

An Iowan in California, 1850

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ISSN 0003-4827

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Recommended Citation

Westholm, Woodrow. "An Iowan in California, 1850." *The Annals of Iowa* 36 (1962), 462-465.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.7646>

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An Iowan in California, 1850

By WOODROW WESTHOLM

The following is a copy of a letter written Feb. 2, 1851, at "Mudspring, Eldorad (O) Co. California" by Doctor Horace Belknap addressed to Abram McClary Esq., Grandview, Louisa Co., Iowa.

Doctor Balknap, physician and minister, was graduated from Connecticut's Yale College and understood seven languages. He left his family on a farm south of Muscatine, Iowa, early in April, 1850, and headed for California. He arrived at Placerville, California, early in October, 1850, accompanying 18 men, 18 ox teams and 3 ponies as Company Physician. At Placerville he collected his share—his pay—and dispatched it back to Iowa by messenger. The messenger was robbed before he reached Iowa, so Belknap's trip and work were for nothing, but his Iowa farm had increased in value while he was gone. He returned via boat around Cape Horn and died shortly after.

Mudspring Eldorad Co. California
Feb. 2 1851

Esqr. McClary

Dear Sir, When I left home I expected that you would come the same journey and therefore no arrangement was made for corresponding. But I think I may presume that a letter from me will not be unacceptable to you as it certainly is very pleasant to me to write it. Probably you have heard from me before this time, from some of the many letters I have sent back. I should be very much pleased to have an evening's conversation with you on a great variety of matters and things that have transpired since I saw you. I think we should be apt to make it late bedtime. And now I have so many things I want to say, that I am much like a man when he is in so great a hurry he can't do anything. But to proceed,—I will suppose that one of the principal questions you would like to ask me, would be,—“What do you think of the California trip on the whole?” 1st As to the difficulties and dangers. They are truly horrible to think of. As I passed along & spent only one day at a time and our difficulties did not usually come in clusters; I was able to bear them with a very good share of patience. But when I had got through the whole & sat down to retrospect the journey and let memory

collect all of its incidents, its many haps (happenstances) & hazzards into one entire assemblage, the sight of it was truly overwhelming! I was nearly in the condition of an old neighbor of mine, who told me that many a time he had pinched his flesh till it was black and blue to find out whether he was alive or not. But you will be apt to ask, what were these difficulties? Answer. I—Sickness and death. It has been estimated that not less than five thousand perished on the plains out of the sixty thousand who started for California this last season. 2nd. Thirst & hunger. There being no supplies to be obtained at Salt Lake or at any of the Forts and having set out with just about half enough we surely did suffer much from hunger. We did not cut beef out of the bodies of dead & decaying oxen & horses as some did, but I did eat some such meat as I hope never to eat again. And I saw one man who came up to another and said, "Can you give me a drink of water?" The other replied I would if I had it, but I have none for myself. He then begged him to procure for him one pint of water & says he you shall be welcome to this horse & he is a very good one. Being answered as before, he pulled out his purse, "here says he is five hundred dollars in gold, get me one tin cup full of water, and you shall have the whole of it & my horse to boot." If I had it or could get it, said the other, you should have it without pay, but I have not a drop & am suffering like you. This was on the Desert 2 and 3 days drive this side of Salt Lake. The Emigrants were told that it was 60 miles, but it was full 80. We were told that at one place on it we would find water & grass. But we found neither. When we had got through all alive we were so thankful, that we carried back 150 gallons and bestowed it gratuitously on some that probably without it would have perished. Sometimes on this Desert-looking as far as the eye could possible reach not one living thing animal or vegetable could be discovered, not even a blade of grass or the marks of any crawling insect,—but it was one vast plain covered with an alkaline efflorescence, principally salts of soda, shoe-mouth deep. 3rd, The want of grass. If the Emigration this year should be larger than that of the last as letters from the States tell us, what they will do for grass it is hard to foresee, for it is yearly growing less, and many teams perished from this cause last

year. 4th. Alkaline water. This began to show itself about the 4th or 5th day after leaving the Missouri river and continued to annoy us for 12 or 14 hundred miles. We managed so as to lose no stock by it, but others along with us were not so fortunate. When the poor suffering oxen had been travelling all day and were ready to drop with thirst, and the suffocating dust, and we came in sight of a plenty of water, it was very hard & apparently cruel to prevent them from drinking, but if they drank, they were sure to swell up in a few hours and die. 5th. Indians. We were not much troubled by them except by importunate begging till we got beyond Salt Lake. Here they commenced stealing stock & a little further on would shoot every Emigrant they could get a chance at. By constant and careful watching we saved our own lives & all of our stock; but many were left in a very pitiable condition,—having their families with them & their team all stolen! To these might be added the suffocating dust,—the deep sandy roads,—the occasional thunder storms which, usually coming in the night, would blow away our tent & then pelt our naked heads with hailstones;—and then the truly terrific Nevada Mountains. The road over the Rocky Mountains was as good as that between your house & Port Louisa, but I assure you the road over the Sierra Nevada is Some. We past over in Sept. & there was snow ther in huge banks 7 years old. I can only say I would never try the trip again & could never advise a friend of mine to try it. I suppose some of your neighbors pointed their fingers at you for not coming, but I am confident if they will try it themselves, they will point their fingers another way. No; never undertake the overland route. To every one I say if you must & will come, take the isthmus route. Perhaps you will think that I am sorry I came. By no means. I run the hazard & came through safe:—I bought my ticket & won a prize & therefore am glad I did so. But it does not therefore follow that I would either run the risk again or advise a friend to do it.

2nd. As to the profits of the mines. On this point I hardly know what to say. The mines hereabouts have been so much dug that it is a rare thing to find a spot that will yield much. And the scarcity of water has been a serious hindrance to the miners. So dry a winter was never known here before & but

little gold has been washed this winter. But I suppose this will eventually work to our great advantage. For the richest spots are in the channels of Creeks & Rivers or the sandbanks. These are usually so deeply covered with water, that it is quite difficult or impossible to work them. This year these richest places will be easily accessible. You may therefore infer that so far from being discouraged or repenting that I came, I am more encouraged now than at any former time. We leave here for the Klamath river next week. We shall go from San Francisco by steamboat. The mines on this river were discovered so late last fall that the setting in of the winter (for they have winters there) prevented miners from going there;—though if it had been known what a winter we were going to have, they might easily have gone. Indeed some few of our neighbors did go & have returned & tell us that on an average they picked up one thousand dollars per day! Now don't think that we are so extravagant as to expect to do such big things, but we do believe we can go there & make a decent little Pile & be ready to come home next fall. . . . I am sorry my sheet is so small. Doctor Stuart died at Ringgold 5 miles from this & was buried last Christmas day,—& they tell me a bankrupt in property, in character & in hope. My health is very good; I weigh 140. Please show this to my family & any others you think proper. Do help my family if they need it. I will pay you well. My respects to all your family. Adieu.
/s/H. Belknap.

Courtesy Western Express, official publication of the Western Cover Society.

Belknap's journal which he kept on his trip relates an interesting item regarding the "begging papers" of the Indians. He stated that nearly every Indian greeted them with "How do'y do," some offering a begging paper asking for something to eat. Some papers said "This Indian is upwards of 80 years old and can't hunt for a living." Another more ludicrous begging paper (apparently written out for the Indian by a sly pioneer) said "Give this da—d rascall a good kicking for he robs the whites and steals whenever he gets a chance."

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