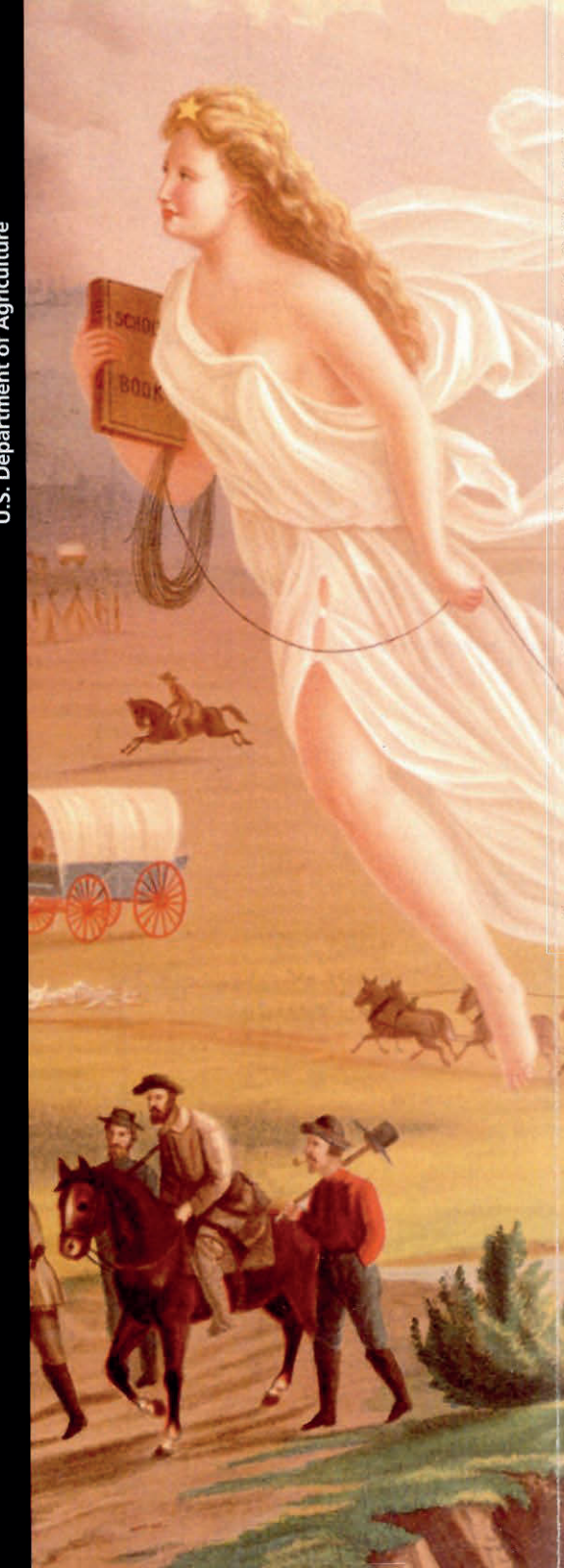


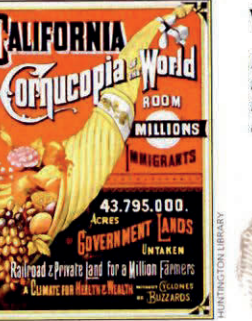


PARADISE

"Ho for California!" Free land. Gold. Adventure. Between 1841 and 1869, more than a quarter million people answered this call and crossed the plains and mountains to the goldfields of the West. By 1849 the lure of instant wealth and tales of riches beckoned at the end of the 2,000-mile California Trail. The story of the men, women, and children who traveled overland to the West Coast has become an American epic. Since the late 1700s, the West had held out the promise of boundless opportunity. After Lewis and Clark found a way to the Pacific in 1805, fur traders followed Indian trails up western river valleys and across mountain passes, filling in the blank spaces on early maps that represented unknown country. By the late 1830s, mountain men had explored most of the routes that became overland trails. In 1837 an economic panic swept the United States and gave people already itching to move an additional reason to go west. Throughout the 1840s promoters and trail guides worked hard to create an idyllic picture of the prospects for greater fortune and better health open to Americans who made the journey to California. One young emigrant said a pamphlet describing a lush California with its ideal climate and flowers that bloomed all winter "made me just crazy to move out there, for I thought such a country must be a paradise."

MANIFEST DESTINY

The concept of Manifest Destiny—that it was God's will and the right of Americans to expand west—is symbolized in John Gast's painting, American Progress, 1872.



African American trapper Jim Beckwourth guided wagon trains and blazed a trail across the Sierra Nevada in 1851.



COLORADO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Watching "one continual stream" of "honest looking open hearted people" going west in 1846, mountain man James Clyman asked why "so many of all kinds and classes of People should sell out comfortable homes in Missouri and Elsewhere pack up and start across such an immense barren waste to settle in some new Place of which they have at most so uncertain information." The answer?—"this is the character of my countrymen."

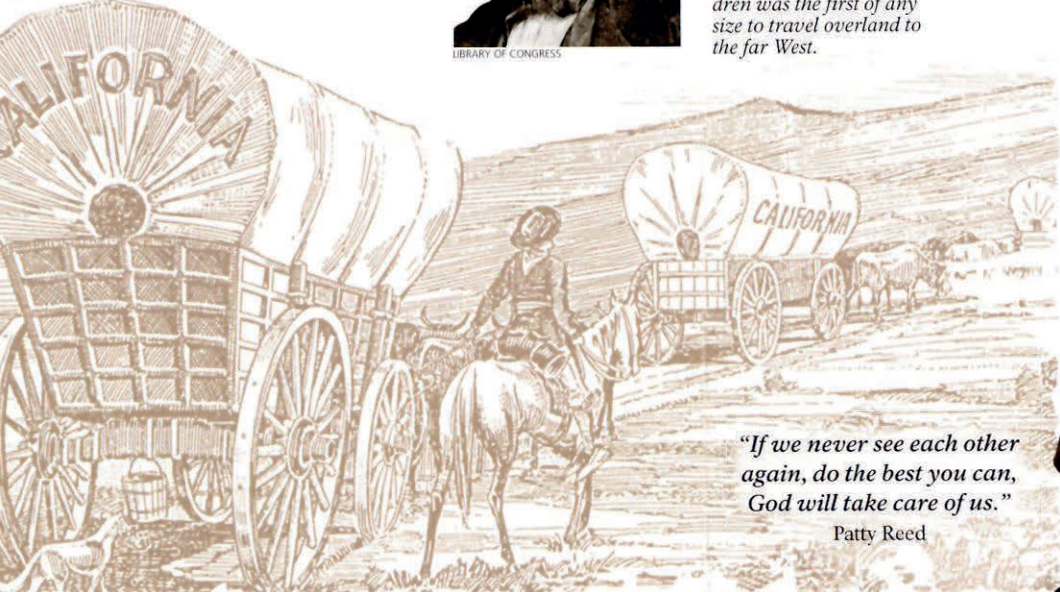
What was the character of Americans in the 1840s? Many embraced Manifest Destiny, a phrase penned by journalist John O'Sullivan in July 1845 to explain the US government's thirst for expansion. It was a new term but not a new idea. Since the beginning of the republic, leaders had aggressively claimed land for the United

States. Manifest Destiny crystallized the idea that it was God's will and the rightful destiny of Americans to take over the continent. It became a rallying cry for overlanders to head west.

Personal motives of the emigrants varied. Some planned to build permanent homes or farms, but many hoped to make their fortunes and return east. One 1846 traveler noted that his companions all "agreed in the one general object, that of bettering their condition," but individual hopes and dreams "were as various as can well be imagined." Dreams spurred a diversity of emigrants too: Americans, African Americans, Indians, Canadians, Europeans—people of all ages and backgrounds crossed the plains.

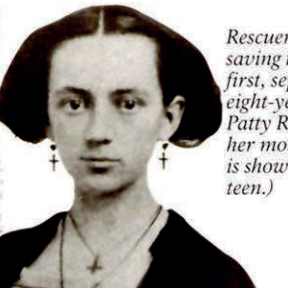


LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



"If we never see each other again, do the best you can, God will take care of us."

Patty Reed



CALIFORNIA DEPT. OF PARKS AND RECREATION

WHY GO WEST?

Posters such as this captured the promise of instant wealth. The call of California was irresistible—health, cheap and fertile land, and a paradise without cyclones or blizzards.



Delayed by mishaps, the Donner-Reed party didn't reach the Sierra Nevada until November. Trapped in deep snow, they stayed in makeshift shelters near Donner Lake (above). Nearly half the party died of cold and starvation.

The first emigrant party to go to California left Missouri in May 1841 with 69 people. At Soda Springs, Idaho, some continued on to Oregon. The others, knowing only "that California lay to the west," struggled across the north end of the Great Salt Lake Desert. They abandoned their wagons before reaching the Humboldt River, packed their livestock with necessities, and in November the 39 travelers, known as the Bidwell-Bartleson party, reached California. In 1844 the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party, traveling the Truckee route, reached the Sierra Nevada in November. Stalled by snow, they left some wagons at Donner Lake and packed onward. In the spring they retrieved their wagons, becoming the first emigrants to take wagons all the way to Sutter's Fort, California. In 1845 John C. Fremont

BEGINNINGS

John Bidwell (left) was 21 when he caught California fever. His 1841 party of men, women, and children was the first of any size to travel overland to the far West.



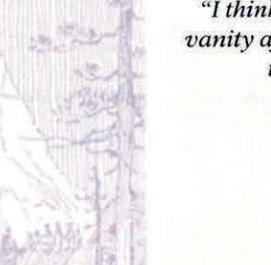
In 1852 miners at Spanish Flat, El Dorado County, (above) pose by their "long tom"—a device for separating gold from rock and gravel.



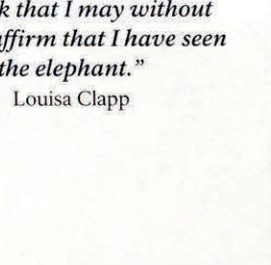
The gold nugget (above left) that James Marshall found at Sutter's Mill in 1848 is about the size of a dime and weighs just over a quarter of an ounce.



Rescuers, intent on saving the children first, separated eight-year-old Patty Reed from her mother. (Patty is shown here as a teen.)



It was awful coming up those mountains. There were great rocks, waist high, that the wheels had to bump over, and it was all the poor oxen could do to drag the lightened loads."



Frances Anne Cooper

GOLD RUSH



By 1860 freight and mail companies, military expeditions, new settlements and trading stations, and thousands of travelers going in both directions transformed the California Trail into a road.



Idaho and the Raft River area, where the main branch of the California Trail separated from the Oregon Trail; or to Utah and the settlements of the Latter-day Saints (Mormons), which were popular way stations. After visiting Salt Lake City, most emigrants followed the Salt Lake Cutoff back to the main trail at City of Rocks in present-day Idaho. For wagons the Humboldt River Valley provided the best practical wagon road through the basin-and-range country, but overlanders continually sought easier ways to cross the steep passes of the Sierra Nevada. Those who turned back often claimed to have seen the elephant's tail. One emigrant, turned back after only 700 miles and said "he had seen the Elephant and eaten its ears."

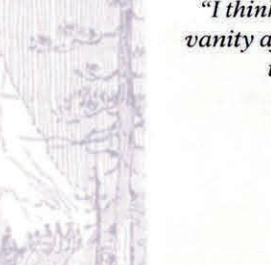


Overlanders preferred oxen to pull their wagons. They were slower than horses but cheaper, more

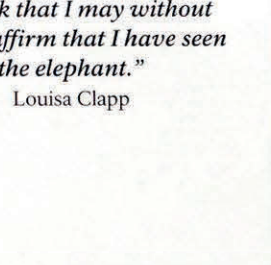
SEEING THE ELEPHANT

"I think that I may without vanity affirm that I have seen the elephant."

Louisa Clapp



WAGONS AND WAYBILLS



WOMEN AND FAMILIES

"One day I read a pamphlet written by... [promoter] Hastings... We kept talking about California until Father decided to put it to a family vote whether we should go or stay. Father went out with Fremont in 1845 to explore the Far Western country... Father came home in time although we had decided to go anyway."



INDIANS AND EMIGRANTS

Painte Sarah Winnemucca (left) recalled that they would have helped the Donner-Reed Party, "only my people were afraid of them."



The quiet land along the California Trail may have seemed empty, but Indian nations had lived there for more than 10,000 years. Unlike Hollywood stereotypes, Indians were more of a help than a danger to emigrants. In the 1840s fatal confrontations were rare. Travelers entrusted their wagons and families to Indians who guided them across swift rivers and through unfamiliar country. In 1844 Paiute Chief Truckee guided emigrants along the route and the river that they named after him. Stories of Indian massacres far outnumbered actual hostile encounters. "We are continually hearing of the depredations of the Indians," wrote Caroline Richardson in 1852, "but we have not seen one yet." Conflict increased in the 1850s and 1860s as thousands of emigrants and

men did not take such risks, were more alert about the teams and seldom had accidents, [and] more attention was paid to cleanliness and sanitation." Even "the meals were more regular and better cooked thus preventing much sickness." Births on the trail were as common as deaths. As one girl recalled, "Three days after my little sister died... we stopped for a few hours, and my sister Olivia was born."

By 1852 about a third of all those crossing the plains were women. Five years later, it was common to find wagon parties made up largely of women and children. These women, as did all emigrants, left familiar homes and endured hardships to find a better life.

Although single men made up the majority of early emigrants and forty-niners, women and families played an important role on the trail.

The first major wagon train, which included the Bidwell-Bartleson party, set out in 1841 with five women and about 10 children. At age 19 Nancy Kelsey (carrying her baby over the Sierra Nevada after the party abandoned its wagons) became the first covered-wagon woman to reach California. Iowans Catherine Haun and her husband caught gold fever in 1849. The Hauns and about 25 of their neighbors longed to go west, pick up gold off the ground, and return home to pay off their debts. Catherine wrote in her journal that women and children on the trail "exerted a good influence, as the

their livestock destroyed Indian food sources. Some Indians tried to collect payment for passage across tribal lands. A few emigrants paid, but most felt little sympathy for Indian claims to the land. Relations deteriorated: Indians killed travelers, and emigrants killed Indians. Violence attracted attention, but it was not the reason most emigrants perished. Thousands died from drownings, accidents, and disease, especially cholera. Many incidents were the work of criminals called "white Indians," who were notorious for their brutality. One 1850 traveler concluded that "the savage Indians" were "afraid to come near the road" and "near all the stealing and killing is done by the Whites following the Trains."

Surviving ruts offer silent testimony of the California Trail, but no one tells this epic better than the people who traveled it. Westward travelers shared similar experiences: the drudgery of walking more than 2,000 miles, the struggle to cross forbidding landscapes, extremes of temperature and weather, shortages of food and water, fear of Indians, accidents, sickness, and death. These emigrants, who saw the elephant and more, remembered the trip west as their life's greatest adventure. Their experiences—often recorded eloquently in journals, drawings, and letters—inspired American popular culture and influenced art, literature, and the movies. Their stories are part of the legacy of the American West.

Although dust from the wagons settled nearly 150 years ago, the California Trail's heritage lives on—with the people who love its history and in the railroads, interstate highways, and powerlines that follow the routes of the old emigrant trails. Today, public lands preserve much of the original landscape. Surviving ruts offer silent testimony of the California Trail, but no one tells this epic better than the people who traveled it. Westward travelers shared similar experiences: the drudgery of walking more than 2,000 miles, the struggle to cross forbidding landscapes, extremes of temperature and weather, shortages of food and water, fear of Indians, accidents, sickness, and death. These emigrants, who saw the elephant and more, remembered the trip west as their life's greatest adventure. Their experiences—often recorded eloquently in journals, drawings, and letters—inspired American popular culture and influenced art, literature, and the movies. Their stories are part of the legacy of the American West.

AN ENDURING LEGACY

The adventure of a lifetime! These emigrants celebrated their trip to a new homeland with this lasting souvenir.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

National Park Service
National Trails
Intermountain Region
www.nps.gov/cali

Bureau of Land Management
www.wy.blm.gov/nhtic
www.blm.gov/cv5c

Forest Service
www.fs.fed.us/r4
www.fs.fed.us/r5

Oregon-California Trails Association
PO Box 1019
Independence, MO 64051-0519
www.octa-trails.org

Internet Information
NPS Comprehensive
Management and Use Plan
www.nps.gov/cali/parkmgmt/index.htm

Auto Tour Route
Interpretive Guide
www.nps.gov/cali/planyourvisit/brochures.htm

Chimney Rock, Nebraska

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California Trail

