

LESSON TWO
Getting There
“Do you want to go to California?”

I. OBJECTIVES

- ◆ To comprehend the rising tide of Anglo-American immigration in the 1840s and its impact upon the ultimate fate of Alta California.
- ◆ To trace the routes most commonly used by argonauts migrating from East to West coasts during the Gold Rush.
- ◆ To describe the experiences of argonauts engaged in the trek to California along these routes.
- ◆ To recount the effects of the exodus on families who stayed behind.

II. TEACHER BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The allure of gold was like a magnet pulling people to California. Despite the fact that Sutter wanted to keep word of the discovery from leaking out, on March 15, 1848, *The Californian* reported, “gold has been found in considerable quantities.” By the summer of 1848, word had spread and many Californians had contracted a severe case of gold fever. On December 5, 1848, President James K. Polk, in his annual message to Congress, acknowledged the discovery of gold in California. With this official validation from the president of the United States, the trickle of argonauts who had left their homes in the East and Midwest now developed into a torrent of émigrés. During the winter of 1848–1849 thousands of individuals made their plans to travel west in search of gold and evaluated the advantages and drawbacks of different routes by either land or sea.

As gold fever intensified throughout 1849, ship owners and brokers in every major American port produced a blizzard of newspaper advertisements and broadsides informing emigrants that sea passage was the most effective way of reaching California. Sea-going emigrants found that travel was expensive, initially between five hundred and one thousand dollars, increasing as demand escalated. Ships carried passengers down the coast of South America, around Cape Horn, and up the Pacific coast to San Francisco, stopping at various ports to take on supplies and relieve the tension

Lesson Two

of this long and monotonous voyage. The first letters written home during the journey were filled with enthusiasm and excitement, which soon gave way to descriptions of the tedious and boring voyage.

Some emigrants sought what appeared to be a faster route by sailing from the Atlantic coast of the United States to the Caribbean, then crossing the continent by land at Panama, Nicaragua, or at several parts of Mexico to insure that they would arrive in the gold fields early enough to claim the most productive sites. Although it was shorter, passengers following this route found the trek across land to be harrowing. As they trudged through tropical rain forests the trek was made more agonizing by the heat and humidity and the myriad animals and insects they encountered. Once across the continent, the successful travelers then had to endure only a short wait for another vessel to carry them to their destination. As later travelers ventured across the Isthmus of Panama they discovered that they had to wait, as ships operating along the Pacific coast could not accommodate the growing number of passengers seeking transport to San Francisco.

Others who elected to travel overland had to determine what route to follow. They could choose the established Oregon and California trails from the Missouri River along the Platte River and across the Rocky Mountains, a trek that had to be completed before the early snows blocked passes through the Sierra Nevada range. More than 20,000 took the Oregon-California trail in 1849 alone. Some selected the southern route through Santa Fe and into Southern California, a route General Stephen Watts Kearny had followed during the Mexican War. Still others pushed farther south and crossed through Chihuahua and Sonora in northern Mexico. The land journey was long and tedious. By the fall of 1849, perhaps 35,000 emigrants had crossed the continent on one of the various overland routes, followed by possibly well over 100,000 in the first three years of the 1850s. Like their comrades tramping through the feverish jungles of Panama or enduring eight months at sea sailing around Cape Horn, the overlanders pressed on year after year, caught up by the lure of adventure or by their hopes for golden prospects in California.

Adapted from Peter J. Blodgett, *Land of Golden Dreams: California in the Gold Rush Decade, 1848-1858* (San Marino: Huntington Library Press, 1999).

III. MATERIALS

Document 1

“California,” California Emigration Society, c. 1849 (Broadside)

As gold fever intensified through 1849 and beyond, ship owners and brokers in every major American port produced a blizzard of newspaper advertisements and broadsides. Seeing the opportunities presented by the enormous demand for passenger berths, they promoted their own golden visions of El Dorado.

Document 2

Journal of a voyage on the ship “Cordelia,” John E. Grambart, entry of May 2, 1849

Here Grambart records shipboard routines such as clothes washing and meals as he journeys west across the Atlantic Ocean.

Document 3

Map of the Isthmus of Panama, N.Y., John A. Lloyd, 1849

Arriving in the old Spanish port of Chagres on Panama’s Caribbean coast, emigrants had to make their own arrangements to convey themselves and their baggage across the isthmus to the city of Panama on the Pacific Ocean.

Document 4

Letter from Mary Jane Megquier to Milton Benjamin, May 14, 1849

Mary Jane Megquier, a doctor’s wife from Maine who ran a boarding house in California, made three round trips across Panama. Her extensive letters are published in the book *An Apron Full of Gold*, which gives a rare woman’s view of the Gold Rush experience.

Lesson Two

Document 5

Letter from Sarah A. Nichols to Samuel and George Nichols, Apr. 7, 1849

In this extraordinary, moving letter Sarah A. Nichols pleads with her husband and son to return home before reaching California.

Document 6

Letter from Samuel Nichols to Sarah A. Nichols, Glasgow [Missouri], May 6, 1849

Only one month later, Samuel Nichols' tragic letter tells Sarah of the death of their son from cholera en route to California.

Document 7

“Tremendous hail-storm on a Mountain after leaving the Platte river,” J. Goldsborough Bruff, Pencil drawing, 1849

A meticulous observer, Forty-Niner J. Goldsborough Bruff captured the essence of the overland migration in the diaries and sketches he kept during the journey. His party, the Washington City Company, suffered through many difficult moments, such as this towering storm near the Platte River in the early summer.

IV. LESSON ACTIVITIES

1. Divide the class into seven groups. Assign each group one of the documents provided with this lesson. (Alternatively, use the “jig-saw” method distributing a different document to each group member.) Project the images on the overhead projector, one at a time, and have a reporter from each group describe their document while it is on view. Use the “Questions to Consider” to guide a discussion about each document.
2. Have each group design a poster or brochure advertising a trip to California by land or sea. (See **Document 1**, the California Emigration Society broadside.) Students can advertise one or more of the three major routes: overland, the Isthmus of Panama, or around the Cape. Students should use visual images and words to describe the advantages of traveling this route.

3. Have students choose a city or town on the East Coast or in the Midwest and map their route to California on a world map. Students should make a packing list for their trip, justifying what they are bringing along. Students can discuss their packing lists in their groups.
4. Ask students to write several diary entries describing their travels along the chosen route, for better or worse.
5. Alternatively, have students design a lettersheet and write a letter home describing their travels.

V. EXTENDED LESSON ACTIVITY

1. Have students design a ride for Knott's Berry Farm based on what they know about traveling to California via one of the three major routes.

VI. VOCABULARY

1. **argonauts**
gold seekers, named after the legendary sailors who traveled with Jason in the *Argo* in quest of the Golden Fleece.
2. **broadside**
a handbill, advertisement or billboard
3. **Cape Horn**
the southern tip of South America
4. **cholera**
an acute infectious disease of the small intestine, caused by bacteria and characterized by diarrhea, vomiting, and muscle cramps
5. **Forty-Niner**
a person who took part in the 1849 California Gold Rush.
6. **frontier**
a region just beyond or at the edge of a settled area.
7. **isthmus**
a strip of land connecting two larger masses of land
8. **malaria**
a disease characterized by chills, fever, and sweating transmitted by the bite of an infected mosquito
9. **pioneer**
one who goes into unknown or unclaimed territory to settle

“California”
California Emigration Society, c. 1849 (Broadside)



**EMIGRATION TO
CALIFORNIA!**

Do you want to go to California! If so, go and join the Company who intend going out the middle of March, or lot of April next, under the charge of the California Emigration Society, in a first-rate Clipper Ship. The Society agreeing to find places for all those who wish it upon their arrival in San Francisco. The voyage will probably be made in a few months.—Price of passage will be in the vicinity of

ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS!
CHILDREN IN PROPORTION.

A number of families have already engaged passage. A suitable Female Nurse has been provided, who will take charge of Young Ladies and Children. Good Physicians, both male and female go in the Ship. It is hoped a large number of females will go, as Females are getting almost as good wages as males.

FEMALE NURSES get 25 dollars per week and board. **SCHOOL TEACHERS** 100 dollars per month. **GARDENERS** 60 dollars per month and board. **LABORERS** 4 to 5 dollars per day. **BRICKLAYERS** 4 dollars per day. **HOUSEKEEPERS** 40 dollars per month. **FARMERS** 5 dollars per day. **SHOEMAKERS** 4 dollars per day. Men and Women **COOKS** 40 to 60 dollars per month and board. **MINERS** are making from 3 to 12 dollars per day. **FEMALE SERVANTS** 30 to 50 dollars per month and board. Washing 3 dollars per dozen. **MASON'S** 6 dollars per day. **CARPENTERS** 5 dollars per day. **ENGINEERS** 100 dollars per month, and as the quartz Crushing Mills are getting into operation all through the country, Engineers are very scarce. **BLACKSMITHS** 90 and 100 dollars per month and board.

The above prices are copied from late papers printed in San Francisco, which can be seen at my office. Having views of some 30 Cities throughout the State of California, I shall be happy to see all who will call at the office of the Society, 28 JOY'S BUILDING, WASHINGTON ST., BOSTON, and examine them. Parties residing out of the City, by enclosing a stamp and sending to the office, will receive a circular giving all the particulars of the voyage.

As Agents are wanted in every town and city of the New England States, Postmasters or Merchants acting as such will be allowed a certain commission on every person they get to join the Company. Good references required. For further particulars correspond or call at the

**SOCIETY'S OFFICE,
28 Joy's Building, Washington St., Boston, Mass.**

Traverse July Term, 147 Washington Street, Boston.

Questions to Consider

1. What was the purpose of this broadside?
2. What jobs were being advertised?
3. Which jobs paid the most money?
4. Who had opportunities to earn more money, men or women?

JOURNAL OF A VOYAGE ON THE SHIP “CORDELIA”
John E. Grambart, entry of May 2, 1849

Had boiled Mackerel & Short Cake & Butter for breakfast, Having a large supply of dirty Shirts on hand & a Washwoman not being convenient I this morning commenced washing my own cloths by taking a Flannel shirt & making a Rope fast to it threw it overboard & Towed it about an hour & hung it in the Rigging to dry, it beats all the Washing Machines (so far as regards woolen cloths) that was ever invented & for the information Washwomen in general & the Public in particular that Flannel cannot be washed clean in Salt Water when Soap is used in consequence of the Flannel absorbing the Soap and there it remains If this weather continues I think could finish up my washing in about a week, Had Sun has shone clear all day, the wind light but fair Lat[itude] 42. 59 Long[itude]

May 3 Weather fine & our fair wind continues with us & we go at the rate of about 6 miles the hour all in good health & spirits thinking we shall be in Valparaiso by 10th. The women have had a very uncomfortable passage of it, the deck over their Berths leak & their Beds and clothing have been wet nearly all the time Since we have left Rio, the wonder is that they have not been Sick

Questions to consider

1. What activities does John Grambart describe? Where is he?
2. Why is Grambart doing his own laundry?
3. Does he appear to like it or dislike it?

Map of the Isthmus of Panama John A. Lloyd, N.Y., 1849



Questions to Consider

1. Why did people select this route to go from the east coast of Panama to the west?
2. What were the advantages and disadvantages?
3. What future projects would shorten the journey across Panama?

Letter from Mary Jane Megquier to Milton Benjamin
May 14, 1849

Mary Jane Megquier, a doctor's wife from Maine who ran a boarding house in California, made three round trips across Panama. Her extensive letters are published in the book *An Apron Full of Gold*, which gives a rare woman's view of the Gold Rush experience.

. . . we were stowed into a canoe . . . twenty feet long two feet wide with all our luggage which brought the top of the canoe very near the waters edge. We seated ourselves on our carpet bags on the bottom of the boat, if we attempted to alter our position we were sure to get wet feet, notwithstanding our close quarters the scenery was so delightful the banks covered with the most beautiful shrubbery and flowers, trees as large as our maple covered with flowers of every colour and hue, birds of all descriptions filled the air with music while the monkeys alligators and other animals varied the scene, that we were not conscious of fatigue, Two natives pushed the boat with poles unless the water was too swift for them they would step out very deliberately and pull us along, Was it not a scene for a painter to see us tugged along by two miserable natives. There are ranchos every few miles where you can get a cup of miserable muddy coffee with hard bread of which we made dinner, then we doubled ourselves in as small compass as possible and started, under a broiling sun the thermometer at one hundred. Arrived at our destination for the night about five o'clock where we seated ourselves on the bank to watch the arrival of the canoes, before dark there were one hundred Americans on that small spot of ground all busy as bees making preparation for the night. Our part thought it best to have the natives cook their supper, it was rich to see us eating soup with our fingers, as knives, forks, spoons tables, chairs are among the things unknown, they have no floors, the pigs, dogs, cats ducks, hens, are all around your feet ready to catch the smallest crumb that may chance to fall, As I was the only lady in the party they gave me a chance in their hut but a white lady was such a rare sight they were coming in to see me until we found we could get no sleep, we got up and spent the remainder of the night in open air, At four we took up our bed and walked, Would to God I could describe the scene. The birds singing monkeys screeching the Americans laughing and joking the natives grunting

as they pushed us along through the rapids was enough to drive one mad with delight when we got tire sitting, we would jump out and walk to cut out the crooks which were many, we could never see more than ten rods, sometimes we would find that we were going northeast when our proper course was directly opposite. At four in the evening we reached Gorgona, another miserable town, where you will find the French, New York and California Hotels, but you cannot get decent food, nor a bed to lie upon at either house. There is a church in town which is not as respectable as the meanest house you have in town they have the ruin of a bell, the tongue of another, hung three feet from the ground, with the addition of a drum made by drawing a bit of hid[e] over the ends of a small keg with the little negroes use to good advantage in calling the congregation together. They divide it off with raw hides to prevent being overrun with domestic animals in time of service, a mule took the liberty to depart this life within its walls while we were there, which was looked upon by the natives of no consequence. After spending two nights and a day at Gorgona we resumed our journey for Panama on the backs of the most miserable apologies for horseflesh that you could conceive off, they were completely exhausted carrying heavy loads over one of the roughest roads in the world, nothing but a path wide enough for the feet of the mule, which if he should make a mistake you would go to parts unknown, many places so narrow it would be impossible to pass each other on horseback. The muleteer would give the alarm that they might stop on the opposite ride. On the top of one of those high hills we found a nephew of Rev. Joy dishing out beans coffee and pancakes in a comfortable way as there was no way of getting to Cal. he thought he would make a little money where he was. . . .

Questions to consider

1. Who provided the labor throughout journey?
2. How many women were on this journey?
3. In what condition were the animals?

Letter from Sarah A. Nichols to Samuel and George NicholsBuffalo April 7th 1849

My husband & Son—You know not my feelings I cannot live if you go any further—Oh return home sell your things & return to me Save oh Save my life I cannot live if You go to California, there is war famine pestilence—murders—& very evil there to await you have mercy on a poor mother oh come home I'm Sick & depres'd—I know not what to do, I think I shall give up the house—I'm not fit for any charge the boys are well—Mrs. Clark thinks I will not live long unless you return home—come back Oh come, I fret & weep day & night, a cruel wife was I to let you leave me—remember If You will go on we never meet on earth again I've pray'd but get no relief If you do not return by May 1 I shall take my passage on a line of Steamers & start for san francisco my mind is decided If you will go to the grave, I'll go with you Earth has no charm for me—unless you both will return—I have made arrangements to leave for California soon as you answer this—unless you will return I come to you—I'm almost heartbroken why should we be separated—George my son beg for me oh plead with your father ere it is too late to save a fond wife & mother Mrs. Tiffany is dead grief kill'd, I shall soon follow. Answer next mail

Sarah A. Nichols

Questions to consider

1. How did Sarah Nichols feel about her separation from her husband and son?
2. What fears did she have?

Letter from Samuel Nichols to Sarah A. Nichols

Glasgow [Missouri] May 6, 1849

Dear & affectionate wife

After becoming a little composed I embrace the first opportunity to communicate to you this sad & afflicting intelligence Our Lovely George is no more but is numbered with the dead I have not Language to express my grief on this sollemn occasion. Oh how I have been smitten and god in his providence has visited us moste bitterly oh remorse remorse my Dear & beloved wife & you my Lovely boys it is for your feelings that I abandon my enterprise & journey & return with the remains of my Lovely Son whose soul is not in the mansions of peace the fortitude he showed to the Last moment was truly great yesterday at four oclock he informed me that he was uneasy in his bowels & had vomited some and he also had a stool & I gave him a part of a tumbler of blackberry syrrup which you put in our medicine chest soon after I was advised by a gentelman from St. Louis to give george thirty grains of calonell I did so and he then vomited a great portion of the medicine up the gentelman from St. Louis had these medicins all prepared by there family physicians & they had every confidence in there collera medicins we then resorted to there medicins and he did not vomit any more but had three free dischareges downwards he had very severe cramping through all parts of his body and particularly in arms hands fingers his Legs & feet and those St. Louis friends informed me that he was out of danger how happy I was about two oclock P.M. I remarked to george that I had full confidence that providence would be with us in this trying & critical period george remarked to me he had the same confidence

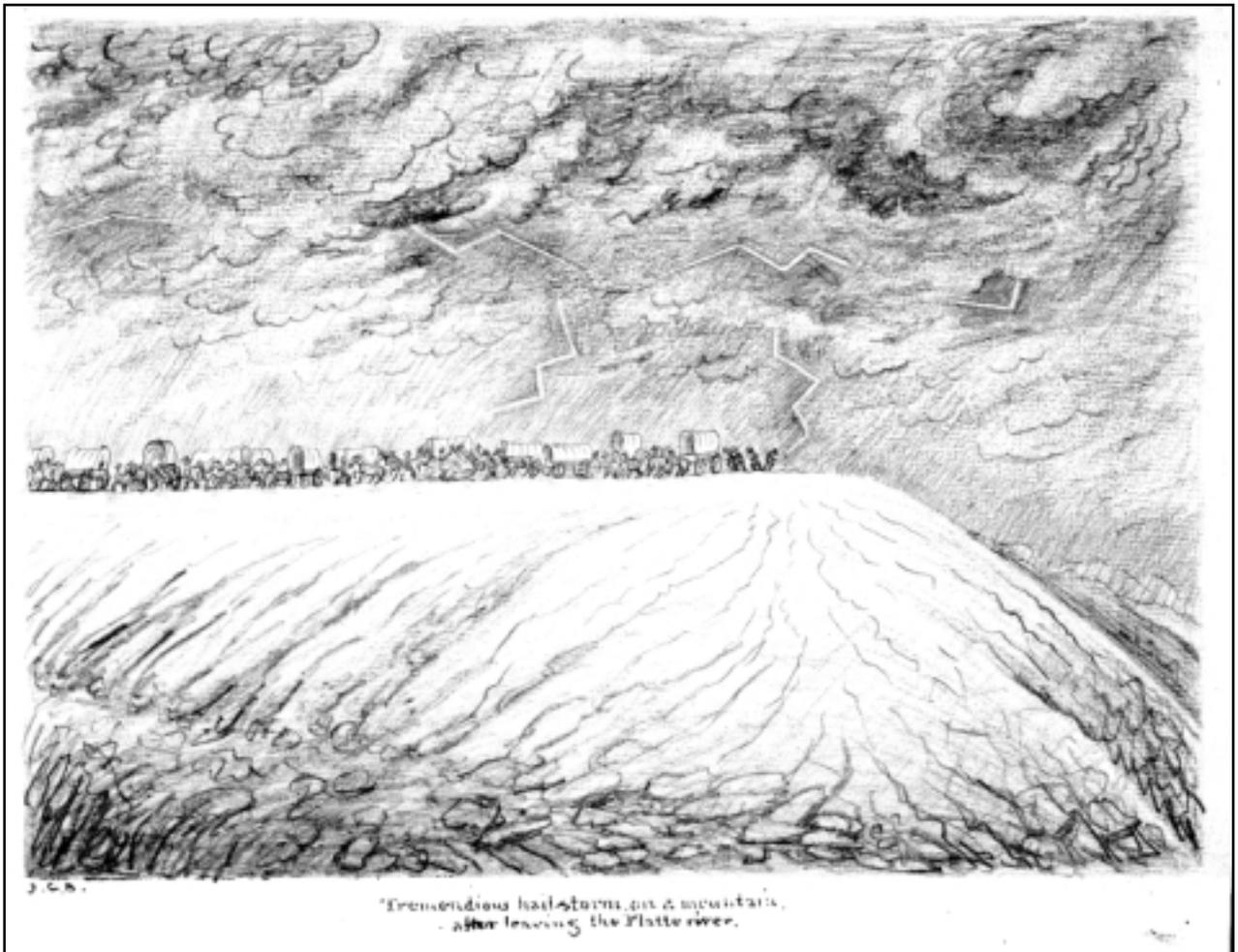
My Dear & affectionate wife & sons bear up under this sad affliction oh how heavy it will fall but bear it oh bear it Let not grief overwhelm you at this most trying time my Lover and prayers for you my dear wife and sons

Question to consider

1. What physical hardships did families and children face on the long trip to California?

**“Tremendous hailstorm on a mountain
after leaving the Platte river”
Pencil drawing, J. Goldsbrough Bruff, 1849**

A meticulous observer, Forty-Niner J. Goldsbrough Bruff captured the essence of the overland migration in the diaries and sketches he kept during the journey.



Questions to Consider

1. What event is Bruff depicting in this pencil drawing?
2. Which route to California is depicted here? How do you know?