

The long journey to California in 1846

By Nancy Dingler

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In the quiet shade and shadows of the pioneer Rockville cemetery stand two stone monuments. Inscribed on the smaller rough-hewn, mossy natural headstone is the name Alford. Placed nearby is a little "stone house" quarried from the same stone that makes up the cemetery chapel.

Weather and time have not been kind to the inscription, for it is well-worn. This is the grave of a small child, the first to be buried at the "new" cemetery.

The tragic irony of this small grave is that the 5 acres, donated in 1856 for the chapel and cemetery, were given by the parents, not knowing that their 3-year-old daughter, Sarah, would be the first occupant.

Landy and Sarah Alford decided to come west, lured by the promise of California around 1846. "Jumping off places" for westward bound were Independence, Council Bluffs and St. Joseph, Mo.

The Alfords likely decided on Independence, Mo., where many families were putting together wagon trains, including the ill-fated Donner party. It is here where they met seasoned frontiersmen Nathan and Roswell Barbour.

Sparks evidently flew between the Alford's daughter Nancy and Nathan Barbour, because on May 9 they were married. Shortly after the union, the families set forth on the arduous journey to California. Nancy and Nathan would spend their honeymoon on dusty, as well as muddy trails, weathering hardships most would not consider.

According to research by Christie Barbour as told by Tom Barbour in the December 2000 issue of The Solano Historian, there were a large number of family groups starting out from Independence on May 11. George Harlan of Michigan brought 26 people and 11 wagons, each painted with its owner's name.

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. George and Jacob Donner each had three wagons.

Mixed in with the families were single men. One of them was Bluford K. Thompson, also known as "Hellroaring Thompson." He was described as "a course, profane,

reckless fellow, a gambler by profession, with some pretensions to gentlemanly manners when sober.”

There was also a celebrity of sorts on the train, in the form of Lilburn Boggs. He was a western trader and former governor of Missouri. His claim to fame or infamy was that he had loosed the state militia against the Mormons. Other notables were William Henry Russell, former U.S. Marshal and Edwin Bryant, former editor of the Louisville Courier.

Russell was elected captain of the wagon train. He turned out to be an amiable but ineffective leader.

The train consisted of 63 wagons, 119 men, 59 women, 110 children, 58,484 pounds of breadstuffs (flour), 38,080 pounds of bacon, 1,065 pounds of gunpowder, 2,557 pounds of lead shot, 144 guns, (mostly rifles) and 95 pistols. Livestock consisted of 700 cattle and 150 horses.

Jesse Quinn Thornton, one of the emigrants, stated that “the cattle were numerous, fat and strong; the tents new and clean; the food, of good quality and abundant in quantity and variety . . . the mode of travel is light wagons universally drawn by oxen and usually about three yoke to a wagon.”

The groups may have started out together, but as the long line of wagons trailed after one another, they would break into smaller groups and vote in and out those that would lead them.

The Alford and Barbour families did not suffer the terrible fate of the Donners, perhaps because on the trail they met James Clyman, a well-known mountain man who was returning to the East. He told the families straight off that he did not like the so-called “Hastings cut-off.”

Taking Clyman’s advice, the party went by Fort Hall, thus sparing them the rigors and delay of the cut-off, which the Donner party fell victim to, leading them into the Sierras in time for early, heavy snow storms and the well-known tragedy of death and cannibalism.

Nathan and Nancy arrived with the rest of the family in California some 30 days before the infamous winter storms. It is believed that the party came down the Truckee River, which they crossed some 25 times, then to the North Fork of the American River, then probably to the Johnson Ranch, 40 miles north of Fort Sutter and finally, on Oct. 10, 1846, to Sutter’s Fort. According to San Jose history, the group then began to divide after five days of rest, some going to Napa, others to Santa Clara.

The Alford and Barbours headed for Sonoma. Nathan enlisted to fight in the Mexican War under Gen. Fremont. On his return from the war, in the spring, he along with Landy Alford framed two houses, which they intended to erect on a couple of lots given them for the purpose. While at work on the houses, Thomas O. Larkin, the American consul in Monterey before the war, made them an offer that they could not refuse.

Larkin offered to take both of the houses to Benicia free of charge to be erected on specified lots in that city. They moved to Benicia in October 1847. Nathan went into the lumber business and built the Solano Hotel in Benicia.

The following year, gold was discovered. The families decided to try their hand at finding a fortune.

Nathan and Nancy, along with their families, traveled to Hangtown (Placerville), mining about \$5,000 in gold. Nancy's health began to fail, so the family returned to Benicia.

On the trip back, they passed through Suisun Valley and noted that the native grasses grew so tall that a man on horseback could almost disappear.

Believing the valley to be of exceptionally rich soil, they decided to settle on 240 acres. The Landrys followed suit, settling near the Barbours. They became prosperous farmers, growing many varieties of fruit trees.

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