

Ho for California!
Published by Permission of Huntington Library Press

Reprinted in part in FCHS Headlight
December 2002

In 1857, a family of residents of Kansas Territory set off in a wagon train for California. They departed from their previous home near the Franklin-Douglas County line. The inter-related families were those of Thomas McCowen, Tom Mewhinney, and A.O. Carpenter. Two of the McCowen daughters, Helen and Emily, later published their diaries, and our friend, John Mark Lambertson (director of the National Frontier Trails Center in Independence, MO) alerted us to them. This selection is from Helen McCowen Carpenter's section of the book Ho for California! Women's Overland Diaries from the Huntington Library by Sandra L. Myres, 1980.*

May 26, 1857

Ho--for California—at last we are on the way—only seven miles from home (which is home no longer) yet we have really started, and with good luck may someday reach the “promised land.” The trip has been so long talked of, and the preparations have gone on under so many disadvantages that to be ready at last, to start is something of an event.

At least two trips were made down into Missouri for young cattle for the teams. Then came the “breaking” process, which was accomplished by yoking them up and putting them “in the swing” between old Smut and Snarly (leaders) and Dave and Start (wheelers). It was hard to say which way one's sympathy should turn, to the young cattle, to the old, to the drivers—surely commiseration was due somewhere. Then there were several trips to Lawrence (15 miles) for dry goods and food supplies. I got two pair of shoes, calico for two spencer waists, jeans for a dress skirt, needles, pins and thread and so forth. In the way of supplies there was flour, sugar, bacon and ham, tea, coffee, crackers, dried herring, a small quantity of corn starch, cream of tarter and soda and that about made up the outfit. Not having fresh fruit in the Territory, we have no jam or preserves. All that trouble is over with now, and we are not worrying about what is ahead of us.

It was thought best to make a short drive today, to merely pull up and start to enable us to go back for anything needed or forgotten. Tonight we are camped on the open prairie near Mr. Fullers and two miles from Centropolis—quite a name for a few pegs driven in the ground for that is all it amounts to except the hope the owner may have in it someday being a town. We trust it may not be a vain hope, but it looks that way now.

Our party consists of three families, and young men as helpers. Already our places have been assigned, that is, the order in which we are to travel. Uncle Sam Mewhinney is the Captain of the train, he having crossed the plains in '49, he has experience of which we are so much in need, and will most likely get. His spring wagon, drawn by old Suze and

Arch (farm horses), is to be in the lead, and Aunt Sis is to be the driver when he is elsewhere. Following this are his two baggage wagons to be looked after by some of the boys of which there are John and Hugh, his 18 and 19 year old sons, and George Haven, Enos St. John and John Newcomb, the last named to act as helpers. The next in order is our wagon with A.O. Carpenter (my husband, myself and Henry Wilson, a 17 year old boy who, by the way, was sold to us by his father the consideration being that Henry receive six months schooling and that he, Mr. Wilson, receive \$25.00. The boy was so hard working at home that he feels he has made quite an escape. Carlo, our white bull dog, completes our household.

The last in line is father's wagon. There is father (Thomas McCowen), mother, 16 years old sister Emily, 9 year old brother Hale, and three months old baby sister and father's man, John Fossett. To all the wagons except the one in the lead there are two to three yoke of cattle. Cousin Teresa is going to ride her Indian pony and help the boys drive the cattle which bring up the rear of the procession. That is, she will help when she wishes to and when she is tired of this, she will ride in the spring wagon with her mother.

The camp tonight looks very pretty. The five wagons with white drilling covers (double thickness over the top) are looking very much dressed up as they stand in a semicircle in the waving green grass. The cattle and horses, 100 or more in all, are off to one side grazing and the camp fires within the circle are burning brightly, inviting the cooks to get to work. I am glad to have enough already cooked, for things do seem so inconvenient. Everything wanted is at the bottom. Yet our wagon gives promise of more comfort than any of the others. That, I suppose, is as it should be, for a bride should have more detail to her outfit than an ordinary emigrants, and although I have been married four months, this will be my bridal trip.

Our wagon has square bows, which makes it much more roomy than the rounded bows. Inside the cover on each side are pockets in which odds and ends may be stowed away. Then there is an "upper deck," or double floor, the supplies being packed between floors and the bed on the upper one. Henry is to sleep on the ground under the wagon. A spring seat painted bright red sits bolt upright in the front and refuses to bend or budge, regardless of size or weight, so we are not relying on this for much in the way of comfort. The greatest convenience of all, and one which none of the rest have, is a new fangled brake to check the speed in going down hill. The others have lock-chains which are a great inconvenience and take up much time to fix and undo. All have boxes at the back of the wagons for carrying the cooking utensils. In ours there is a Dutch oven, a camp kettle, frying pan, and coffee pot. These, with some tin plates, tin cups, tin spoons, knives and forks, a rolling-pin, bread pan, milk can and a smoothing iron, constitute my entire kitchen furniture. What we are to have to eat is going to be of much more importance than how it is cooked or served.

As we are about to bid farewell to Kansas, I go back to fancy over the two years spent here. First the weary journey of three weeks on a river boat between St. Louis and Westport, Missouri, with children of the party critically ill. Then the struggle to get a roof over our heads on the preemption claim with fencing and planting, for a crop was of prime importance as all supplies had to be hauled from Westport, a distance of 50 miles.

Then followed long days of lonesomeness and longing for youthful companions, my late school mates and summer school of fifteen pupils. Before the summer waned, the entire community was stricken with fever and ague (none escaped). After eight months of pioneer privation and loneliness met some young people at a Christmas party. Other such gatherings soon followed, but such pleasures were cut short by border troubles and an army of "Border Ruffians," under H. Clay Pate, who invaded the neighborhood with no regard for life or property. The mother of our little colt was taken and our only cow. At the battle of Black Jack, Reel (not then my husband) received a painful wound. A spent ball, having followed the ribs around, was cut out of the back. It is some satisfaction to know that in making Sharps rifle cartridges I helped to make Kansas a "Free State."

This is certainly a most beautiful country. The grass is from one to ten feet high, and there is a profusion of wild flowers all over the prairie. But the violent thunderstorms are enough to wreck the nerves of Hercules and the rattlesnakes are as thick as the leaves on the trees, and lastly "but not leastly" the fever and ague are corded up ever ready for use. *Notwithstanding* all these *allurements*, in consideration of what we have undergone, physically and mentally, I can bid Kansas Good Bye without a regret. Still we are sorry to part with Aunt Catherine, Uncle Tom and the children. The picture they made in the old farm wagon when they came to see us off will never be forgotten. Aunt Catherine looked very sad when saying she was sorry that Kansas was not good enough for us.

May 27, 1857

There were no laggards this morning. Perhaps the beds were a trifle hard and uninviting, making it easier to obey the call, "Get up." Made an early start and nooned on the prairie in the rain. Near us was a Mexican train of 30 wagons and a great number of horses. These are on the way to Missouri for goods to take back to Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Traveled all day over beautiful broken prairie and camped on the bank of 110 Creek where there was sufficient wood and water for our uses.

[Author's note: The party was traveling on a portion of the Santa Fe Trail. 110 Creek, between Willow Springs and Burlingame in Shawnee County, was 110 miles from the Missouri River.]

The diary continues in the above publication until October 22, 1857. The families made it to California by fall and the Carpenters settled in the Grass Valley area in central Nevada County.

*Editor Sandra L. Myres interpreted Mewhinney as Mcwhinney when transcribing this diary.