

THE MOVEMENT TO THE FAR WEST DURING THE DECADE OF THE SIXTIES

There is scarcely a school child who does not know something of the early migrations over the Oregon Trail and of the rush to California in the gold days. These romantic western thrusts of the American people have become classic in our historical literature and historians can find little to write that is not repetition of oft-told tales. It does not appear, however, that much serious attention has been given to the later movements which carried much larger numbers of people into the far west and laid the foundations for permanent prosperity.

The present paper deals in a rather impressionistic fashion with the movement to the far west during the decade of the sixties. This decade has a special interest because it witnessed a westward movement which was surprisingly continuous in spite of a civil war, and because the completion of the first transcontinental railroad at the close of the decade wrought a great change in the conditions of life in the far west. The paper presents a general view of the volume, motives, and characteristics of the migrations of this period, together with some account of the services of communication and transportation. The term "far west" has been used roughly to include the Pacific Coast and Rocky Mountain regions. It is obvious that a paper of this character can constitute only a general survey. In fact, a complete and detailed treatment of any segment of the western movement cannot be written until for each of the states or sections there has been prepared an adequate history of settlement and immigration.

Census figures furnish an approximate guide to the volume of migration. For instance, between 1860 and 1870 the following increases in population are to be noted: California from 379,994 to 560,247; Oregon from 52,465 to 90,923; Washington from 11,594 to 23,955; Nevada from 6,857 to 42,491; Colorado from 34,277 to 39,864; and Utah from 40,273 to 86,786. Among the territories newly organized during the decade Arizona showed a population of 9,658 in 1870; Idaho, 14,999; Montana, 20,595; and Wyoming, 9,118. In brief, the population of the Rocky

Mountain and Pacific Coast regions was larger by about 373,000 in 1870 than in 1860—or an increase of more than 71 per cent. It is impossible to tell how much of this increase was due to migration from eastern states, but a conservative estimate would indicate that more than 300,000 people moved overland to the far west during the ten years. From the standpoint of mere numbers the increase of this decade has been greatly overshadowed in later periods, but the significance of the movement lies in the fact that it occurred during a time of war and reconstruction and had its goal in a region still far beyond the frontier line.

Census statistics are dry and lifeless, and for the Rocky Mountain regions during the period under discussion they are notably unreliable. Fortunately we have numerous contemporaneous accounts of the western migrations of this decade which give life and color and movement to the story. Many observers along the frontier were struck by the volume of the movement to the far west while the war between the States was in progress. In these migrations were to be found adventurers from all parts of the world, draft-evaders from the North, and families from the South and the border States seeking escape from the ravages and disturbed conditions of war. In 1863, for instance, it is said that the road at Omaha was "covered most of the time with the wagons of those bound for Colorado, California and Oregon; one train of nine hundred wagons was noted, another of twelve hundred. On the Kansas route this year a traveler from Colorado, sixteen days on the road, met on an average five hundred wagons a day going to Colorado and California." The freight traffic across the plains, placed at 36,000,000 pounds in 1860, was estimated to have increased to 63,000,000 pounds by 1864.

A traveler over the route to Idaho in 1864 wrote as follows from Council Bluffs: "The immigration is said never to have been exceeded. When you approach the town the ravines and gorges are white with covered wagons at rest . . . Myriads of horses and mules, the largest and finest I ever saw, drag onward the moving mass of humanity toward the setting sun. . . . The motives which propel this living mass are, of course, various. Old Californians, who many times cursed their folly for starting, and who thought on their former return that they would never leave home again, missing the interest and terrible stimulus of a mining life, have sold our their farms and are off for a better climate. The golden dreams of all, the real success of a few, the fabulous sums made by merchandise and speculation, goad

on a mixed multitude of jobbers and traders, while the ubiquitous liquor seller, and the smooth, quiet black-leg, bring up the rear. The result is, realms are being peopled as if by magic."

Further on he wrote: "Such is the region over which two thousand six hundred wagons had preceded us to Fort Laramie, averaging four horses, mules and oxen to each. . . . It is guessed that three-fourths of this year's immigration is yet to come, and if so, the whole will foot up to a hundred and twenty-five thousand people. . . . Day after day they trudge on, with sand in their eyes, sand in their ears, sand in their neck, bosom, boots, stockings, hats, clothing, victuals, drink, bed clothes; their bed in sand."

In fact, so alarming did the rush to the far west become that the governor of at least one western state was constrained to issue a proclamation in the futile attempt to stem the tide. "I am advised by numerous letters from sources deemed reliable," declared Governor Stone of Iowa in February, 1864, "that large numbers of men qualified for military duty, are preparing to depart at an early day, beyond the Missouri. It is useless to disguise the plain object of this sudden hegira westward, in the midst of winter, and months in advance of the season at which vegetation appears on the plains. . . . Men who are capable of an undertaking so arduous, and able to delve in the golden mines of Colorado, Nevada, and Idaho would make excellent material for filling up the wasted ranks of the Union Army." Therefore he forbade any citizen of Iowa, without a proper pass, to cross the western boundary of the state before the tenth day of March, the date on which the draft was to go into effect; and he called upon all the military commanders along the Missouri to assist in enforcing this prohibition.

One writer tells us that during the war between eleven and twelve thousand immigrants who arrived at New York declared their intention of going to Utah. "Every year large companies of the Mormons came, mostly peasants from England, Scotland, and the north of Europe, and every year a large caravan set out from Utah to meet the newcomers on the frontier, and to conduct them to their destination. They moved as one large organized body, men, women, and children walking, with only the baggage in wagons."

After the close of the war the movement to the far west was greatly augmented, and was notable in the South as well as in the North, and particularly in the border States where large numbers

of southern sympathizers left their homes for the west. General Pope on the frontier wrote of the "incredible numbers" of emigrants. General Dodge declared that the trade into the Rocky Mountains was doubling each successive year, and he estimated in 1863 that fully 5,000 teams crossed the plains each month. Oberholtzer tells us that "from the first day of March to August 10, 1865, 9,386 teams and 11,885 persons in stage-coaches, in ox and mule trains, and in other parties, had passed Fort Kearney in Nebraska on the Platte route. Travellers from Denver to Fort Leavenworth . . . in Kansas, a distance of 683 miles in July, 1865, said that they were never out of sight of emigrant and freight trains. A man coming east from Denver on a stage-coach counted in three days 3384 teams bound west. The movement continued through the winter of 1865-6. The officers in command of military posts reported that their hospitals were filled with frost-bitten teamsters and emigrants, whose mules had frozen to death and whose trains, stalled on the plains, were now buried in the snow."

"It is wonderful," wrote Demas Barnes, in describing a trans-continental trip made in 1866, "to see the number of farmers with their families and household goods thus migrating to further western homes. Those we saw were principally from the States of Illinois, Indiana, and Missouri, and were either bound for Utah, Oregon, or Washington Territory. We estimated from four to five hundred wagons passed each day—one day at least a thousand. This is only *one* route."

Although there is ample evidence that thousands of settlers crossed the plains for the purpose of taking up farms in the regions further west, the main attraction during this decade was mining. The California gold fields had by no means entirely lost their lure. The discoveries in Colorado in 1858 had led to the immediate stampede of nearly 100,000 people to that region, most of whom had soon returned home disappointed. Nevertheless, during the decade of the sixties, the mines of Colorado continued to be the goal of thousands. "They literally deal in 'great expectations,' and discount the result at the first opportunity," wrote a visitor in Denver in 1866. "Just think of it—one dollar a quire for the paper I write on, ten cents apiece for eggs—at wholesale—ninety dollars for transporting sixty pounds of baggage! Of course they are in a hurry to point you to a 'blossom rock'—gold certain—a hole in the hill twelve feet deep, and consider they give you a bargain at fifty thousand dollars. Ten thousand car-

casses of poor over-worked animals, marking the highway over seven hundred miles of parching, treeless plain, is a small matter—while gold is before them, around them, everywhere.”

But new discoveries to the northwest, in the so-called Inland Empire, were now creating new excitement and attracting widespread attention. The Nez Perce and Salmon River regions in Northern Idaho; the Boise Basin and the Owyhee district to the south; the John Day and Powder rivers in eastern Oregon; and Deer Lodge, Bannack, Alder Gulch and Last Chance Gulch were the centers of the new mining activity during the Civil War. The movement to these localities caused the most conspicuous instance of an eastward moving frontier, so that a Montana poet was led to write:

“From Eastern hives is filled Pacific’s shore—
No more inviting sun-set lands are near;
The restless throngs now *backward* pour—
From East and West they meet, and stop right here.

“Away our published maps we’ll have to throw—
The books of yesterday, today are lame.
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And towns and roads are made on every side,
In shorter time than books and maps are bound.”

Early in 1861 the movement from the coast was under way and soon the exodus of miners from California and of farmers from the Willamette Valley caused alarm. Walla Walla was full of miners on their way to Idaho. The town of Lewiston came into being as an outfitting point from which long pack trains set out for the mines. The traffic on the Columbia River grew to such proportions that new steamboats were being built. By summer it was estimated that there were more than 7000 men in northern Idaho. After a severe winter the movement continued anew and on a larger scale. In May 3800 people set out from San Francisco for the north and large numbers came also from the east, and from Colorado, Utah and Canada, swelling the population of northern Idaho to 30,000. Simultaneously miners poured into eastern Oregon. Auburn, a town which has long since disappeared, soon had a population of 3000. Baker and La Grande came into existence. In the election of 1864, the counties east of the Cascades cast 4450 out of a total of 18,350 votes cast in

Oregon. The year 1863 was marked by a notable rush to southern Idaho and to Montana. By 1864 the Boise Basin alone had a population of 16,000, and Bannack City in Montana achieved its reputation of being about the wildest town in all the mining regions.

No railroad yet bridged the distance between the Missouri and the outposts of settlement on the coast and in the mountains, but the means of travel and communication were considerably improved over the days when the first settlers journeyed to Oregon or the first stampede to California occurred. There were numerous well-beaten roads. The now familiar Oregon-California Trail, with its branches, remained the most travelled highway. Then there was the main Santa Fe Trail, with a branch along the north bank of the Arkansas to Colorado and with a connecting road from Fort Smith, Arkansas. From the latter point there was a road running southwestward to El Paso. Thence two roads led to Yuma on the Colorado River in California. From Powder Horn on the Texas coast, reached by boat from New Orleans, there was a road to El Paso. In the far north a road extended from St. Paul to Walla Walla. These are merely the main arteries of travel. There are many connecting roads, particularly in the mountain regions, leading to isolated mining camps or forming short-cuts.

During the period from 1850 to 1870 the region between the Missouri River and the Pacific Coast witnessed the development of stage lines and stage companies on a scale hitherto unknown. As early as 1850 a stage line was put into operation between Independence and Salt Lake, where connection was made with a line running with considerable irregularity to Sacramento. In 1858 John Butterfield secured the contract for carrying the mail and established a through stage line to California by the southern route. By the decade of the sixties, therefore, overland stage lines were well established. Ben Holladay was the outstanding figure in the system of transportation across the plains during this period. His own private stage-coach, handsomely decorated and comfortably equipped with beds, is said to have made the trip to California on occasion in about twelve days. The comments of the public on the service over his lines varied, however, with the experiences and dispositions of the writers.

"It is not a *pleasant*, but it is an *interesting* trip," wrote Demas Barnes. "The conditions of one man's running stages to make money, while another seeks to ride in them for pleasure, are not

in harmony to produce comfort. Coaches will be overloaded, it will rain, the dust will drive, baggage will be left to the storm, passengers will get sick . . . children will cry, nature demands sleep, passengers will get angry, the drivers will swear, the sensitive will shrink, rations will give out, potatoes become worth a gold dollar each, and not to be had at that, the water brackish, the whiskey abominable, and the dirt almost unendurable. I have just finished six days and nights of this thing; and I am free to say, until I forget a great many things now very visible to me, I shall not undertake it again."

On the other hand, travellers like A. K. McClure, Silas Seymour and General Rusling found stage-coach travelling quite endurable. "We found his stages to be our well-known Concord coaches," reported the last named writer, "and they quite surpassed our expectations, both as to comfort and to speed. They were intended for nine inside—three seats full—and as many more outside, as could be induced to get on. . . . The animals themselves were our standing wonder; no broken-down nags, or half-starved Rosinantes, like our typical stage-horses east, but, as a rule, they were fat and fiery, and would have done credit to a horseman anywhere." Silas Seymour reported that "the speed, comfort, and regularity of these Ben Holladay Overland stages is certainly astonishing, when we consider the fact that they pass through hundreds and thousands of miles of almost uninhabited country; and that it is only five years since the experiment was first attempted."

But the people of the far western settlements and mining centers demanded not only increased facilities for the carrying of passengers: they were especially desirous of improved mail service. The short-lived attempt to maintain the pony express in 1860 and 1861 was the most spectacular response to this demand. Eighty riders, five hundred horses and two hundred station-keepers were employed by the company which endeavored to make the pony express a success. "The sight of a solitary horseman galloping along the road was in itself nothing remarkable," wrote General Reynolds, "but when we remember that he was one of a series stretching across the continent, and forming a continuous chain for two thousand miles through an almost absolute wilderness, the undertaking was justly ranked among the events of the age, and the most striking triumph of American energy."

The pony express soon disappeared, leaving to the stage-lines undisputed supremacy as carriers of the mail. There is evidence,

however, that the service was often far from satisfactory. The temptation to fill the coaches with well-paying passengers and their baggage led to shameful neglect of the mail. Demas Barnes wrote from Denver that "the mail is piled up at different places and I think the bottom of it here will hardly move for a month . . . I speak only what I know, and repeat a remark made by the agents: 'Too much trouble to tear the pile out from the bottom' . . . I have seen the stages pass through here loaded with passengers, and not carry a pound of mail, while perhaps two weeks' mail, or more, lay heaped up in the office!"

There are tales of mail-bags falling from stage-coaches with no attempt to reclaim them, and even of sacks of mail used to fill up mud holes in the road so that the coaches could pass over them. "The government pays Wells, Fargo and Co. \$1,000,000 or so to carry the mails," complained McClure, "but they lose so much mail-matter that business men are glad to pay them treble postage, in addition to the government postage, to insure prompt transmission of papers and letters. . . . While Wells, Fargo and Co. are permitted to have special mails, carried at a large extra profit, they have every inducement to confuse, delay, and lose the regular mails."

A service of even more vital importance than the mail to the people of the mining regions and other isolated sections and to the garrisons of military posts was the service of supply, or the freight transportation system. During the decade of the sixties this business grew by leaps and bounds. At Atchison alone the sum of six million dollars was invested in the business, "which employed upward of 5000 men, 5000 wagons, 7000 mules and horses and 28,000 oxen. The traffic in 1865 was seven times what it had been in 1861, four times as great as in 1863. It was computed that in 1865 the shipments into Colorado had aggregated 104,000,000 pounds of goods." The firm of Russell, Majors and Waddell, holding government contracts for transporting supplies to the forts, used more than six thousand wagons, each with a carrying capacity of three tons, and is said to have owned seventy-five thousand oxen. "It is doubtful if there was another section of country on the face of the globe over which, in the sixties, passed so much traffic by ox, horse, and mule team."

The sight of these wagon trains, sometimes fully five miles in length, was a thing long remembered by every traveller. "Going up the 'River,' as the Missouri was always called, these trains being loaded all had their full complement of wagon-masters,

teamsters, cooks, etc.," writes General Rusling. "But, returning empty, several wagons were often coupled together. . . . Even here on the Plains, about the last place that we would suppose, the inherent aristocracy of human nature cropped out distinctly. The lords of the lash *par excellence* were the stage-drivers. The next most important, the horse or mule teamsters; and the lowest, the 'bull-drivers'."

To complete this survey of the expansion of means of communication and transportation which accompanied the movement of population to the far west during the sixties, it would be necessary to take note of the extension of telegraph lines and the growth of steamboat traffic on the Missouri. The limits of time, however, make it desirable to pass over these services without discussion.

When on May 10, 1869, two engines, one from the east and one from the west, met at Promontory Point on the now completed transcontinental railroad, the end of the old days in the far west was in sight. For many years to come people continued to migrate across the plains in covered wagons, mule and ox-trains continued to haul freight, and stage-coaches to carry mail and passengers. But after 1870 the old isolation was gone. A new day had dawned for the people of the mountains and Pacific Coast.

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