

MOSQUITOE MISERY ALONG THE HUMBOLDT RIVER ROUTE

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The two to three-week emigrant journey on the California Trail along the Humboldt River between 1849 and 1860 was miserable enough with the extremes of heat and cold, intense clouds of dust, lack of potable drinking water, and the monotony of daily travel, especially west of Gravelly Ford. As Henry Puckett wrote in his diary on Aug. 26, 1850, **“for some time past, each day’s journey has been so exactly similar to its predecessors, that description of one would almost answer for all.”**

But there was another misery that arose from the numerous sloughs along the Humboldt River - clouds of voracious mosquitoes. As they trekked down the Humboldt, a number of emigrants expressed their vexation and vulnerability in their diary and journal entries, often with a sense of humor and resignation.

After leaving Gravelly Ford on July 27, 1859, Nellie Phelps bemoaned in her journal: **“The mosquitoes annoy us this morning, notwithstanding they would not permit us to eat our suppers, which we succeeded in getting between the thwacks, brushing, and generally fighting of[f] the vexatious intruders. ... We staid in the mountains until we thought the ‘stingers’ had left the camp; but found them thick as ever, so we made twenty fires, and sat in the smoke thereof, until we were nearly likened onto smoked beef. ... Could not sleep, although I had my sun-bonnet on, and a large silk handkerchief pinned closely down over my face, boots and gauntlets on, and closely wrapped in the blankets; yet on the morrow was looking as though I had the measles from the bites of our patience - trying, test of endurance annoyers.”**

Nearing modern Battle Mountain on the south side of the Humboldt River on July 12, 1852, John F. Riker lamented on his diary pages: **“Through the day we suffer from the extreme heat, and at night it is almost impossible to either sleep or rest on account of the legions of mosquitoes that infest this region. While some of them thrust their long bills into our bodies like hungry tigers, those that are forced by their superiors to await their turn, keep up a constant singing and yelping, as though they were at a feast and at last sure of one good meal. In this manner they keep up their performances until the morning sun compels them to desist from their murderous purposes. To escape their attacks during the night, we are compelled to cover entirely over with blankets, baggage, or whatever we can lay hands upon; in this manner we get a little rest, and in truth it is but little.”**

A day's travel beyond Stony Point on the north side of the river, on July 11, 1850, John F. Cobbey reflected: **"We now encountered, a countless number of mosquitos [sic] These are very affable fellows, they readily, form, an acquaintance; my they even embraced us like old acquaintances; but I must confess I have reason to suspect their affection was nothing, but self interest, For as soon as they would light on us they would drive their beaks through our shirts; and draw from our veins the purple flood of life. And notwithstanding repeated slights, the[y] pursued us, with a fanatical zeal. We could not indure this; and soon give up the project, we now plunged our bodies beneath, the turbed [sic] waters of Humbol[d]t's river and drove the assailents [sic] off;"**

A little farther along the Humboldt, on July 23, 1860, James L. Lowry described his encounter: **"Last evening and thro the first half of the night and this Morning the Mosquitoes were awful There was no rest for man or beast woman or child all had to fight or be eaten – Bacon greese [sic] &c were freely applied to man & beast but it was but small relief & it was brush brush & swipe-swipe with no little swearing all the time."**

In the area northwest of present Valmy, and the same year, recently married Mary Jane Guill, on Aug. 17, recorded her dismay: **"When we stopt I thought I would try and catch some fish. sat on the bank of the river a few minuets [sic] and I was glad to get away with myself from the mosquitos [sic] for I really thought they would carry me away without any ceremony at all. I believe there is more and they bit worse than all I ever saw before in my life. ... O I wish I could get rid of the mosquitos smoke wont drive them away."**

Halfway down the Humboldt, on June 24, 1850, Walter Griffith Pigman described what it was like for man and beast: **"After camping, we were attacked by mosquitoes, until, as the boys say, we could stir them with a stick. We staked our mules and went to bed but not to sleep. About eleven o'clock the watch came in and called all hands up, saying the mules were suffering intensely from the mosquitoes—we could hear them moan from the pain and torment of those venomous insects. We got up and harnessed the mules and put out at midnight, traveled until daylight, stopped and rested awhile and finding no grass then traveled on until one o'clock; rested and grazed one hour, afterwards traveled 'til night still followed by millions upon millions of mosquitoes."**