

No other chapter in all American history is more thrilling, nor has there been one of a profounder bearing upon the destiny of the Republic, than the chapter of the Argonauts.

The destiny of the Pacific States is just being visioned. The foundation of its mighty civilization was laid by men of brain and brawn and tremendous courage.

The following story is compiled from notes left by John Rueger and now is prized as one of the finest heritages of The Rueger family.

The Story of John Rueger PIONEER OF "49"

I was born in the northern part of Switzerland in 1817. My father who was a physician, died when I was about four years old and was soon followed by my mother. Although an orphan I received fair education but at the age of fifteen left school and was apprenticed to a cooper. After I had spent some years at this trade. I devoted a few more in, the occupation of brewing.

In October 1834. I left my native country and set out for America with the family of my brother-in-law. After remaining in the United States for three years I returned to Switzerland and in 1838 bought a brewery. In June of the same year I was married but my wife died in 1842, leaving me with three children. The next year I married again and my second wife bore me one son. I was not successful in business and the potato famine and failure of the crops in 1846-47 caused such a depression of the country that I again went to America, leaving my family in Switzerland. I settled in Detroit but a few months after I arrived, came the news that gold had been discovered in California. Upon hearing this I resolved to try my fortune in the gold mines. I intended to cross the plains but at that time knew nothing of the nature of the country through which I was to pass. Accordingly I bought a horse and a light wagon, placed my bundle upon it and started. But I had only gone three or four miles before my wagon broke down and I had to return. Seeing the folly of attempting the journey in the manner I have described, I sold my outfit and took passage on the steamer to Toledo and from there I went to Cincinnati. A few hours after my arrival there a steamer landed bound for St. Louis, on which I embarked. When I arrived at St. Louis I found the cholera raging so fiercely that I left with the next steamer for St. Joseph. On this boat I made the acquaintance of two gentlemen who were also going to California. With these men I made an agreement to get a yoke of oxen and some provisions and go with them. We remained at St. Joseph for a few days and then crossed the Missouri. Finding excellent grass for our cattle we decided to encamp near the river for a few days. On May 9th we started on the long and arduous journey across the plains. About 25 miles from St. Joseph we passed a house which I was told was an Indian Mission and here I saw the first Indians. About 220 miles from the Missouri we passed through a swamp where the wagons often sank and it required the united strength of the whole party to pull them out again. After traveling a few hundred miles farther we passed Independence Rock which was even then covered with the names of hundreds of travelers who had gone on before. Shortly after passing this rock we met a train of emigrants, who had horses instead of oxen. The drivers were bright, lively young men and as they passed on they cheered and shouted and were soon out of sight. We followed at our usual gait, and the next day we passed a camp a few hundred feet from the road, and upon approaching it we saw the men who had passed us the day before sitting before the tent evidently very sick. We soon saw that they had the cholera and I gave them some bitters, but it was too late to help them and the next day they were buried. We hardly ever saw any Indians, as they were frightened away by the cholera and smallpox. We soon reached the South Platte, which we forded at a place where it was very wide but not deep, and we had to cross as quickly as possible on account of quicksands. From here we crossed to the North Platte, which is a rapid and deep stream and in order to cross it we had to take the beds of the wagons off and caulk them, then by means of these crude boats we in-

tended to take our goods over the river. I went over with the first load and remained on the other side to watch the goods. One of our party named Muller wanted to pull a boat over by swimming and towing it after him but he had not gone half way before he gave up the attempt. Mr. Muller was in a hurry to get everything to the north side and in his impatience overloaded one of the boats and when it was a short distance from the northern shore water began to run in over the back. I saw it from the shore and called to them to throw out the heavy things in the back. They did this, and one of the party, a youth of nineteen, threw a rope to the wagon, and with this we drew it ashore, having lost nothing but a few sacks of flour. We brought the animals over by making them swim by the sides of the wagons, hitched them up and started for Laramie.

Here we had the oxen shod so that they would be better able to endure the journey over the mountains. After we had passed Laramie, good water began to be scarce. Almost all the springs were so strongly impregnated with alkali as to be unfit to drink and we would not allow the oxen to drink it as the effects would have been fatal. I had some absinthe in my stores and having heard that alkali would turn the absinthe black, used this as a test and by this means we were enabled to use only pure water. In a few days we reached the Sweetwater river, where we found excellent pasturage, and then started for the South Pass. As we were traveling along the river some of our party noticed the glittering patches of mica in the sand and thinking it was gold, scooped it up, but the others told them what it was and they stopped their exertions. In the South Pass the nights were very cold but the air was very clear. To the north, apparently at no great distance, we saw the Wind River Mountains with their peaks covered with snow. When we passed Pacific Springs we thought that the worst part of the journey was over, but we were soon enlightened. As we went along, the mountains seemed to grow higher and higher but at last we reached the summit. Very little rain falls on the west side of the Rockies and often we found the dust a foot thick. After crossing the Rockies we reached the Big Sandy River and from here we started over a desert 54 miles wide. Knowing that we would find no water in this place we gave the animals as much water as they wanted before we started. We traveled 24 miles at a stretch and reached Green River where we allowed the exhausted animals to rest. We gave them only a small quantity of water at first but after they were cool we let them drink their fill. At Green River some Mormons had a ferry and with this our goods were brought to the other side. Before proceeding we unloaded all unnecessary provisions and piled them up for the use of those who should follow. All our preparations having been completed, we started out again. The road from this point was very mountainous but we crossed without mishap.

The next place of importance was Soda Springs. All around were cone-shaped mounds between 20 and 30 feet high and at the top of each there was a basin of bubbling water. We mixed some of this water with sugar which caused it to effervesce, making a very pleasant drink. Leaving this place the road wound around to Bear River. I noticed that the ground gave out a hollow, rumbling sound as the wagons passed over it. Upon investigation, I found that the whole bank of the river was honeycombed with tunnels which extended back under the road, causing these peculiar reverberations. All of these openings were pouring out this same foaming water as we obtained from the springs. The road now branched off in two directions, one to Fort Hall, the other to Raft River. We chose the latter as it was considerably shorter. We traveled over a rolling prairie, abundantly covered with grass, consequently we proceeded very leisurely. On the top of an eminence we found the crater of an extinct volcano.

Our next halting place was the Snake River, where we fished for crabs with a hook baited with salt pork. Having rested our animals and allowed them to get their fill of the grass which grew in the neighborhood, we set out for Humboldt River. Rumors now began to reach us of the thievish habits of the Indians in the vicinity. They would steal anything from an ox to a brass ring. We saw nothing of the Indians however, until we had traveled some eighty miles, when one day a party of three came into camp to beg and steal what they could. Their woebegone appearance aroused my pity and I gave each an old coat, a pair of trousers and a handful of crackers. My friend Muller laughed at me for showing them any sympathy but the next day I had the laugh on him. We encamped that night with another party of emigrants having about twenty oxen and these were turned loose to graze with our six. In the morning our six were there, but the other twenty were gone. The Indians had come overnight and driven off all except ours. The old clothes and the few handfuls of crackers had saved our oxen. Of course I reminded Mr. Muller of his words of the day before and he took them all back. Having hitched up our oxen we proceeded along the Humboldt until we came

to the junction of the California and Oregon roads. Here a notice was nailed up informing us that we could reach the Feather River in six days by taking the northern route. Mr. Muller wanted to go straight ahead but I insisted on going to the north. Not being able to agree we separated. It did not take me many days to realize that Muller was right as the subsequent events showed.

Having packed up about fifteen pounds of provisions I started on foot, following in the wake of the teams which were going the same way. My clothing, blankets and other necessities made such a heavy load that I was compelled to lighten considerably before I had really started upon the journey. Following the wagons, which I intended should guide me, I crossed a desert where water became very scarce, causing all much suffering. I had confidently been following the wagons expecting to reach my journey's end in a week when I was dumbfounded to find that the whole party had taken the wrong road.

The first wagon had passed the road which would have taken them through Noble's Pass, where we intended to go, and the others had all followed without any thought of going astray. But as there was no help for it we proceeded as best we could. Not having any definite knowledge of the road the emigrants could not supply proper accommodations for the animals and the result was that they began to drop thick and fast. The dying animals choked up the road and the teams had to turn out in order to get ahead at all. Other parties had gone ahead of us and the dead animals from their teams created a most sickening stench. We passed a hot spring around which the ground was actually covered with the carcasses of dead animals.

All now began to suffer extremely and I often wished myself with my party. After much toil we reached the summit of the Sierras.

The road up was so steep that twenty oxen were required to drag an empty wagon up the slope. From the top of the mountain we beheld the western country. It caused us much surprise to find the whole slope before us thickly wooded. Below us lay a beautiful lake which we found to be Goose Lake. On the southern margin of this lake the road again branched to the north and the south. As we rested at the side of the lake we congratulated each other that our troubles were over but in fact the worst was yet to come—for the five of us at least. I with four companions set out southward on foot through beautiful valleys in the very best of spirits. There was plenty of water and though our provisions were scanty we expected before long to replenish our stock in the land of gold. We had but one meal per day consisting of soup. It was not as good as you could get at a French restaurant, it was pretty thin and weak. One supplied a little bacon, another crackers, which we boiled and then ate. I was given charge of the provisions in order that all might be supplied, not one of the others trusting his companions. At last our provisions were exhausted and having boiled our last soup we divided our party. Two went off by themselves while the other two stayed with me. We traveled through Pitt River Valley in one day arriving at a place called Big Meadows, Plumas County, not far from the headwaters of the Feather. Here our party was again increased to five by the addition of two strangers. We attempted to purchase food from passing teams with what few dollars we had remaining but were absolutely unable to get even a mouthful. Starting off again we noticed a sign to the effect that the mines were forty miles distant. At this point my worldly wealth consisted of a blanket, an overcoat, a quart measure, a lead pencil, a pocketbook and a few dollars in coin. I also had bacon and flour enough to make a half cup of soup. We were not troubled much about our lack of food as our late experiences had accustomed us to very light rations. We marched along all that day following in a narrow foot path which grew fainter and fainter until we lost it in the numerous deer trails which crossed it. We accordingly encamped by the river, which we intended should be our guide and went to sleep without thinking much about our condition.

The banks of the Feather were so broken that finally we had to climb the mountains and walk along the top, going down to the river only when it was necessary. Our main articles of food were some nuts like the hazelnut, completely incased in thorns, and a few wild cherries, which we found in the chaparral.

The cherries were all skin and pit and were very sour, but by cooking them we obtained some nourishment. We

had been in the mountains four days when one afternoon we entered a canyon which was completely crossed and recrossed by deer paths.

I was walking some little distance lost in deep thought when I suddenly missed my companions. I looked around and at last saw them about fifty feet above me climbing upward. I shouted to them and they said that all the paths lead to the river and in the end it would be alright. So I proceeded and soon lost sight of them. Having reached the river I looked around for the others but they were nowhere to be seen. As I had a shotgun with me I fired it several times but they were so far distant that they didn't hear me. I had some tea in my wallet so I made myself a cup of tea and the thought occurred to me that tea leaves might satisfy my hunger. And so in my half-starved condition, I swallowed them and they made me feel a little better. I soon went to sleep and awakened early in the morning and proceeded on my way. At intervals I would call, hoping to attract the attention of my absent companions but without avail. Supposing that they were ahead of me, I went forward as fast as possible, going higher and higher into the mountains. Toward noon I was near the top and I was beginning to feel hungry when I noticed a bush full of bright red berries and I hastened to it but found that someone had been there before me as the ground was strewn with husks of berries.

Upon looking around I found the tracks of a gigantic bear. The footprints of the animal were about eleven inches long so I had a pretty fair idea of its size. But these signs didn't frighten me in the least as I proceeded to clear the bush of the remaining berries which gave me quite a meal. At that time I knew nothing of the ferocity of the grizzly, for such it undoubtedly was, else I would not have felt so secure.

From here I climbed to the mountain top in order to get my bearings from the sun. Having reached the top I noticed a peak southwest from which I took my bearings. Whenever I wanted water I had to go down into the canyon and having a little canteen I filled it every morning and evening and traveled all day along the heights. One day while going through some chaparral I lost my canteen and whenever I needed water after that I had to walk quite a distance. My carbine being out of order, I used it as a staff to help me in climbing.

Four days after leaving my companions I had reached a broad plateau at the top of the mountains and it being near nightfall I concluded to sleep there. I built a fire near a fallen pine and lay down not far from it and went to sleep. I had not slept very long when I was awakened by great heat, and getting up quickly saw that the tree trunk was on fire. I had barely gotten into a safe place when the flames burst out directly over the spot where I had been sleeping. This adventure made me somewhat more careful but the same thing happened to me again a few days later. I had built my fire for the night in a very narrow canyon on a level bank, but before going to sleep I descended to a little stream and with my quart measure poured water on the flames until I thought they were extinguished. Then I composed myself for the night. Before very long I heard the crackling of the flames and getting up I poured more water until I was sure they were out. I had been sleeping some time after that when I was again awakened by the light of the fire. I then literally soaked the bank with water and went to sleep. When I arose in the morning I was not sure whether I had been burned alive or not. On examination I found that the bank was composed of dry timber, and had I known it certainly should not have built a fire upon it.

Setting out in the morning I walked along looking for berries, but found none. To make matters worse, I lost my knife, and everything thus going against me made me lose my spirits altogether, in fact I feared my tribulations would turn my head. I was getting so weak that I could not get even water without risking my life. The heat now began to be unbearable and berries very much scattered, causing me to feel more and more like giving up. While I was walking along in this mood, looking at the ground, I fancied that I saw a human footprint. At first I was sure that it was a delusion, but after hunting a little I found more and by following them closely I at last reached a path along which I walked, hoping soon to reach human aid. I had already observed that the tracks were those of Indians, but even they are human beings, and I decided to take my chances with them. The path led through bushes of manzanita berries of which I ate although they were not very palatable. Having not yet reached the end of the path at evening, I lay down where I was and slept, starting again early in the morning along the same road. I had walked about an hour or two when I entered a little valley where on all sides I saw oak trees and in the midst was built a crude hut. I was startled by the appearance of half a dozen

Indian children, stark naked. They fled from me in fear but I went on until I saw two squaws sitting on the ground, while all around them were piles of acorns which they had gathered. As I approached, a fully grown Indian, also naked, stepped from the hut and confronted me. I advanced a few paces towards him but he motioned for me to take my leave. This was a very inhospitable reception for me so I continued down the valley but suddenly found my farther advance stopped by a barrier of rocks, through which I saw no opening. While I was trying to think what I had better do I heard steps approaching and in a little while the Indian whom I had seen a little time before came up to me. He was now armed with bow and arrows and a knife. I understood by his signs that he wanted me to follow him, which I did and soon we entered a narrow chasm through the rocks and on the other side entered another valley. As I stepped into the open air I was astonished to hear someone singing far down the valley. My Indian guide signified to me that he wished me to remain where I was, so I sat down and naturally felt very much overjoyed with the prospects of soon joining white people. The Indian soon returned and I offered him a little tin plate which I still had in my possession, which caused him to be rather friendly toward me. I motioned to him to sit down beside me and he did so. I spoke the Spanish word for river to him and upon his appearing to understand it, I asked by signs whether I could reach the river by sunset, but he shook his head. During this time two Indian boys about thirteen years of age approached and these I now followed down the valley. After half an hour's walk we came to another Indian youth who now relieved the other two of the duty of guides and went further down the valley with me. At last we heard voices approaching and the boy showed me in their direction and ran off. I waited where I was and soon saw three Indians coming toward me. Their clothing was just as scanty as that of my former guides, except that one of them wore a band of feathers upon his head. With this one I carried on a conversation by signs and made him understand that the sun had set ten times since I had anything to eat. The Indian showed me, by a significant motion what my fate would have been had I come out among a neighboring tribe. He then acted as my guide and I followed. At sundown I noticed that the valley had been constantly growing wider as I advanced and could then see down into a large valley, which I found afterwards was the Sacramento Valley. I stood and looked over the stretch of country and when I turned around I saw that my guide had left me. Not knowing what to do I crawled into some high grass nearby and went to sleep. In the morning I could not help smiling at my folly in trying to hide in the grass as I left a broad track behind me by which anyone could have traced me. From this point there was a well defined path which I followed. I walked until the sun was high in the heavens and was already very weary when I happened to notice the mark of a hoof and a few minutes later heard voices. A turn in the path suddenly brought me in sight of a group of men sitting on the ground eating their lunch. I hurried towards them feeling thankful for my return. I asked for something to eat, but they refused. I expressed my willingness to pay for it, but they said they had scarcely enough for themselves, but if I wished to buy food there was a store a little farther on and I immediately set out. Upon reaching the store, I found that the main provisions were flour and rice, each worth 60 cents a pound. I bought some of each and was preparing to leave when I heard a voice behind me. "Stranger, where do you come from?" Turning around I saw a short good natured looking man standing before me, who said again, "Where do you come from?" I certainly must have been an object to excite the curiosity of anyone. I had not shaved for five months and my face was covered with a thick, shaggy beard, my hair was long and unkempt, surmounted by an old torn hat, my coat was buttoned to my neck to hide my naked chest, for I had given my last shirt to the Indians; I wore no trousers, only a pair of deer-skin drawers, while to the soles of my feet were tied pieces of sole leather. Upon his repeating the question, I answered, "From the mountains." "Everyone comes from the mountains just now, but you come a curious way," said he. "I saw you coming down the valley." His next question was, "Are you sick?" "No." "Then you are starving." I answered "Yes" and told him that I had been wandering in the mountains for eleven days without food. "What have you in those bags?" he next asked. "Flour and rice" was my answer. "If you eat that you will be a dead man within three days. Give it to me and I will return your money." He took me to another shanty where he gave me a glass of porter and three crackers, remarking that I should have no more that day. He gave me a place to sleep in a shed, and I rolled myself in my blankets and slept soundly until eleven o'clock when he awoke me and gave me a piece of pie and some porter. I could not drink the porter, so I ate the pie and kept the porter till morning. Upon rising in the morning, I found I was on Foster's Ranch on Chico Creek and that my benefactor was called Captain Yates. After remaining here three days, I started off to see if I could find the party which I had left. Captain Yates prevailed upon a teamster to take me to Losseh's Ranch, about 25 miles north. I waited here for three days without hearing of any of my companions. Having spent all of my money except thirty cents, I tried to trade off my silver watch for food, but the storekeeper said he would not give a song for a silver watch. So I threw down my thirty cents and told him to give me its

value; he gave me three crackers. I disposed of these and started for Foster's Ranch that evening, reaching it at two o'clock. I remained here a few days and then started for O'Neil's Ranch, reaching it on Sunday morning. I then crossed the Feather and was traveling along the road when I happened to come across some friends just sitting down to their lunch. They invited me to partake of their meal with them and upon hearing my story lent me two dollars. Just as we finished our repast two men approached and I soon recognized them as two of my lost companions. My friends gave them something to eat and while eating they told the story of their wanderings. They had followed all the windings of the river through the brush and had had a very hard time. Their two companions lost heart altogether and would often sit down and "want to die" and it was with much difficulty that they were persuaded to move on. They had obtained some food from the Indians in exchange for their blankets but had been made sick by it. They had spent nineteen days in the mountains and had lost their blankets so they were pretty badly off. The remaining two of the party came through safely, but I heard nothing of them until later. We all journeyed together from here to Nye's Ranch, the present site of Marysville. Captain Yates had informed quite a number of people of my adventures in the mountains and by this means I received a good deal of aid. Next we traveled to Nichols' Ranch, where we were invited to eat breakfast, and from here we went to Vernon at the junction of the Feather and Sacramento. Here we obtained work mowing hay and the troubles of our journey ended. Later I moved to Marysville and remained until 1855, when I moved to Benicia, California, and have remained here ever since.