

*It is hard to realize today the terrors that the desert held for settlers who toiled across the empty wastes by covered wagon in 1849. The trip, which now takes only a few hours by automobile, then required days of courage and endurance, as well as careful preparation. In the following narrative Sarah Royce tells of her experiences in crossing the desert from Salt Lake City to the California goldfields. She was traveling in a single wagon with her two-year-old daughter, her husband, and several other men when the party lost its way. They had started before daylight and missed a turn that led to a grassy meadow and water.*

Very early that morning we began to look anxiously for the depression in the ground and for the waterholes which we were told would mark the Sink of the Humboldt, but it was nearly noonday before we came to them. There was still some passable water in the holes, but not fit to drink clear; so we gathered enough sticks of sage to boil some, made a little coffee, ate our lunch, and thus refreshed we hastened to find the fork in the road. Our director had told us that within two or three miles of the sink we might look for the road to the left; and we did look, and kept on looking, and going on drearily till night was fast approaching. Then the suspicion that had been gaining ground in my mind took possession of the whole party. We had passed the fork in the road before daylight that morning and were now miles out on the desert without a mouthful of food for the oxen and only two or three quarts of water in a little cask.

We were forced to halt, for the oxen were nearly worn out and night was coming on. The animals must at least rest, if they could not

be fed. That they might rest, the oxen were chained securely to the wagon; for hungry and thirsty as they were, they would, if let loose, start off frantically in search of water and food, and soon drop down exhausted. Having fastened them in such a way that they could lie down, we took a few mouthfuls of food and then fell wearily to sleep.

The first question in the morning was, How can the oxen be kept from starving? A happy thought occurred. We had, thus far on our journey, managed to keep something in the shape of a bed to sleep on. It was a mattress-tick, and just before leaving Salt Lake we had put some fresh hay into it—not very much, for our load must be as light as possible. But the old gentleman traveling with us also had a small straw mattress and the two together might keep the poor oxen from starving for a few hours. At once a small portion was dealt out to them and for the present they were saved. For ourselves we had food that we believed would last us till we reached the gold mines if we could go right on: but if we were much delayed anywhere it was doubtful that we would have enough to eat.

*They decided they must turn back; the distance to the next waterhole was too far. Soon after they began retracing their steps, they met another group of emigrants who confirmed their suspicions that they had missed the turn in the road some fifteen miles back.*

Soon after losing sight of the dust of the envied little caravan, I left the wagon and walked the remainder of the day except for occasional brief rests. For a while I kept near

the wagon, but by and by, being very weary, I fell behind. I was all alone on the barren waste, but I recognized the features of the neighborhood and knew we were near the sink. I felt no particular apprehension, only a feeling that it was a weird and dreary scene and instinctively urged forward my lagging footsteps in hope of regaining sight of the wagon. . . .

The next morning we resumed our backward march after giving out the last mouthful of fodder to the oxen. The water in the little cask was nearly used up in making coffee for supper and breakfast. We had lately had very few chances for cooking; and after we finished breakfast only a little boiled rice with dried fruit and a few bits of biscuit remained. If we could only reach the meadows by noon—but that we could hardly hope for, the animals were so weak and tired. There was no alternative, however, the only thing to be done was to go steadily on, determined to do and endure. . . .

I found no difficulty that morning in

keeping up with the team. They went so slowly and I was so unnaturally stimulated by the desire to get forward that, before I was aware of it, I would be some distance ahead of the oxen, straining my gaze as if expecting to see a land of promise, long before I could have any rational hope of the kind.

Just in the heat of noonday we came to where the sage bushes were nearer together; and a fire, left by campers or Indians, had spread for some distance leaving beds of ashes and occasionally charred skeletons to make the scene more dreary. . . .

Wearily passed the hottest noonday hour. The two young men had been out of sight for some time when all at once we heard a shout and saw a few hundred yards ahead a couple of hats thrown into the air and four hands waving triumphantly. As soon as we got near enough we heard them call out, "Grass and water! Grass and water!" and shortly we were at the meadows.

## CHECK YOUR READING

- 1. The main reason the Royce family wanted to reach California was to**
  - A prospect for gold
  - B buy farmland
  - C be reunited with their relatives
- 2. The group the Royces were traveling with included**
  - A a large number of wagons
  - B all their relatives from Utah
  - C their family and a few others
- 3. The critical supplies the party lacked after becoming lost were**
  - A ammunition and rifles
  - B fodder and water
  - C food and medicine
- 4. The water they found the first day was not clear, so they**
  - A searched for better water
  - B gave it to the oxen
  - C boiled it
- 5. The one thing the oxen needed most after the first day was**
  - A food
  - B rest
  - C water
- 6. The morning of the second day they fed the oxen**
  - A mattress straw
  - B their own supply of food
  - C Both A and B
- 7. The fact that they had missed a turn was confirmed**
  - A by some other emigrants
  - B when it was daylight
  - C by checking their map
- 8. When Sarah lagged behind the wagons and they disappeared from view, she felt**
  - A afraid that she was lost
  - B alone, but not afraid
  - C that she was about to die
- 9. The morning of the second day Sarah Royce was**
  - A ready to give up
  - B determined to go on
  - C delirious from thirst
- 10. The small party managed to survive because of its**
  - A steadfastness
  - B ingenuity
  - C Both A and B