**Edward Smith Diary**

**By Andrey Kuchkovskiy**

Edward Smith was an ordinary man, with an ambition like many before and after him to travel west. The culture of western wagon migration was around for the past eight years with a slow but steady rise in the number of emigrants, yet the big difference of 1848 emigrants is that they did not set out to the west to mine gold. Smith set out on a six month journey from Independence, Missouri in 1848 to San Francisco, California. Little did he know that gold was discovered in Sutter’s Mill sometime during his journey, and the following year would see an exponential growth in people traveling westward.1848 was known to be the last year that the western trails would not be packed with thousands upon thousands of wagon trains full of people seeking to make a fortune in gold mining. Edward Smith’s diary is one of only eight other known 1848 complete western trail diaries, found among some of the vast historical record collections at the Fresno Historical Society. In his diary, Smith recorded where his party stayed, when they set off, how far they traveled, the weather conditions, encounters with other people, scenery he saw while on the trail, and sometimes the status of his wagon party’s progress.Edward Smith’s diary is a great historical record that paints an interesting picture of the western migrating culture and landscape of the era.

Edward Smith himself was a merchant with some education in law, originally from Kingston, New York where he married his wife Jane and had two children. His family later moved to Springfield, Illinois where they had four more children and lived for another seven years before setting off to California in 1848. The records do not point to a specific motive as to why they decided to set off to California, however, he does mention that he had a brother-in-law that practiced law in San Francisco. In San Francisco, Smith worked as a merchant for a short while before eventually settling with his family in San Juan, Monterey County. In San Juan, Smith established a post office and also worked as a land surveyor, in his diary he made several land surveys of Monterey County between the years of 1851 through 1853.

In 1848, people expected there would be a significant rise in covered wagon emigration, instead the numbers were fairly low. The Mexican American War and the bone chilling stories of the Donner Party in 1846 could have possibly dissuaded many people from emigrating.[[1]](#footnote-0) Edward Smith, regardless of the perilous possibilities, set off from Springfield, Illinois on April 5 according to his daughters account. Smith officially does not start recording in his diary until they begin their journey from Independence, Missouri on April 29. They initially traveled with one other family party and brought horses and cattle with them. His small party consisted of only about three wagons. Smith possibly expected to set off with Joseph Ballinger Chile’s party of twenty-eight wagons bound for California, the two parties eventually catch up to each other and travel together. On board the Chiles party we will see another diarist by the name of Richard May.

After only two days of traveling, Smith’s party realized that they were going the wrong way. On April 30, some people informed Smith that they were on the Santa Fe Trail instead of the Oregon Trail, which would later split off into the California trails. On May 1, Smith’s party back tracked about eight miles and headed down the right trail. On May 5, the Smith party joined a twenty-three wagon party led by Reverend Kelly and referred to the party as the Oregon party. Smith often expressed his frustrations about the slow progress they were making, it was either lost cattle or the slow pace and disunion of the Oregon Company. On May 21 and 22, the party was hit with severe rain and thunderstorms. Smith records some river crossings in the month of May, as well as some minor encounters with Pawnee Indians where he often saw them camping in the distance.

Smith had been pushing his party fairly quickly all the way through June 10, passing through a famous historical site like Chimney Rock in Northern Nebraska that often signaled the end of the prairies for many wagon trains. Surprisingly enough, it seems like the next entries indicated that his party mainly stayed within the vicinity of Fort Laramie, Wyoming for nearly seventeen days. This could have been due to the fact that he was waiting for the California bound Chile’s party, which was the last wagon train of the year.[[2]](#footnote-1) Richard May was also a fellow diarist in Chile’s party, much of his accounts coincide with Smith after June 27 as they set off again from the fort. Richard May’s accounts differed from Edward Smith on the basis of writing style. May offered very large daily accounts with philosophical thinking and often very detailed landscape descriptions. Smith did not use as many words as May, however, his account did often contain some details that May failed to include.

On July 16, the company woke up and found “about ½ of the oxen were gone.”[[3]](#footnote-2) However, this was no singular incident, in fact, this happened very often. Animals and livestock usually strayed away at night and this simply meant they would have to take off a little later than scheduled, since they had to go out and round them up. On July 24, Smith mentioned that they passed several graves and a ruined wagon on their way to Fontenelle Creek.The Oregon and California Trails was full of perilous reminders like these of the dangers that were involved in emigrating west.

The journey was undoubtedly entering its most challenging part, the Rocky Mountains. There was constant ascending and descending, along with rocky and forested terrain. The Chiles-Smith party was slowly becoming one of the last wagon companies of the year, yet did not seem too concerned about their lacking speed. The Sierras were still to come, and they were still five hundred miles behind the leading parties. Chiles was an experienced leader of the party who made the journey before, and consistently believed that more rest for the oxen was necessary. Some days saw only three miles of progress, yet other days saw steady fifteen to twenty-five miles being completed. On August 21 they made their way through the Thousand Springs Valley where progress remained slow and steady. Both May and Smith expressed some interest in the springs, which Smith mentioned could fit into a single acre with some hot and some cold. Several Native American encounters included instances of livestock theft, in those certain parts of the country they were referred to as “digger Indians,” because of the harsh terrain that required digging for unappealing choices for food like roots, worms, or insects.[[4]](#footnote-3)

On September 5, tragedy struck Edward Smith as he was shot in the arm by one of his fellow party members while on guard duty. Richard May recorded the event as an accident. Smith seemed not to be terribly physically impaired and the man who shot Smith, Mr. Misner, seemed to regret it terribly. Smith, on the other hand, recorded an interesting account once he was able to. Smith left a comment at the end of his entry stating “He says it was an accident but I doubt it.”[[5]](#footnote-4) Smith left no further explanation of his spiteful comment, and hardly wrote at all for the next ten days. On September 15, Smith seemed to have recovered and continued to write. As they made their way through Nevada, times continued to be difficult as large amounts of livestock were dying due to a lack of water and food, also Paiute Indian thefts. Few oxen were left to pull the remaining wagons, and the trek over the Sierras proved just as grueling. With few oxen, men had to push their wagons up the mountains.

However perilous and difficult the journey may have looked at this point, the end was inevitably in sight. Chiles and Smith separated on September 29 near a Canyon road in Nevada as Chiles seemed to have lost his bearings. Smith recorded an account where Chiles attempted to extort Smith for money “Rc’d message from Capt Chiles that for our money he would help us out of the Canyon and a good pile at that or we might stay this of course was indignantly refused.”[[6]](#footnote-5) Smith continued to recount the harsh character that seemed to have taken over Mr. Chiles in other instances, after they separated. This is effectively where May and Smith’s diaries diverge. The reality of their situation set in as some days began to see the first signs of snow and bitterly cold temperatures. The rest of the journey seemed to be tiring but fairly smooth once they got over the highest elevations, and made it through the passes as the winter snow set in over the Sierras. On October 15, Smith finally arrived in Sutter’s Mill, California. His reaction to witnessing the berserk gold mines of Sutter’s Mill, seemed to be the least interested. Smith was not swept away in the mining culture of the time, he came to California in search of a new life. Smith continued his basic accounts from the beginning all the way until the end. It was difficult to understand the exact feelings and emotions of the tribulations that faced Smith, his family, and his party through simply his diary, however, his steadfast commitment to document a consistent diary required some reading in-between the lines. If anything, this diary demonstrates Edward Smith’s strength mentally and physically to overcome a task of this magnitude, and the type of mentality that is required to travel across these trails. 1848 was just the beginning to an era of western emigration, it outlines that the west is a heavily desired goal for many people, yet it required a steadfast dedication within the most perilous of times.

**Sources:**

* Edward Smith, “A Journal of Scenes and Incidences on a Journey from Missouri to California 1848.” Fresno Historical Society Archives.
* Michael E. LaSalle, *Emigrants on the Overland Trail: The Wagon Trains of 1848*. Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 2011.
* Richard Martin May, *A Sketch of a Migrating Family to California in 1848.* Fairfield, WA: Ye Galleon Press, 1991.
* Gregory M. Franzwa, *The Oregon Trail Revisited.* 3rd ed. Gerald, MO: Patrice Press, 1990.

1. Michael E. LaSalle. 2011*. Emigrants on the Overland Trail: The Wagon Trains of 1848*. Pg. XIV [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Michael E. LaSalle. 2011. *Emigrants on the Overland Trail: The Wagon Trains of 1848.* Pg. 218 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Quote fromEdward Smith’s Diary [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Michael E. LaSalle. 2011. *Emigrants on the Overland Trail: The Wagon Trains of 1848.* Pg. 376 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Quote from Edward Smith’s Diary [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Quote from Edward Smith’s Diary [↑](#footnote-ref-5)