

FIREARM ACCIDENTS ON THE CALIFORNIA TRAIL

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Gunshot accidents were a common occurrence all along the overland trails. Because of the unfounded fear of American Indian attacks, emigrants came heavily armed. Most of the available guide books recommended that every male emigrant carry a revolver and a rifle. However, too many were inexperienced in firearm use which led to numerous fatal accidents. As historians have noted, far more emigrants were killed either by their own firearms or by those of a fellow emigrant than by American Indians.

Along the Humboldt River on Aug. 6, 1849, the night guard of Isaac Wistar's company sounded the alarm of Indians trying to steal their livestock. After driving off the marauding Indians, Wistar reported "a sad sight awaited us on returning to the wagons. The dead body of P. lay on the ground, his discharged gun beside him. The gun had been hanging in the wagon and in pulling it out hastily, muzzle foremost, it had been discharged, the bullet passing through his heart. P. had been liked by all."

Ironically, at the end of Wistar's journey on Aug. 26th, he had a similar accident but luckily escaped injury. After guiding his wagon down the steep incline to Steep Hollow (on the Truckee River route), Wistar climbed back up to get loose livestock. On the way up, "I hastily pulled my rifle out of a bush where I had concealed it about half-way up, when it discharged itself in my face, the ball piercing my hat in three places, giving my hair a smart wrench and scorching both hairs and eyebrows."

While camping at the famous hot and cold springs in Thousand Springs Valley in 1852, Eliza Ann McAuley recounted in her diary for Aug. 14 a "distressing accident" that occurred about two hours before she arrived: "Two brothers, who had been out hunting, stopped here to wait for their train. As they were sitting on the ground they heard a gun fired off across the stream, and thinking there were Indians about, one of them sprang to his feet at the same time catching up his gun, which was lying on the ground before him, with the muzzle toward him and it went off, the ball passing through his lungs. He was still alive but sinking rapidly when we left."