

## THERE'S GOLD IN CALIFORNIA!

They came from everywhere, from Europe, South America and nearly all the countries of the world. It was 1849 and gold had been discovered laying on the ground at Sutter's Mill in California, a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century version of today's lottery which eventually would yield fifty billion in the equivalent of today's dollars. As the word spread, most pioneers made plans to migrate to California along one of four routes, one in Iowa, the Mormon Trail, and two in Missouri, the Oregon or the Santa Fe Trail. The fourth and oldest route, established in 1832 was the California Road connecting the Fort Smith area with Santa Fe, New Mexico. Although the northern routes were more popular and no records have been kept, it has been estimated that over 500,000 emigrants began the journey west and approximately 50,000 died along the way. Although a few deaths resulted from raids by hostile Indians, most were attributed to disease, primarily cholera, contracted through using polluted water.

A large portion of pioneers using the California Road reached it through the trail running from Arkansas to Grove Springs that intersected with the Military Road near Horse Creek. They then turned south to the Cherokee Agency at Three Forks. The travelers crossed the Arkansas River at the mouth of the Verdigris by ferry to the Choctaw Agency near present day Muskogee. The Military Road, which had been opened in 1843, over much of the previous Texas Trail, was initially marked with a plow furrow on the prairie. Its popularity was supported by the fact that as many as 1000 wagons were estimated to travel over the road during any six week period. A second source of access to the California Road was by steamer on the Arkansas River beyond Fort Smith. Many were veterans of the Georgia Gold Rush a few years earlier, one reason for the Cherokee removal. Steamer passengers would disembark at old Fort Coffee, which had been converted to a boy's school, near the Choctaw Agency.

Important decisions faced the pioneers at this juncture. Obviously, if they had traveled by steamer, a complete outfitting would be necessary. If arriving overland, repairs to wagons and acquiring supplies for the long journey would be undertaken. Also a decision had to be made concerning whether to use oxen, horses or mules since there were advantages and disadvantages related to each animal. Oxen were the least expensive at forty to fifty dollars for a pair, they also were the strongest and ate native vegetation, but were slower. Horses or mules were faster, but needed grain for feed and had poor traction in sand and mud. Oxen only required a wooden yoke and chain whereas horses and mules needed expensive harness. Horses and mules also tended to wander off, which was the primary reason wagons were drawn up in a circle in the evening to form a temporary corral when they were on the trail.

Other decisions had to be made regarding "signing on" with a particular train. The journey would be arduous and some possibility of Indian raids existed, but most of the consideration focused on the route and potential weather conditions, the terrain and the availability of food and water. Members also determined who the wagon master and guide would be and developed any necessary rules or bylaws governing the trip. The California Road wagon trains began their long journey either from the Cherokee or Choctaw agencies

then the two routes converged at Perryville, four miles southwest of present day McAlester. From that point, dependent upon the plan accepted during the organizational meeting, the routes westward diverged into two options. One, the northern route, generally followed the Canadian River northwest across present day Oklahoma to the Antelope Hills northwest of Elk City near today's Texas border, then on to Santa Fe. Arriving at Santa Fe, pioneers again had two choices. One was to proceed west to Albuquerque where the route divided again, either northwest to intersect with the California Trail in northern Utah and San Francisco or directly west across the Mojave Desert to southern California. A second choice was to turn south at Santa Fe to El Paso and join a more southerly route along the Mexican border west to California. The second option for pioneers at Perryville was to turn south, cross the Red River at Colbert, continue across Texas to El Paso and then on west to southern California. Upon reaching California at San Diego, pioneers would turn north on El Camino Real, "The Kings Road," that connected numerous Spanish missions, and proceed to San Francisco and the "fields of gold" that had prompted their journey.

More than 160 years later the risks of this western migration spanning five to eight months against incredible odds is difficult to imagine, but the motivation is understandable, a chance to "get rich quick." To some extent, yesterday's gold rush is today's lottery without the deprivation, but with similar odds...leading to the conclusion that, in a historical sense for getting rich quick, the more things change in terms of human nature, the more they stay the same.







