

DOCUMENTS

Robert Robe's Diary While Crossing the Plains in 1851

Robert Robe was born in Ohio in 1821 and died in Brownsville, Oregon, in 1908. His diary, while crossing the plains in 1851, is written in crisp, straightforward sentences. It adds one more piece of evidence to the growing materials pertaining to that interesting period of colonization in the Far West.

The copy of the diary here reproduced is furnished by Mr. Robe's grandson, Cecil F. Robe, a graduate student in the University of Washington.

Hubert Howe Bancroft in his *History of Oregon*, Volume II., page 681, refers to Rev. Robert Robe as follows: "In October Thompson was joined by a young minister from Ohio, Robert Robe, and on the 19th of November they, together with E. R. Geary of Lafayette, at the residence of the latter, formed the Presbytery of Oregon, as directed by the General Assembly at its session in that year. In 1853 there were five Presbyterian ministers in Oregon, the three above mentioned [Lewis Thompson, Robert Robe, E. R. Geary], J. L. Yantis and J. A. Hanna."

The hasty spelling and the lack of punctuation are, of course, unchanged in an effort to reproduce the document faithfully as written. The diary ends abruptly after the party had passed through the Umatilla country.

First of Diary, 1851

Apr. 10. Left Washington for Cincinnati via boat.

12. Left Cin. for St. Louis.

17. Left St. Louis St. Joseph.

May 1. Left St. Joseph and after traveling five miles encamped for the first time.

2. Passed through Savannah and camped near the Nodaway Bridge.

3. Crossed the bridge and passed through Oregon, a fine wheat country.

4. Skirted the prairie having bluffs on the right. Crossed the little and camped on the big Targruo. Extensive rolling prairies to the east. Grass plentiful today.

5. Travelled to Rock creek about twelve miles.

6. Passed through Oregon crossed High creek and the Nisnabotna River and camped near the Missouri River.

7. Arrived at Fort Kearney. I will here remark concerning the Missouri River that it is a much smaller stream than I expected. It is also exceedingly difficult of navigation owing to its shallowness and changeability of its current.

The Bluffs noted by travellers, I first saw at St. Jo. and thence on the east side of the river to Fort Kearney and others say they extend to a much greater distance.

These are not regular primated but abrupt irregular natural mounds.

11. Crossed the Missouri after a few days detention and camped five miles dist. We are here in country of the Otoes a peaceful Indian tribe said to number 300 warriors. The country is a beautiful rolling prairie well watered and its courses skirted with timber.

13. Our company of 13 wagons travelled about twenty miles on an elevated ridge.

14. Before starting experienced a most terrific storm of rain, wind and hail accompanied with appalling explosions of electricity. Afterward travelled about 20 miles much of the way through rain & were compelled to encamp without grass or timber. Spent a night of vigilant watching and perpetual storm.

15. Still raining. Started to depart without breakfast after two hours travel came in sight of the Platte and pitched soon after on a pleasant tributary of the Saline river. Spent the remaining day in drying baggage etc. etc. A pleasant site.

16. Travelled 20 miles to an old camping ground. Met a trader who informed us that nearly all the Indians are absent to a governmental treaty at Ft. Laramie. We are now in the Pawnee country. Passed numerous graves today most of whom we learned from the inscriptions were the latest emigrants of last year. Some had been disinterred by wild beasts.

17. In the morning left three boys in search of a stray cow. They not having arrived against 1 P.M. I volunteered to go back in search of them, found them about 7 miles back following the train after a fruitless search. All arrived late in camp much to the joy of the parents.

18. Morning rainy—Road descending toward the Platte. Becomes intensely dark & misty towards noon—in the afternoon torrents of rain. The elements seem thrily armed for warfare with the poor emigrant floods to overwhelm winds to devastate and lightening to petrify and scathe and when seemingly exhausted resummon their forces again and again to the charge.

19. A fine day. The first spent in travelling on the plains of the Platte river.

20. Continued our journey up the Platte valley which I would judge to be here some 12 miles wide on this side of the river. The only game seen here are the antelope and wolf beside some wild fowl.

21. A rainy morning started early passed an old Pawnee village in ruins. The houses are constructed by placing timbers in forks and upon these without placing upright poles then rushes bound with [illegible] and finally earth. Chimney in center. Day became more & more rainy and wound up with a storm which beggared description.

22. Bluff approach the river—travelling less monotonous river finely skirted with timber.

23. Roads very muddy in afternoon. Today our waggon severed itself from our former companions & joined a company of Californians.

24. Before starting a trader direct from Ft. Kearney arrived at our camp. He informs us it is yet 25 miles thither. Travelling is by no means dangerous a waggon of provisions passing with only three guards. In the afternoon passed the entrance of the Independence Weston & St. Jo roads. Emigrants became more numerous.

25. Passed Fort Kearney this morning and after a short drive encamped. Having conversed with some of the soldiers I find they consider life very monotonous.

26. Roads heavy—short drive—a storm.

27. High Bluffs on the opposite side of river approach and present a beautiful appearance. At night a fearful storm.

28. Roads heavy nothing singular.

29. Have arrived in the region abounding in Buffalo. At noon a considerable herd came in sight. the first any of us had ever seen. thus now for the chase—the horsemen proved too swift in pursuit and frightened them into the Bluffs without capturing any—the footmen pursued however and killed three pretty good success for the first.

30. Nothing remarkable today.

31. Game being abundant we resolved to rest our stock and hunt today—Started in the morning on foot. Saw probably 1000 Buffalo. Shot at several and killed one. Where ever we found them wolves were prowling around as if to guard them. Their real object is however no doubt to seize the calves as their prey.

Saw a town of Prairie dogs, they are nearly as large as a gray squirrel. They bark fiercely when at a little distance but on near approach flee to their holes. Wherever they are we see numerous owls. After a very extensive ramble and having seen a variety of game we returned at sunset with most voracious appetites.

June 1. The Bluffs become beautifully undulating losing their precipitous aspect and the country further back is beautifully rolling prairie.

2. In the evening camped beside our old friends Miller and Dovey. They had met with a great loss this morning their 3 horses having taken fright at a drove of buffalo and ran entirely away. Some of our company killed more buffalo this evening & a company went in the night with teams to bring them in.

3. Spent the forenoon in an unsuccessful search for the above mentioned horses. In the afternoon pursued & caught our company after

4. Crossed the south fork of the Platte at 2 P.M. This place is called about four hundred and twenty miles from old Ft Kearney where we crossed the Missouri.

5. Crossed the Bluffs and entered Ash hollow passing down it to the North Platte. Here the scenery is beautifully romantick. On arriving in view of this fork we descried on the opposite side a large train of emigrants this being the great Mormon route from Council B to S. Lake. Saw this evening a rendezvous of French traders with Indian wives. Indians are around us.

6. Roads very heavy today on account of deep sand.

7. Numerous graves of 1850.

8. Travelled almost all day in sight of singular rock called the Court house rock.

9. Passed today the Chimney rock we have moreover been in view of this for more than 24 hours before arriving at it. It is probably 200 feet high and seems to be a conglomeration of rock indented clay which is gradually wearing away with the lapse of time.

10. Passed Scotts bluffs today. These are an extended range of bluffs north of the road presenting a great variety of shape and at a little distance much resemble a city in ruins.

11. Passed Robedory trading post he informs me he is acquainted with Rev. Mr. Hamilton the missionary and has two daughters in that school.

12. Came from Horse creek to the Missouri this forenoon and remained by a stream of fresh water till morning.

Formed acquaintance with a train from Morgan Co. Ohio and enjoyed some kind friendships travelled 5 miles back after dark from their encampment.

13. Passed 2 or 3 French trading houses today.

14. After 5 miles travel arrived at Ft Laramie and rested the remaining day. This place abounds in lodges. Indians are therefore numerous. Sioux & Shians are here united—friendly but thievish. This is a central trading point for Indians & French traders.

15. Travelled four miles & encamped in good grass.

16. My beast got loss early this morning.—Started after her on foot when near there learned that an Indian had caught her. On arriving in sight saw her with an Indian on her back and an officer from the fort after him. The Indian had offered her for sale very cheap hence was suspected of theft and pursued and obtained forthwith but lost the chain which he said he had thrown in the river.

Resolved to pack through from this place—bought a pony in connection with Capt. Hardin of Weston.

17. Started with Hardin & Treoit expecting 3 others tomorrow. At noon when about starting our pony took fright & ran back. Hardin went back in pursuit. I went on to overtake the wagons which we overtook late.

18. Waited at Horse shoe creek which is near 41 miles from Ft Laramie. Indians are numerous but we remained unharmed. Eventually a train encamped for the day when we had plenty of company.

In the evening they returned with a pony which they had obtained in exchange for ours which they had caught it having proved to be a wild horse.

19. Started on our ponies to overtake the teams ahead. In the evening after a good days travel we were suddenly encompassed by four Indians not knowing their intentions we beckoned to them to keep aloof and on the presentation of a rifle they cried out Sioux whereupon they were kindly congratulated this tribe being very friendly. Encamped near two trains which were both much annoyed by the Sioux who surrounded them and begged food most vexatiously.

20. A short travel. No strange occurrence.

21. We passed several streams of running water. As we approach the mountains these streams & springs supply excellent water. There is no scarcity of wood above Laramie.

22. Travelled from Deer creek which is a good camping place and arrived in the evening at the upper Ferry. There is a bridge over Platte at Deer creek but this does not seem to be much used. There is also an intermediate ferry but this is generally used. Saw Buffalo today they are plenty in this region.

23. Remained at the ferry resting.

24. Crossed early and pursued our journey. We here leave the Platte and strike out into the Bluff. Road rather rugged. Passed the mineral spring at noon camped at the Willow spring. Excellent water grass poor.

25. Passed in the morning down a creek of good water grass good, afterward through deep and oppressively warm here worse for cattle. Came in the evening to Independence Rock. This is a few rods after striking Sweetwater river. This rock is isolated, elevated and craggy. A great number of names are engraved on the parts next the road. Sweetwater river is a small tributary of the Platte of excellent water. We went up its valley five miles to the Devils gate. This is a curiosity of considerable note. The current rushes through a chasm of rock which looks as though torn asunder by some great convulsion.

26. Much sand, very hot at noon. We now see considerable of the Rocky Mountains. Camped on a small stream near the river after travelling 28 miles. Grass plenty on the river.

27. After starting this morning the atmosphere suddenly became very cold. Directly it rained and sleeted and the wind blew very cold, a striking contrast with the heat of yesterday. We today crossed the Sweetwater several times. After a long days drive stopped in the cold rain and spent a disagreeable night.

28. Today more pleasant than yesterday plenty of grass on the river in the evening crossed a long ridge and camped late with a company of Californians from Missouri. Three negroes in company.

29. Crossed the Sweetwater for the last time and after going 8 miles farther passed the summit of the Rocky Mts. This pass is very easily made the road gradually ascending until you find yourself descending toward the Pacific. We encamped this evening at the Pacific springs which are a few miles beyond the pass. The waters run hence into the Colorado river.

30. About noon passed the road leading to the Salt Lake roads very sandy and winds high which make travelling very unpleasant. Passed little Sandy creek and seven miles further Big Sandy and encamped here for the night Grass not good but

water plenty and a sufficiency of wood. Exchanged today my horse now jaded for a mule—even trade.

July 1. Left big Sandy to cross a desert variously estimated at from 49 to 53 miles. The first part of the road we found to be very level afterward more precipitous. Wild sage here grows abundantly but grass is very stunted. We learned that there is water some distance from the road but we were unable to find it by the direction given us hence we were compelled to make the entire trip without resuscitating ourselves or animals. Arrived before night in sight of Green river but it was late before we arrived at it. Encamped on the hither bank near some lodges.

2. Crossed the river current rapid. Fare \$11. per waggon. Moved forward 8 miles to grass and rested the remaining day. Grass good.

3. A short journey. Grass good.

4. Crossed rough and hilly road water and grass plenty.

5. The same rough steep roads.

6. Struck Bear river this morning the road on this river is good there is also an abundance of grass. The Indians here are the most interesting and intelligent that I have seen on our whole journey. They seem to be semi-civilized and have large droves of very fine horses here we find some strawberries of an inferior quality.

7. Came to Owens station on Thomas fork there Hardin and Smith remained intending to go with a drove of horses I joined the company of Dr. Davenport from Ohio. This company shows much kindness.

8. Continued our journey up the pleasant valley of Bear river. In the evening camped near some Nes Perce indians from Walla Walla who are here trading. They have encouraged some of our company considerably by their statement concerning grass etc. down Snake river. One of their company says she has a white husband and can talk considerably in English another can converse and has learned to swear in English.

9. Came in the evening to the soda springs the upper ones have deposited a considerable quantity of rock from increments contained in the water. The water boils up in the center, and is of a mineral weakish unpleasant taste. The nether springs are quite palatable the water here does not seem to boil up but the gas seems to boil up through it by which it is impregnated with carbonic acid. Last of all comes the Steamboat Spring the water whereof is warm and spouts up 2 or 3 feet. A remark was here

made by several "Hell is not more than a mile from this place."

10. This morning several of our horses wandered away—after a couple of hours of anxiety they were overtaken about six miles distant. After a few miles travel we passed the California Trail and turning to the right we went almost northward passing a soda pool of considerable size. Traces of volcanic action are here very manifest volcanic stones being everywhere scattered over the plain. We camped this evening where the grass was abundant but it was found directly that our cattle were poisoned. The process of doctoring therefore commenced, medicine, lard, or bacon. The source of the poison seems to be uncertain. Some suppose it to be alkali others a weed which however is unknown.

11. Commenced the day doctoring cattle. Lost one ox. travelled five or six miles. Camped at the foot of the mountains.

12. Crossed the mountain which forms the rim of the great basin separating the waters of the Salt Lake from those of the Pacific the passage of the mountain not difficult. Came in the afternoon to an excellent spring the head of waters running into the great Western ocean continued our course down the rill until it became a beautiful mountain stream dashing over cataracts and rushing through deep and craggy ravines.

13. Early this morning struck a sandy plain which continued for several miles. Travelling heavy came about 2 o'clock to excellent springs and grazing passed two or 3 creeks this afternoon beautiful meadows on every hand. Struck Lewis river and camped in sight of Fort Hall.

14. Crossed Portneuf river this morning rising the bluff we traversed a barren sage plain and were exceedingly annoyed with dust the whole day.

15. We passed the American Falls this morning their height is perhaps fifty feet—The falls are irregular and present an appearance of no extraordinary beauty or sublimity. They received this name from the circumstance of several American traders being here precipitated into the gulf below and consequently destroyed. Sage plains continue camped in the evening at Beaver Dam creek.

16. Continued our journey through the sandy sage plains arrived at noon at a creek where is excellent grazing and in the creek fine fish. In the afternoon we commenced the passage of a barren sage desert of 15 miles camped after travelling about 7 miles road very rocky.

17. Started very early arrived about nine o'clock at Marshy

springs there were several trains encamped one of them Dr. Patterson's had the last night lost one fine horse and another Mr. Keeney three by the Indians. They had come very nigh there being no guards and cut the lariats from the wagons. They had started with one other horse but being hotly pursued he was abandoned—hence regained.

18. Were astounded this morning by intelligence obtained from messenger who had come for a physician that last night at Rock Creek which is several miles in advance two persons had been shot by the Indians and severely wounded. We arrived in the evening at this place an excellent camp one of the wounded men Mr. Black of Illinois will not probably long survive the ball having entered the abdomen and passed out near the spinal column the other Mr. Steward is slightly wounded. A very large number of trains centered here this night. Fears pervade the women and muliebrish men.

21. Left our camp at Rock Creek and proceeded toward the river leaving this creek a mile or two on our right. Camped on its bank and drove our cattle into the bottom to graze—banks very rugged.

22. Camped this evening at the rivers edge at the mouth of warm spring branch the country through which we have passed is a barren sage plaine. Some bunch grass found in places.

23. Arrived early at the Salmon Fall creek this is a fine mountain stream. At its mouth we found an excellent encampment. In the evening we crossed the Bluffs and arrived at the Salmon Falls. These folk of the Snake are very irregular altogether I should think they exceeded thirty feet. The scene here is not so imposing as at the American Falls. But the roaring of the waters is heard at considerable distance—very fine fish are here obtained by barter from the Indians.

24. Ascended a very steep bluff this morning nooned on a very high bluff near the river. Camped in a sage plain carrying our water to camp about a mile and a half.

25. Ascended this morning to the river at the old crossing where we arrived about noon. Two trains were in the act of crossing which are the first this season. The south side is almost universally traveled to avoid the difficulty of crossing. We determined to cross and take the north side hoping thereby to obtain better grazing hence vigorous preparations were commenced by the calking of wagon beds etc.

26. All our effects were landed about noon hence we re-

loaded and drove about four miles. We tied two wagon beds together and used them as a ferry large loads can thus be conveyed.

27. Our road lay about seven miles from the river and from six to two from the mountains on the right. We find ourselves amply repaid for our labor in crossing for here there is excellent grass on the bottoms of numerous small streams of excellent water. This contrasted with the barrenness and drouth of the country just passed through is very delightful. In the evening we arrived at the hot spring and encamped. Water here issued in abundance from several springs sufficiently heated for culinary purposes.

28. In the afternoon crossed Barrow creek and camped at a spring to the left hand of the road after traveling about twenty miles.

29. A little after starting Mr. Coolege with whom I was riding was suddenly thrown from his horse and seemed at first but little injured in a few minutes later however he fainted and fell headlong in the road. After a little detention he was able to be placed in the waggon and seems to be not seriously injured. We nooned at a small creek of fresh water—crossed in the afternoon Charlottes fork a fine stream and camped in the evening at Willow Springs. The hills today are clothed with luxuriant bunch grass.

30. After travelling a few miles we struck the Boise river a clear mountain stream and nooned on its banks—at night camped a few miles further down. Indians are numerous here and have plenty of horses.

31. Continued our travel down the pleasant valley of the Boise. The Indians here barter fine fish for old clothes and trinkets. One of them obtained from us for a fish a pair of old pants directly after he returned with another for which he obtained a shirt and now deemed himself more gorgeously appareled than a king.

Aug. 1. Crossed this morning the Boise river and continued our way down its right bank. Wood, water and grass which we had hitherto found to plentifully on its banks are found to its mouth. Here we arrived late in the evening. Ft. Boise is situated here which is an old station of the Hudson Bay company hence belongs to the sisterhood with Ft. Hall. Half breeds as usual numerous. There is the old crossing of Snake river. We crossed however as he had done before swimming our cattle.

2. Travelled in the evening after crossing about six miles and camped in sage.

3. Arrived about noon at the "Malore"* river a good camp travelled in the afternoon ten miles further to the Sulphur Spring. A poor camp.

4. Travelled ten miles this morning and arrived at Buch creek this part of the road is surrounded by mountains running up very high on either hand. At this place we found the train formerly mentioned as having a man wounded by the Indians. He seems near to death. Afternoon this man has just been buried having died since our arrival. Alas! to be buried to be devoured by wolves—but more lamentable that friends assemble not to follow our remains to the tomb and shed one farewell parting tear. Alas the sadness that fills a mother's soul on hearing the intelligence of such a burial as this more than two thousand miles from home—his soul ascends to God and his body lies down to await the resurrection day.

Travelled three miles to Snake river.

5. Travelled five miles to Burnt river. Were detained the remaining day by the sickness of Mrs. Alexander.

6. Travelled eleven miles today this is by far the most precipitous and mountainous part of country through which have yet passed. The road winds up the narrow valley frequently crossing the stream. Once today we left the channel turning to the right and winding a couple of miles over the mountain. The road is much better than might be expected.

7. Travelled about fifteen miles today a considerable part of the day we were to the right of the river winding up ravines. There is here plenty of grass the mountains being all lined with bunch grass there is also considerable of wood on the river and mountain.

8. Turned this morning up a branch of the river and left it to our left the road is quite good except one very steep hill. Nooned near the head of the branch and in the afternoon crossed the ridge which brings us in view of the Blue Mountains—there for the first time since leaving the Missouri river our eyes were greeted with the pleasing prospect of abundance of timber. The range far off to the left is clothed with an abundance of pine the hills hereabouts are clothed with luxuriant grass. Descending

*Note.—"Malore" river must be Malheur. There is also a footnote in the margin of the original about the dead man mentioned.

into the sage plains below. We camped for the night grass plenty no water.

9. Crossed the ridge which brings us in view of Powder river valley descending we found plenty of grass—there is water standing here in pools not very good for cattle—drinking water by digging a few feet. Late in the afternoon we struck the first branch of the river. We went however two miles farther to the crossing—Grass here is very abundant. This vale would on several accounts several accounts form quite a good settlement.

10. Crossed this morning the two and three branch of this river. Country interesting and level. In the evening we crossed the ridge which brings us to the Grand Ronde the hill is not very difficult of ascent but it is of descent being near two miles and very stony. Camped at the foot of the hill at a branch.

11. Crossed the upper end of the Grand Ronde about eight miles wide this Ronde is about 25 by 30.

It abounds in herbage red top grass high as my head—this would make a very fine settlement. We were here visited by several Cayuse Indians who are very friendly among them a chief. In the afternoon ascended the hill to the left which is long and difficult. The Indians have here opened a new route for two miles for which they charge toll \$1 per wagon. Descended a very steep hill in the evening and camped late at Grand Ronde creek—no grass, wood and water plenty.

12. Ascended a steep hill pine timber there is an abundance of green grass beneath the pines as the day advanced the forests became more dense in the afternoon we passed the main ridge of the Blue Mts. Encamped late near Lee's encampment.

13. Arrivd early at Lee's encampment where we remained till noon. In the afternoon travelled to the Umatilla country—rather pleasant on account of timber and grass—road good.

14. The road is good down this valley. Indians very plenty and friendly—trade brisk for peas, potatoes, etc. etc. Camped at the crossing of the river.

15. This morning very cool—bunch grass abundant struck the river in the afternoon camped after travelling fifteen miles.

16. Travelled three miles down the bottom there we turned to the left taking the cutoff—here there is an agency in building. Travelled eight miles thence to Butter Creek road rather heavy—here is excellent water and grass.