

# Cholera plagued wagon trains on trip west

By Jerry Bowen

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In my last article, we began following the long wagon trip to California in 1849 with James S. Pleasants and his family. They had named the wagon train the Pleasant Hill Wagon Train in honor of the town they had been living near in Missouri.

James and his friends were avid hunters and were in awe of the huge herds of buffalo and antelope. Food along the trail was easily obtained at the time.

The first part of the trek was fairly easy and with pleasant weather. By the time they reached what is today, Nebraska, the weather began to turn sour and some of the wagon train members died from cholera.

With the deadly disease depressing members of the train, they continued on, all in constant dread that perhaps they would be next to become sick and possibly end up in a nameless grave in the wide expanse of the then relatively unknown prairie.

Two members of the Pleasant Hill Trail were so unnerved by the deaths that they decided to turn back toward home by themselves. The rest of the members finally convinced them that to do so would be much more dangerous than continuing toward California in the company of friends.

It was about June 1849, and they had passed Fort Kearney and were traveling up the south bank of the mile-wide and shallow Platte River. James Pleasants' son, William, commented in his book "Twice Across the Plains," which he wrote much later, "Since the good-bye to civilization on that beautiful morning in May last, though many troubles have beset our pathway and we have drunk of the bitter dregs of misfortune, the expedition has much to be thankful for. The cattle and other stock that started with us are still in good condition and doing excellent service, which is no small item when one stops to consider the terrible consequences that might result should the men and women of our party be suddenly deprived of the means of transportation here in the midst of the vast wilderness."

Travel details recorded by J. Goldsborough Bruff, a traveler in another wagon train that was in the same approximate vicinity as the Pleasant Hill Wagon Train, included the graves he encountered along the way. As you read Bruff's diary it's evident that cholera and accidents were no stranger to any of the travelers at the time. A few of the graves he listed near the junction of the North and South Platte rivers were, "J. M.

McClanahan of Morgan Co. Mo.-Died 13 June, 1849; Daniel Maloy of Gallitin Co. Ill.-Died

June 18, 1849 of Cholera; Jno. Waugh of Scott Co. Mo. June 17, 1849; Rachel E. Pattison-Died June 19, 1849 ... ” and the list goes on and on, page after page of deaths with the main cause being cholera.

When the Pleasant Hill Wagon Train reached a point about 20 or 30 miles past the confluence of the North and South Platte Rivers, one more name was added to the frequent deaths along the trail. Thomas Moore died of cholera and was buried on the south bank of the South Platte, probably somewhere near the Oregon Trail crossing at Big Springs, Neb.

After burying Moore, they made preparations to cross the South Platte River. The river had a sandy bottom that tended to act like quicksand if a wagon was to stop while crossing. Pleasants commented, “Much time is consumed in making this portage, but finally, barring a few slight accidents, all are safe on the other side.”

Misfortune struck again as another “old man” named Kearnes died of cholera and was buried on a bluff north of the South Platte River.

Although William Pleasants gave hardly any details about their march to the West for the next few days, he does say that, “Leaving the river at this point of crossing we move in a northwesterly direction through a rolling hill-country and after making fifty miles or so reached the North Platte, a fine stream about, I should judge, four hundred and fifty yards broad.”

At this point they crossed the North Platte, probably somewhere in the vicinity of Scottsbluff, Neb. It appears they had left what we know today as the Oregon Trail and perhaps continued their journey on the Mormon Trail that is on the north side of the river.

According to William Pleasants, we next find the Pleasant Hill Wagon Train somewhere south of the Black Hills after several days of travel. It was here that they had an interesting encounter with a French trapper who entered their camp. The trapper told them, “Why undertake the hazardous journey in quest of gold, when right here in these hills, almost within a stone’s throw of where you are now standing, and to be had almost for the asking, is virgin gold in quantities that would stagger the dreams of avarice.”

He went on to tell tales of how the Indians dug the gold in quantities and made rude personal ornaments out of it.

They decided to lay over for a while and sent 10 men with the trapper to investigate the possibility the tales were true, even though they had some trepidation that it would be a trap to attack and pillage the train of its food and goods.

The men returned two days later without actually reaching the Indian village they had set out to visit. They turned back when they realized they would have to ford an icy river to the north of where they had camped. This leads me to believe they were actually somewhere between Scottsbluff, Neb., and Fort Laramie, Wyo., south of the Black Hills and the "icy river" may have been the Nebraska River.

History later reveals the wealth in gold that was to be had for the taking in the Black Hills. One can only wonder how our own local history might have been different had they found what they sought in the gold region of the Black Hills of South Dakota!

As they continued their slog to the West the country became rocky and hilly with high mountain peaks looming in the distance. Good campsites with enough food and water became scarce and harder to find.

Bruff described the surrounding area on July 8, 1849, "The isolated hills here are of sand, gravel and clay ... Hollows of standing water emitted a disagreeable effluvia. Mosquitoes in abundance. No wild animals or game seen. Buffalo chips scarce, grass good, fuel drift-wood from the river. Northern side of the river, as far as we could see, white sand hills. Many ox-trains on the opposite shore."

The Pleasant Hill Wagon Train was nearing Fort Laramie. Here it is interesting to note that an increasing number of detours parallel to the Oregon Trail become more numerous. The notion that the California-Oregon Trail was just one path isn't true. In the Laramie, Wyo., area the alternate routes had many names such as Bluff Route, North Bluff Route, South Bluff Route, River Route and Plateau Route.

Pleasants tells of crossing the "Laramie Fork" to reach Fort Laramie. This was the intersection of the Laramie and North Platte Rivers. Pleasants could have been on any of the above named trails at this time.

After several more days travel in a westerly direction they had to cross to the north side of the North Platte River again. Apparently they are now on the main Oregon Trail, which also carried the name "Poison Spider Route," and are in the vicinity of today's Casper, Wyo.

The trail turned to the southwest here and pointed toward Independence Rock. The wagon train also divided into three parts here after a particularly hard crossing of the North Platte River. Pleasants recorded the reason for splitting the train as, "... not

because of any ill feeling or misunderstanding among us, but for the simple reason that we have now reached a section of country where stock feed is becoming scarcer...”

Indeed, the trail was becoming more hazardous as Bruff described on July 23, 1849, “... piled around were hundreds of dead animals, chiefly oxen. Ox geering lay about in profusion.” Continuing along the trail, he encountered abandoned wagons, food and supplies and many more graves.

I'll continue the story of the Pleasant Hill wagon train in my next column.

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