

Chronicling the trek west to Pleasants Valley

By Jerry Bowen

Sunday, December 18, 2005

The Old California and Oregon Trails that led to the settling of the West during the gold rush are well chronicled by many of the pioneers who made their way here.

In reading accounts written by the pioneers, and in actually traveling on some of the more remote sections of the trails that remain much as they were, one can understand the hardships that were many and often deadly. Yet they came, lured by the promises of a better life.

Some of the diaries offer exceptionally complete descriptions of the daily trudge to the West. Others only reported where they thought they were and the weather and some wrote years later of their experiences.

With the latter, even though many hardships still are much in the minds of those who wrote later, the sufferings on the trail were tempered by time.

The diary of J. Goldsborough Bruff is one of the most complete records kept while on the Oregon/California trail and included many drawings he made along the way, detailing what he saw. The trek to California as recorded by James S. Pleasants' son, William J. Pleasants, is one of those written and published many years later.

With that in mind, as we follow the trip west with the Pleasants family I'll refer to comments from both the Bruff and Pleasants documents of their time on the trail.

Why this choice? Both followed much of the same route and at about the same time though they were in separate wagon trains. And, yes, Pleasants Valley is named after the Vacaville pioneers.

James S. Pleasants was born April 29, 1809, in Lincoln County, Ky., and at the age of 24 married Lydia Mason on Aug. 8, 1833. They moved to Pleasant Hill, Mo., in 1835. Pleasant Hill was a small farming settlement southeast of St. Louis with roots going back to 1828. The Pleasants farmed and raised their family for the next 14 years near the Pleasants Hill community.

Tragedy struck in 1849 when Lydia died, leaving James with three sons - Joseph Edward, William James and Harvey - and three daughters. It's interesting to note here that the names of the daughters are not recorded in William J. Pleasants' book "Twice

Across The Plains,” published in 1906.

That lack of names was a practice that was common for the times. Even the list of wagon train members of a later trip to California in 1856 has the Pleasants family members listed as “Thomas Harvey Pleasants; W. J. Pleasants and three sisters.”

James Pleasants was still a relatively young man of 40 when his wife died. As newspaper accounts of the gold discovery in California continued to grind out stories of the fabulous riches lying around for the picking, he naturally took an interest, as had many others. After a few months of bereavement he decided to carry out “...his long cherished plans and at once began preparations for the journey westward.”

With his two sons, James and Joseph, and friends, John and David Burris, who decided to accompany him, he made his preparations for the long journey to the golden fields of California. He expected to be gone about 18 months and gathered the supplies he felt he would need for that amount of time.

Finally on May 6, 1849, the little party headed for its first rendezvous with others at a meeting point they called “Lone Elm,” two days’ travel from Pleasant Hill. Lone Elm Camp, as it is known today, was used often as a meeting place for wagon trains heading west. It was located southeast of Kansas City, Kan., just south of today’s town of Olathe, Kan.

Once the parties were together they began to organize the wagon train, write rules of conduct and regulations and elect officers. John Lane was chosen as wagon master, James Hamilton as captain and the wagon train was named “The Pleasant Hill Train.”

When all the preparations were complete there were 33 wagons, 74 men, four boys and seven women that left Lone Elm.

In William Pleasants’ narrative, he described the purpose of the majority of the travelers to head west at the time as, “Just here I will say the main object in view with nearly all of us on this expedition, was to dig gold, and we really expected to obtain from that source within a few months sufficient riches to return home independent. But some of those among us had friends who were already in California. A brother of Mr. Lyons was in Vacaville; William Hopper had a cousin, Charles Hopper, living in Napa Valley, near Yountville. These gentlemen may have had other things in view, but as I before stated, with the majority of us it was simply to enrich ourselves in the gold fields that we went to California, though of course a love of adventure and exploration in a new country, fascinating themes to most men, may have greatly influenced us also.”

Though he doesn’t specify the route they took or any specific dates of events

throughout the memoir, he described the earliest part of the trip to California as having to cross many watercourses with good weather to keep their spirits high.

Most likely they headed north to Independence, Mo., and crossed the Mississippi River west of there into Kansas then south to Olathe where the Lone Elm Camp was.

From Lone Elm, weather and muddy ground became a factor of their progress when he estimated they averaged five to 15 miles a day. During the latter days of May and early June, rainy weather slowed the progress.

They found the Indians friendly and were helpful by lashing several canoes together to carry supplies across some of the rivers. Buffalo and antelope were abundant, so there was no problem with the supply of food. From Lone Elm their route probably took them through today's Topeka, Kan., and turned northwest to follow the north side of the Little Blue River through part of Nebraska.

The trip was light-hearted and fairly easygoing in the beginning, with decent weather. But it was to change suddenly in both respects

Tragedy struck the Pleasant Hill Wagon Train when John Lane, the wagon master, came down with cholera, which was epidemic in 1848-49.

Cholera is an infectious disease caused by bacteria, usually by drinking water that is contaminated, by improper sanitation, or by eating improperly cooked fish. Symptoms included explosive diarrhea, stomach cramps, nausea, vomiting, and dehydration. Death is generally due to extreme dehydration and the disease has a high death rate.

The wagon train halted and although every effort was made to save his life, he died the next day. He was buried somewhere on the north side of the Little Blue River. This places the wagon train somewhere before the Platte River between Hanover, Kan., and Kearney - then Fort Kearney - Neb.

Heavy rains for some time made travel quite difficult and slow. Before reaching the south bank of the Platte River, near Fort Kearney, cholera struck again. This time it took the life of Julius Wright, the only son of a widow who had remained home.

On nearing the Platte River they found it and all the surrounding streams to be heavily swollen by the constant rains. It was here that William Hensley, described as, "...an exceedingly lively, jovial, good-natured fellow," was walking with some of the members of the party when he made the comment, "Boys, this would be a dreadful place to be buried in. I should hate to die and be laid away in this low, muddy flat."

In a strange turn of circumstance, that night Hensley came down with the dreaded cholera and was dead by the next morning. His death so unnerved his messmates that two of them decided to return home. To do so alone would have more than likely proven disastrous for the two men. Second thoughts and an appeal by members of the group caused them to rethink their decision and continue to California with the rest of the train.

When the wagon train reached the North Platte River it must have been near Fort Kearny although there is no mention of the military installation. The weather finally had cleared up at this time.

At about the same time, William G. Bruff and his wagon train reached the fort via a different route known today as the "Nebraska Road" that began in today's Nebraska City and follows much of Interstate 80 in the state. In his diary entries of early June 1849, he recorded many days of rainy weather. On June 15 he noted, "Commences clear, light airs from the south, temp 60 degrees ... sent 2 men ahead to Ft. Childs (early name for Ft. Kearny) to inform my friends that we were close by."

I believe that both wagon trains were within two weeks of each other at Fort Kearney. It's understandable that there is no mention of the fort in Pleasants' account since it was little more than a couple of adobes and some tents at the time.

At this time I am assuming that the Pleasant Hill Wagon Train was in this area sometime in late June or early July, probably ahead of the Bruff train based on weather accounts and the average speed of the Pleasants wagon train.

I'll continue the story of the Pleasants family trek to California in my next column.

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