

Pioneer Men and their Control of the Overland Route to California: The Diary of John Martin on His Journey West in 1859

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In the years following the California Gold Rush, but before the construction of the transcontinental railway, settlers enticed by economic opportunities in California traveled the difficult overland trails on covered wagons out West. John Martin, a twenty-four-year-old farmer, was one of these settlers. His diary of 1859 is a daily account of his journey with his two brothers and a team of oxen from Plum Hollow, Iowa, to Sacramento, California.¹ Although he only provides short, factual observations and reserves any personal opinions or thoughts on the journey, his account does offer insights into myriad details involved in a long and complicated endeavor. The first entry in Mr. Martin's journal is dated Saturday, May 14, 1859, and reads: "This day we left Plum Hollow at noon, camped East Nebraska City, distance traveled 15 miles weather cloudy and cool with some rain."² This is typical of his journal entries. Mr. Martin's diary does not include thoughts, feelings, or subjective views on his situation, motivation, or objectives. However, the information on locations and conditions yields insights into the society of Mr. Martin's time.

Following the California Gold Rush, most settlers heading to California traveled along a network of trails that include the Platte River Trail, Mormon Trail, and the Oregon Trail through Nebraska, Wyoming, and Utah.³ The Mormon Trail was the basis for much of the California Trail.⁴ Based on the locations identified in Mr. Martin's diary, it is likely that he traveled along the same route. His diary attests to the success of these trails and the support system the trails

¹ Tom Gregory, *History of Yolo County, California* (Los Angeles: Historic Record Company, 1913), 564.

² John Martin, *Untitled* (Diary from 1859). In author's possession.

³ Merrill Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969), 5-7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

connected. For example, settlers understood by this time that they needed to head west in May from one of the “jumping off” points on the trail, like those in Iowa, in order to arrive in California before snowfall in October.⁵ According to Mr. Martin’s journal, his trek coincides with this timeline.

By 1859, the Gold Rush had largely cooled, but the infrastructure that it helped bring about was an extremely active route for settlers heading to California. From John Martin’s account, it is clear that a detailed plan for crossing the plains to the Pacific was available and accurate, and there were plenty of settlements and help along the way. The motivation for the migration during this time period seems to be a burgeoning agricultural economy. Mormons appear to be among the first to chart the path West and provided safe haven to other pioneers passing through their towns and their city. Although women and Native Americans were certainly present and involved in this migration, they appear to have been excluded from the decision-making process of paving the way West along the Oregon and California trails.

As with other patterns of migration to and across the United States, the forces compelling the migration West during the time of Mr. Martin’s journey were primarily economic. However, by 1859, the economic opportunities were likely agricultural, not from mining. The economic engine of California was supported by the U.S. government and investments were made to enable the settlement of the West. Although the technology used by the settlers seems primitive by today’s standards, at the time the wagons and trails enabled a large number of people to migrate to California. Based on Mr. Martin’s observations, it is evident that by 1859, a clearly-defined infrastructure was established to move settlers West to support the agriculture-based economic development of California.

⁵ Ibid., 6.

Mr. Martin's diary offers evidence that such an infrastructure was in place in 1859 and that it provided settlers with a plan, a path, and support during the journey. Throughout his diary, Mr. Martin references the conditions of roads, the availability of resources such as grass and water, and place names of where he passed or camped. For example, on July 24th, just after crossing the Bear River in Wyoming, midway through his journey, Mr. Martin writes, "Left camp at 8 o'clock, 9 miles to yellow cr. 6 from there to cash cave where we camped. Roads good, weather cool and cloudy with some rain, grass first rate, whole distance 15 miles."⁶ Entries like this affirm the presence of an infrastructure for his journey West. The frequent notations on road conditions are informative, not because the roads were rocky or sandy, but because roads were present. Even during what was likely the most difficult part of the journey, the trek through the Humboldt Valley in the Nevada desert, Mr. Martin remarks on the quality of roads. On September 11th, Mr. Martin writes, "Preparing for the desert... 13 mi. to the well, 9 mi. to the sand, road good... 12 m. to river."⁷ The presence of roads, even in some of the most difficult parts of the journey, is evidence that a well-travelled path was in place and this enabled passage through tough terrain.

John Martin's diary also notes the presence of other wagons on the journey, particularly in the early days of their travels. For example, his entry on May 16th he states that he "met 50 wagons."⁸ On May 17th he notes that he "met 86 wagons," on May 19th he states that his party "passed 36 wagons," and on May 20th he says that there were "about 40 wagons passed today."⁹ Although it is not clear from his journal whether he met the same wagons more than once, it is

⁶ Martin, *Untitled*, July 24.

⁷ *Ibid.*, August 23.

⁸ *Ibid.*, May 16.

⁹ *Ibid.*, May 17 – 20.

possible from his account that Mr. Martin may have encountered as many as 212 wagons over the course of five days at the beginning of his journey.

John Martin's diary also notes sightings of landmarks including Chimney Rock, Independence Rock, and Devil's Gate.¹⁰ These landmarks were known to settlers as signposts on their journey; in fact, Independence Rock received its name because settlers aimed to reach this point by the Fourth of July, and many of them carved their names on the rock to mark their passage.¹¹ Mr. Martin notes in his journal that he arrives at Independence Rock on July 3rd, an indicator that he was on schedule.¹²

John Martin's diary also notes stops at government fortifications including Fort Kearney on May 30th and Fort Bridger on July 20th.¹³ On June 27th he notes using a mail center, and on July 22nd he describes utilizing the services of a blacksmith to shoe his oxen.¹⁴ Additionally, Mr. Martin describes a trading post near an Indian village on June 18th.¹⁵

Throughout his journal, John Martin chronicles the location and availability of water, grass, and wood. These natural resources would have been critical to the survival of settlers like John Martin traveling with livestock like oxen. Of the hundreds of place names identified in his diary, the vast majority are references to creeks and rivers, underscoring the importance of water to his survival and to that of his livestock.¹⁶

Examined in their totality, these references to natural resources, landmarks, roads, and government-sponsored services are indicative of an infrastructure designed to support groups of people venturing West with herds of livestock. Settlers needed clean water and grass for their

¹⁰ Ibid., June 15, July 3 – 4.

¹¹ Frank McLynn, *Wagons West* (New York: Grove Press, 2002), 153.

¹² Martin, *Untitled*, July 3.

¹³ Ibid., May 30, July 20.

¹⁴ Ibid., June 27, July 22.

¹⁵ Ibid., June 18.

¹⁶ Ibid.

livestock, recognizable natural landmarks to help them keep track of their progress, military forts to provide protection against Indian attack and to enable communication, and private services like blacksmiths to maintain their livestock. Unlike earlier waves of settlers looking for gold in the Sierras, John Martin's account is evidence that the settlers traveling West during the 1850s were primarily involved in an agriculture-based economy. Herds of oxen are not required for panning for gold, but they are necessary for felling timber and plowing fields.

John Martin's experiences are testimony to the success of a concerted effort on the part of the U.S. government to establish a safer, clearly defined path to California that allowed farmers to reap the agricultural riches available there. In 1858, the year before John Martin and his brothers ventured West, the federal government sponsored surveying teams to chart what would become known as the Pacific Wagon Roads, along the California and Oregon trails.¹⁷ This was the product of the widespread belief in Manifest Destiny, the inherent right and obligation of Americans to conquer western territories, and the Polk administration's expansionist policies.¹⁸ The U.S. government also fortified and supplied forts along the trails West in order to protect settlers and provide important services like mail service and supplies.¹⁹ Government-endorsed private enterprises like the Pony Express, the Transcontinental Railroad, and telegraph lines soon followed in the early 1860s.²⁰ Additionally, the U.S. government engaged in treaties with Native American tribes in order to prevent aggression against settlers and to suppress inter-tribal

¹⁷ *Wagon Roads West; a Study of Federal Road Surveys and Construction in the Trans-Mississippi West, 1846-1869* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952), 170.

¹⁸ Mary Beth Norton, et al, *A People and a Nation*, Eighth Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 2008), 370.

¹⁹ *Westward Expansion Reference Library*, "Trails West,"

http://ic.galegroup.com.ezproxy.sfpl.org/ic/uhic/ReferenceDetailsPage/ReferenceDetailsWindow?displayGroupName=Reference&disableHighlighting=false&prodId=UHIC&action=2&catId=&documentId=GALE%7CCX3426500015&userGroupName=sfpl_main&jsid=1be52a3c691efc5534f0025aa075607b9 (accessed May 7, 2012).

²⁰ Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road*, 471-72.

warfare that caused instability in the region.²¹ Because of these policies, the late 1850s were a time of relative peace, evidenced by the fact that John Martin does not mention a single conflict with Native Americans. In the 1860s violent clashes between settlers and Native Americans would result from a breakdown in the treaty agreements, an increase in the number of settlers, and diminished military presence in the area during the Civil War.²²

Another critical component of the infrastructure used by John Martin to emigrate was the trail blazed by the Mormons a decade earlier. John Martin's account attests to the importance of Mormons in establishing and maintaining much of the infrastructure, as well as their service as hosts to settlers heading West. This is particularly evident as John Martin chronicles his experiences in and around Salt Lake City, Utah. Although he does not refer to the community by name, he simply refers to it as "The City," Mr. Martin describes arriving at Emigration Canyon on July 30th: "This morning we left camp for the city, cross the little mountain, then went down Emigration Canyon to the city."²³ The Little Mountain is a landmark nearby Salt Lake City, and Emigration Canyon is part of the route established by the Mormons to Salt Lake City.²⁴ The following day, John Martin remarks on the Mormon leader Brigham Young. He states that, "today we went over in the city, went to a meeting, twice Brigham Young preaching..."²⁵ It is unclear whether John Martin attended an event presided over by Brigham Young or simply heard about this event; however, it is evident that Mr. Martin was aware of the controversial leader's

²¹ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v., "Native American,"
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1357826/Native-American> (accessed May 15, 2012).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Martin, *Untitled*, July 30.

²⁴ *Encyclopedia of the American West*, "Salt Lake City, Utah,"
http://ic.galegroup.com.ezproxy.sfpl.org/ic/uhic/ReferenceDetailsPage/ReferenceDetailsWindow?displayGroupName=Reference&disableHighlighting=false&prodId=UHIC&action=2&catId=&documentId=GALE%7CBT2330501312&userGroupName=sfpl_main&jsid=728a42278df85c05b6fa0 (accessed May 15, 2012).

²⁵ Martin, *Untitled*, July 31.

influence. According to Mr. Martin's account, he spent several days in and around Salt Lake City.²⁶

The influence of the Mormon pioneers is apparent not just from Mr. Martin's experiences in Salt Lake City. During the early part of his journey, he notes stopping at several locations along the Platte River Road in Nebraska, a part of the Mormon Trail established by the religious group before the civil war.²⁷ In his journal, John Martin mentions stopping at Salt Creek, Elm Creek, Cherry Creek, and Lawrence Creek.²⁸ These are all tributaries and pioneer settlements along the Platte River in Nebraska, which was the route paved by the Mormons in their migration to Utah.²⁹

Near the end of his journey, John Martin mentions spending time at sites established by Mormons in California. For example, he states that he visits the "Mormon Tavern" in Clarksville, and Sly Park which is near Placerville.³⁰ Sly Park was founded by the Mormon pioneer James Calvin Sly.³¹

John Martin's long stops at various Mormon settlements and his mention of witnessing or hearing about Brigham Young speaking imply a reliance on Mormon hospitality and a lack of fear of Mormons in general. His use of the Platte River Road is evidence of a route established by an earlier mass migration of Mormons West. Additionally, sites in California named for Mormon pioneers indicate a widespread Mormon presence outside of Utah.

Although the Mormons originally moved West in order to establish a remote religious community, free from persecution, they later capitalized on their strategic location along what

²⁶ Ibid., July 30 – August 3.

²⁷ Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road*, 129.

²⁸ Martin, *Untitled*, May 20, 23, 25, June 15.

²⁹ Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road*, 129.

³⁰ Martin, *Untitled*, September 30, September 28.

³¹ Wikipedia contributors, "James Calvin Sly," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=James_Calvin_Sly&oldid=482773076 (accessed May 15, 2012).

would become the California Trail. When Brigham Young was the second president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, he led what might be considered the largest, well-organized mass migration West. In 1847, he led the first group of Mormon settlers from Nauvoo, Illinois, to the Great Salt Lake Valley in Utah.³² Young led his followers West to escape the often violent reception his church faced when they tried to settle in Missouri and Illinois.³³ The church's practices were considered peculiar and scandalous, particularly their custom at the time of polygamy. The Mormon's also faced persecution and prosecution by state and federal authorities.³⁴ However, the Mormons did not stay isolated in Utah. Brigham Young also organized the establishment of Mormon settlements throughout the West in Nevada, Idaho, Wyoming, Arizona, Colorado, and California.³⁵ As among the first to arrive and establish settlements in the area, Mormon leaders found that subsequent waves of settlers could be quite profitable. In fact, Brigham Young himself owned various lucrative enterprises in transport, agricultural processing, and real estate.³⁶ Although they were driven to isolate themselves from the rest of the country, it appears service and hospitality to settlers served the Mormon's economic interests. The California Gold Rush simultaneous to the Mormon migration also allowed them to maintain ties to the larger community.

John Martin's diary informs an understanding of the economic forces and people involved in settling the West. However, it is the absence of information in his journal that reveals

³² Norton, *A People and a Nation*, 357.

³³ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Brigham Young," <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/653923/Brigham-Young> (accessed May 15, 2012).

³⁴ *Encyclopedia of the American West*, "Salt Lake City, Utah," http://ic.galegroup.com.ezproxy.sfpl.org/ic/uhic/ReferenceDetailsPage/ReferenceDetailsWindow?displayGroupName=Reference&disableHighlighting=false&prodId=UHIC&action=2&catId=&documentId=GALE%7CBT2330501312&userGroupName=sfpl_main&jsid=728a42278df85c05b6fa0 (accessed May 15, 2012).

³⁵ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Brigham Young," <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/653923/Brigham-Young> (accessed May 15, 2012).

³⁶ McLynn, *Wagons West*, 420-21.

insights into the people who were left out. His account of emigrating to California demonstrates that women and Native Americans were largely excluded from the decision-making process.

In his journal, John Martin notes the names of men who are somehow involved in the process of his travel to and resettlement in California. For example, at the outset of his trip in Iowa, he mentions bringing along the Loy Boys.³⁷ At the conclusion of his journey, he describes working for Peter Baldes to earn money to pay for supplies needed on his new farmstead.³⁸ And in between he mentions many other men including Mr. Nape, Mr. Jones, Brigham Young, J.J. Kearney, and Jacob Pricherd.³⁹ However, there are no women mentioned in his journal. Similarly, John Martin details all of the places in his arduous trip to California. He notes the names of countless rivers, creeks, and towns. Nearly all of these locations have Anglo-European names. The only exception is Sacramento, his destination. Native Americans are nearly nonexistent in John Martin's diary. The only instance in which he mentions Native Americans is when he notes the location of a trading post near an "Indian village."⁴⁰

The nearly complete absence of information on women and Native Americans in John Martin's diary is evidence of the disenfranchisement of women and Native Americans during this time. If women or Native Americans had a role in his journey West, there likely would have been some mention of them given the level of detail included in his diary.

It is difficult to make a value judgment on the role of women and Native Americans based on the absence of information in a single person's diary. It is entirely possible that Mr. Martin encountered women and Native Americans during his journey, but his bias as a male pioneer in mid-nineteenth century America may have precluded him from mentioning them.

³⁷ Martin, *Untitled*, May 14

³⁸ *Ibid.*, September 25.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, September 20, July 31, May 30, October 2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, June 18.

Accordingly, the historical record of the time is largely written by men who may have had a bias against women and Native Americans. However, the U.S. Census figures shed some light on the numbers of women and Native Americans during the time of John Martin's trek. According to census records in 1860, women become an increasingly smaller share of the population the farther West along the overland trails. In Nebraska, men and women are in equal numbers. By contrast, in California the ratio is two to one in favor of men. In California, there were 227,019 white men and 96,158 white women in 1860. For the populations categorized as black and mulatto, the ratio of men and women in California are similar to whites in 1860. Among the Indian population, although the numbers are proportionately low compared to whites, the balance of men and women is more equally distributed; there were a reported 10,593 Indian men and 7,205 Indian women. However, the population of men classified as Asiatic outnumber Asiatic women by nearly thirty-two to one with 33,149 Asiatic men and 1,784 Asiatic women.⁴¹

The low numbers of Native Americans in California may be explained by the devastating impact of communicable diseases transmitted by Spanish settlers a century before. Their absence in John Martin's record may be evidence that the U.S. government's efforts to placate Native tribes and distance them from settlers was successful. For example, the First Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1851 established boundaries for the tribal territories in the regions crossed by the pioneer trail. The treaty also forbade tribes from waging war with each other and with American settlers heading West through their territories.⁴²

The many difficulties experienced during the long, trying journey overland may explain the low numbers of women in California in 1860. Unlike their male counterparts, women in

⁴¹ United States Census Bureau, "Census of Population and Housing: 1860 Census," <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1860.html> (accessed May 15, 2012).

⁴² *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v., "Native American," <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1357826/Native-American> (accessed May 15, 2012).

wagon trains heading West had to endure the same hardships and were responsible for a larger share of the workload with cooking, cleaning, and child care.⁴³ Women may have been reluctant to travel overland because of the health risks to their children. Cholera and other diseases were responsible for the deaths of many children along the trails.⁴⁴ Whatever the cause, it is clear from John Martin's account that the overland journey to California was likely designed for and by white men.

Although women and Native Americans were largely excluded from leadership roles in the journey overland to the West, seemingly by design, the network of trails and the support infrastructure connected by them did service the economic engine of California. John Martin's diary offers ample evidence to support this notion. Mr. Martin's account includes place names of settlements along nearly the entire route. He describes a multi-faceted network of forts, towns, trails, roads, waterways, and markers that collectively made the journey possible and safer for men, like him, who brought herds of livestock to participate in California's growing agricultural economy. The conquest of California and the West by Americans was arguably an inevitable extension of the conquest of the New World three centuries before. And it is also a reminder of what is gained and what is lost when patriarchal white men chart the path and make the rules.

⁴³ McLynn, *Wagons West*, 124.

⁴⁴ Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road*, 83-85.