

Trek to California was arduous

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Whenever I read about the efforts early pioneers made to reach California, I am awed at their dogged spirit and their willingness to accept incredible hardships.

They gave up homes, friends, and family, put all worldly possessions on one wagon and set out on a journey of anywhere from four to six months; crossing prairie, rivers, desert and the Sierra on foot.

And all that without knowing where the journey would really end.

With the first news of gold filtering back east, the year 1849 saw more than 25,000 brave souls headed for California. While most were single men, a small percentage consisted of women and children. Luzena Stanley Wilson was one of those women. She set out on May 1, 1849, her 30th birthday, together with her husband and her two small sons, Thomas, 3 1/2, and Jay, 1.

Her reminiscences, recorded by her daughter Correnah in 1881, mirror the experiences of other pioneers. They tell of her hopes and fears, and of the hard, relentless work to keep the wagon train moving.

Like most travelers, they had to lighten their loads along the way. By the time they had crossed the Sierra, they and their oxen looked utterly worn out. Any attempt at vanity or other trappings of civilization had long been left behind. Luzena describes their tattered state: "The first man we met was about 50 miles above Sacramento. He had ridden on ahead, bought a fresh horse and some new clothes, and was coming back to meet his train. The sight of his white shirt, the first I had seen for four long months, revived in me the languishing spark of womanly vanity; and when he rode up to the wagon where I was standing, I felt embarrassed, drew down my sun-ragged bonnet over my sunburned face, and shrank from observation. My skirts were worn off in rags above my ankles; my sleeves hung in tatters above my elbows; my hands brown and hard, were gloveless; around my neck was tied a cotton square, torn from a discarded dress; the soles of my leather shoes had long ago parted company with the uppers; and my husband and children and all the camp, were habited like myself, in rags."

While their ragged state had not been of much concern to Luzena during her long journey, this messenger brought back to her how far they had come. "A day or two before, this man was one of us; today, he was a messenger from another world, and a

stranger, so much influence does clothing have on our feelings and intercourse with our fellow men.”

Even after their arrival in makeshift Sacramento, and early next spring, in Nevada City, thoughts about clothing remained unimportant. Most women made do with simple cotton or wool dresses. Both fabrics had their advantages. Wool proved less flammable than cotton, a benefit around open fireplaces, whereas cotton fabric was easier to care for than wool.

Adornments were simple, too. A ribbon around the neck or waist, a piece of lace freshened up the look. It took some time for more elaborate decorations to make their way around Cap Horn. A year later, in 1850, Luzena still recalls the scarcity of dress ornaments.

“For several years my best dress was a clean calico. The first installments of genuine finery which came into the interior were crepe shawls and scarfs (sic) from the Chinese vessels which came to San Francisco. But the feminine portion of the population was so small that there was no rivalry in dress or fashion, and every man thought every woman in that day a beauty. Even I had men come forty miles over the mountains, just to look at me, and I never was called a handsome woman, in my best days, even by my most ardent admirers.”

Despite the scarcity of finery, entertainment flourished. Luzena’s description of a ball in Nevada City in the spring of 1850 vividly recalls the atmosphere of these frontier towns.

“After we had been in the town of Nevada City three or four months, the first ball was given. There were 12 ladies present and about 300 men. The costumes were eccentric, or would be now. At that time it was the prevailing fashion for the gentlemen to attend social gatherings in blue woolen shirts, and with trousers stuffed into boot-tops. Every man was ‘heeled’ with revolver and bowie-knife. My own elaborate toilet for the occasion was a freshly ironed calico and a plaid shawl. The dresses of the other ladies were similar. ... A number of the men tied handkerchiefs around their arms and airily assumed the character of ball-room belles. Every lady was overwhelmed with attentions, and there was probably more enjoyment that night, on the rough pine floor and under the flickering gleam of tallow candles, than one often finds in our society drawing rooms, where the rich silks trail over velvet carpets, where the air is heavy with the perfumes of the exotics, and where the night is turned into a brighter day under the glare of countless gas-jets.”

The same spirit of making do could be found in early Vacaville society. Luzena’s recollections in 1881 allow us a glimpse of the early entertainment.

"We residents of Vaca Valley were an amusement-loving people in the early days of the settlement, and every few weeks saw a ball or party given, to which came all the younger portion of the surrounding families, and not seldom the town overflowed for the night with the buxom lads and lassies from thirty miles away. The largest room in town - usually my dining room (at the Wilson Hotel) - was cleared to make room for the dancers, and they danced hard and long until daylight, and often the bright sunlight saw the participants rolling away in their spring wagons, or galloping off on horseback to their distant homes. The costumes were, like the gatherings, quite unique; the ladies came in calico dresses and calf boots; a ribbon was unusual, and their principal ornaments were good health and good nature; the gentlemen came ungloved, and sometimes coatless. But the fun was genuine, and when the last dance was turned off by the sleepy fiddler who kept time with his foot and called of in thundering tones the figures of the cotillions it was with a sigh of genuine regret that the many dancers said 'good morning.' Now the little town has grown civilized; when they give a party now, the young ladies come be-frizzled and montagued, with silk-dresses, eight-button gloves, and French slippers with Pompadour heels; and the young men come in all the uninteresting solemnity of dress-coats."

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