this "*Lornada*"³² Affectionately yours &c.

Wm. C. Foster.

I wish all my relatives to accept my heartfelt good wishes for their prosperity and believe me [a] very sane old fellow, fond of my friends but always compelled by "awful poverty" to be negligent and seeming careless of their attentions. I expect to make my pile this winter and be back in season to go to N.Y. I have kept a voluminous Journal which I shall publish on my return.³³ Should any of you write me direct your letters to Sacramento, California. Give my love to all my old acquaintances if any are yet in remembrance of me and my old Scholars in particular.

NOTES

1. The editor is indebted to retired National Park Service historian Merrill J. Mattes of Littleton, Colorado, who assisted with the footnoting of the letter. Mattes is the author of the award-winning book *The Great Platte River Road*, published by the Nebraska State Historical Society in 1969. The editor also thanks classmates at Midland Lutheran College, Fremont, Nebraska, who helped translate the almost illegible original document.

2. The desire to search for gold in California.

3. "Golden Bison" probably refers to a company of gold seekers. Such fanciful names were not uncommon. January 15, 1981, letter from Merrill J. Mattes to editor.

4. "Indian Town" or "Indiantown" was a transitory Mormon settlement frequently referred to by journalists of the period as they approached Council Bluffs or Kaneshville. *Ibid.*

At Council Bluffs, Foster paid 10 cents to have his name listed in the May 29, 1850, *Frontier Guardian*, and for the subsequent mailing of the Mormon

newspaper to his family in Michigan. Letter from John Cumming, director of the Clarke Historical Library, Central Michigan University, Mount Pleasant, Michigan, to editor.

5. The Loup River flows into the Platte or "Nebraska" River near Columbus.

6. The Pawnee, the Indian tribe most closely associated with Nebraska, moved into the valleys of the Platte and Loup Rivers around 1541. James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), 21.

7. It is a good 700 miles from the mouth of the Platte River to where it turns south toward Colorado and the emigrants left it to cross the Continental Divide. Foster was talking about the valley of the Platte in general terms, and that included the North Platte. January 30, 1981, letter from Merrill J. Mattes.

8. The buffalo often made trails by traveling single file. These trails cut across the Oregon Trail and made riding in a wagon a bumpy proposition. Merrill J. Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road*, 243-244.

9. Ancient Bluff Ruins between Oshkosh and Broadwater in western Nebraska were a curious set of geological formations from which emigrants were able to get their first glimpse of Chimney Rock, about 40 miles away. *Ibid.*, 133.

10. The Castle or Castle Bluffs formation was 7 miles west of Ash Hollow. *Ibid.*, 282, 347.

11. Court House Rock, about six miles south of Bridgeport, was the "dramatic introduction to a chain of picturesque bluffs along the North Platte which were considered among the scenic wonders of the West." *Ibid.*, 339.

12. Chimney Rock, about three and a half miles southwest of Bayard, was the most famous landmark along the Platte Valley route. *Ibid.*, 378, 380.

13. Laramie Peak was 30 miles northwest of Wheatland, Wyoming, about 45 miles west of Fort Laramie.

14. The tip of the Rock is now 325 feet above the base of the cone. Mattes, *Great Platte River Road*, 380.

15. Fort Laramie, on the left bank of the Laramie River about 1½ miles from its confluence with the North Platte, protected the Oregon-California Trail and served as headquarters for campaigns against the Indians. Francis Paul Prucha, *A Guide to the Military Posts of the United States 1789-1895* (State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, 1964), 84.

16. Through 1849 emigrants following the north side of the North Platte crossed to the south side at Fort Laramie. In 1850 a few continued up the north side; Foster was one of these. Gradually thereafter most north side emigrants stayed on the north side west of Fort Laramie, but might make a personal side trip to the fort to look for mail. January 30, 1981, letter from Merrill J. Mattes.

18. The Blackfeet and Crow were tribes of Wyoming and Montana; the Sioux roamed the Dakotas, Wyoming, and Nebraska.

18. Alkali deposits.

19. Independence Rock, about 50 miles southwest of Casper in south central Wyoming, was found by the US Geological and Geographical Survey of 1870 to be 193 feet high at the north end and 167 feet at the south. Gregory M. Franzwa, *The Oregon Trail Revisited* (St. Louis, Mo., Patrice Press, Inc., 1972), 257.

20. "The emigrants left a multiplicity of dimensional estimates on the Devils Gate. It would seem to be from 300 to 500 feet deep, about 30 feet wide at the bottom and 1,300 feet through the chasm, and, perhaps, 300 feet across at the

top, at the widest part." *Ibid.*, 264.

21. This could refer to Wind River Peak, 30 miles north-northwest of South Pass in Wyoming.

22. Fort Bridger, rebuilt as a US military post in the summer of 1858, was, when Foster's letter was written, a frontier trading post on Black's Fork of the Green River in southwest Wyoming.

23. Foster chose to take, not the Ft. Bridger route, but the dryer Sublette Cutoff straight west over the desert to the Green and then the Bear Rivers.

24. Joseph Ware's *Emigrants' Guide to California* advised travelers, "From the Big Sandy to Green River, a distance of 35 miles, there is not a drop of water." But Franzwa states, "It was nearly 50 miles, and many an emigrant had blood in his eye for Ware before the jaunt was over. The 50 to 75 miles that was saved by avoiding Ft. Bridger wasn't worth it." Franzwa, *Oregon Trail*, 279.

25. The Continental Divide runs through the Wind River Mountains in west central Wyoming.

26. These springs in southeast Idaho were mentioned in many emigrant diaries and letters. Most are now beneath the tailwaters of the Soda Point Reservoir, formed by a dam across the Bear River.

27. Meyer's Cutoff (also known as Hudspeth's Cutoff) left the Soda Springs-Fort Hall Road several miles north of Soda Springs; went due west for over 100 miles; then joined the older road from Fort Hall that joined the Salt Lake Road near City of Rocks before reaching the headwaters of the Humboldt River. January 30, 1981, letter from Merrill J. Mattes.

28. The head of the Humboldt River is located near Halleck in western Nevada.

29. The Humboldt Sink is 35 miles north of Fallon in western Nevada.

30. The Carson River is 20 miles south of Fallon. It appears that Foster exaggerated at this point.

31. Foster may have been referring to the legendary California Elephant, a mythical beast often referred to by westering emigrants. It was, according to Merrill Mattes, "the popular symbol of the Great Adventure, all the wonder and the glory and the shivering thrill of the plunge into the ocean of prairie and plains, and the brave assault upon mountains and deserts that were gigantic barriers to California gold." Mattes, *Great Platte River Road*, 61.

32. *Jornada*, Spanish word for "journey."

33. No journal has thus far been discovered.