

ing their destination, mainly due to poor health or fear of Native Americans.

Emigrants who came before 1849 were generally farmers and their initial destination was Sutter's Fort in Sacramento. From there they fanned out all over the territory to find land. With the discovery of Gold in 1848, the number of emigrants jumped. From 1849 on, some years had as many as 50,000 folks coming into California. The destination of most was the Gold Country, for example Nevada City or Columbia.

African Americans

About 3,000 African Americans had reached California by 1850. However, the passage of anti-black legislation made them second-class citizens so most moved on to Canada. Some of those who stayed, however, became leading citizens, such as William Liedesdorff and Mammy Pleasant.

Loss of Life

Failure of leadership and keeping the wagons on pace led to the disaster of the Donner Party in 1846. 87 men, women and children got caught in continuous snowstorms in the Sierra beginning in late October. Forty-two emigrants and two Indian guides died. The largest loss of life was in 1857. The Fancher party of 50 men, 40 women and 50 children was attacked by local Indians in Utah but was able to hold them off for five days. The local militia arrived to lead them to safety, but it was a trick. The militia murdered all in the party except for 17 children under six. It was learned that the Indians had been working for the militia. One of the militia leaders, John Lee, was arrested. He was found guilty and was executed.

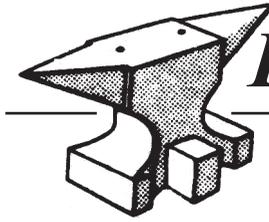
Homestead Act of 1862

In 1862 Congress passed the Homestead Act, which permitted the head of a family to acquire 160 acres. If he settled on and cultivated the land for 5 years it was granted to him. By 1890 all available federal land had been settled by these pioneers.

The End of Wagon Trains

By 1860 stage coaches provided alternate transportation across the continent but it was very expensive and it was rough (see Mark Twain's vivid description of his stage coach trip in *Roughing It*.) Wagon trains continued to be a popular way to cross the plains until 1869, when the transcontinental railroad was completed.

By Rich Bartke with information from Spartacus Educational (UK) and the California-Nevada chapter of the Oregon-California Trails Association



El Cerrito Historical Society

*P O Box 304, El Cerrito, CA 94530
elcerritohistoricalsociety@yahoo.com
www.elcerritowire.com/history*

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Our Next Program, 6 PM June 21, at the Recycling Center El Cerrito: Where Recycling is a Pleasure

This meeting will be a Tour, Open House and Historic Talk by the people behind the El Cerrito Recycling Center. The El Cerrito Recycling Center is one of the nation's oldest and longest lived such sites. Started by volunteers in 1972 and eventually taken over by the City, it was overseen by Joel Witherell, who did more than anyone to ensure its continuity.

The center was completely rebuilt earlier this year, a tribute to the vision of its founders and the commitment of our City to a green future. Our panel will include early volunteers and people who ran the center, including founders Ken Little, Susan Kattchee and Becky Dowdakin, who ran the program for years; also Allan Gardiner, who built the first glass crusher. Meet at the Recycling Center, 7501 Schmidt Lane at 6 p.m. Thursday, June 21, 2012

This event is free and is wheelchair accessible.

Information: Dave Weinstein, 510-524-1737, davidsw Weinstein@yahoo.com.

The El Cerrito Historical Society is a volunteer, non-political, non-profit corporation that has as its purpose the preservation and appreciation of the history of El Cerrito. It does this by providing educational and research opportunities; by the collection of historic photographs, documents, artifacts and cultural objects; by advocating the preservation of historic resources in the city; and by encouraging others to help further these aims. Anyone may join; dues are \$20 (Household member), \$50 (Sponsoring member), and \$250 (Life member).

Wagons West

Conversations in the 1830s about Traveling West

It was in the 1830s that conversations began about settling on lands in California. There were several reasons why people were willing to risk the long trek. Many mentioned escaping the fever-infested swamps of Missouri and Mississippi. Antoine Robidoux claimed he had never seen anyone in California with the fever or ague (malarial fever). Francis Parkman interviewed a large number of emigrants and claimed that many desired escape from unpleasant weather: “The bad climate seems to have been the motive that has induced many of them to set out.” Stories also circulated about the high quality of the crops that could be grown in California.

One commentator averred that: “The motives which thus brought the multitude together were, in fact, almost as various as their features. They agreed in one general object – that of bettering their condition.” Richard Henry Dana in *Two Years Before the Mast* wrote about California: “In the hands of an enterprising people, what a country this might be!”

The Economics and Logistics of the Wagon

The overland journey from the Midwest meant 6 months to cross 2,000 miles of difficult country. And it wasn't cheap, costing an estimated \$1,000 for a family of four. In addition, they needed specially built wagons that cost about \$400 each. The canvas tops were water-proofed with linseed oil and stretched over a framework of hoops. Although the wagons were mostly of wood, iron was used to reinforce the wagons at crucial points. But iron was used sparingly because it was heavy and the extra weight might slow down or exhaust the animals pulling the wagon. The wheels were made of wood strengthened with iron. The front wheels were usually smaller than those in back.

These wagons could carry up to 2,500 pounds, but 1,600 was the recommended maximum. Research suggests that a typical family of four carried 800 pounds of flour, 200 pounds of lard, 700 pounds of bacon, 200 pounds of beans, 100 pounds of fruit, 75 pounds of coffee and 25 pounds of salt. The wagons were also packed with cooking equipment, water kegs, an axe and shovel. Some emigrants took furniture but it was often abandoned on the trail.

These wagons rarely had springs but since they traveled so slowly they usually did not throw the passengers around. But there was little room in the wagons for passengers so only small children or senior citizens rode. The rest of the party walked beside the wagon or rode a horse.

The wagons did not have brakes and this could cause serious problems when traveling downhill. One solution was to use chains to lock at least one wheel. Another was to drag a tree behind the wagon.

Beasts of Burden

Emigrants used horses, oxen or mules to pull their wagons. The most popular, more than half the animals used between 1840 and 1860, was oxen. They were cheaper, stronger, and easier to work than horses or mules. An ox cost \$25 in the 1840's but a mule was \$75. Oxen were less likely to be stolen by Native Americans on the journey and were more useful as farm animals at the destination. Oxen were able to survive on sparse vegetation and were less likely to stray from camp. But they could become restless when hot and thirsty and they could cause a stampede in a rush to water. During the early years of migration mules were the second choice but later horses replaced mules as the second choice for pulling wagons. Families often took more than one wagon. Some also took herds of cattle, including milk cows.

Wagon Trains

Wagon trains elected a captain to command the train and maintain order on the journey. Most also employed guides, usually mountain men such as Kit Carson, Tom Fitzpatrick, Jim Baker, Stephan Meek, Joseph Walker, Jim Bridger & William Sublette.

Emigrants usually waited in Missouri in the spring until the rivers and creeks had receded and grass had grown to feed the animals. On the other end, snow could be expected to fall in the Sierra Nevada in October. Wagon trains traveled slowly, not much over 2 miles an hour. If the 2,000 mile trip was to be done between May first and October first, 153 days, emigrants had to average 15 miles a day. There was little time to recover from illness or injuries, to rest on the Sabbath, or to wait to repair broken wagons or equipment.

The first wagon train to California was the John Bidwell party in 1840. This group suffered considerable hardships and had to leave their wagons in Nevada. Of the 69 people who set out, only 32 reached California. In 1844 the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party was the first wagon train to cross the Sierra Nevada. That train was managed by a tough old mountain man who had never been to California but maintained discipline. Although they were snowed in over winter no one died and 2 babies were born, so the train arrived with 2 more than it started with.

Accidental shootings were the main cause of death on the overland trails. Second-most common was drowning; more than 300 people drowned between 1840 and 1860. Between 1840 and 1848 an estimated 2,735 people migrated overland to California. One survey showed that only about 50 emigrants returned home before reach-