

The California Trail

~ Traffic ~

The method of travel and the hardships were the same as those faced by earlier emigrants, most of whom had gone to Oregon, although some had entered California. The increased number of travelers created new problems. The animals of the first spring caravans ate up the feed along the trail, leaving little for those who followed.

At Fort Kearny on the Platte River, a newspaper correspondent counted 180 wagons coming by on a single day—one every five minutes.

Deaths by drowning were commonplace at stream and river crossings. Traffic jams at both the Missouri River and the North Platte River caused aggravating delays. At the North Platte, the Mormons set up a ferry service, floating groups across at three dollars per wagon, fifty cents per person. Sometimes, the emigrants chose to build their own ferries. One practice was to lash together several canoes to make a raft. Others caulked the cracks and removed the wheels, then floated their wagons across, using ropes to steady them. The animals were forced to swim the rivers.

Buffalo herds were a common sight on the plains. Gold-seekers enjoyed the adventure of the hunt, often killing more buffalo than they needed for food.

Indians were prevalent, but in these early years, they usually did not confront emigrants. They would visit to trade for food and guns, and they would often steal livestock.

Overland companies were organized much like military units. Officers issued commands and conducted infantry drills. They posted guards and decided when to camp and what direction to take. They stocked their wagons with rifles, pistols, knives, and swords.

Gold-seekers heading for California included city people who were inexperienced with outdoor life. Many were without experience at handling mules or oxen; they couldn't fix wagons; they didn't know how to hunt. They didn't anticipate the dangers of the trail and relied too heavily on guidebooks which were frequently misleading. Those who failed to join companies with experienced outdoorsmen ran great risk of being stranded or lost in the wilderness. Nevertheless, many preferred to travel on their own. Some rode horses or mules, used ox-drawn wagons, or walked.

~ Features ~

President James Polk, in his Message to Congress on December 5, 1848, said, "The accounts of the abundance of gold ... are of such extraordinary character as would scarcely command belief." His speech set the stage for "the 49ers."

Easterners who were eager to start out immediately to California were able to go by ship although some preferred a land route which was far less expensive. Pioneers in the Midwest prepared to go overland; the most direct way to the gold fields lay straight across the plains and across mountain ranges and desert.

The traveler by sea had a choice of two routes. He could make the long voyage around Cape Horn at the tip of South America. Or he could sail to Central America, take a river and overland route to the Pacific, and take another ship to San Francisco; this was usually at the Isthmus of Panama but sometimes at Nicaragua, and occasionally through Mexico.

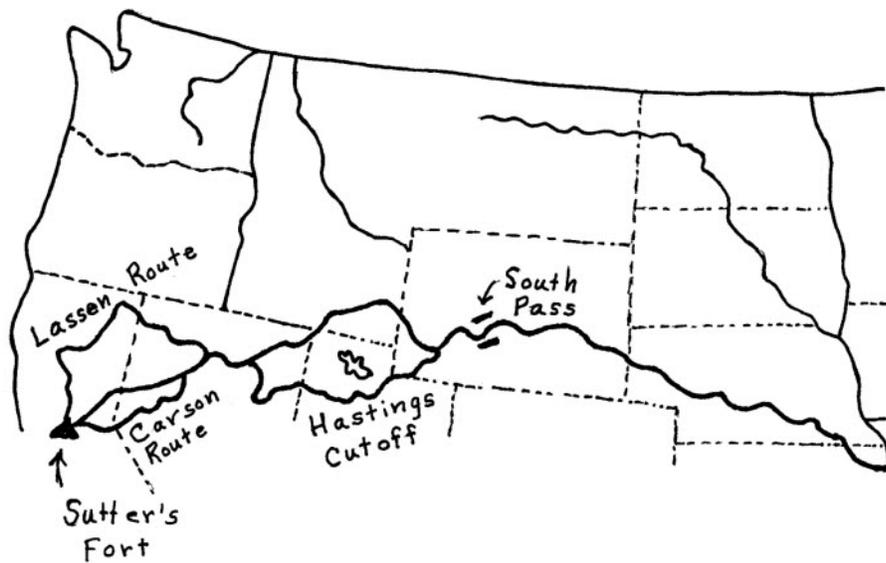
The most frequently traveled overland route to the gold fields was the one that followed the *Oregon Trail* from the Missouri to the Rocky Mountains, and from there down the *California Trail* to Sutter's Fort.

The trail along the Platte River was fairly easy. Sometimes a company seemed to have the prairie all to itself. At other times, thousands of slow-moving wagons crowded the trails as far as the eye could see.

The worst hardships took place after leaving Laramie because grass was sparse, and there were days without decent water. At the North Platte River, there were often long waits for ferry service.

After the South Pass at the Continental Divide, trails branched in different directions to zigzag through valleys and canyons for hundreds of miles. The long pull along the Humboldt River was followed by a marshy bog called the Sink. The dreaded Forty Mile Desert stretched from the Sink to the foot of the Sierra Nevada.

Alternatives: Lassen's northerly route went toward Oregon before turning south to California, adding 200 miles but avoiding the Forty Mile Desert. To avoid the Humboldt Sink, many emigrants headed for Salt Lake City after crossing the Rockies. And emigrants coming from the South chose routes that converged at Santa Fe, then on to San Diego or Los Angeles. A common trail followed the Rio Grande south, then west, crossing the Guadalupe Mountains, the Gila and Colorado rivers, and the Colorado Desert.



~ Timeline ~ The California Trail

- 1846-48 The United States is at war with Mexico.
- 1848 On January 24, James Marshall, a carpenter at John Sutter's sawmill, finds a gold nugget about the size of a dime; it weighs just over a quarter of an ounce.
- 1848 On February 2, President James Polk signs the Treaty of Guadalupe Hildalgo to officially end the war with Mexico. For only fifteen million dollars, the United States acquires 525,000 square miles of land (now California, Texas, the major portion of Arizona and New Mexico, western Colorado, Nevada, Utah, part of Wyoming). The Rio Grande and the Gila Rivers mark the boundary between Mexico and the United States. President James Polk's Message to Congress on December 5 sets off a raging epidemic of gold fever.
- 1849 On February 28, the mail carrier, the *California*, enters the Golden Gate at San Francisco Bay. She is the first steamship to complete the trip around Cape Horn and to arrive at San Francisco. She carries over 400 passengers, although she was designed for only 210.
- 1849 40,000 gold seekers come to California by sea. An almost equal number come overland on the *California-Oregon Trail*, making the 2000-mile journey by covered wagon, horseback, or on foot. Around 10,000 come by the *Santa Fe Trail* into southern California.
- 1850 In the first six months of 1850, over 39,000 people are recorded as having passed through Fort Laramie, some going to Oregon, many to California. A census shows that one quarter of California's population is from a foreign country.

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Route of the California Trail

St. Joseph, Independence, Council Bluffs, and other frontier towns were jumping-off points to start the main trail overland to California. The trail coincided with the *Oregon Trail* until it crossed the Rockies. Some went north of the Great Salt Lake, others south, before coming together at the Humboldt River.

The most important stretch of what became the main *California Trail* was the path of the Humboldt River, flowing from northeastern Nevada some 400 miles across the arid flatlands lying between mountain ranges of the Great Basin. It provided the water and grass that was vital to the emigrant trains.



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