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Article Summary: Lester, one of a number of Pike's Peak diarists, faithfully recorded his observations and experiences. His diary recounts the journey of eight Iowans who traveled across Nebraska Territory and into the Rocky Mountains in hopes of finding gold there. When he found no gold, he continued west to California.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Gurdon P Lester, Henry R Foot, Seth Foot, Franklin Russell, William Benson, E Benson, George Wakeman, W Mann

Place Names: Farmersburg, Iowa; Fairplay (spelled Fair Play by Lester), Colorado; Elkader, Iowa; Vinton, Iowa; Koszta, Iowa; Newton, Iowa; Adelphi, Iowa; Fontanelle (spelled Fountainelle by Lester), Iowa; Denver, Colorado; Cherokee, Iowa

Keywords: Gurdon P Lester, Panic of 1857, Pike's Peak Gold Rush

Photographs / Images: map of "Routes to the Pike's Peak" from S W Burt and E L Berthoud, *The Rocky Mountain Gold Regions*, 1861; Henry Foot in California; Seth Foot as a Union soldier about 1862; advertisements for two dry goods stores in Plattsmouth about 1860 (*The Rocky Mountain Gold Regions*); McDonald's Ranche at Cottonwood Springs, Nebraska; map of the "Gold Region near Pike's Peak" from Randolph B Marcy, *The Prairie Traveler*, 1859



“Enrout for Pikes Peak”

The 1860 Travel Diary of Gurdon P. Lester

Edited by Virginia Foote Anderson and Richard E. Jensen

Introduction

In 1859 and 1860, the years of the so-called Pike’s Peak Gold Rush, some 200,000 people made their way toward a region of the Rocky Mountains that was then contained in Nebraska and Kansas territories. Many of these people, anxious to preserve a record of their noteworthy endeavor, kept diaries in which they reported their observations and experiences.¹ Gurdon P. Lester must have been one of the most faithful of the Pike’s Peak diarists. In the spring of 1860, as he traveled by wagon from his home in Farmersburg, Iowa, to the mining town with the ironic (as it turned out) name of Fairplay, he scarcely ever let a day go by without making an entry.

His habit of diary-keeping stayed with him on his next trip west. Long-time readers of *Nebraska History* may have seen his journal of an 1866 trip to the Montana mines in the December 1965 issue. The diary was edited by Charles W. Martin, whose introduction and notes amplify and illuminate Lester’s entries. Martin was struck by Lester’s “keen observations” and noted, with apparent regret, that “very little” was known of Lester himself except that he was an enthusiastic traveler and diarist. In 1969 one of those “keen observations” made a brief appearance in *The Great Platte River Road* by Merrill J. Mattes; here Lester told of alighting from

his stagecoach “5 miles above [upstream from] Kearney Station,” or, as Mattes explains, “about three and a half miles above the fort.”² Thus, while he surely never imagined that his words would find their way into print, Lester has come to occupy a small but not entirely insignificant niche in nineteenth-century regional history.

Lester’s 1860 diary records the journey of a company of eight Iowans who, after leaving their home state, traveled across Nebraska Territory and into the Rocky Mountains in this massive, and in some ways fantastic, migration. The very name that became attached to the movement was in itself a fantasy, for the regions where gold was discovered—Cherry Creek, Clear Creek, the headwaters of the South Platte—were almost sixty miles north of Pike’s Peak. But the short, alliterative name of the mountain was easy to remember; furthermore, Pike’s Peak was the landmark closest to the gold regions on the maps of the day. These, no doubt, are the reasons why midwestern newspapers of 1859 and 1860 routinely reported emigrant parties as being “en route for Pike’s Peak” and why Gurdon Lester used the same phrase to announce his party’s destination.³

One of the many guidebooks that came off the presses at about that time called the gold-bearing lands, extravagantly, “the modern Ophir.” (Ophir was a Biblical land “of uncertain location,” the dictionary says, reputed to have furnished gold and precious stones for King Solomon.) Another guidebook, more practically, advised travelers to the mines not to set off alone but to “organize themselves into companies.”⁴

Lester’s 1860 diary, now in the possession of the Durham Western Heritage Museum of Omaha, provides a detailed human account of the journey of one of those companies. It begins, “G. P. Lester, H. R. Foot, S. Foot, Franklin Russell, Wm. Benson, E. Benson, Geo. Wakeman & Rev. W. Mann started enrout for Pikes Peak, Monday Apr. 2nd, 1860, with fifteen head of cattle and three wagons with provisions for six months.”

The men were from Clayton County, in northeastern Iowa. Lester and the two Foot brothers lived in Farmersburg, very likely on land belonging to Moses Foot, the father of Seth and Henry and the stepfather of Gurdon. These three young men—Gurdon and Henry were twenty-three and Seth was twenty-six—had been well acquainted for over a decade, ever since Moses, a widower, had married Mary Lester and had taken her and her three children into a household that already contained his five children.

Gurdon Perkins Lester, Mary Lester’s youngest child, was born in Venice, Cayuga County, New York, on April 27, 1837. When he was about eleven years old, he moved with his family to Ohio, where, in 1849, his mother married Moses Foot, farmer, of Fitchville. The 1850 census record shows that all the children in the household, from seven-year-old David Foot to eighteen-year-old Nelson Lester, had attended school within the year. The years of schooling made their mark on Gurdon; a reader of his diary can tell that he took pleasure in the written word, though he did not always know how to spell it.⁵

As the party set out on April 2, the Foot-Lester trio no doubt rode together

Virginia Foote Anderson, a retired teacher of English, came across Gurdon Lester’s 1860 diary while doing research for a life of her grandparents, Seth and Amorette Foot.

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Diary of Gurdon P. Lester

in one of the three wagons. George Wakeman and Reverend Mann rode in another; almost from the start they kept somewhat to themselves, first by choice and later by necessity. The two Bensons (probably brothers) and Franklin Russell must have made up the third group. The company's "provisions for six months" conformed to the advice given by many of the guidebooks. But what about the "fifteen head of cattle?" Could these men be taking fifteen milk cows or beef cattle to the gold mines? The answer, as a later entry makes clear, is that most of the cattle were oxen, but some of them really were cows.

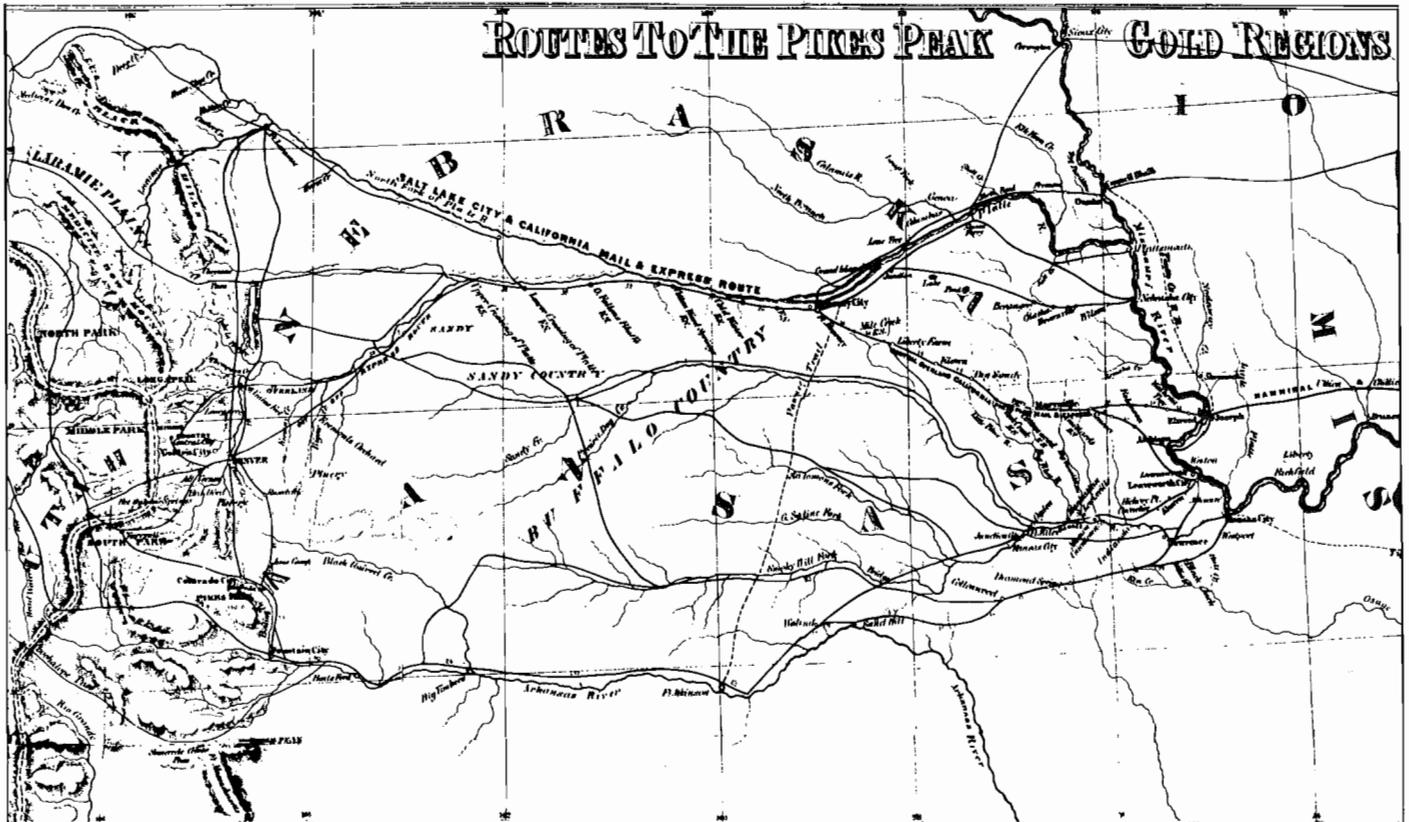
Another question is that of motivation: what impelled these eight men to leave the farms and whatever else occupied them in Clayton County? Probably, for most of them, the pressure of hard economic times. Historians are inclined

to blame the Panic of 1857 and the ensuing depression for the gold fever that drew so many away from their homes and their customary pursuits. The Panic, writes Robert L. Brown, had pushed people to embark on "foolhardy ventures that would never have been considered in normal times." And while most of the country recovered rather quickly from the depression, the Midwest lagged behind. As late as February 1860 the region's distress provoked a visitor, Horace Greeley, to conclude that the West was "poor," indeed that "desolation" had spread over this land. When he wrote these words, Greeley was in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin—directly across the Mississippi from Clayton County, Iowa. In such times a man, or a group of men, might well be driven to "foolhardy" action. When reports of the money to be made in the mines

reached their part of the country, they would have been in a frame of mind to be persuaded.⁶

For more than a year before the date of the company's departure, the newspapers of eastern Iowa had been doing their part to keep the subject of the Pike's Peak Gold Rush alive in the minds of their readers. In October of 1859 the *Dubuque Weekly Times* printed, on its front page, a long letter from a man named Chauncey Wiltse, writing from Auraria in the gold region. After prospecting for two months, Wiltse says, he has finally located at Mountain City in Gregory's diggings, where he plans to spend the winter. "I do not know what may turn up," he continues, "but I am quite confident that I have the ropes laid for a fortune."⁷

On January 13, 1860, the *Davenport Daily Democrat and News* issued an op-



Map from S. W. Burt and E. L. Berthoud, *The Rocky Mountain Gold Regions* (Denver, 1861), facsimile ed. Denver: Old West Publishing Co., 1962), by permission of the publisher

timistic report of its own:

FOR PIKE'S PEAK. From present appearances we should judge that the emigration to the gold regions of Pike's Peak will be far greater the coming season, than ever before. . . . We may look for a large amount of gold from this newly discovered El Dorado during the summer of 1860.

By March 12 the *Democrat and News* had grown more cautious: "The PIKES PEAK fever is not so killing by far as it was one year ago. Some are getting ready to go, but the number is not very large." A week later, the paper reversed its prediction, as new evidence came in: "FOR THE GOLD REGIONS.—Saturday morning, seven teams crossed the river on the ferry boat, all of them bound for the gold regions of Pike's Peak. The rush to that section will be immense this spring."⁸

Whether the reports were encouraging or discouraging, the mere fact that the subject was kept alive, day after day and week after week, must have lured not only the newly impoverished but also those—of whom Gurdon Lester was probably one—who were primarily seeking adventure. The decision to go to the mines offered a man the chance to see new things and do new things. Though it did not guarantee him a new livelihood, it gave him, at least, a new vocabulary, which in turn allowed him to define himself in a new way. Whatever his previous occupation, he could now lay claim to the jargon of the mines.

This process of self-definition by language is illustrated in a letter written from Cherry Creek by a former city councilman from Council Bluffs: "We can find the 'color' in most every place, but as a general thing, the soil would not pay unless extensively worked. But up Cherry Creek, it will pay in almost any way you choose to work it."⁹ The councilman's self-conscious quotation marks around the word *color* interpret his new vocabulary for the folks back home, showing them that he is speaking as a miner now. These terms—"finding the color," "making the soil pay"—will turn up in Gurdon Lester's diary as he

demonstrates, to himself at least, that he has learned the lingo.

The councilman-turned-miner, whose letter was dated October 1858, gave an optimistic account of road conditions across Nebraska Territory: "Despite a slight sprinkling of sandy intervals, hills and hollows. . . we did not 'double teams' all the way out here," he reports.¹⁰ Optimism about the roads still prevailed more than a year later: "The roads between the Missouri river and the gold regions are said to be first rate," wrote the *Davenport Daily Democrat and News* on March 31, 1860. "A good team with a light wagon can make forty to forty-five miles per day." Two days after this report was printed, Lester and company set out for the mines; it would not be long before they would be in a position to dispute those claims.

As a contribution to the history of the Pike's Peak Gold Rush, Gurdon Lester's diary has left us a valuable record of his external observations—the prices of things, the wages men earned, the presence or absence of wood, water, and grass. Lester was obviously a curious man, interested in material facts, not particularly introspective; yet his diary also follows the course of his inner thoughts and feelings, tracing a progress from elation and confidence through boredom and endurance to exhilaration, then to disappointment, anger and, finally, new resolve. This progression, up until its final stage, must have been experienced by a great many would-be gold miners. And if Lester's new resolve resulted in the dissolution of the company, that too was one of the realities of the Pike's Peak Gold Rush.

G. P. Lester's Diary.

G. P. Lester, H. R. Foot, S. Foot, Franklin Russell, Wm. Benson, E. Benson, Geo. Wakeman & Rev. W. Mann started enroute for Pike's Peak Monday, Apr. 2nd 1860 with fifteen head of cattle & three wagons with provisions for six months.¹¹ April 2d camped on Turkey River at Elkader and voted to have the County [seat] relocated at Elkader.¹² 3d camped

one mile north of Strawberry Point in Clayton Co. 4th camped on Ottar Creek. 5th on Head Creek in Benton Co. on the 3d day of our travel Wakeman accidentally sat the prairie on fire with a prairie grass wad from a shot gun while attempting to shoot a prairie chicken, which cause Wakeman, Russell, Foot, & myself about an hours hard labor to extinguish the flames while the rest of the company proceeded with the train. During the same day we encountered a severe storm of sand. Friday about 2 oclock we crossed the Red Cedar river on a toll bridge at Vinton. Found Vinton to be a decidedly a nice town of 1500 inhabittance. Saturday evening camped on a high prairie to spend the sabath and on the sabath Rev. Mr. Mann preached at 11 oclock and again at 5 P.M. At 5 P.M. all the boys left Russell & myself to guard the wagons and at half past 5 the rain commenced decending in torrents and kept up a constant pouring until nearly day light when the storm abated leaving the sky overcast with clouds and on the 9th about six oclock we started [2] again on our journey and about 9 oclock we witnessed a violent hail storm of about 20 minutes duration and on the following evening we camped on Little Bear Creek near the <Burlington> Davenport & Council Bluff R. R. which was under rapid construction. And on the same day we crossed the Iowa River one mile from Koszta on a toll bridge. Koszta is a town of about 200 inhabitants. at the above mention town I mailed a letter to my friend A. S. Payne. The 10[th] we camped in Satimus grove 80 rods from Westfield. This might properly be called a stake town. The 11th we passed through Newton in Jasper county a town of about 1400 inhabittance. Newton is a flourishing town and has a splendid courthouse, steam gristmill, stores, &c. &c. That night we camped on Ottar Creek. 12[th] Camped 3 miles from Des Moines River. Crossed the Des Moines about 9 oclock on a rope ferry on the morning of the 13th at Adelphi. This is a miserable town having no hotel nor stores

Diary of Gurdon P. Lester

but is provided with two steam saw mills. After we had crossed the Des Moines, Wakeman & Mann left us calculating to meet us again at Glenwood. The same day we passed through Carlisle a small town of no great importance. On the night of the 14th we camped about 100 rods from Middle River in the timber. There we found the nicest timber I ever found in Iowa.

On this stream there is plenty of Buckeye timber [3] something that I never saw before in the State of Iowa. The cottonwoods on this stream are the nicest I ever saw. Here on Middle River we camped until the morning of the 16th. From the 9th until this date we have had beautiful roads & weather but have traveled through a very dry section of country it being on the dividing ridge between North & Middle River. 16th we again started on our journey feeling much refreshed. This evening we camped again on Middle River after traveling about 22 miles. Tuesday evening the 17th camped on Nodaway River and Benson traveled 4 miles farther and camped at Fountainell, the county seat of Warren Co. This town has lately been founded but it still contains quite a respectable court house. 18th we passed through Fountainell about 9 o'clock and that evening camped at Whitneyville in Cass Co. on high Prairie and on the 19th arrived at Lewis and that evening camped on Nishnabotony. Here we found several of our old acquaintances of Clayton Co. Carty, A. N. Rich, R. Crandal and others. The 20th camped in Wheelers Grove. And the 21st on Silver Creek and spent the sabbath. And it was here where we first turned our cattle to grass. Silver Creek is 15 miles from the Missouri River, and 8 from Glenwood.¹³

Before this late date we became tired of leading our cows so we purchased a yoke and put our [cows] [4] in the middle of the team having one yoke forward and one behind which held them perfectly firm we had no difficulty in learning our cows to draw.¹⁴

Up to this date the weather continues



Henry Foot in California. Courtesy of author



Seth Foot as a Union soldier, photographed about 1861 by A. S. Addis, Leavenworth City, Kansas. Courtesy of author

to hold fair and dry but pretty good indications of rain.

By this time (after traveling three weeks) whenever we struck camp it seemed like home whether on the Prai-

rie, or in the Groves. And by this time the excitement began to wear off and scenes began to appear more every day alike.

The morning of the 23d we leave Silver Creek and pass through Glenwood about noon. Here we made a purchase of our mining tools such as picks and shovels and a quantity of flour.

We struck the Missouri Bottoms about 2 o'clock P.M. on the same day. Pacific City is situated on the Glenwood & Plattsmouth roads at the foot of the bluffs. The Missouri bottoms are rich fertile lands yielding heavy burthen [?] of grass and extend from 2 to 5 miles back from the river.¹⁵ There is a heavy belt of timber extending along the Missouri opposite of Plattsmouth consisting mostly of Cottonwood. Being slightly intermixed with sycamore, oak & honey locust. The night of the 23rd we camped on the Missouri flats adjoining the timber. The 24th Wakeman & Mann again joined our company and this day was spent in hunting and strolling around through the woods and along the river. The 25th we again took up our line of [5] march and crossed the Missouri River at Plattsmouth on the steam ferry Emma at 9 o'clock. Here we made our stock of provisions complete.¹⁶ Our teams now start while I remained behind to get some newspapers. I being headless [heedless] and not paying any attention to which road our teams took when I started out I took the wrong road and traveled until 10 o'clock at night when I was obliged to put up for the night.

Early the next morning I was again in search for my company and at 7 o'clock A.M. I again arrived at camp where there was a general laugh throughout the whole camp. I had been absent from the company about 20 hours. This day being the 26th I spent in riding and sleeping for I had blistered my feet so that it was with great difficulty that I could walk. This night we camped on the open prairie. The 27th we crossed Salt Creek and camped about 5 miles west of it. And on the 28th the wind blew a perfect gale from the south. And

never in my life did I witness such a day. The sand that kept constantly blowing nearly blinded us. And that night the 28th we camped on Pattents Ranch on Wauhoo Creek to spend the Sabbath. On this Creek we found about 30 wagons the most of which went on on the morning of the 29th.¹⁷ Here is where I first received an introduction to washing clothes which I will venture to say was done up in rather of a rude manner as we had to use pans for washtubs. [6] While we was encamped here a train of six men, three wagons & twenty six horses passed enrou for California. The wind still continued to blow and the prospect of rain was quite flattering.

During the past few day[s] we have traveled over rolling Prairies with but few streams and timber is very scarce. The Prairies are of a black sandy loam slightly intermixed with clay, as yet the grass is very poor. At this point we are 60 miles from Missouri River and 35 from Platte bottom where we expect to reach the Platte. On the morning of the 30th we again started on our journey and arrived at Platte Bottom May 2nd at 11 oclock A.M. That night we camped two miles west of Elm Creek. The 3rd we past Clear Creek. Here is a ranch and Clear <Clear> Creek is as beautiful a stream as ever I saw. The 4th we past Old Pawnee Village. We passed over the battle ground of the Pawnees vs. the Sioux & Cheyennes. I stood upon the grave of the Pawnee Chief and around his grave there is a circle of about 10 feet in diameter that surrounds his grave that is made of horses skulls. These were skulls of his pony's that were sacrificed at the day of his burial.¹⁸ The night of the 4th we camped 3 miles west of Pawnee Village. The 5th camped on the Platte. Today was the first time that we left the Platte Bottom but the road again came back to the flats again in about a mile travel. Camped on Platte [7] Sunday the 6th while camped on Platte Bottom we got in company with [a] friend [of] Russell & Wakeman who started from Farmersburg two weeks after our company. We also found A. N. Rich &

PLATTSMOUTH, NEBRASKA,

Is situated a short distance from the mouth of the Platte. It has several large outfitting house. A good steam ferry makes trips every ten minutes across the Missouri river. The road from here to Fort Kearney is good, and the distance shorter than from any other starting point. Your attention is called to the following advertisements.

SPRATLEN, DAVIS & CO.,
WHOLESALE DEALERS IN

DRY GOODS,
GROCERIES,

Boots and Shoes, Hardware
BACON, FLOUR,

—AND—

ALL KINDS OF OUTFITTING GOODS.

IN THE LARGE BRICK STORE,

CORNER MAIN AND SIXTH STREETS,
PLATTSMOUTH, - - - - - NEBRASKA.

T. E. TOOTLE.

T. K. HANNA.

TOOTLE & HANNA,
DEALERS IN

DRY GOODS, GROCERIES
BOOTS AND SHOES, HARDWARE,
BACON, FLOUR

—AND—

ALL KINDS OF OUTFITTING GOODS.

—ALSO—

Commission and Forwarding Merchants.
CORNER MAIN STREET AND LEVEE,
PLATTSMOUTH, - - NEBRASKA.

Advertisements for two dry goods stores in Plattsmouth, about 1860. Burt and Berthoud, *The Rocky Mountain Gold Regions*

Co. The 7th we also camped with Rich and co. on Platte. 8th we witnessed an ofal storm of snow, rain & hail that lasted until 11 oclock & then cleared off

cold with high winds & camped 3 miles below Ft. Kearney. 9th at 8 oclock A.M. past Ft. Kearney. I stoped here about 1/2 hour. Mailed a letter to my friends.¹⁹

Diary of Gurdon P. Lester



McDonald's Ranche at Cottonwood Springs, Nebraska. NSHS-RG2469-1

10[th] we came in company with three men one by the name of Wm. Frame and the other two his nephews by the name of Thos. & Chas. Allen from Washington Iowa. The 11th 2 of our company (Seth Foot & Geo. Wakeman) started at 4 o'clock P.M. on a hunting excursion and got lost from the company and after wandering until about the hour of 12 (midnight) they were under the painful necessity of begging lodging at the tents of some stranger. They were finally received after asserting in bold terms that they were men guilty of no crime and pawned their guns <for> to the proprietors of the tent to guarantee good behavior. They came into camp about sunrise the next morning. 12th we camped 15 miles below Cottonwood springs on Platte.²⁰ 13th being Sunday we all stop to recruit. [8] On the 8th we came into the Buffalo range and to see the carcasses of dead Buffalo the number was truly astonishing. In the elaps of four days I think I saw more than 1,000 dead Buffalo. But as yet have not seen a live one.²¹ For the reason that they have not got as far north as this point yet as the season is quite backward and consequently grass is very poor and there is nothing to induce them to come to the Platte valley. As I write it being the 13th it is raining quite hard from the north west attended with cold wind. Thus far

our rains have been few in number this spring and those few accompanied with cold bleak winds from the north west.

We were visited today by two Sioux Indians, who came for the express purpose of begging. They had a letter of recommendation signed by different individuals stating that they were in very poor circumstances and greatly stood in need of something to eat. We gave them something to eat and then they shook hands and went away contented. The 14th we was detained one half day to put a new ex into Wakeman & Manns wagon.²² We past Cottonwood Springs, Box Elder and camped on the river as usual, during the day we had hard winds. 15th past Jack Morrows and camped on Freemonts Slough. On the 8th of May snow fell six inches deep and three men perished with the cold. One by the name of Painter was [9] burryed by the road side. I was to his grave. He was from Lewis Cass Co. Iowa. Age 18 years. 16[th] camped on a slough. 17th past Alkali Lake in the forenoon in the after noon Seth, Elder & myself waded the Platte in search of grass and game.²³

We found a little of both but not in paying quantities. Camped on Platte also on the 18th. 19th at noon we drove our cattle across the river in order to get feed. For the last days travel we find

very bad roads, heavy sand hills and very poor grass. Today has been the hardest day's work for our teams since we started from Iowa.

We camped two miles below Upper Crossing and the feed being so poor, the next morning (being Sunday) we came to the conclusion that we had better travel on until we came to better feed. After traveling about four miles we found feed sufficient for our cattle and we turned out for the day. Monday morning the 21st we again started on. 10 miles above Upper Crossing we had 3 miles of very hard sand and that night camped on Platte. 22nd we had less sand but still enough for comfort. The 23rd we found quite heavy sand and had to double teams once. The 24th good roads and very good grass. 25th we arrived at the Cut off at 2 o'clock P.M. and took "the Old Road.["] Between Cut off & Bijou Creek, a distance of 3 miles we found deep sand the most of the way. We arrived at Bijou at 4 o'clock P.M. and after letting our teams rest until [10] 7 o'clock in the evening we started for Freemont's orchard a distance of 10 miles, for full one half of this distance we had tremendous heavy sand. We reached Freemont's orchard at 1 o'clock at night. Here we camped until the next morning. This morning the 26th we for the first time behold the Rocky Mts. We

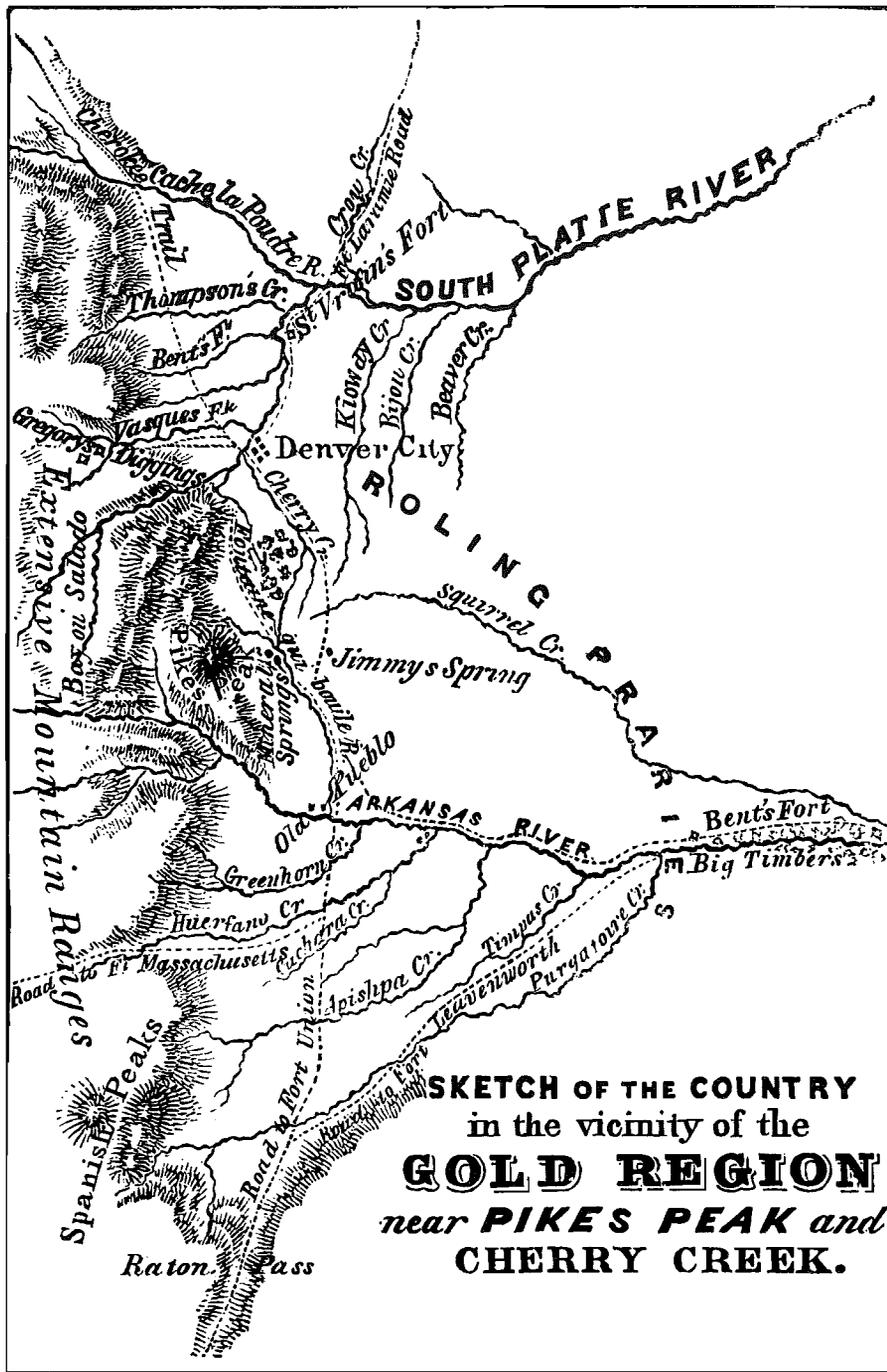
were told by those that have traveled the road before that they are full 100 miles off whereas they dont appear to me to be more than 10 miles off. We can see clearly that these mountains are covered with snow. We can plainly see Long's Peak as it towers above all the adjoining mountains. The Black Hills can also be seen from this point.²⁴ This morning we drove 3 miles above Fremont's orchard and found the best grass I have seen since we struck the Platte Bottom. Here we remained until monday morning. The 26th we met Walter Wakeman on his return to the states. While we remained here we were visited by the Indians. The object of their visits are to beg which they are naturally built for. The weather remains beautiful and as we draw near the mountains the nights are quite cool. Sunday the 27th was cloudy and gave strong indications of rain. This evening Benson was on the watch and the night was dark and the wind blew and he got lost from the wagons and cattle and as he was searching around to find the camp he accidentaly [11] walked off into the river where the water was about four feet deep. Shortly after this he arrived in camp.

The 28th we encountered an offal storm of rain and hail that lasted about six hours. We drove about 5 miles and camped until the morning of the 29th. This morning the 29th we had about one mile of sand. 30th This morning the mountains look beautiful as the sun shone upon their sumits that was caped with snow. Here we have tremenduous heavy dews. They are equal to a small shower. At this point there is a considerable timber on the Platte. We passed St. Vrains old Ft. at 2 oclock P.M. This was a French trading post and by the look of the walls has been deserted for a number of years as they are crumbling and falling to the ground. These trading posts were made of sun baked brick. We camped 10 miles above St. Vrains at an old trading post. Slight shower during the night 31st Passed another old post at 8 A.M. and at 9 we got sight of Pikes Peak far to the southward.²⁵ This

peak was considered to be full 150 miles distant. For about 40 miles down the river from Denver the bottom land are mostly converted into ranches especially where there is any grass. June 1st Today at 11 A.M. we first got sight of Denver City when we were 3 miles distance arrived at 12 1/2. I stayed in the city until 4 P.M. I found Denver to be a [12] town of full 3,000 inhabitation and in a flourishing condition. Occupations of all kinds are carried on there to a considerable extent. Provisions are very high. Flour \$15 per cwt. Bacon 25/100 per lb. Sugar 25 cents Coffee 500 cents Lumber \$65 & 70 per thousand and other things in the same proportion. This evening we camped on the west side of [the] Platte for the first time. 2nd Today we reached the mountains at 3 P.M. at 5 we struck camp in a beautiful valley in the mountains at a little town that has lately been founded and is called Bradford.²⁶ It contains 4 or 5 shantys. In this valley we find very good grass for our cattle and the best of spring water. 3rd This morning I took a stroll upon the mountains and the scenery is of a most beautiful character. I could look into the Snowy Range and see both Long's & Pike's Peak one far to the right and the other to the left. The sumits of the Black Hills are principally covered with Pine, Spruce and Cedar timber. At 2 P.M. I listened to a sermon delivered by Rev. Mr. Rolls of the Methodist order. He spoke from Luke 11 chapt. and 28 verse. This was the first sermon I have heard since leaving the states. Our seats were ox yokes wagon tongues &c. 4th This morning we commenced climbing the mountains and longer and steeper hills I never had the exquisite pleasure of ascending. [13] These mountains are beautifully watered with large springs of the purest kind of water. Today we passed a portable steam saw mill. Lumber was selling at this mill for \$50 per thousand. 5th Wakeman & Mann again broke another axaltree which caused us to lay by one half day at evening we again crossed the Platte to the east side and camped.

Here I prospected some but could not raise the color. The ground along the most of the stream is pierced full of holes dug by emigrants as they journey through prospecting for gold. The pine timber in many places on the mountains is of a very good quality, as it makes very good lumber and shingol. 6th This morning I went out hunting and had an excelent shot at a wild turkey but owing to my being slightly deseased with the buck feaver I lost him, quite fortunate for the turkey. Today the roads are still worse than ever as they are very stony and full of stumps. We have crossed the Platte River six times this day. Wakeman & Mann again broke down and as there was no feed we came on and left them behind. 7th roads are a considerable better today. We arrived at South Park at noon and traveled about 5 [?] miles and camped on a beautiful stream the name of which I did not learn. 8th At 8 oclock this morning we passed Hamilton leaving it about 2 miles to our right for Fair Play diggings. We arrived at Fair Play at 5 P.M. I washed several pans of dirt this evening and got the color of gold [14] very readily. The miners along this stream have dug a ditch some 2 miles in length in order to turn the water so as to work in the bed of the river.²⁷

9th Today we bought us a claim for \$250 to be payed the half of what we take out until the same is payed. The evening the embankment gave way which was a great damage to the ditch company. Miners are paying \$2.50 @ \$2.75 per day for hands and board.²⁸ There is but little lumber about these diggings and what there is sells readily for 20 cents per foot. Claims along this gulch extend 100 feet up and down the stream and from bluff to bluff. 10th At 11 oclock I again listened to Mr. Rolls. It has snowed at intervals nearly all day and where we are now located we can look upon the Snowy range about 10 miles distant to the north west. 11th we think ourselves located for a season and we commence erecting a cabin which we completed on the 13th and moved



tity.²⁹ Finally all became dissatisfied and as there was several others in the gulch that had also become dissatisfied and proposed going to California some of our party are [15] now making arrangements to start for California.

There has not been but one night since I arrive at Fair Play diggings but what it has froze water. It is said by those that pretend to know that Fair Play diggings are 8,000 feet above Denver City.³⁰ We being at such an altitude the air is very light and let a person attempt to ascend much of an elevation he finds his breath nearly exhausted by the time he arrives at the top. At the time I now write it is the 24th of June and there is scarcely any body that can work their claim to any advantage on account of high water. They can sink a shaft not to exceed 5 feet before they are prevented from going any further by water's coming in notwithstanding the river is turned and the old channel is well drained.

Rev. Mr. Rolls again preached to the miners today. On the 26th of June Henry & myself started in company with four others from Fair Play to California. We arrived at Denver City on the 30th of June and remained here until the 7th of July when we again struck out across plains & mountains. Clear Creek is four miles from Denver wood water & grass in abundance. 15 miles farther is the same. 20 miles wood water & grass this is Boulder Creek. The next creek of any importance is Tompsons fork. Here we found the U.S. troops from Camp Floyd bound [16] for Arizona. They numbered about 800. The next stream of any importance is Cache le Poudre this stream is bridged toll 50cts. Here is a french town of the same name as the stream on which it is situated.³¹ After leaving Cache la Poudre we struck into the mts. and after two days drive we crossed the black hills and struck Larimie plains. here wood is very scarce and watering places far between. While on these plains our boys were fortunate enough to kill two Antelope and several white rabbits. Larime fork is the largest stream

Randolph B. Marcy, *The Prairie Traveler* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1859)

into. We then got sluice boxes and thought would test our claim thoroughly. Ten of us in company commenced work and run a sluice one day

and for our labor we got \$3.87. We prospected in several other places and could raise the color of gold without any difficulty but not in a paying quan-

of any importance in these plains. Larime Peak could plainly be seen from the road that we traveled. After leaving Larime fork the creeks are quite plenty and the next of any size is Rock creek 15 miles from Rock C. is Medicine Bow Timber plenty. 12 miles past C. no timber water & grass. 15 miles North Platte wood water but grass poor. here is a trading post. at North Platte we first saw some of the Snake Indians. We arrived at North Platte July 20th. 21st we forded North Platte & camped over Sunday. 23rd to Sage Creek 21 miles wood water & grass. 24th to Muddy Creek 12 miles wood water & grass today we were on the summit of the Rocky Mts. at Bridgers Pass. 25th camped on Mudy Creek 20 miles grass water & sage brush for wood. 26th Drove 25 miles passed Barrel Spring and camped without water grass very poor, met a train from Salt Lake 27th 15 miles to Bitter Creek. 28th 10 miles on Bitter³² [Diary ends here.]

Outcomes and Endings

Gurdon Lester did get to California and he stayed five years, apparently missing the Civil War. He did not like the army, as he admitted in the 1866 travel diary mentioned in the introduction. On that trip he stopped overnight at Fort Kearny, where he remarked, "Here I saw a little of soldier life, which please to deliver me from."³³

It is not clear whether Henry Foot stayed in California for the full five years, but he stayed long enough, at least, to have his picture taken. In 1866 both men were back in Iowa, ready to go west again. Seth Foot, however, was the first of the family trio to retrace the Platte River route. In the spring of 1862, while stationed at Fort Kearny, he was detached from his company of the Eighth Kansas Volunteer Infantry and sent with the Fourth U.S. Cavalry to Fort Laramie. He may well have been chosen for this duty because he had driven part of the same road just two years before.³⁴

In the years following the war both Gurdon Lester and Henry Foot married and established families. Gurdon and

Minerva Lester made their home in Cherokee, Iowa. He traveled around the Midwest from time to time but continued to live in Cherokee for the rest of his life. When he died in October 1898, the *Cherokee Times* characterized him as a good citizen "in all respects" who "bore the respect and good will of the entire community." Henry Foot had died seven years earlier in Monona, Iowa, where he lived with his wife, Julia.³⁵

Of the three brothers who shared a wagon as it made its way "en rout for Pikes Peak" Seth Foot had the shortest life. He died in the spring of 1864 of a wound he had suffered six months earlier in the Battle of Missionary Ridge.³⁶

Notes

The editors wish to thank the Durham Western Heritage Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, for permission to publish Gurdon Lester's diary.

¹ Estimates of the number of people who emigrated to the Rocky Mountains in the years 1859–60 range as high as 220,000. Robert L. Brown, *The Great Pikes Peak Gold Rush* (Caldwell, Id.: Caxton Printers, 1985), 44–46. A number of the gold rush diarists are quoted in Elliott West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1998), 384–87.

² Charles W. Martin, ed., "A Round Trip to the Montana Mines: The 1866 Travel Journal of Gurdon P. Lester," *Nebraska History* 46 (1965): 174; Merrill J. Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1969), 199.

³ *Davenport (Iowa) Daily Democrat and News*, January – April, 1860; *Nebraska City News*, Apr. 21, 1860.

⁴ S. W. Burt, *The Rocky Mountain Gold Regions*. . . (Denver City, C.T.: Rocky Mountain News Printing Co., 1861), last page; O. Allen, *Allen's Guide, Book and Map to the Gold Fields of Kansas and Nebraska and Great Salt Lake City* (Washington, D.C.: R. A. Waters, 1859), 5.

⁵ Abram W. Foote, *The Foote Family* (Rutland, Vt.: The Tuttle Co., 1907), 284; *Cherokee (Iowa) Weekly Times*, Oct. 1894, Oct. 22, 1898; 1850 Census of Huron County, Ohio. In the 1850s and 1860s the family's surname was most often spelled without the final e.

⁶ Brown, *Great Pikes Peak Gold Rush*, 42; Horace Greeley, *New York Weekly Tribune*, Feb. 4, 1860, quoted in Allan Nevins, *The Emergence of Lincoln* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), 1:193.

⁷ *Dubuque Weekly Times*, Oct. 27, 1859. Gregory

Gulch, which Wiltse calls "Gregory's diggings," was the site of the richest find of the spring of 1859. In early May a party of four men led by John W. Gregory followed the north fork of Clear Creek almost up to its headwaters. There they discovered "dirt yielding up to eight dollars a pan." West, *Contested Plains*, 177.

In 1874 Chauncey Wiltse made the original survey of the boundary between Nebraska and Dakota Territory. He marked the boundary at intervals with posts, but these disappeared and the boundary had to be resurveyed. Ruth Y. Wetmore, ed., "Surveying in Western Nebraska: The 1883 Journal of Harley Nettleton," *Nebraska History* 73 (1992): 77.

⁸ *Davenport Daily Democrat and News*, Mar. 19, 1860

⁹ S. R. Olmstead, *The Gold Mines of Kansas and Nebraska* (New York: 1859), 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* "Doubling teams" meant that the team from one wagon would be harnessed with the team of another to pull one wagon through a difficult section of the road. Then the two teams would be unhitched and led back to pull the second wagon through. When there were three wagons, as was the case with the Lester party, the configuration became even more complicated.

¹¹ Rumors about gold deposits in the Colorado Rockies had circulated since the days of Zebulon Pike's explorations in the area in 1806. In the spring of 1858 a Delaware Indian wandered into Lawrence, Kansas Territory, and showed the townsfolk flakes of gold he had found somewhere in the Rocky Mountain foothills. Residents of Lawrence went to investigate and they met William Green Russell, an experienced gold hunter, who had been prospecting in the mountains since early spring. It was the beginning of a stampede. By fall miners were panning gold in paying quantities along Cherry Creek in present-day downtown Denver and on nearby Dry Creek.

During the next two years, tens of thousands of novice miners like Gurdon Lester poured into the area, and they were closely followed by a supporting cast of shopkeepers and business people. The towns of Denver City and Auraria were platted in the latter part of 1858. Auraria was inhabited largely by people from eastern Nebraska. In 1859 Jefferson Territory was carved out of parts of Nebraska, Kansas, and Utah territories, but it would be two years before Congress would approve territorial status for the area, renamed as Colorado.

By the fall of 1858 reports of the gold strike were being published in newspapers across the country and by the following year, guidebooks were being issued offering advice for travelers bound for the gold fields. Lester's mention of having provisions for six months suggests that he read one of the books, which usually listed supplies needed by parties of four men. Some of the items listed were one thousand pounds of flour, five hundred pounds of bacon and dried beef, and six gallons of whiskey, the latter undoubtedly for medicinal

Diary of Gurdon P. Lester

purposes. Routes and distances were discussed and testimonials from successful miners were offered. See W. B. Horner, *The Gold Regions of Kansas and Nebraska, Being a Complete History of the First Year's Mining Operations, Also Geographical, Climatological, and Statistical Description of the Great Northwest* (Chicago: W. B. Tobey & Co., 1859).

¹² Editorial additions and page numbers from the diary are in brackets. Occasionally Lester made a mistake or changed his mind and drew a line through a word or words. These are enclosed by <>.

Lester's meaning is not clear. An election held in 1856 established Elkader as the county seat of Clayton County. The county borders the Mississippi River in northeastern Iowa. Jacob A. Swisher, "The Location of County Seats," *The Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 22 (1924): 220.

¹³ After Lester and his party set out from Elkader they traveled to the southwest, passing through the little town of Strawberry Point and then Vinton, the county seat of Benton County. Vinton is about twenty miles northwest of Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Koszta is a small town about thirty miles southwest of Cedar Rapids. Here the party turned in a more westerly direction. Newton, the county seat of Jasper County, is about thirty miles east of Des Moines. Adelphi is on the north side of the Des Moines River, twelve miles east of Des Moines. Carlisle is south of Des Moines. Fontanelle, Whitneyville, and Lewis were on the road heading nearly due west across southern Iowa.

¹⁴ If Lester's party was typical, twelve of the fifteen animals they started with would have been oxen to pull the three wagons. The cows may have been milk cows, although Lester never mentions milking. The practice of taking cows on a trip to the western mines was recommended by J. Quinn Thornton, an early guidebook writer, who advised that "as many young cows as can be brought should accompany the loose stock. These can be yoked as the oxen give out, stray or are stolen or killed by the marauding savages of the desert. Cows are not so strong as oxen, but they endure fatigue longer, and can subsist upon less." J. Quinn Thornton, *Oregon and California in 1848*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1849), quoted in Lambert Florin, *Western Wagon Wheels: A Pictorial Memorial to the Wheels That Won the West* (Seattle: Superior Publishing Co., 1970), 83.

¹⁵ The word in question is very difficult to read in Lester's manuscript, but *burthen*, suggested by James Potter, is the most plausible reading. This word, though probably archaic even in 1860, fits Lester's context. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *burthen* can mean "what is borne by the soil; produce, crop." *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, vol. 1, ed. James A. H. Murray (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888).

¹⁶ Glenwood and Plattsmouth, Nebraska, are nearly opposite one another across the Missouri

River about fifteen miles south of Omaha. There were occasional road ranches west of these communities where supplies could be purchased, but prices were often exorbitant. The men were still six hundred miles from their destination. West, *Contested Plains*, 127.

¹⁷ Upon leaving Plattsmouth they traveled in a southeasterly direction for the first half of the day and then turned due west. They camped on the open prairie on the night of April 26 near present-day Manley, Nebraska. The next day the road angled to the northwest and they camped about five miles west of Ashland. They were on the main branch of the Oxbow Trail that began in Nebraska City. Lester's party spent a long day on the trail on April 28 to reach Patten's road ranche near the head of Wahoo Creek and near the present town of Touhy, about twenty-five miles north and slightly west of Lincoln. The next day was Sunday and they rested, as was their custom. The number of wagons that went on their way that Sunday suggests that the practice of "spending the Sabbath" in rest and recreation may not have been common among emigrants. Guidebook writer Thornton, however, had offered two persuasive reasons for following the practice. Emigrants, he wrote, "ought to remain in camp on the Sabbath day. Aside from the obligation imposed by the command of God, the cattle will endure more if they are permitted to enjoy this periodical rest." Thornton, *Oregon and California*, 84.

¹⁸ The party left Patten's on April 30 and traveled slowly for two and a half days and entered the Platte Valley east of Bellwood on May 2. Lester's Elm Creek was probably present Bone Creek. Clear Creek is nine miles west of Bellwood, and there are wagon ruts in this area.

The Pawnee were living on a reservation about twenty miles to the north, around present-day Genoa, Nebraska. Lester's "Old Pawnee Village" was the remains of earthlodges abandoned by the Grand band of the Pawnee in the late 1840s. See Roger T. Grange, *Pawnee and Lower Loup Pottery* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1968), 23. There is no historical evidence of a battle in this vicinity, but the scattered bone fragments and other trash left by the villagers is sometimes misinterpreted as evidence of a conflict. The Lester party's camp on the night of May 4 would have been due east of and across the Platte River from Columbus.

¹⁹ Farmersburg is about ten miles north of Elkader, Iowa. Fort Kearny, established in 1848, had a post office and mail went on the stagecoaches on a regular schedule. The Pony Express began running on April 3, 1860, and there was a station at Kearney City or "Dobytown," a civilian community two miles west of the fort. Merrill Mattes and Paul Henderson, "The Pony Express: Across Nebraska from St. Joseph to Fort Laramie," *Nebraska History* 41 (1960): 100.

²⁰ Washington, Iowa, is in the southeastern part

of the state. Cottonwood Springs is on the south side of the Platte, south of present Maxwell, Nebraska. There was a stagecoach and Pony Express station there. Mattes and Henderson, "Pony Express," 103.

²¹ On May 8 Lester was a few miles east of Fort Kearny, and the locale was the approximate eastern limit of the buffalo range until about the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Lester's choice of words is misleading. There were no carcasses of buffalo, but rather skeletons left by hunters over many decades.

²² They were now in Lakota hunting territory, though it is odd that only two men were mentioned. They were probably part of a larger hunting party in the vicinity. In his entry for June 5 Lester indicated that "ex" stood for "axle."

²³ Jack Morrow's ranche and Box Elder Creek were south of the Platte and present North Platte, Nebraska. Morrow had a well stocked store and assisted travelers by offering to locate lost stock and return it for a fee. He was married to a Lakota woman and it was rumored that her relatives stole the animals and then turned them over to Morrow. Despite this allegation, Morrow's Ranche was considered one of the best stations on the road. Mattes, *Great Platte River Road*, 263, 276-77.

Fremont's Slough paralleled the river for several miles and was fed by springs. The fresh water was a welcome relief after the muddy Platte. Alkali Lake is two miles southwest of Paxton.

²⁴ The Upper Crossing of the South Platte is a few miles west of Brule, Nebraska. It was heavily used by Oregon- and California-bound emigrants heading for the North Platte River at Ash Hollow. It is odd that Lester did not mention passing Geminin Beauvais's trading post, which was near the crossing. They were northeast of Sterling, Colorado, when they had to double their teams. The "cutoff" was a road on a direct line from present Fort Morgan to Denver, a distance of about seventy miles. It was shorter than the trail Lester followed, but the only water was at two stagecoach stations. Henry Villard, *The Past and Present of the Pike's Peak Gold Regions* (1860; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1972), 169. Bijou Creek enters the South Platte just west of Fort Morgan, Colorado; Long's Peak was seventy-five miles due west of their camp at Fremont's Orchard, which consisted of several groves of native cottonwood trees. The Black Hills are today's Laramie Range.

²⁵ St. Vrain's adobe trading post was occupied in the 1840s. There were other competing posts in the area. Lester's other "old post" may have been the remains of Fort Lupton. Villard, *Past and Present*, 169; Leroy R. Hafen, "A Brief History of the Fur Trade in the Far West," *Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West* (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark Co.), 1:169.

²⁶ Denver was founded late in 1858, but the majority of the residents came in 1859. The Lester

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party had averaged just over sixteen miles a day since leaving Plattsmouth, Nebraska Territory. Bradford was about eight miles southwest of Denver.

²⁷ After leaving Bradford, Lester's party traveled south along the South Platte and then turned northwest up Tarryall Creek to near Hamilton and then southwest for a day to Fairplay. Fairplay is on the South Platte River on the western edge of South Park.

²⁸ Owners of successful mines paid employees \$2.50 to \$2.75 per day, plus board. This was three times as much as a man could earn doing common labor back in the states. Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States* (New York: International Publishers, 1947), 1:220.

²⁹ The most fortunate miners averaged about \$40 per day, but \$3.87 for ten men would not have been a living wage. In 1859 it was estimated that the chance of falling in the former category was about one in twenty. By the time Lester arrived, most of the rich claims had been taken and the odds would have been much higher. Villard, *Past and Present*, 62, 144.

³⁰ The actual elevation at Fairplay is 9,850 feet, less than 5,000 feet higher than at Denver, which is 5,280 feet above sea level. U.S. Geological Survey, *Map of Colorado*, 1980; *Columbia Gazetteer of the World*, ed. Saul B. Cohen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

³¹ Lester certainly knew that two of the richest strikes had been made near the heads of Boulder and Clear Creeks in 1859. West, *The Contested Plains*, 177. Thompson's Fork enters the South Platte southwest of Greeley.

The men were on what was then called the California Road that went north to Lester's Cache La Poudre, near today's Laporte, Colorado. This was probably the town founded in 1859 by Antoine and Nicholas Janis and originally called Colona. West, *The Contested Plains*, 188. At this point the road began a long curve to the west into the Laramie Plains, southwest of Laramie, Wyoming.

The soldiers were from Camp Floyd, located about twenty miles south of Salt Lake City. They may have been on their way to south-central Arizona Territory to reinforce Fort Breckinridge, founded in May 1860.

³² They probably skirted the north edge of Medicine Bow Peak and arrived at the North Platte River in the vicinity of present Saratoga, Wyoming. Bridger's Pass is about twenty-five miles southeast of Creston, Wyoming. The party struck Bitter Creek near its headwaters, fifty miles due east of Green River, Wyoming. The Snake Indians were the Shoshoni.

³³ Martin, ed., "A Round Trip to the Montana Mines," 281.

³⁴ Post Returns, Fort Kearny, Nebraska Territory,

March–April 1862 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M617, roll 565) Records of the Office of the Adjutant General, Record Group 94, National Archives and Records Administration.

³⁵ *Cherokee Weekly Times*, Oct. 22, 1898; Foote, *The Foote Family*, 284.

³⁶ Seth Foot's military record is noted in *Report of the Adjutant General of Kansas, 1861–65*, vol. 1 (Topeka: Kansas State Printing Co., 1896). Foot enlisted August 28, 1861, and was promoted second lieutenant of Company A, Eighth Kansas Volunteer Infantry on December 12, 1861. Wounded by a shell on November 25, 1863, he died at his father's house in Farmersburg, Iowa, on May 14, 1864. His death was caused by an overwhelming infection that developed as a consequence of the wound. Volunteer Service File F185 VS 1870, National Archives and Records Administration; Regimental Casualty List, Col. John A. Martin, Carded Medical Record, Record Group 94, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, NARA; Report of Brig. Gen. August Willich, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, eds. Lt. Col. Robert N. Scott and Lt. Col. Henry M. Lazelle (Washington: GPO, 1888), ser. 1, v. 31, pt. 2, 264; Amarette E. Foote [sic] Pension File, Box 33456, NARA; George Worthington Adams, *Doctors in Blue: The Medical History of the Union Army in the Civil War* (New York: H. Schumann, 1952, rpt. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 139–40.