NEW ALBANY EXPEDITIONS TO THE OLD WEST IN 1848 – 1850.

Journey in Striking Contrast to the Luxury of Travel To-Day – What Goldseekers Endured.

Fifty years ago this April, and nearly half a century before the publication of Robert Louis Stevenson's book entitled "Across the Plains" an unpretentious little green paper-covered pamphlet of sixty-four pages, bearing the same name, was published in New Albany, Ind., by "Jno. R. Nunemacher, city book store; Kent & Norman, Ledger bldgs.; C. Hagan & Co., Louisville; William H. Moore & Co., Cincinnati, and Lippincott, Grambo & Co., Philadelphia." A publisher's note states that the first portion of this chronicle of a trip to California in 1850 was printed in the *New Albany Daily Ledger*. The author's name was James Abbey, and the book bears the following elaborate explanatory title:

A Trip Across the Plains In the Spring of 1850.
Being a Daily Record of Incidents of the Trip
Over the Plains, the Desert and the Mountains.
Sketches of the Country,
Distances from Camp to Camp, etc.
And Containing Valuable Information to Emigrants
As to Where They Will Find Wood, Water and Grass
At Almost Every Step of the Journey.

James Abbey, whose one achievement in print was recently resurrected from a dark shelf near the ceiling in Lafayette Woods's second-hand shop, was an Englishman by birth, son of Ansel and Bersheba Abbey, and was for many years a steward on the steamboat *United States*, which ran between Louisville and New Orleans. When on land the young man indulged a bent for reporting, and is remembered by Mr. Chas. W. Cottom as having often furnished for his own pleasure river notes and other news items to the old *Daily Ledger*. It was but natural and logical, therefore, that his willing pen should record in daily notes details of a trip lasting four months – an ox cart journey of over 2,000 miles in quest of gold in far California.

Two years before James Abbey's trip, however, this small town of 3,000 inhabitants (not lighted as yet by street lamps, the people carrying lanterns on all after-dark excursions, to which no railway came, the L., N.A. & C. Railway being then in construction) became mildly aroused with the earliest circulation of the news that gold has been found in California, and in April, 1848, ten men, with two ox wagons loaded with food, clothing and implements, left New Albany on the steamboat "*Meteor*" Captain Turner, via the Ohio, Mississippi and Missouri rivers for Independence, Mo.,

then a popular frontier starting ____ for emigrant trains to the far West. ___ Robinson, a log pumpmaker, still _____ New Albany, was among the men __ earliest migration, and his wagon-_____ were Alfred Rager, Nathan Benton, _____ Bolin and Horace Kent, the later a ___ of Alexander Kent, the founder of Kentland, Newton county, Indiana. At Independence the two New Albany wagons, each hauled by four yoke of sturdy oxen, joined a train of nine wagons from Tennessee, and after being ferried across the Missouri river rolled off toward the Western coast on the Utah trail, or Great Salt Lake trail, so called because Brigham Young, in 1846, had led his band of followers across it from the States to Utah Territory.

THE "RUSH OF TRAVEL."

The route led across a corner of Kansas, through Nebraska, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado and Nevada to great, golden California. Though emigration at that time was considered heavy, and wagon trains were never out of sight of other trains, the rush to California in 1850 was so much greater that one man with a single team, it is averred, could have made the journey in safety. Mule teams were also used in traversing the great, rough highway of the plains, but they soon lost caste as having a tendency to "give out," while the slower ox, if fed and watered, could step with sustained strength and dignity from one ocean to the other. At that period the plains were alive with Indians and swarming with buffalo; but the excited gold-seekers stopped not often to shoot game, while the Indians were temporarily peaceable and unoffending. Only once in the long journey, one Sunday morning, the New Albany camp was visited by red men – 300 in number. They feigned to be searching for an "enemy," and thoroughly ransacked the Indiana wagons without finding him. They also inquired for "whisk," but as there was no "fire water" discovered among the stores the warriors departed without making any trouble. Great droves of buffalo – more properly American bison – were often met on the trail, and the ox teams were always turned aside and halted to give them the right of way. Food was abundant, each wagon carrying 2,500 pounds of provisions – bacon, flour, beans, rice, coffee, dried fruits, etc. – but when the mountainous part of the trail was reached much of this had to be thrown away to lighten the loads.

In fact, all along the way, the roadsides were strewn with everything imaginable, cast overboard by preceding emigrants – tools, clothing, food and furniture; small fortunes for junkmen, had not the golden junk of California seemed more alluring. Through the Black hills, across the Rocky mountains, which William Robinson describes as "not counting at all by the Sierra Nevadas" – the ox wagons toiled on. Rivers were ferried by caulking the wagon-beds, roping them together and floating them over; while the oxen had to swim across. Before the great sandy desert was reached, grass was cut and loaded for the oxen, and sacks and casks of water taken on the wagons. The water came boiling hot from

"Steamboat Spring," near the Humboldt river, and had to be cooled before the oxen were allowed to drink it. Two nights and a day of hard travel left the sixty-five mile desert behind. As an experiment, an eight-foot well was dug, but the water was found to be strong, nauseating brine. After a toilsome journey of nearly four months, long and dangerous, but not marred by any special mishap or suffering, the New Albany gold-seekers – these early "49ers", or more properly "48ers" – reached the trail's end in what William Robinson quaintly calls "the California settlement," Sacramento.

They camped on arrival at the edge of the settlement, and when ready to move on to Weaversville in three weeks the town had built up with cabins and shanties so that it surrounded their camp. Everything was selling at prosperity prices – for the sellers – beef 50 cents a pound, boots $15 a pair – and other necessities in proportion. A gold-digger's "cradle" cost $30, but two of our Hoosier prospectors hired a cross-cut saw for 50 cents an hour, felled a tree, sawed out boards, bought a piece of zinc, perforated it, and manufactured a "cradle." It cost $4, and when ready to move weeks later the two owners sold it readily for two ounces of gold, or $32. An ounce of gold, $16, was a good day's work at that time, and $10 per day was the average man's luck. Gold, otherwise than hid in the ground, was obtainable in San Francisco, and William Robinson soon left the gold-fields at Weaversville for hauling freight at $50 per day in San Francisco. Food, dry goods of all kinds, tools, furniture, all classes of freight needed by miners was pouring into San Francisco by ship loads from New York; mules and drivers were at a premium, and $4 or $5 per load from the wharves was easily earned. After two years of California life the New Albany men, one by one, returned to their homes; by ship to Panama, thence to New Orleans and to Indiana.

A SECOND EXPEDITION.

In April, 1850, New Albany speeded on its way the expedition put into print by James Abbey. The gold fever was now at its height, and 200 men from this town and Floyd county, with ox-teams and wagons, set off by boat to the Missouri starting points. Many residents still remember the equipment of these California emigrants, the bright blue wagon-beds with large white canvas tops, the assembly on the river banks, the embarkations and farewells. Two steamboats – the *Cortlandt* and the *Dove* – were then running up Missouri river from this point. Among those who went were several elderly men, and lads of eighteen; but the majority were men nearing thirty. Among them John Nafius, Hicks King, Daniel Cline, John G. Greene, P. J. Greene, James G. Shields, Alfred H. Nunemacker, John Gavin, Jerome Beers, Charles Winstandley, Ben Shindler, Antony Genung, James Newbanks, Ben F. Lemon, Ben Reissinger and many others. Of the older men were 'Squire Wilson, "in his sixties"; 'Squire Leslie, almost seventy; Dr. Maginness and Dr. Hoover, sr. On arrival

at St. Joseph, Mo., after an eleven-days' trip on the *Dove*, 5,000 emigrants from all parts of the country were found already on the ground, waiting to have their wagons ferried across the river. Steamers arrived daily, bringing loads of gold-seekers, and three weeks' feed had to be purchased, to last the oxen until spring grass should appear. Corn was then 86 cents a bushel, oats 90 cents, hay $2.25 per cwt, potatoes $1 a bushel, white beans $1.25 a bushel, and flour $6 a barrel. Each wagon had five yoke of oxen and a several days' wait for passage across the river in a scow ferry, worked by ropes, was the opening ordeal that befell the impatient emigrants.

Abbey's letters – in a diary kept with phenomenal and cheerful fidelity – record in detail the progress of the journey – the weather, including wind, rain and snow, the episodes and disasters, the health of the men, the condition of the oxen and the miles covered each day. One hundred wagons were of this train, and a wait of two weeks was experienced, in camp just across the Missouri river, before all had assembled to go forward. New Albany was musical in those days, "Billy Reissinger's band" was found to be in camp and is thus described, despite a rainy night:

"After supper all hands volunteered and hauled up a big pile of logs for our campfire, around which all seated themselves to hear some music. Billy Reissinger was elected leader of the band. Our music consisted of cornet, ophyclide, trumpet, fiddle, guitar and a flute. They played 'Home, Sweet Home' and 'A Life on the Ocean Wave.' The Missouri river rose eight feet last night, and is now full of floating ice and drift."

April 21 James Abbey walked four miles in the rain to visit a sick man from Ohio in another camp; gave him medicine, in his capacity as amateur doctor, stayed three hours with him and left him much better. Early May found the party in camp eight miles from Fort Kearney, after "hard dragging over the sandy plains for 270 miles," resting for the start to Fort Laramie, five hundred miles away. April weather had been cool and windy, streams were full and difficult to cross, mud abundant and no grass as yet for the oxen. Big rattlesnakes were numerous; often killed by the dozen by the "boys" before the 4 o'clock breakfast of coffee, ham and bread, cooked on "the little sheet-iron stove." At little Blue river a young man from Ohio died of the "measles;" good grass was there first found for the cattle, and willows were noted as turning green along the banks. Two days later, at Wood creek, a Kentucky Methodist preacher, Mr. Jamison, dropped his pistol from his belt on his wagon tongue, with the result that its full charge passed through his under jaw, carrying away several teeth and breaking the jaw in two places. One May day, while the stock was resting and grazing, at noon, the historian counted, passing on the Utah trail, two hundred horse teams, eighty mule teams and sixty ox teams. At this time cattle feed was about out and grass not to be found in plenty.

A DAY TO BE REMEMBERED.

On a pleasant Monday, May 6, grass was reached, and the "desert schooners" cast anchor and ate a hearty dinner – oxen and men. "Our dessert was something to be remembered," related James Abbey. "It was Mr. and Mrs. Naghel's plum pudding, which was presented by them to our mess before leaving home. We drank to the health of Mrs. Naghel from our tin-cups, wishing her a long life and a happy one. We smacked our lips with joy that we were blessed with good health and a plum pudding for dinner on the desert wilds." The next day the New Albany caravan passed ten dead horses and mules on the trail, no dead oxen as yet. Thirty buffaloes were seen, twelve wolves, antelopes, and any quantity of snakes. While the cattle were halted to graze, sixty four-horse teams, forty mule teams, thirty ox teams and two ladies on horseback passed by. Five government wagons were met, the drivers reporting grass scarce on the Platte and corn $5 a bushel. Fort Kearney is described as a pretty place of fourteen houses – three two-story frame buildings, the rest of sod or mud, with roofs of dried grass. Three thousand two hundred emigrant wagons had passed Fort Kearney during the spring rush to California, and three hundred more were in that vicinity. Along the Platte a little grass was found, but not a stick of wood within ten miles; all fires for cooking were kept up with dry grass. The trail led along the valley of the Platte, which was then four miles wide and very shallow, eighteen inches marking its greatest depth. At Plum creek nineteen ox teams were encountered, thirty-three days out from Fort Laramie, laden with buffalo robes and furs for the American Fur Company.

Along the Platte valley many articles were found strewn by the roadside – log-chains, ox yokes, horse collars and cooking stoves, cast away by emigrants to lighten their wagons. The Platte was studded with thousands of islands, some a mile in length, which assumed singular shapes at a distance, resembling steamboats, flatboats, skiffs, camels and elephants. At this point in the journey the train of seven wagons reorganized, choosing as captain R. R. Stevens, of Louisville. The companies are recorded as five from New Albany – Abbey & Co., McBride & Co., Richey & Rowley, Gilmer & Kline, Alex. O'Neal & Co.; Armstrong & Stevens, of Louisville; Sanders & Co., of Shippingport. As the May heat was becoming intolerable these emigrants started on the trail as early as 3 o'clock each morning, and observed the Sabbath by going into camp for the entire day.

On one occasion a herd of buffaloes stampeded the grazing cattle, leading their owners a chase of six miles, but were recovered without any loss. At another time Mr. Wicks, cantering by the train on horseback, stampeded the cattle in yokes, occasioning much perturbation and violent exercise for the emigrants. Late in May grass was only six inches high, and buffalo chips the only fuel to be found along the trail. At Ash Hollow the wagons had to be locked and let down a seventy-five-foot

precipice with ropes. Buffalo herds became more numerous, as well as larger, and Sioux wigwams of more frequent appearance in the valley of the north fork of the Platte. In sight of Fort Laramie poor grass and no water were to be had. News, per mule train, was received that Mr. Jamison, of Kentucky, had died on the way from his accidental pistol wounds. His family was with him.

A FAITHFUL SCRIBE.

Fort Laramie is described as a great trading post of twenty houses, inclosed by a wall. ["You must excuse all errors," says James Abbey, "as I write seated on a bucket, with a board on my knees, a candle in a lantern, with the wind blowing, and extremely cold."] The mountain traders were as "keen as any Yankee wooden-nutmeg or clock peddler in the States." Their prices were: Sugar, 25 cents per pound; bacon, 18 cents; ham, 25 cents; flour, $18 cwt.; loaf-bread, 50 cents; brandy, $18 per gallon, etc. Across the Black hills the trail was rough and high, slippery from frequent rain and hailstorms; but the oxen traveled, on an average, twenty miles a day. At the upper ferry on the Platte 900 wagons were waiting to cross. The New Albany men waited until evening to have their wagons pulled over, the cattle swimming. Ferry rates were $4 for each wagon. In the Sweetwater valley good watering places were many miles apart, the country barren of grass, and the only fuel was dried sagebush. When the train reached the Fort Hall route, on June 17, a violent snowstorm was encountered. As they toiled on toward the Great Salt Lake the desert-mirage was experienced. "Worn with travel and thirsting for water," writes James Abby, "there might be seen, sometimes to the right, sometimes to the left, and then in front, representations of large rivers, lakes and streams of pure water; but as we advanced they would recede or fade away, leaving nothing to view but the barren desert and the blighted hopes of the weary traveler." Often a whole day would be traversed in a broiling sun over a dusty trail without finding a drop of water for the oxen, while, in sight, were mountains whose tops were covered with snow. Along Bear river, in Colorado, small willow and cottonwood trees were found; also fine grass and wild strawberries in abundance. "Beautiful forest flowers and geraniums: also contributed to the weary emigrants' joy at this stage of the trip. In the mountain passes an ox wagon occasionally upset and spilled out the "plunder," but with no other damage. The mountain travel, through deep, difficult, narrow gorges, where the sun never shone, covered days amid scenes of grandeur, but of painful solemnity and loneliness. The highest mountain – name not given in the chronicle – but which overlooked the Great Salt Lake valley, was 7,245 feet above sea level, and the adjoining mountain was covered with snow to the depth of eight feet. Salt Lake City, at this time, consisted of log houses, a few aristocratic dwellings being built of sun-dried brick, covered with mud, and one story high. Butter, at Salt Lake City, was 75

cents per pound. A wagon worth $120 in the States cost $500, and other articles in proportion.

In the New Albany emigrant camp, about seventy-five miles beyond Salt Lake, the Fourth of July, 1850, was celebrated with great and praiseworthy gusto. A procession was formed at 8 o'clock and marched around in a grove of box elder, where a salute was fired in honor of "freedom's birthday." The Declaration of Independence was read by Messmate Frost, of Kentucky. An excellent dinner of "knick-knacks," saved for the great occasion, was served. Toasts were rendered, a salute of firearms accompanying each sentiment. Patriotic and sentimental songs were sung, "and," concludes James Abbey, "I have no doubt the glorious Fourth was celebrated with as much spirit and zeal in this far distant valley as in our own Indiana." No special mention is made of "Billy Reissinger's band" in this great desert patriotic celebration, but it is safely assumed that New Albany music was foremost as well as in the thick of the festivities of the emigrant gala day. From Utah on to California the toilsome journey over the long, rough trail seemed to grow more toilsome; men and oxen must have been worn and weary, although the chronicler continues to record "good spirits" and the morning starts made after each hasty breakfast "in hearty good will." Lofty mountains, deep and difficult streams, heavy rains, cold northern winds in July, no water or brackish water for man and beast, intolerable mosquitoes, scorching sun and choking dust – exposure without much protection to the torrid zone in the daytime and the frigid zone at night, being, as Mr. Abbey optimistically comments, "rather trying on the constitution." In middle July Messrs. Thomas S. Kunkle and Christopher Fox, of New Albany, took breakfast with the Hoosier camp, having left their teams at Salt Lake, to "pack through" on horseback. Also at this time three other New Albany wagons joined the train, viz: Wilson and Rodgers, Pennington and Jones, and Dayton and company.

In one twenty miles the emigrants passed twenty dead horses, four mules and two oxen, the latter minority evidence in favor of the survival of the slowest. Stealing Indians were encountered, a train in advance losing twelve horses and ten mules in one night, the emigrant guard having been caught, stripped, gagged and left wounded with arrows, but not dead. Day by day the struggle over the terrible country went on – an eager search for grass and water almost obscuring the original ambition for gold. On one occasion the men swam a river to cut grass for the cattle, and then carried it on their backs for three-quarters of a mile through swamps and water to their waists. "But," continues the historian, "we are blessed with good health, are no ways dispirited, and the best of good feeling prevails between all the members of our mess." Late in July they counted dead cattle, horses and mules by scores, also fifty wagons deserted and burned by emigrants intending to pack through to

California. Before reaching the sixty-five-mile desert they traveled thirty-six miles without seeing a spear of grass and counted in the day's travel 200 dead horses, mules and oxen. Six hundred pounds of hay were made before the desert trip opened. Beside the great labor of cutting it, the men had to carry it a mile through water three feet deep. On the edge of the desert forty-six deserted wagons were encountered. Water was bought at $1 per gallon, and in the first fifteen miles desert travel 350 dead horses, 280 oxen and 120 mules were counted. Loss of personal goods seemed a matter of small importance, and leather trunks, clothing, wagons and all were left on the trail to save the animals and reach the journey's end. In the desert were encountered traders from Sacramento, out twelve days with provisions to sell to incoming emigrants; flour $1.50 per pound, sugar $1.25 per pound, bacon $1 per pound, etc.

A TERRIBLE JOURNEY.

After the great desert the Sierra Nevada mountains. Seven yoke of oxen pulled the Abbey wagon up to the first summit, over a rocky road described as a hundred times worse than any road yet traveled between Indiana and California. Snow eight feet deep and December weather on Aug. 12. On the second mountain one wagon was thrown away, and teams doubled by the two messes. In half a mile these oxen refused to pull; provisions and clothing were packed on their backs, and the last wagon abandoned. The kitchen ox – so to speak – became frightened, and ran off down the mountain, throwing pans, dishes, tin cups, knives and forks, helter-skelter in every direction; he was caught up with, however, and his load partially recovered. Six miles per day was considered good travel over these frightful, perilous roads, through banks of snow fourteen feet deep. Aug. 15 found the New Albany emigrants fifty miles from the "gold diggings," traveling terrible mountain miles, which were estimated to be "twice as long as miles in the valley"; the next few days' travel brought them to camp near Weaversville, Cal., and at the last dinner on the trip they cooked the last provision made for the long journey. Men who had preceded them were found in low spirits, gold being scarce and provisions high. The miners on Weaver creek were in number eight to ten thousand in a district eight miles by ten; and James Abbey was of the opinion that the gold-harvest was about over, except in exceptional cases. "I have done some tall digging," he wrote, "and the most I could achieve in one day was $4, wet feet and aching bones." Gold was to be found, however, and by industry and perseverance a number of the Indiana men amassed a creditable quantity before returning home.

With these Indiana gold-seekers of 1850 was Mr. John Nafius, still a hale and hearty resident of New Albany, and vividly recalling interesting incidents and accidents of the long overland pilgrimage. On the boat-passage up the Missouri river a huge snag ripped into the steamboat,

throwing six or eight oxen overboard; although this occurred at midnight, the cattle were all recovered. In the Black Hills, while camping, Mr. Nafius and his partner started out with pick and pan for a little private gold-digging. They came in sight of the wigwams of a large Indian encampment, and swiftly left the trail, to hide in the underbrush; soon they encountered a white man, crying and in an almost distracted state. He told them he had lost his partner and felt quite sure that he had fallen into the hands of the Indians. Messrs. Nafius and Sutton urged the man, for his own protection to remain with them, but he dashed off wildly into the thicket and was lost to view. No gold was found in the Black Hills, but the two New Albany men, on attempting to return to camp, discovered themselves to be lost. They wandered until 10 o'clock at night, fearing Indians, not daring to lie down for fear of wolves; and finally happened on a stranger camp, where they were cared for and fed until, sadder and wiser, they found their own wagons on the march the next day. Five yoke of oxen were driven by John Nafius; and only one ox of the six lived to reach California. At Salt Lake City they exchanged two oxen for one fresh one, and bought lighter wagons. The "blanket coats," often referred to by James Abbey, were heavy overcoats, light or dark blue, made of Mackinac blankets, an inch thick, and lined with flannel. These coats cost from $12 to $18; and many of them had to be cast away on the Salt Lake trail to lighten the burdens of the toiling oxen. A Floyd county farmer, who had purchased a "blanket coat," wore it twenty years, and then brought it to town to have it relined.

On the mountain trails Mr. Nafius recalls the emigrants would hear hearty cheering, as if from a great distance; looking vainly below them, forward and back, they would finally look up, to see almost hanging over their heads emigrant wagons on the trails miles higher up the mountain side. At Sale Lake City the new great temple of the Mormons was building, while the old small temple in the center of the new edifice was intact, and still in use by Brigham Young and his followers. Mr. Nafius witnessed much of the outlawry and violence which characterized early days in golden California; and remembers the earliest organization of the "Vigilantes," who instituted law and order in the primitive and ungoverned mining districts. In front of the Weaversville hall, where the "Vigilantes" met, hung a huge four-foot triangle on a pole; and this instrument was hammered lustily for the public good when it became suddenly necessary to call a council of these preservers of the common peace and welfare. Men who were industrious and persistent found gold; even the small accumulators made it pay in time; and those who failed did so because they were constantly making changes, leaving and thus losing the claims they had taken, in the expectation of finding richer fields.

Reviewing the terrible overland journey, and the hard work at its end, it is evident that the men of half a century ago were of the kind recently

and felicitously described by Frederick Remington as "men with the bark on." On the "old West," even those who suffered from its wilds and dangers, now look regretfully. Says a current magazine writer: "The West of the good, old days is gone forever. It costs a thousand dollars now to kill a grizzly, with luck and a Western guide thereto. For a million dollars you may not lawfully kill a buffalo. There is no West."

- EMMA CARLETON.