

# Wagon folks hoped for land of plenty

By Jerry Bowen

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Not all the wagon trains that headed west to California in the 1800s were on a quest for riches found in the gold mines of the Golden State.

In fact, several of our early Solano County pioneers were here before gold was even discovered in Coloma. Their motivation for journeying west had come from the reports by John C. Fremont and a book by Lansford Hastings, as well as letters and word-of-mouth information from emigrants who had returned from California. California was touted a land of plenty with good weather and rich land for growing crops.

Among the early arrivals were the Alfords and the Barbours, who eventually settled in Suisun Valley.

Nathan Barbour was born Jan. 12, 1813, one of eight children by his father's first wife.

When Nathan was 21, he left home, first for Kentucky, then, after only three years, for New Orleans, working as a trader on the Mississippi River. He eventually made his way to Andrews County, Missouri, where he lived until coming to California in 1846, crossing the plains with an oxen team, and arriving in October of that year. His older brother, Roswell, accompanied him on his westward trek.

Apparently Nathan met Landy Alford and his daughters Nancy and Virginia at Independence, Missouri. Nathan married Nancy on May 9, 1846 and the Barbours and the Alfords prepared to journey west, with high hopes and expectations. An extraordinary absence of selfishness was evident in the beginning of the trip, but as with so many others who would later travel West, the trip would take its toll in suffering, intrigue, ruthlessness and self-preservation.

There were other family groups, some of note and some not, besides the Barbours and the Alfords who came with the original wagon train as it started. There was George Harlan of Michigan, with 26 people and 11 wagons, each painted with its owner's name. Among them were the Wimmers, who were part of the later gold-discovery in Coloma. Samuel Young, of Tennessee via Missouri, had two wagons, 12 yoke of oxen, four cows and some heifers, a pair of mules, an extra horse and a light carriage for his pregnant wife. And then there was the well-known George and Jacob Donner, each with three wagons as part of one of the better-known wagon trains, the Russell-Harlan Young-Donner party.

To give you an idea of the logistics of just the Russell-Harlan Young-Donner party, it consisted of 63 wagons, 119 men, 59 women, 110 children, 58,484 pounds of flour, 38,080 pounds of bacon, 1,065 pounds of gunpowder, 2,557 pounds of lead shot, 144 guns (mostly rifles) and 95 pistols. There were 700 cattle, and 150 horses.

Then there was Bluford. K. Thompson, known as "Hellroaring" Thompson, "A course, profane, reckless fellow, a gambler by profession, with some pretensions to gentlemanly manners when sober."

The notorious Lilburn W. Boggs, western trader and former governor of Missouri, the man who loosed the state militia against the Mormons was also a part of the early train. He would go on to become the first Alcalde (Governor) of the Sonoma District as well as a delegate to the California state constitutional convention in 1850 and a member of California state assembly 19th District from 1852-53.

It is not certain which particular wagon group included the Alford-Barbour family. Other units started from points other than Independence and it is estimated that 200 wagons and close to a thousand emigrants were on the move about the same time. They held their final meeting May 11, 1846, before departing.

As they progressed, there were splits and reorganizations. One party would frequently overtake and pass another. Leaders were changed from time to time. One party, as a practical joke, even elected a pompous egotist captain one day, and then by pre-arrangement voted him out the next.

Poor decisions were bound to occur with such irregularity and uncertainty of leadership. This was reflected later in the tragic events of the Donner Party.

The route taken by most of the parties, including the Barbours and Alfords, is attributed to a meeting with James Clyman, a wise old plains and mountain man, who was returning eastward. He was amazed at the ignorance of the emigrants, and couldn't understand why they would give up their good farm homes for California, of which he thought little as a place to live, and said so.

Clyman didn't like the new Hastings cutoff, which later was to lead the Donners astray. Having traversed part of it, he spoke with first-hand authority.

The majority of the 1846 California migration, including the Barbour-Alford unit, went by Fort Hall, escaping the rigors of the Hastings Cutoff through the Wasatch-Uinta Mountains and the great salt desert. But on July 19, at Little Sandy Creek, the Donner-Reed party decided to follow Lansford Hastings' faulty advice to take his cutoff, and elected George Donner captain. Both were poor choices and history has recorded

the results of those fateful decisions with brutal clarity.

Nathan and the others came down via the Truckee River, then to the North Fork of the American River, probably to the Johnson Ranch, 40 miles north of Fort Sutter, and finally, on Oct.10, 1846, to Sutters Fort.

The group then began to divide after five days of rest, some going to Napa, others to Santa Clara.

The Alfords and Barbours traveled to Wolfskill's ranch and here they divided, the Alford's going to Sonoma accompanied by Barbour's wife, while Nathan remained behind for a few days and enlisted in the battalion that Fremont was at the time recruiting. He was sent to Sacramento and served five months. At the end of March 1847, Mr. Barbour followed his friends to Sonoma, where he, with Landy Alford began building two houses on a couple of lots given them for the purpose.

While they were working on their new homes, a chance meeting with another Solano County historical figure, Thomas O. Larkin, would bring about an unexpected change in the lives of the families and their choice of where to settle.

In my next column I will trace their moves to various parts of the county before they eventually settled in Suisun Valley.

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