

Kept a Diary

WHILE CROSSING THE PLAINS IN 1849

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THE DIARY kept by George Brittain, of this city, while crossing the plains in 1849 will be of value to historians of California.

Of the many men who crossed the plains in the early days of '49 it is quite safe to say but very few if any of them kept a complete record of their journey.



George Brittain kept a diary, which contains many interesting and exciting facts of his entire trip over the plains and desert. Associated with this diary is a touch of romance, which adds to its interest.

“It was on the 16th day of April, 1849, I left my home in Boonville, Missouri,” said Mr. Brittain recently. “I had been married three months previously and I was, of course, very ambitious. The gold fever at that time was intense and I wanted to go and make my fortune digging for gold in the new Eldorado of the West. My mind was filled with visions of wealth, living a life of ease and surrounded by those I loved. I figured that three years of hard labor would be sufficient for the realization of my dreams.”

Although Mr. Brittain is now near his ninetieth year he has the appearance of a man who in his younger days possessed the qualities that would attain for him the success he desired in a country that promised such great opportunities. Such were his dreams and such were the arguments he presented to his young bride to console her during his long absence.

When the morning of the 16th arrived, Brittain's mules were ready, his wagons were loaded with supplies and the men who were to form the party stood waiting while George Brittain bade his wife a tearful good-bye, after which the party turned their faces toward the West and headed straight for the plains.

One hour later the diary received the first installment of his experience away from home. From that time on, a record of every incident that occurred from day to day throughout his whole trip was religiously kept. Nothing escaped his notice and everything was of sufficient import to make note of. Even the description, condition, and location of the trail over which they passed was faithfully recorded. How accurate it was in detail was proven later when this little book was sent back to Boonville to his wife to be used as a guide for the trip which she undertook, to join her husband. Not only did it server her and her party, but it became a most useful guide and a great help to many others in finding their way across.

The diary was sent back and forth time and time again and there are many who have long since passed over the “great divide” who could have vouched for its reliability. It finally reached its owner and author and has since been greatly prized as a memento of the strenuous days of '49.

There was something else for Mr. Brittain to do besides keeping a diary, that was equally important, and that was, to build bridges and rafts needed to cross streams. These were made secure in view of the fact that they would make traveling for this wife much easier and also lessen the hardships of others who followed the same trail.

A Six Month's Trip

It took him six months to reach California. Hardly had he set foot on California soil when he realized that the fire of his love had not cooled upon the mountain's snowy tops nor were the flames extinguished on the hot sands of the desert. Though he became more and more determined to win fortune for his bride, to endure existence away from her was impossible. So when he found a man who was returning to Boonville, he gave him \$25 to deliver the book into the hands of Mrs. Brittain, who immediately began preparations for the journey. Three months later the husband mounted his mule and went eastward to meet his wife. They met a Truckee. He found upon her arrival that her horses were in a condition to make further progress impossible. As horses were exceedingly scarce, the question of conveyance was a difficult one.

“I was beginning to get discouraged when I was attracted by a crowd of men evidently discussing some matter of interest. I joined the crowd and heard a man remark:

“If I can't sell the blamed thing I'll burn it.”

“I inquired what the ‘blamed thing’ referred to was and was told that it was a carriage owned by Doctor Glenn. I at once offered to buy it and it was sold to me for \$25. The problem was at last solved to my entire satisfaction and my wife traveled in comfort to her future home in Marysville.

“The carriage which Mr. Brittain bought was one of twenty-five which Dr. Glenn had manufactured for him in St. Louis, Mo., for the purpose of carrying passengers over the plains. The price of \$200 was charged for each passenger. But they never got beyond Truckee, as their horses had given out.

(Glenn county is named after Dr. Glenn.)

“I did not do any mining, but engaged in horse raising. I raised some of the most valuable horses that were ever produced on this Coast. One known on the turf as Bloomsbury I sold for \$2000. Another called Orphan Boy I sold for \$1500. The buyer was Thomas Atchison of this city.

“When we started from Boonville, Mo., we organized as a company and traveled under strict military discipline. I was second officer in Command and took charge of the guns and guards. In places where the Indians were numerous and hostile we put on extra guards. We found them particularly so all through Kansas, committing thefts and acts of hostility among the emigrants. Stealing stock seemed to be one of their favorite occupations and their method was certainly a resourceful one. Their chief object was to get a reward and then keep the stolen property besides. They would steal the same stock over and over again and would as many times demand a reward for their return.

Trouble With Indians

“It was pitiful, as well as amusing, to see how scared our men were at the sight of a redskin; consequently they would allow them many privileges. Riding on the wagons was one of them. But we soon found out that that wouldn’t pay, but not until the Indians got away with a lot of our guns did we realize that our American habits of politeness were not appreciated by the natives. After this occurrence our men were strictly forbidden to permit the Indians to mount our wagons. But in spite of every precaution that was taken the rascals got away with our stock again. As we had nothing more left to offer them as a reward, they kept the stock.

“A man by the name of McDowell, who had joined our train in Kansas suffered great losses and was therefore very much incensed against the Indians and vowed that he would kill the very next one he came across. As we were not anxious to stir up any unnecessary trouble, I advised him to be more considerate, for I knew that if such a threat was put into action the outcome would be serious, as the country through which we were passing was swarming with red devils of the most savage kind.

“A thousand men can’t prevent me,” answered McDowell with an oath.

“I saw he was in a bad frame of mind and all efforts to persuade him made him all the more furious and determined. So I said no more, hoping that in his calmer moments he might appreciate the importance of my advice to keep peace. But no so; he seemed to be constantly on the lookout for the enemy.

“We were traveling over a very rough trail, on the left side of which was a deep ravine. Suddenly I saw McDowell raise his rifle and take deliberate aim and fire. My eyes followed the direction of the gun and I saw not far ahead of us an Indian roll over the bank. McDowell had kept his word. The loud report of the gun seemed to serve as a signal, for it brought several other Indians on the scene. But each one as he made his appearance above the bank was shot with as much ease and grace as one would pick presents off a Christmas tree. And all the time McDowell was as cool as a cucumber. His widespread reputation as a ‘sure shot’ was certainly manifested by his fine marksmanship. After the last Indian had fallen he looked around as if to say, ‘Where are the rest?’

“Although everything seemed quiet after this little single-handed skirmish we were all nevertheless a little uneasy. We turned away from our course along the bank of the ravine and followed a single trail that wound in and out among brush so thick that it was impossible for us to see more than fifty feet ahead. After an hour of this difficult travel, we finally struck a bend that brought us out into an open and straight wagon road, although the brush was still thick on one side.

“Our train consisted of about ten wagons. The last wagon was driven by a man whose wife and child accompanied him. We hadn’t gone more than a half-mile when we heard a terrific scream and on looking back were horrified to see three great burly redskins looting the last wagon. Instantly another Indian emerged from the brush, sprang into the wagon and grappled with the woman, who fought back with all the strength she could command. We were altogether about twenty-one men. According to our rule, in case of emergency, one man remained with each wagon, so the rest of us with our rifles ran back to the people who needed our help. For a while bullets flew thick and fast. We emptied every gun into the hides of the devils.

“The woman having been released from the Indian who had dragged her from the wagon, picked up a rifle that had fallen to the ground and discharged it into the thicket where she saw an Indian concealed, she being seized with an inspiration to ‘settle his hash’ as she explained.



“There must have been at least ten Indians, but only five remained in the fight, the others fled after the first shots were fired. Two of our men were wounded, one recovered, but the other died soon after. Of those five redskins who took part in the fight only one escaped. The rest were left for dead. After picking up their guns and such things as we thought we might care to keep as souvenirs we resumed our journey.

““Another incident in which I alone played the important part occurred in June. We had unusually hot weather considering the time of the year and as we were all anxious to make rapid progress, we made as few stops as possible, sometimes traveling day and night at a stretch, stopping only long enough to prepare a meal or for a few minutes rest. We had reached the Platte River on this particular hot day and camped on its bank for the night. We were so exhausted from the heat and constant travel that the

anticipation of a good night's rest was very pleasant. After caring for our stock, we had our supper. The river looked so cool and inviting I was tempted to take a swim.

“With my first plunge into the water, I experienced great relief and remember swimming about for a long time and enjoying it. It was not until I felt myself being drawn under by an awful current that I realized my danger. The thought that I was drowning overpowered me. Every act of my life seemed to stand out before me as if mirrored in a looking glass. Then all I remember was that I was being grasped by the head by hands firm and strong – the rest was a blank.

“When I recovered consciousness. I found myself back on the camping grounds. I owe my life to one of our party who strolled on the bank of the river to enjoy his pipe after supper.

“One of the most interesting features in passing through the Indian settlements was their custom of laying away their dead. We came across a lone cottonwood tree that was about six feet in diameter and found that it held the remains of a child apparently about 10 years old. The body, wrapped in skins, lay between branches supported on two long poles, over which were draped beautifully beaded buffalo and elk skins. The beadwork was wonderfully artistic in design and workmanship. In the hollow of the tree were also various articles and skins. But on the south side of Church rock, which is about 500 feet above the level, was a real city of dead Indians laid away in the branches of trees. Along this creek is a great bed of quick lime. One of our party, Doctor Redman, who later became prominent in the affairs of California, having been appointed by Governor Burnett, Judge of San Jose, California, went exploring and received as a reward for his wandering spirit, a good ducking that came very near ending his career.

Horrors of the Desert

“I think that it is not within the power of the pen to describe the horrors crossing the desert which looked like one vast field of salt. The scorching sun, the melted rock, the heavy sand, no water nor feed for the horses were some of the terrors of the journey. We had to double our teams to drive through it all and were compelled to leave the other wagons behind. We did not ride, but walked beside the wagons so as to lessen the weight for the horses that were almost exhausted. We passed at least 200 wagons that had been abandoned by their owners.

“I can't tell how many horses and cattle we saw suffering and dying. Such a sight was enough to move the hardest heart. It must have been very hard for those who, after driving and beating the poor animals until they dropped on the road because they could go no further, to leave them to starve. Some men with better feelings rode along and relieved them from their suffering with powder and lead. The stock that succeeded in reaching water drank as much as twenty-three buckets full and was then shot

“After traveling twenty hours without making a stop, we found that we were yet twelve miles from the Carson river. This news depressed us, as we hoped to reach water before this. Our stock although having received the very best of care and attention throughout the whole trip, was beginning to show signs of collapse. So we resolved to put our teams to three of the lightest wagons, leaving behind one man to each wagon, and started at midnight to drive the recruit teams through. After which we would return for those remaining.

“We traveled hard until nearly daylight. At last we saw the faint spreading of the dawn and felt the refreshing moisture and knew that we were nearing the Carson river. When we reached the river we found plenty of cottonwood timber and large willows. The first thing we did was to water our stock. Then one man started back with water for the three men we left behind and one man and myself started up the stream to hunt for grass. At the end of five miles we found good grass and plenty of shade. Here we halted and, freeing our stock, let them graze and take their first drink after their long fast. Very soon the rest of our party joined us. I will never be able to describe our joy. We felt like the Pilgrims in history – full of gratitude to Him who led us safely through the dangers of our journey into the promised land – God’s country, Indeed!”