

Maintaining Compassion

If there is any meanness in a man, it makes no difference how well he has it covered, the plains is the place that will bring it out.

This declaration, from the 1852 diary of pioneer E.W. Conyers, echoes the sentiment of many an emigrant, for the unrelenting struggle of traveling the Trail tested their integrity. The constant feeling of being tired, hungry or sick wore on the men and women, and the further one traveled, the more difficult it became to feel compassion for others. For every story of an emigrant going to great lengths in helping one another to continue the journey, there is an equal story of discord or abandonment.

Outposts such as Fort Laramie or Fort Hall were iconic landmarks that embodied a spirit of progress for pioneers along the seemingly endless journey. The days of rest spent at forts along the trail offered a chance to recuperate from illness, purchase supplies or make repairs, but an oasis in the wilderness could also reveal both the best and worst of a man's character. J. Goldsborough Bruff, an emigrant to California described a scene from a camp in the Sierra Nevada:

October 14, 1849 - A considerable camp of emigrants there, with women and children; and on a neighboring hill Major. Rucker, U.S.A. was camped, with his wagons, provisions, & men, of the Relief party, sent out by General Smith.

The Major commanded the expedition. We proceeded together to the Major's tent and was introduced to him. - found him to be a very friendly man, and perfect gentleman. He was surrounded by begging emigrants, men, women, & children. The Major had killed an ox the day before, and he had to serve out the fresh beef, pork, flour, bread as judiciously as possible, - subject of course, to much imposition.

The importunity of the begging emigrants, was annoying; some greatly in need, some meanly bent on an increase of stores, and others who would steal a dying man's shoes. His stores were insufficient to serve those actually in want, but how was he to discriminate? Then he had to contend with impudence from the disappointed and rude applicants. It was one of the most delicate, and troublesome duties ever entrusted to any one!

Source: The Journals, Drawings and Other Papers of J. Goldsborough Bruff, April 2, 1849-July 20, 1851, ed. By Georgia Willis Read and Ruth Gaines, 1949, Columbia University Press