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**Review of *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60* By John D. Unruh, Jr.**

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*The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60.* By John D. Unruh, Jr. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979. Foreword, preface, introduction, illustrations, tables, maps, notes, bibliography, and index. xviii + 565 pp. \$22.50.

In this somewhat less than precisely titled work John D. Unruh set out to synthesize an enormous amount of published and unpublished material concerning travel across the plains during a period of two decades. Readers will discover that to Unruh "the plains across" meant the central route to the West Coast. He refers only briefly to a southern passage (pp. 67 and 400) and to the Pike's Peak rush that admittedly brought forth miners, as opposed to emigrant settlers (p. 119). However, he does discuss the miners' rush to California in '49. It is estimated that one hundred thousand "Peakers" headed for Colorado before Unruh's terminal date of 1860. Even though perhaps only 40 percent of them ever made it all the way, these are impressive figures, and in any case their collective experience would be interesting to lay against that of the earlier Argonauts.

The introduction to *The Plains Across* reviews previously published works, including historians' accounts of the overlanders and the standard textbooks of the frontier movement. The burden of this analysis is that these efforts had their shortcomings, especially because they did not always follow up accounts of trail experiences that succeeded the initial movements. Having more or less set up his straw man, Unruh presents what he held to be a new approach, treating more thoroughly the interaction between the overlanders and such groups as the army, the Indians, the Mormons, the federal government, the traders, and others, as well as filling the gap mentioned in later trail history, especially the 1850s.

In terms of discussing these subjects, of pulling together a vast amount of both well-known and fugitive material and presenting it in a series of chapters under the appropriate titles suggested in the above-mentioned areas, the author succeeded very well. However, one can take almost any historical topic that has been done nearly to death, assert that it was not covered thoroughly enough in the past, and usually be right.

Particularly welcome is the author's discussion of the evolution in travel modes and facilities, especially during the 1850s, and his point that after the first flush of excitement, such as the attraction of Oregon to first-comers or the '49 gold rush to California, historical interest in the overland movement flagged, even though the emigration continued to grow and become more sophisticated. Welcome also is his chapter on the Mormons and their "halfway house" that supplied travelers, often at rigorous rates as urged by Brigham Young and occasionally under difficult conditions for buyers. The chapter on West Coast assistance, from both California and Oregon, is excellent and is one of the best examples of Unruh's contribution to the general story of overland migration.

The author, who passed away shortly after completing his study, had worked at it for a decade. First written as a doctoral dissertation at the University of Kansas, the book encompasses an enormous amount of material that

now is packaged and ready for use by others. This is not to suggest that the result is a mere compendium; Unruh synthesized, interpreted, and viewed a fairly well-known story from a fresh viewpoint. His final chapter, one that concerns the overlanders in historical perspective, does some summing up, but a somewhat stronger conclusion would have been in order. Taken as a whole, the study is a welcome addition to an already large body of literature on a major American movement and will henceforth be required reading among students and others interested in the westward movement.

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