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"I FEAR THE CONSEQUENCES TO OUR ANIMALS"
EMIGRANTS AND THEIR LIVESTOCK
ON THE OVERLAND TRAILS

DIANA L. AHMAD

"You cannot be too careful of your teams; on their condition depends entirely your success in getting through" to the Pacific coast, warned Philip L. Platt and N. Slater in their 1852 Travelers' Guide across the Plains upon the Overland Route to California.¹ The diaries, letters, and guidebooks written by the emigrants who crossed North America on the overland trails during the mid-nineteenth century reveal a new awareness of the animals that journeyed with them. Often written as advice to those who might follow them, the travelers worried about their animals in ways beyond what theologians and philosophers would have expected or anticipated. Borne out of the need to get to California, Oregon, or Utah safely, emigrants learned a new standard of care required for the animals that hauled them across the continent. Their writings add to the knowledge not only of the rigors and challenges along the overland trails but also of how the emigrants manifested a new relationship with their livestock.

Between 1840 and 1860 approximately 300,000 people emigrated to California, Oregon, and Utah.² The reasons for traveling three to five months over nearly 2,000 miles included the desire for gold, a farm, or religious freedom. Numerous books on the history of the American West and the overland trails fill library shelves, yet the authors largely ignore the domestic animals that went west with the human travelers.³

During the last forty years, historians have begun to look at the significance of animals in history, yet most have concentrated on the British colonial era in North America. Authors such as Alfred W. Crosby Jr. and William Cronon first looked at the impact of European

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people and animals on the new environment of North America. Virginia DeJohn Anderson expanded their work by demonstrating how European animals helped expand the British colonial empire in North America. Then, Katherine Grier brought the study of animals into the nineteenth century, explaining the changing relationship between humans and animals.\(^4\)

As with the human-animal interactions of the early colonial years, emigrants on overland trails forged new relationships with the domestic animals that accompanied them. Overlanders learned how to deal with many new situations along the trails, such as trading with the indigenous populations for fresh animals, performing veterinary procedures, and handling the livestock during storms and while crossing rivers. Although many emigrants knew how to take care of the livestock on their family farms, travel on the overland trails forced them to look at their animals in a different light, as their lives now relied on their domestic stock in an unprecedented way. To ensure that all those concerned made it to their destinations safely, many overlanders learned new ways to care for their animals, and some developed a compassion for their traveling companions.

Overlanders often wrote about their experiences in diaries, journals, or letters in a style that was meant to be read by others. They detailed their experiences and commented on the landscape, the flora and fauna, and the potential productivity of the land they crossed. They understood the significance of their undertaking, that their journey was history making.\(^5\) They also wrote about the livestock that accompanied them, often in great detail and with emotion.

Diaries, journals, and letters sent home became valuable tools for future emigrants. Friends and relatives often shared letters they received from overlanders, while newspapers published letters emigrants sent home. Publishers produced dozens of commercial guidebooks; however, the information provided by family members and friends carried a credibility that unfamiliar authors did not possess.\(^6\)

**Religious and Philosophical Beliefs**

In addition to the guidebooks and advice from friends and relatives, emigrants also carried with them a set of religious beliefs about animals forged in the traditional Christian churches. Emigrants believed that humans possessed dominion over all the animals of the earth, and also understood that they must treat their animals well.\(^7\) Philosophical as well as religious views of animals also influenced the travelers. Aristotle argued that humans ranked above animals because humans possessed rational souls and animals did not. Enlightenment philosophers debated whether or not animals possessed cognitive abilities, were self-aware, or had moral reciprocity. Arguments changed in the eighteenth century when David Hume advocated treating animals kindly because people were bound by the laws of humanity, while Immanuel Kant argued that people had no moral duties to animals because they could not reason, yet he claimed that if people mistreated animals, abuse against humans would soon follow. In 1789 Jeremy Bentham wrote that animals deserved humane treatment and suggested that it was not important whether or not animals could reason, but whether they could suffer.\(^8\)

The settlement of British North America began during the new philosophical and religious debates about the place of animals vis-à-vis humans. In 1641 British colonial concern for animals in North America originated in the Massachusetts Bay Colony when the Puritans passed the “Body of Liberties” that included two sections on the treatment of animals and afforded them some legal protection. By the early nineteenth century, New York (1828) and Massachusetts (1835) passed legislation making gratuitous cruelty of animals a misdemeanor, although the laws did not apply to strays. America’s growing interest in animals resulted in the establishment in 1866 of the American Society for the Prevention

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Fig. 1. “Crossing the Plains.” Courtesy of the University of California–Berkeley, Bancroft Library.
of Cruelty to Animals. By that time, eighteen states and territories possessed laws against cruelty to animals; however, the statutes were seldom enforced. The movement west came at the time of changing views about animals in the United States and coincided with the overlanders’ desire to go west on the labor of their livestock. As a result, the emigrants developed an association with their animals that exceeded any relationship previously advocated by religious leaders or philosophers.

“OUR GUIDEBOOK”

Writings about the western trails and the animals that accompanied them began with the first overlanders. In the early 1840s, several personal narratives of journeys to the West became published guidebooks, including Lansford W. Hastings’s 1845 The Emigrants’ Guide to Oregon and California, a book about his journey west in 1842, and John C. Frémont’s 1849 The California Guidebook about his expedition to Oregon and California in 1843 and 1844. In 1849 Joseph E. Ware published the popular Emigrants’ Guide to California even though he had never traveled west prior to writing his book. Having based his book on the work of others, he repeated their errors, yet Ware’s work remained one of the better guidebooks available to emigrants. In 1848 William Clayton, a member of the Latter-day Saints’ movement to Utah, published a guidebook that provided accurate mileage between locations, as he had developed the “roadometer” that counted the number of rotations made by a wagon wheel, allowing distances to be measured with relative accuracy. Emigrants often purchased one or more of the commercial guidebooks, priced between fifty and seventy-five cents, before departing.

While some authors of guidebooks were well-known military men or adventurers, other writers, especially diarists, came from a variety of backgrounds: farmers, teachers, immigrants from Europe, and even children. Many writers sincerely believed their experiences would aid those who followed. Lansford Hastings’s guide claimed that there was an “utter destitution” of information regarding the trip west, and he intended to provide “a succinct [sic], and at the same time, practical description” of Oregon and California. Despite the number of such publications prior to 1852, Andrew Child claimed no “reliable guidebook” existed and believed his account gave “some useful ADVICE TO EMIGRANTS.”

Profit motive likely encouraged most authors to produce publications intended for future emigrants. Hastings wanted the United States to acquire California and hoped for a political position for himself in the future state. J. M. Shively and Joel Palmer hoped to develop communities in Oregon and sell land to settlers. Yet the diarists and letter writers also wanted to provide “a faithful account of our travels and vicissitudes” to their friends and relatives. The exact number of people who read the private writings can never be calculated, but it is likely that those who received the letters shared the communications with those they knew. The Iowa Weekly Observer published an 1853 letter from Stuart Richey expressing a common desire of many writers: “I will tell you a little of the journey to this place, which had I known, it would have saved me much trouble.” Undoubtedly, the diaries, letters, and articles informed many about the overland trails, as well as boosting the sales of newspapers.

Publishers provided testimonials to the value of their guidebooks. A group from Wisconsin and Illinois recommended Platt and Slater’s book as a “correct and useful work for emigrants across the plains.” A few of the guidebooks praised similar publications, such as Hosea Horn’s lauding of William Clayton’s book: “Many works, purporting to be Guides, have been offered to the public, and as many have proved worthless, save one—that of Mr. CLAYTON—from Council Bluffs to the City of the Great Salt Lake.” Clayton’s guide met with nearly universal approval.

The writings of overlanders often referenced the guidebooks, sometimes noting a specific author and other times just referring to it as “our guide book.” Emigrants commented posi-
tively on some of them but readily noted the errors in the publications. Often the travelers found discrepancies in the guidebooks, about such things as the distances between locations or the amount of pasturage available for livestock. Despite earlier praise, Bennett Clark eventually warned, “Let no travellor [sic] hereafter be governed by Wares guide as it is perfectly worthless.” Clark was not alone in his condemnation of Ware; Dr. J. S. Shepherd also concluded that Ware only deceived the users of that guidebook.17

JUMPING-OFF TOWNS

Likely with a guidebook of unknown value and some letters from friends in hand, the emigrants made their final preparations. Most of the travelers gathered in Independence or St. Joseph, Missouri, while others went to Kanesville (renamed Council Bluffs in 1853), Iowa, or Winter Quarters in the future Nebraska. By the time of the gold rush, the population of these communities generally ranged between 1,500 and 2,000. The towns served as supply centers and sources of information. In the initial stages of the overland trails, Independence outstripped the other communities as a jumping-off point because of its experience with the Santa Fe trade.18 It was here that the emigrants learned to camp, prepare their outfits, and train their animals.

In these communities, many emigrants had their first experiences with the animals that became an intimate part of their lives over the next three to four months. Because so many people started in Independence or St. Joseph, only a few managed to obtain lodging in hotels, while the remainder lived in tents and wagons near their livestock. They quickly noticed the number of animals around them, prompting William Braden to write, “I think they count mules &c as Emigrants.” Amos Batchelder noticed the “oxen, mules, and horses are to be seen in every direction, running at large or tied up to the trees, while the mules are constantly braying, [and] make the forest resound with their unearthly music.”19

This Animal or That One?

During the days and weeks of preparation, emigrants often expressed preference for one animal over another for the long journey. Most authors recommended oxen, although horses and mules had their proponents.20 Guidebook authors, including Hastings, Shively, and Ware, recommended trading the horses from the United States for Indian horses because “the shabbiest Shawnee pony you can pick up will answer your purpose better than the finest horse you can take from the stable.”21 Some emigrants preferred mules, “our long eared horses,” for their transportation needs because they believed mules were better suited to the deprivations of the trails, as they willingly ate the vegetation nature provided.22

Diarists and guidebooks alike praised the ox as the best animal to get emigrants to their destination. Andrew Child claimed the ox “as safe, if not THE SAFEST animal that can be employed upon the road,” while others praised the creature as “preferable to any other animals, for teams,” and “[oxen] perform their journey about as well as mules.” Some doubted whether the oxen could handle the heat of the Great Plains, but all agreed that oxen could live on the pasturage along the trails.23 Other advantages of oxen, emigrants believed, were that they would not wander far from camp during the night and that Native Americans would not steal them. Joel Palmer recommended getting fresh oxen at the start of the journey, as they would not be jaded like those that had already traveled 500 miles to the jumping-off towns.24

Occasionally, emigrants took cattle with them as well. Brought along largely for the milk and meat they provided, some considered cattle “easier to drive” and they could be used as replacements for oxen no longer able to pull the wagons.25 Whether the emigrants wanted to use the animals to pull the wagons, to eat for supper, or to carry their belongings, some of the best advice came from guidebook author John Steele, who recommended: “Let your horses, mules, oxen, &c, be in a healthy condition.”26

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The number of animals recommended for the journey varied with the writer, the availability of animals, and the wealth of the emigrants. Most recommended four or five yoke of oxen per wagon; at two oxen per yoke, that amounts to eight or ten oxen per wagon. Occasionally, they also found that “cows are just as good” at pulling the wagons and “worth four times the amount” once they arrived in Oregon. What is not clear from diarists’ comments is whether the animals were cattle or oxen, as writers often switched between the terms for their team members.27

SUPPLYING THE JOURNEY

Draft animals made up an important part of the emigrants’ budget. Overlanders from Eastern cities or from Europe faced greater expenses because they needed to purchase most of their goods for the journey, whereas American farm families often already possessed the animals and supplies needed. St. Louis competed with the jumping-off cities for the overlanders’ business. Many travelers purchased goods in St. Louis only to discover that the city’s merchants falsely represented the prices of goods in St. Joseph or Independence in an attempt to lure the emigrants into their shops and businesses.28

Those emigrants who waited until they reached the departure towns to buy animals and supplies discovered the cost of oxen ranged from thirteen to thirty dollars each, while mules and horses cost between fifty and seventy dollars apiece. Emigrants found the prices for mules and horses “reasonable” at Independence and discovered that the cost of an entire outfit of wagons, yokes, animals, and other items was indeed less expensive in Independence or St. Joseph than in St. Louis. For example, George W. Buchanan purchased mules for forty to fifty dollars each and oxen for thirty to forty dollars per yoke in Independence, whereas William Braden paid eighty dollars a head for mules in St. Louis. To service the needs of the animals, Independence had a number of businesses devoted to draft animals preparing to go west, including three harness and saddler shops, two ox-yoke maker shops, three livery stables, and 47 blacksmith forges that employed 400 to 500 workers.29

TRAINING BEGINS

Regarding the training of the animals, emigrant authors offered suggestions they believed suited the best interests of their friends and family back east. For many, their first experience with animals occurred at the jumping-off towns when they learned how to ride and train their newly purchased livestock. Amos Batchelder enjoyed the excitement of breaking the mules but hired two New Mexicans to “teach them the science of mule breaking.” He found that the trainers “well earned their money” trying to train the emigrants, as well as the animals. Others found the time spent breaking mules harder than they anticipated, as the mules “broke up their pack saddles, and performed various other feats of the rough and tumble description as might be expected from such ugly customers.” The emigrants blamed the “natural disposition” of the mules for their behavior and the difficulty in training them, rather than their own inexperience with the beasts.30

While still training in the Missouri River’s towns, emigrants made final preparations to their wagons, having been advised not to overload the wagons and to take no “trumpery,” warning that overloading the wagons might “break down your teams at the start.” The wagons carried supplies for human and animal travelers alike. The emigrants provided long lists of items needed for the journey, including water kegs, nuts, bolts, tools, rifles, knives, cooking utensils, and tents. For food, many recommended rice, flour, “thick fat middling bacone,” hard bread, tea, dried fruits, vinegar, and butter. The lists of needed items for the four-legged travelers included ropes, shoes, nails, extra hames and whiffletrees for the yokes, pickets, halters, and packing saddles. Andrew Child’s guidebook warned, “Many a valuable ox was left on the road the last season [1851], for the want of a SINGLE SHOE.”31
During the first days of the journey, the overlanders noted the behavior of their livestock and how their skills improved while handling the animals. In 1863 Daniel McLaughlin informed the *Omaha Daily Nebraskan* that he encouraged his mules forward by whistling “I’m Bound for the Happy Land of Canaan,” while Christian Nielsen, a native of Denmark, discovered his oxen preferred receiving commands in English, so he obliged them. Getting the mules and oxen to behave the way people wanted and needed did not come quickly or easily for humans or animals alike, but soon the wagon trains fell into a daily routine.

**Falling into a Routine**

The basic advice included making slow but steady progress and walking as much as possible, so as not to unduly burden the animals. In 1853 Dr. J. Tarbell ended his guidebook with the adage “Haste makes waste,” and encouraged his readers to use moderation on the journey. The emigrants offered the clear message that getting to California, Oregon, or Utah depended on the care given to the animals. Some travelers took seriously the Book of Deuteronomy, which told people to rest their animals on the Sabbath.

Once under way, “the roads is full of Emigrants [sic] before and behind” as the wagon trains fell into a routine. A regular day started about dawn when the travelers took the animals to fresh grass if it was available. After breakfast, they traveled slowly until a “nooning,” when animals and humans alike rested during the heat of the day and ate what they could. When the day cooled off, the wagons continued until they located the night’s camping spot. Many traveled sixteen to eighteen
miles a day if all went well. At the end of the day's travels, the emigrants formed a corral of wagons. Some travelers put the animals inside the corral, while others moved the exhausted stock nearby so they could forage for food. Sometimes the emigrants picketed the animals, tying one end of a rope around an animal's neck while the other end was tied to a stick eighteen to twenty inches long and stuck into the ground. This allowed the animals to graze in a small area but prevented them from wandering away during the night.

Whether the emigrants put the animals inside or outside the corral, they still used sentries to make sure nothing happened to the creatures. Letting the livestock roam freely allowed them to better forage for food; however, the travelers feared that they might wander too far away during the night or be stolen by Native Americans. Despite corralling, picketing, and guarding the livestock, some animals still strayed away from camp. Sometimes the owners located the animals right away or a day or two later, while other animals were found but not by their original owners. Emigrants described animals that "did not like the emigrating business" and at every opportunity tried to run away.

**CONCERNS OF DAILY LIFE**

Traveling with domestic animals included three basic concerns of daily life: feeding the stock, crossing the rivers, and replacing animals. Other problems along the trails included stampedes, storms, Native Americans, and keeping the animals as healthy as possible. Grass along the trails started to grow in late March or April. As many overlanders started west about that time, some writers recommended carrying grain to keep the animals in good shape until the fresh grasses appeared. Sometimes emigrants fed flour to their mules to supplement the meager grasses the animals found.

Writers warned of potentially harmful water along the trails. For example, Andrew Child reported that near the Upper Ferry of the Platte, about six hundred miles from the Missouri River, "no water that is not poisonous" was available to travelers, while Platt and Slater warned, "Great care should be taken to prevent your animals from drinking until you reach Bear river" in southeastern Idaho.

Rivers provided drinking water for the two- and four-footed travelers, but rivers had to be crossed and sometimes crossed again and again. People living along the rivers occasionally set up ferries to help the emigrants get to the other side. In the early 1850s, for example, the ferries along the Platte, Green, and Willow Springs Rivers charged at least $1.50 per wagon and yoke of oxen and up to $7 for one wagon and $1 per horse or steer. To avoid paying the fees, emigrants drove their wagons and animals along the banks of the river to a suitable crossing place and hauled their outfits across while swimming the stock to the other side. Crossing the rivers entailed much effort, danger, and anxiety for all concerned. As he crossed the Platte, Finley McDiarmid found "the languages from all nations where [sic] here dealt out with many blows and more curses to the poor animal." Overlanders warned that the current sometimes carried animals and humans away or that the stock ran over people in the animals' efforts to get out of the water.

Because of the loss of horses, oxen, and mules due to the lack of potable water to drink, good grasses to eat, and the inherent dangers in crossing rivers, it became necessary to acquire animals along the trails. Published guidebooks indicated horses could be obtained at, for example, Fort Bridger, a trading post about 1,000 miles west of Independence that had been built by Jim Bridger and Louis Vasquez. Meant to service the needs of the emigrants, they charged twenty-five to fifty dollars in trade goods, such as sugar and flour, per head of stock purchased. At Fort Hall, an installation run by the Hudson's Bay Company in eastern Idaho, packhorses could be had for twenty dollars per 100 pounds of weight; however, the traders wanted cattle in exchange for the packhorses rather than cash. Diarists noted the costs of animals along the trails as well, but found considerably higher prices than those listed in the guidebooks. In the last quarter of the journey,
ponies, horses, and mules sold for $100 to $200 each, while traders purchased jaded, worn-out stock for ten to twelve dollars apiece.\textsuperscript{42}

Without a doubt, feeding and watering the animals, crossing rivers, and replacing the animals kept the overlanders busy, yet they also encountered problems, when the everyday routine on the trails became dangerous. Writers frequently commented about Native Americans, storms, and stampedes. The published guidebooks contained few favorable comments about Native Americans, and often portrayed the numerous indigenous tribes as thieves and rascals who wanted the animals that accompanied the overlanders.\textsuperscript{43}

In a distinctly different tone, letter writers and diarists often wrote about others’ troubles with Native Americans, rather than incidents they experienced firsthand. Amos Batchelder’s group never experienced trouble with Native Americans; however, he described how the Indians allegedly crawled “among the animals of the emigrants, with a wolf skin on them, or some other disguise in order to frighten them, and raise a stampede, then steal the animals.” The stories about Native American thieves caused some of the overlanders to “keep a strong guard out all the time” and “always tie your Horses to your waggon wheel when you lay down for the Indians will steal them if they have the least chance.”\textsuperscript{44} The often unsubstantiated rumors of Native American thieves caused the emigrants more distress than the facts warranted. On the other hand, emigrant encounters with the Native Americans sometimes benefited both parties, as when they traded with one another for new horses and supplies. In 1850 one doctor traded four boxes of pills for two Indian horses, while another emigrant traded a rifle and two cups of brown sugar for an Indian pony.\textsuperscript{45}

Occasionally, emigrants reported that “our cattle was very much frited [sic]” by Indians
along the trails, but more often thunderstorms frightened the stock. Storms came with such ferocity that mules and horses often “turned tail to the wind.” After storms ended, overlanders reported that their stock looked like “a flock of wet turkeys” and called the storms “part of the spices of this journey.” With hail reported to be the size of bullets, walnuts, and hens’ eggs, the emigrants sometimes found it necessary to hold onto the animals during storms to prevent them from running away.46

Storms sometimes caused the animals to stampede, but hunger, thirst, or unusual noises frightened the animals enough to cause the dreaded event. To prevent a stampede, some emigrants chained their still-yoked animals to a tree or wagon wheel at night. Because of the virtual certainty of stampedes, Captain Randolph B. Marcy’s guidebook recommended that travelers prepare “several good horses” to chase after the stampeding animals and head them back to camp.47 Stampedes wasted the energy of the livestock and needed to be prevented if possible.

**PROTECTING THE HEALTH OF ANIMALS**

Maintaining the strength of the animals forced the emigrants to learn how to care for their livestock. As many overlanders were new to handling animals, experiences on the trails became their teacher. From the start, overlanders understood the need to rest the animals as much as possible, but they quickly learned of other problems that threatened the health of their animals, such as dust, soft sands, alkali poisoning, hoof problems, and the weather.

In order to protect the animals, overlanders drove through the rough parts of the trails as slowly and deliberately as possible to avoid injury and “to save them all we could.” Writers warned of steep areas along the journey, such as at Heber Spring and in the Blue Mountains, where it might be necessary to double-team the wagons in order to get through the region successfully, and cautioned readers about the large, flat, smooth rocks the animals traveled over: “[W]hen a creature steps upon these and makes an effort to pull he falls down as quick as if he were upon an inclined body of smooth [sic] ice.”48 In addition to the mountain passes, the emigrants had to deal with extremes in temperatures. Animals occasionally froze to death in the Sierra Nevada, or after snow and rain “look like drowned rats, shivering from the cold.” At the other extreme, temperatures during the day rose to over 100 degrees on the Great Plains or in the deserts of Nevada, so to handle the heat, many traveled at night and in the cooler morning hours in hopes of saving the animals as much as possible.49

Early on the journey, overlanders noted how well their animals fared, but after four or five weeks they found their stock “fall of [sic] a little” or “are failing fast.” Others credited the strength of their animals to the fact that they never ate grain and had grown up accustomed to eating what was available on the lands, but in time, even those animals weakened due to the difficulty of the trip. To strengthen the animals, the emigrants rested, or recruited, the animals as often as possible. While the animals recruited, the emigrants cleaned and repaired their wagons and washed clothes, undoubtedly permitting themselves to rest as well.50

Eventually, the labor of pulling wagons, carrying people, and hauling goods became too much for some of the animals and they gave out. Some simply lay down on the trail and refused to go farther. Occasionally, lame animals could be sold, such as George Belshaw’s cow that he sold to traders for six dollars at a trading post. If the lame animals could not be sold to traders or Native Americans, the animals had to be abandoned where they fell. Emigrants reported numerous oxen standing by the side of the road or lying down, trying to eat whatever was within their reach, even an iron hoop.51

Often recording the number of dead domestic stock they passed each day, emigrants sometimes ate or sold the meat of dead animals for twelve to thirty-eight cents per pound. On May 20, 1850, without realizing the accuracy of his statement, Finley McDiarmid commented that the number of dead animals he recorded “will fall far short of the actual number.”
The number of dead livestock grew from one or two per day to hundreds, especially along the California Trail as it wound through the Humboldt Sink in the deserts of Nevada. Leander V. Loomis lamented that it was like “almost Seeing the eliphant [sic],” indicating he had seen and experienced enough, but he still had several weeks to go before reaching his final destination in California.52

To keep the animals alive and healthy as long as possible, the overlanders developed remedies for alkali poisoning, sore feet, and assorted smaller yet potentially deadly problems. Alkali, a soluble salt from the ashes of plants that consists of potassium or sodium carbonate, caused many problems along the trails. Located along the well-traveled routes and near such famous landmarks as, for example, Chimney Rock, Independence Rock, and Fort Laramie, the alkali areas caused much trepidation. Captain Marcy identified alkaline springs at the head of the Sweetwater River and west of South Pass as having “the yellowish-red color of the grass growing around them,” and emigrant George Belshaw noticed that alkali looked like lime. In addition to its appearance, alkali areas could be identified by the number of dead animals in the vicinity.53

In the likelihood that the animals drank from the tainted waters, the overlanders had several cures. Most commonly, emigrants gave horses, oxen, or mules a combination of vinegar and grease, such as in bacon, to effect a cure that allowed the animals to recover well enough to continue the journey. Eliza Egbert suggested giving “a good dose of whiskey” as a remedy for alkali poisoning.54 Success rates for the cures were noted in the journals, but judging by the reports of the hundreds of dead animals around the alkali areas, the travelers either did not universally know of the cures or the remedies were not as effective as they claimed.

Other significant health problems for the livestock included sore feet resulting from hot sand, prickly pear thorns, gravelly roads, and the “dry, sharp stubs of clotted grass” that caused openings in the hooves. Suggestions for taking care of sore hooves included pouring hot pitch or tar on the heels and singeing them with a hot iron, making shoes with leather, sometimes from animals that died recently, or making shoes from spare sheet iron.55

Emigrants debated whether the animals should be shod for the trails. Some suggested keeping all animals shod, shoeing the horses but not shoeing oxen, and shoeing the forefeet “at least.” Lansford Hastings found that the more the animals traveled, the “hoofs became more and more hardened.” Despite the quandary over whether to use shoes, the authors recommended taking extra shoes and nails along, and Hastings suggested that most traveling companies had a blacksmith among the emigrants who could assist with the shoening process.56 Blacksmiths’ shops existed along the trails, such as at Forts Kearney and Laramie, and emigrants were permitted to use the equipment free of charge, or they could pay a blacksmith to work on their animals. Emigrants also found blacksmiths’ shops at, for example, South Pass, Willow Springs, and Mormon Station in the Carson Valley. The costs of services rendered by blacksmiths either traveling with the wagon trains or at established shops ranged from 12½ cents for one shoe to five dollars for shoeing one horseshoe and tightening the other three.57

Animals also suffered numerous smaller injuries, such as ill-fitting saddles and heavy packs that caused sores on the animals’ backs. Captain Marcy suggested washing sores with castile soap and water or applying a “free application of grease” on the wounds to heal them. To cure colic, he recommended mixing two tablespoons of brandy with two teaspoons of laudanum in water, then pouring it down the animal’s throat. If that failed, he recommended one tablespoon of chloride of lime dissolved in a bottle of water and poured down the throat. For snakebite, Eliza Egbert claimed that tobacco and, once again, whiskey applied to the wound relieved pain and helped the beasts survive.58

Dust and sand caused a number of problems for the animals as well. William Babcock’s company lost several oxen within a few days, so they
decided to cut one of them open and discovered the “wind pipe and lungs covered with dust,” so his company started to maintain greater distances between each of the teams, believing that if they had adopted this system earlier “we should have saved more of our cattle.” No matter what happened to the animals—dust, snakebite, alkali poisoning, or hoof problems—the emigrants tried their best to heal them. They needed the animals to get to their destinations, because if the animals failed, the lives of the travelers would be jeopardized.

**THE HUMBOLDT RIVER REGION**

For those going to California, the last part of the journey through the Humboldt River region in northern Nevada and then across the Sierra Nevada took much of the remaining strength of the emigrants and their animals. Named by Capt. John C. Frémont for Alexander von Humboldt, the naturalist and geographer, the Humboldt River flowed through Nevada in a west-southwesterly direction, through an area of patchy, poor-quality grass and intermittent water, causing the emigrants to trek through the neighboring desert to get to the next section of river. It eventually flowed approximately 300 miles into a dry lake bed known as the Humboldt Sink. Emigrants sometimes became “foot packers” because their animals had given out in this area. For those whose animals remained alive, the emigrants disposed of excess goods in order “to favor teams as much as possible.” With the end of the journey in sight, the overlanders knew they had to rely on their livestock even more than previously.

While going through the deserts, emigrants often traveled at night to avoid the heat of the day. The strong odor of rotting animal bodies allowed the travelers to stay on the trail through the Humboldt River region without
need to clearly see the route, noting that “Horses, mules, and oxen lay indiscriminately on the roadside, putrifying, and rendering the air pestilential.” In 1850 Finley McDiarmid found that “indeed we are now getting a naked view of the Elephant; he is an awful animal, breathing out pain and misery in all ways and forms” on the deserts of northern Nevada.

Taking two, three, or four days to cross, many of the animals gave out for lack of water before they reached the Carson or Truckee Rivers, depending on the final destination of their owners. While still in the Humboldt Sink area, some emigrants bought water for their livestock from trading posts or other overlanders for as much as two dollars a gallon. Some abandoned their wagons and goods in the desert in order to take the animals to water, hoping they would find their possessions when they returned. After finally crossing the sink, the overlanders observed, “[W]e have passed the Rubicon.”

Unlike those who traveled across Nevada, the emigrants who crossed the Cascade Mountains to Oregon found the feed along the pack trails better than the feed along the wagon route. As a result, many abandoned their wagons, sent their animals west via the pack trails, and took passage in boats down the Columbia River. For others, animals were sometimes sold at Fort Walla Walla or left to winter at The Dalles to be reclaimed in the spring.

ABANDONMENT

Because of the harshness of the journey, many animals never made it to California or Oregon and had to be abandoned. Admitting to sadness, Finley McDiarmid “shed tears while passing those starved and worn out creatures that have rendered for the benefit of man their last staggering effort; and when unable to do him more service they are left in a hopeless burning desert without food or water to pine away and die!!” Sometimes abandoned animals slowly followed behind the wagons, coming into camp many hours after the people. During the nights, some of the tired livestock fell victim to wolves. Travelers noticed ravens flew overhead, “seeming to have an eye on our poor skeleton mules, and appearing to say ‘we will have an opportunity to pick some of your bones before many days have gone by.’”

Writing with great feeling about the dead animals they passed, the emigrants’ words reflected the changes in attitude regarding animals in the mid-nineteenth century. They found that some emigrants abandoned the jaded animals to “stagger about from a mistaken feeling of humanity,” while others shot the animals “to terminate their sufferings.” Some emigrants could only look at their animals one last time because they had no weapon to end the creatures’ lives. The journey had made the animals the overlanders’ partners in the cross-continent adventure, and the travelers mourned the animals’ passing, understanding how much harder the remainder of the journey would be without their livestock.

THE END OF THE TRAIL

Having dealt with an array of problems and events with their animals, overlanders learned their livestock retained an unexpected value at the end of the trail; the worn-out creatures could be sold for high prices at the animal markets in Oregon and California. The prices offered made the sales of the animals worthwhile and likely necessary, because the travelers needed the funds to start a farm, a business, or a mining venture. Prices offered for the well-traveled animals varied with the condition of the livestock. Some overlanders recruited their animals before putting them on the market, but others sold them as soon as they arrived, sometimes for as little as ten dollars. Leander Loomis found the Grand Horse Market in Sacramento shortly after arriving and sold his horse, Old Bill, for eighty dollars. Considering that horses sold for approximately fifty to sixty dollars at Independence, Missouri, at the start of the journey, the price received for the well-traveled horse was remarkable. In 1854 oxen in Oregon sold for $150 to $200 per yoke, but sold in Independence for $30 to $
The animals had retained their value or even increased their worth by the end of the journey because of the need for livestock in the growing regions along the Pacific Coast. In the end, the desire for the practical outweighed the relationship that had developed between humans and animals during the journey, and the emigrants sold their traveling companions. The animals had served their purpose.

Domestic animals successfully brought thousands of emigrants to Utah, California, and Oregon. The importance of animals in westward expansion, as noted by Crosby, Cronon, and Anderson, continued along the overland trails all the way to the Pacific. Emigrants developed techniques to deal with the creatures because, in most cases, they had no alternative but to learn to work with the situations they encountered. They also developed a companionship with the animals that likely surprised even the emigrants. The overlanders changed as a result of their journeys to the Pacific with their animal companions. They learned that their success depended in large measure on the treatment of their animal traveling companions. Daniel McLaughlin could have been speaking for many emigrants and livestock on the journey when he wrote that every few feet his mules “look around at me with a wink, as much as to say 'damnation tough, Mr. Ferguson,' and start again.” Emigrants and animals had formed a partnership on the journey. The overlanders needed the domestic animals to transport them to their destinations, and their writings demonstrated a new concern and compassion for the animals that hauled them across the continent.

NOTES


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37. Shepherd Journal, May 13, 1850, 4; Egbert, “Mother’s Diary,” June 4, 1852, Loomis, A Journal of the Birmingham Emigrating Company, August 9, 1850, 119; McDiarmid to Constantia McDiarmid, August 29, 1850; Nielsen Diary, June 3, 1853.

38. Batchelder Journal, May 20, 1849, 6; Harry and Nancy Jane Bradley, May 3, 1852, Harry and Nancy Jane Bradley File, 1852, Ms OCTA, Box 3, Bo–Bu, Mattes Library, Independence, MO (hereaf-
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41. Dary, The Oregon Trail, 101–3; Palmer, Journal of Travels over the Rocky Mountains, July 25, 1847, August 8, 1847, 35, 42; Shively, Route and Distances to Oregon and California, 9.


43. Ware, The Emigrants' Guide, 33; Shively, Route and Distances to Oregon and California, 4; Child, Overland Route to California, 46; Kroll, "The Books That Enlightened the Emigrants," 107–8; Unruh, The Plains Across, 183.

44. Batchelder Journal, May 28, 1849; Sawyer Journal, 20; Benton Diary.


46. Belshaw Diary, May 8, June 14, 1853; Batchelder Journal, June 20, 1849; Morgan Diary, June 24, 1849; McDermid to Constantia McDiarmid, June 20, 1850, July 30, 1850; Sawyer Journal, June 22, 1852.

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