

Letter to the DONNER TRAIL MARKING EXPEDITION from Wendell
Robie, 1940 and a typescript copy of part of the diary of
John Markle, 1849

THE FULL PRESS
AUBURN, CALIFORNIA

DECEMBER, 1995

A letter to the DONNER TRAIL MARKING EXPEDITION from Wendell Robie, 1940 and a typescript copy of part of the diary of John Markle, 1849.

This letter and partial diary is an interesting item I recently obtained. In the letter the "DONNER TRAIL MARKING EXPEDITION" of the USFS and the Auburn Chapter of the Native Sons of the Golden West for July 28, 1940, will need more explanation. The letter represents an interesting bit of early trail marking activity by one of the major trail personalities, Wendell Robie. Wendell was a major lumberman in the central Sierras with large holdings in the Donner Pass area. He also had lumber yards in the Auburn, Truckee and Tahoe areas. As a boy, I worked at the Tahoe Truckee Lumber Company in Truckee and knew Wendell quite well. He was always interested in California history and had special interest in the Sierra trails. Until his death, he was a prime mover in local and regional history and Western trails.

It appears that at one time W. Robie owned the John Markle diary. It was quoted in THE REPORT OF INVESTIGATION OF THE OVERLAND EMIGRANT TRAIL prepared for Governor Earl Warren in 1949 by the California State Park Commission. Robie is given as the source. Also it was used by Harold Curran in FEARFUL CROSSING, 1982. Curran states that he has typescript excerpts in his collection. J. Townley in THE TRAIL WEST, 1988, records this diary noting that it was published in the Grizzly Bear, Dec. 1934. M. Mattes, in PLATTE RIVER ROAD NARRATIVES, 1988, cites it as No. 553 but makes the error of stating that Markle used the Humbolt-Carson route to Sutter's Fort. Mattes also says that Bancroft Library, U.C. Berkeley has a typescript copy of 93 pages, indicating a complete copy of the diary. It is not cited by D. Hardesty or S. Lindstrom in their work on the Donner camp sites or in C. Graydon's or T. Hunts books nor G. Stewart in the CALIFORNIA TRAIL, 1962. Where the original diary is today is not known to me. This typescript copy is dated 1940 and appears to have been in Wendell's possession at that time. Enjoy!

NORMAN L. WILSON, DEC. 1995

TO THE
DONNER TRAIL MARKING EXPEDITION
of the
United States Forest Service
and
Auburn, Native Sons of the
Golden West

July 28, 1940

91 years ago, the Donner Trail section of the old Emigrant Road was the most important gateway into California for those who came overland. It was the most difficult part of the whole road between the Missouri River and Sacramento.

In the year which followed the great rush of the pioneers in 1849 and 1850, toll road companies built new roads over the mountains in substantially the same location as the present Route 40 Highway and the trail of the pioneers faded into oblivion.

In 1849, young John Markle came across the plains and mountains to California, and kept a diary of his experiences, in which he carefully recorded a description of the road traveled each day.

At the present time, it is interesting to recognize the aid of Markle's journal, in restoring the location of this old route to the present generation, and to note that his unseen hand from the days of '49 has so clearly drawn a picture of it for us today. Among the thousands who traveled on the crest of the first wave of emigration, it remained for this young man's record to definitely preserve the line of the road.

This copy from his diary is made for your use, to help put together the known and unknown sections of the Donner Trail, so that knowledge of the entire route thru the Sierras may be restored.

Wendell T. Robie

Auburn, California
July 10, 1940

A PORTION OF THE DIARY OF JOHN A. MARKLE

Written in 1849 while enroute over the
Emigrant Trail to California

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This copy describes that part of the trail in the Sierras of California as Markle found it and traveled it. To preface this portion of his diary, it is sufficient to state that Markle, in company with five friends, left St. Joseph in a wagon train 1:00 o'clock P. M. on Wednesday, April 18th, 1849; that to this date they have made steady progress, and are in the present State of Nevada, only one day's journey from the Salmon Trout River (now Truckee River).

SUNDAY, AUGUST 12, 1849

This morning we arrived at the boiling springs where we cooled water for our mules. There were about 20 teams encamped when we came there, and from the appearance there had been a general destruction of property, as there were wagons, clothing, guns, lead, irons, mining tools, and all kinds of stuff left laying there by emigrants whose stock had given out.

We lay by until 5 o'clock in the evening. The day was a disagreeable one, as it was very hot and no water except what we cooled; and it being hot enough to boil meat sufficiently done in 20 minutes, we could not get it very cool in the hot sun.

About 4 o'clock, Graves and I started ahead of the teams for the Salmon Trout River on foot, with a canteen of coffee and one of hot water and some biscuit.

The road was beautiful for 12 miles during which time we passed a salt spring, but the water could not be used. We then ascended a little hill which was steep and very sandy and continued so for 10 miles which brought us to the river, where we arrived between 11 and 12 o'clock in the night.

The water was clear and cool. Before we drank any, we filled our canteens and before we were satisfied we drank five pints apiece. We then got in among the willows and slept the balance of the night as comfortably as if we were on a bed of feathers.

Three of the wagons got to the river about an hour after sunrise and the other three were left in the sand as their mules gave out. They brought the mules on to the river and watered them and turned them out to graze with the intention of going back for their wagons in the evening.

MONDAY, AUGUST 13, 1849

Today we lay by, recruiting our mules. We herded them about three miles down the river where there was good grass.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 14, 1849

The grass being excellent and our mules tired, we are still laying by.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 15, 1849

Today we traveled 10 miles. In the morning we crossed the river and traveled up the right hand side for about 4 miles and crossed again. In the 10 miles, we crossed seven times. The crossings were very rocky and the same. The water in the river was beautifully clear and cool and the banks were decorated with a few large cottonwood trees. The grass was all ate off the bottoms as they were very narrow; back of which the mountains rose high and abruptly. Today, Mr. Dahl got badly hurt by falling off a precipice. At night we had a shower of rain, the first since the first day of July.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 16, 1849

Today we traveled 20 miles. Six miles brought us to where there was good grass, during which time we crossed the river 5 times. 14 miles more brought us to a beautiful valley where there was any quantity of grass, and in the 14 miles, we crossed the river 20 times more and the fords were very rough. The mountains and valleys as yesterday.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 17, 1849

Some of our mules being tired and the grass excellent, we remain in camp to recruit them. About 9 o'clock A. M., Kit Carson passed our camp with a pack train. He had started by way of Fort Smith, but the Colorado River being overflowed, he had to steer his way through the mountains and strike the road by way of Fort Bridger, about 500 miles out of his way.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 18, 1849

This morning we started early and traveled 20 miles. After crossing the valley (about 3 miles) we left the river. 8 miles more brought us to it again, where there is a pine tree that measures 15 feet, 3 inches in circumference. 9 miles more brought us to where we are encamped on the river among some large and beautiful pine trees. The camp is pleasant, but the grass very scarce.

In our day's travel, we only crossed the river 4 times, and the road was so stony that the wagon would scarcely get to the ground.

SUNDAY, AUGUST 19, 1849

21 miles today. This morning immediately after starting we crossed the river, when Graves, Steiner, and myself left the wagons and crossed the mountain which the road wound around leaving it on the left, in search of game, but found it very scarce.

About 9 miles brought the wagons to a valley where there was grass and water and in the ravine there was a kind of dust which some claimed was gold. 8 miles more brought us to a creek where there was a good camp. 4 miles more brought us across a ridge to another valley where we encamped, and the grass and water very good.

The first 9 miles after leaving the river, the road was very rough but the balance was good. This morning after crossing the creek, we got into a thick pine country, which made the traveling quite pleasant, compared with the traveling before as we had shade to rest in.

MONDAY, AUGUST 20, 1849

Today we traveled about 10 miles and encamped in a valley at the base of the mountain about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile east of Truckee Lake. The first 2 miles brought us to the valley where Donner encamped. 1 mile more brought us opposite to where his cabins were, which were situated about 1 or 2 miles from the road on the right hand side. There were a number of fragments left, but more human bones than anything else. 6 more miles and we came to where the Graves family wintered and all perished except 5 and 2 of them died after they got through. 1 mile more and we came to Fosters and Breens cabins where we encamped. The road now leaves them on the right, but the old road ran just past them leaving them on the left.

Graves and Fosters cabins are the only ones that are standing yet and they present a gloomy appearance. In Fosters there were old clothes which were worn by females and also, long female hair which appeared as if it had fallen from the head, and any quantity of bones in and around the cabin.

In the afternoon seven of our men ate a red berry which was very plenty in the valley and at night they proved to be poison. They all got very sick. Some of them thought they were going to end the chapter, particularly R. Woodward. There were a great many straw and gooseberries; but they were unfortunate and did not get them.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 21, 1849

Today we traveled 12 miles. Soon after starting we crossed the Southeast end of a mountain. The road then was very good for three or four miles when we commenced climbing over rocks and stones. 10 miles brought us to the summit of the long dreaded Sierra Nevada. We came within about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile of the top when it became so steep that we had to double team. The ascent was difficult, but not so much so as I expected. We had all the wagons on the Summit by 1 o'clock P. M. 2 more miles brought us down into a valley where we encamped. The descent was gentle with some places pretty steep, but not so rough as the ascent. The view from the peak on the south side of the gap was magnificent.

The poisoned men are better this evening.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 22, 1849

Today we traveled 18 miles. Soon after starting we crossed a small stream which headed in the mountain where we descended. About one mile from our camp, we left the valley to our right and went up a ravine to the left. 4 miles more, brought us to a group of lakes, 6 in number. The water in them was cool and beautifully clear. They averaged from 1 to 2 miles in length and from 400 to 500 yards in width.

The road was very rough and after passing the lakes, which were strung out about 4 miles, we traveled up and down 9 miles of the infernalst roughest road that ever was traveled. The last mile was so steep that we had to check down with ropes.

After we all got down we encamped among the rocks at a beautiful spring, which is one of the head branches of the Yuba River. There was no grass where we encamped, but by driving our mules up the other branch, we got very good grass.

In coming down the mountain to our camp, Doctor Quimby's wagon upset.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 23, 1849

Today we traveled 15 miles. The road today was indescribable, but it was the damn-dest, roughest and rockiest road, I ever saw. About 3 miles from our camp, we had to take out our mules and let our wagons down with ropes. It was off of one rock and on to another, all day except a short distance after we started and a few places in the bottom of the river.

We also ascended some very steep mountains and 9 miles brought us to where we left the Yuba River. We then crossed a mountain which was not as rough as I expected. 6 miles brought us to a valley on Bear River where we encamped. The grass was very good, but there was none between the two camps. 8 miles from our last camp we came to where there had been grass, but it was all ate off. In crossing from Yuba to Bear River, there were a few oak bushes and on top there were two small lakes. Through the day we past another cabin where some of the sufferers of the Donner Party got to.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 24, 1849

Today we traveled seven miles. Five miles brought us to the main branch of Bear River where there is a large valley. In descending to the valley there is a very steep hill where we let down with ropes for about three-quarters of a mile and the trees were worn very much where the rope had run around. Two miles more brought us to the lower end of the valley where we encamped and mowed grass.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 25, 1849

This morning, the Armstrong and the Mississippi Messes thinking their mules too much reduced to go ahead, lay by. Captain Taylor and our wagon started and traveled thirteen miles.

The road for five miles was as usual, rough and hilly. Three miles brought us where we crossed the river and we then ascended two hills, the second was so steep that we had to double team. Seven miles brought us to a spring on the left hand side of the road and six miles more brought us to another spring where we tied our mules to the trees and fed the grass we cut in Bear Valley. The road for the last six miles was very good. The timber was very large and not any grass along the mountains or any other place.

SUNDAY, AUGUST 26, 1849

Today we traveled 14 miles. Eleven miles brought us to another branch of Bear River where there were some of the gold diggers operating but not with much success. The road from our camp to the Branch ran along a ridge and was very hilly as there were a great many gaps in it. The descent to the branch was so steep and long that we had to tie trees to the wagon. We then crossed and ascended a long steep hill or mountain. Three miles from the branch brought us to a spring on the left of the road where we encamped and cut down trees to let our mules graze upon the leaves as there was no grass.

MONDAY, AUGUST 27, 1849

This morning we started and drove three miles to another branch of Bear River where Blair's Mess was encamped. By this time our mules were so fatigued that we could go no further. We encamped and drove our mules four miles to grass. A number were digging gold where we encamped but it is scarce.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 28, 1849

Today we traveled 16 miles. Eight miles brought us to a spring on the left of the road and eight miles more brought us to another spring or puddle where we encamped. We tied the mules to the wagon and fed them on brush. The country was hilly with more oak than usual and was not so rocky as before.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 29, 1849

Today we traveled eight miles. The road was hilly and rough; water was scarce and not good and could only be got in ponds which were very much stagnated. About five miles brought us to a tolerably good spring on the left of the road where there was some grass in the ravines, but it was so dry that the mules would not eat it. Our camp was in a small valley on the left. Oak timber was more plentiful today than usual and about sunset we got in sight of the long looked for valley of the Sacramento.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 30, 1849

Today we traveled twelve miles. Six miles brought us to a spring at the base of a hill on the right and four miles more brought us to Johnson's. Two miles more down the river and we encamped where we found good grass. The road today was very good, the valley presented a beautiful appearance.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 31, 1849

This evening we started and traveled fourteen miles and encamped at Nicholson's Ranch about 12 o'clock in the night.

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1849

This evening we started and traveled twenty-five miles during which time there was no water. We encamped about one o'clock in the morning near a slough.

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 1849

Today we traveled nine miles. Four miles brought us to where we crossed the American Fork. $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles brought us to Sutter's Fort which was converted into a hospital. $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles more brought us to Sacramento City.