

A L C O V E S P R I N G S

K A N S A S

October 3, 1970

This land we have traversed this morning is all a small part of the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. At that time there were not many white men west of the Mississippi River. However, Lewis and Clark were sent out by President Thomas Jefferson to explore the country, and in the years 1804 - 1806 they ascended the Missouri River to its source, crossed the Continental Divide, and went down the Columbia River to the Pacific Ocean, and then made the return trip to St. Louis. Soon after that Fort Osage was established east of Independence, and the fur traders became active up and down the river systems. Joseph Robidoux was at Council Bluffs for the American Fur Company and had noted the good trading possibilities at the Blacksnake Hills.

The white population seeped up the Missouri River about as far as Boonville, and after several applications for Statehood in 1817 and 1819, the State of Missouri was finally established in 1821. The western boundary was what is now the eastern boundary of Platte, Buchanan, Andrew and Nodaway Counties. The area from that line west to the Missouri River had been reserved for the Indians.

During the 1820's and 1830's this area where we stand was inhabited by the Indians and enormous herds of buffalo. The fur traders were not here very much, as they tended to follow the rivers to the north and west of here where the trapping of beaver was better.

In 1822 the overland trade from near Boonville, actually Old Franklin, to Arrow Rock, to Independence, through the country to the South and West of us began to the Spanish settlement of Santa Fe. This was a profitable trade, and the many wagon trains developed the Santa Fe Trail from Independence.

The American trappers going to the Northwest there met the Canadian trappers working for the Hudson Bay Company. Both the United States and Great Britain claimed the Oregon Country, and word of its richness and desirability seeped back to the American population. About 1840 overland migration from Independence to Oregon began and the "Oregon Trail" was developed. It ran from Independence west, left the Santa Fe Trail, crossed the Kansas River south of here, and the wagons moved on up to this very area where we stand. Alcove Springs was a convenient place to stop for a rest before fording the Big Blue River just ahead. It gave a favorable opportunity to fill the water casks for the dusty trip. A few miles to the northwest of here the Trail from St. Joseph, which we have followed, met the main Oregon Trail from Independence.

We are very close to the Nebraska line here -- though of course in those days of the 1840's there was no State and no line. Kansas did not become a state until 1861. The trail proceeded on north till it reached the Platte River at approximately the present site of Grand Island. Then it followed the river west and north by Ft. Kearney and the split of the river at what is now North Platte. The route then usually followed the South Platte for almost fifty miles, forded it, and proceeded on up the North Platte past Jail rock, Courthouse rock, Chimney Rock, and Scotts Bluff. Near Scotts Bluff Antoine Robidoux, brother of our own Joseph, had set up a trading post and forge -- where many wagons were repaired -- at exorbitant charges.

Moving on west, the next stop was Fort Laramie, now in Wyoming. The trail then led on north to the present site of Casper, and up the Sweetwater River to South Pass, elevation 7,550 feet, through the Continental Divide. Then southwest by the Big Sandy and Green Rivers to what is now northeast Utah. Then up into present Idaho, to Ft. Hall, the present Pocatello, Idaho. From there the Trail went on north and west into Oregon. During the 1840's thousands of settlers followed that route.

However, there was in the 1840's some movement into California, branching off at Ft. Hall in Idaho, turning down across present Nevada to the Humboldt River, then the Truckee River, near present Reno and into present California through what we now call the Donner Pass. Once over the final barrier of the Sierra Mountains, it was a downhill run to Sacramento. From there we could go by water down into San Francisco Bay. That was the "California Trail."

Gold was discovered at Sutters Mill late in 1848, and in 1849 the gold rush began. The St. Joseph newspaper reports several men travelling by sleigh in January, 1849, on their way west. That was the beginning of a great movement extending through the 1850's. St. Joseph was more important as the Eastern terminus of the California Trail in the 1850's than it had been in the Oregon Trail days of the 1840's. Weston had been laid out in 1837, six years ahead of St. Joseph in 1843. There was a time when many of the steamboats from St. Louis stopped at Weston, which for a few years was the second city in size in the State of Missouri, coming after only St. Louis. But St. Joseph soon achieved its stride and became Queen of the River towns. For the long and hazardous wagon trip across the Plains St. Joseph became the optimum place to disembark from the steamboats, outfit, and start off. In the year 1850 the permanent population of St. Joseph was about 2,000. It is estimated that 50,000 people left that point on the road west. Those expansive days of the 1850's in St. Joseph saw the young Milton Tootle come down from Savannah at age 26 to start his fabulous mercantile career; it saw Robert Washington Donnell and Albe M. Saxton operating their store with young R. L. McDonald as the unpaid clerk, learning the business. It saw John Corby running his store with the first metal safe and the first brick house in St. Joseph. It saw John Patee draining his marshy land south of Messanie Street and building the Patee House, in anticipation of the Completion of the Hannibal & St. Joseph Railroad, which was to come in 1859.

So -- we stand here on very historic ground. They had to be mostly young people who would face the unknown trails ahead of this leap into the dark, going to an unknown land from which most would never return. Some never got any further than right here. There are many graves, some marked by rough stone, some unmarked, all around us. One of the best publicized of the trips west by here is that of the Donner Party in the Spring of 1846. The families of Jacob and Geroge Donner, James Frazier Reed, all from Illinois, and others, rested here in May of that year. They waited five days for the swollen waters of the Big Blue River to subside so they could get across. Mrs. Reed's mother, Mrs. Keyes was 76 years old; she died and is buried here. She had been advised not to make the trip, but she was anxious to see her son who had gone to Oregon and she hoped that he would meet her at Fort Hall. The Reeds and the Donners were well-to-do^{do-}farmers and well equipped for the trip. Mr. Reed had built a large and elaborate wagon, which his daughter called the Pioneer Palace Car. It had two decks, beds, stove, and even a rocking chair for Mrs. Keyes. But she came to the end of her road right here.

The Donner-Reed party finally amounted to a group of about 80 men, women and children headed for California. They made the trip successfully through Wyoming, and there made a wrong decision. They decided to take what on the map was a "short cut" -- south of Salt Lake -- where wagons had never been before -- though they did not know that. They were given bad advice. They had a terrible time getting across the salt desert, and finally, months behind schedule, reached the final wall of the Sierras at the end of October. They thought they had two weeks more of good weather, but the snows came early, and there were snowed in -- 20 feet deep -- for the winter in make-shift lean-to's. Food ran out and they were forced to eat the flesh of those who had died. About half of the group survived the Winter, and the next spring -- 1847 -- finally were rescued and taken on into California.

Going across the Plains was not easy, and we can all take great pride in the courage and tenacity of those Americans who made it.