

A SCENE OF DEATH AND DESOLATION ON THE BLACK ROCK DESERT IN 1849

Prepared by Don Buck

Nearing their destination on the overland trail to California, emigrants and gold rushers had to traverse dreaded deserts on whatever trail they took. If they were taking the Carson Trail or the Truckee Trail in 1849, they confronted the Forty Mile Desert crossing in what became western Nevada. Those taking the Applegate Trail and Lassen Trail to the goldfields of northern California faced the fearful crossing of the Black Rock Desert in northwestern Nevada.

One of the most graphic accounts of crossing the Black Rock Desert in 1849 came from the journal of Joseph Alonzo Stuart. His party had turned westerly off the main California Trail at the big bend of the Humboldt River (present Rye Patch Reservoir in Nevada) onto the Applegate Trail. Before reaching the Black Rock Desert, they passed only two meager springs to quench their thirst and that of their animals, Antelope Springs and Rabbit Hole Springs. From there it was across the barren Black Rock Desert to the next water at Black Rock Springs (hot springs). On September 15, Stuart and his fellow messmates began their ill prepared journey, so graphically described by Stuart in his journal:

“At Rabbit Hole Wells I found our mess packed to start after eating dinner, leaving out nothing for me, and the wells being drained to the last drop I failed to get even a drink of either myself or my horse. This was 27 miles from Antelope Spring and 41 miles from the point we left the Humboldt where my horse got his drink of water, and over 50 since he had a full feed 30 or more hours ago. To Black Rock Springs were 34 miles still to be traversed before we found water again, though we knew it not.

On we plodded, my horse and I, over 30 miles from food or drink either way, whether before or behind. Night found us far behind all my comrades; I dragging, pushing and coaxing by turns my weary horse, the dreary waste stretching as far as the eye could reach—I knew not how much farther—a scene of death and desolation. On either side of the road and almost walling it in were the dead and decaying carcasses of horses, mules and oxen mingled with the deserted and dying beasts of the day. One never can realize the horrors of such a situation till called upon to pass through it himself. The teamsters’ hoarse voices as they urged their fainting teams to renewed exertion; the wail of women and children who had left all but what they were carrying on their backs, wading wearily through literal ashes in sorrow on their journey, so buoyant a few hours ago, were heard at intervals.

At last I was alone with my horse in this waste now thickly covered with dead sage brush, at times in close proximity to snarling wolves, angry at our disturbance of their feast, but giving hope of water ere long. Occasionally I would overtake one of our own animals and he would for a time bear us company, cheering on my own beast till, stumbling, he would fall to rise no more. At last poor old Charlie stumbled and fell upon his knees, and though I helped him to rise he refused to

move another step. With his legs braced wide apart he leaned his head against my shoulder and groaned. He had seen his mates fall thus one by one and he had lost hope. The beast that had so faithfully served me, had followed me like a dog and so often eaten out of my hand must be left to die of starvation and thirst. Taking off his bridle and saddle I used the stirrup straps to pack my blankets and started to leave him, but I had not gone many yards before my attention was arrested by a low whinny and on looking back I saw the poor fellow staggering on in a vain effort to follow. He fell, and his bleached bones will probably form for years a part of a wall of white that marks the road for seventy miles, and tells the traveler of the sufferings of the pioneers over that desert.

Lonely, weary and faint, my limbs aching and throbbing, I toiled on through the deep dust for some three miles before I overtook the last straggler, a woman sitting in despair by the side of the road and having a heavy pack of bacon. By means of cheering words of hope and an exchange of packs she was persuaded to make one more effort and we trudged on with renewed courage. We very soon overtook one of our own train, John MacDonald He was leaving his horse, having reached this point and had given up all hope of ever seeing daylight. He had become so utterly demoralized by what he had already experienced that only strong persuasion on my part induced him to pack his blankets and shoulder his rifle to come on with us.

A light ahead appeared at length, a welcome sight though we knew weary miles must be traversed before its genial warmth could relieve our aching limbs. We expected that campfire to be at the end of the desert. On reaching it we found the family of a low-bred fellow from Missouri, owner of the female chattel whom we had assisted to carry the bacon he had given her in order to relieve his failing team. Without even an offer of a cup of the coffee he was drinking or a slice of the bacon I brought we delivered his slave over to him and struck out for our camp four miles off. He had already been there after water for his family, driving his cattle loose and leaving them there till they would be able to return for the wagon.

Our stiffening limbs warned us not to stop for rest, and we pushed on, but four longer miles mortals never trod, encouraged by not even the sight of a campfire. We reached the famous Black Rock Springs at 2 A.M. Sunday morning. I had been on my feet for twenty-three hours without food or drink. Hungry and faint I sought my own mess and asked for dinner—for supper—for *something* to eat. There was nothing. They had made some fritters and fried some bacon, but only the fat remained, and the bag of flour was under a stranger's head. No. 1 mess loaned me some parched corn meal and with some cold tea I made fritters and commenced to eat. Thirst at once claimed attention and carrying the fritter, about the size of the palm of my hand, I took my drinking cup to search for the cool water. On my return to finish my supper I found that Dr. Bachelder's mule had eaten all the fritters up and was licking out the pan. My boot was drawn back in anger for a kick in the nose, but I reflected that she was also hungry, so I rolled myself in my blankets and soon forgot my troubles in sleep."