

Historical Threads

A Tale of the Trials of the Death Valley 49ers

By Jay M. Jones

In January of 1848, the gold discovery in California dramatically impacted history all over the United States. One piece of that history occurred in Iron County before the arrival of the first Anglo-American settlers in this area in 1851.

William Manly tells his part of the story in the book, "Death Valley in '49". A copy can be found at the Cedar City Library in the Park or a free e-book version can be downloaded at www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/12236.



U. S. postage stamp commemorating the statehood centennial of the Golden State. California became a state on September 9, 1850, just six months after the death Valley 49ers finally arrived in Los Angeles.

Manly was living in Wisconsin and working in a lead mine when news of California gold caused a fever that could be cured, as he said, only by a trip to California. He agreed to drive a team and wagon with his friend, Asahel Bennett, whom he was supposed to meet at the crossing of the Missouri River at Council Bluffs, Iowa.

Manly was delayed, missed his appointment with Bennett, and ended up driving another team west for another Forty-Niner.

At what is now Green River, Wyoming, Manly and six others found an old ferry boat filled with sand on a bar in the river and reasoned that the river must end up in the Pacific Ocean. Being late in the season, fearing snows ahead in the California Sierras, and not wanting to winter in Salt Lake City, Manly and companions appropriated the boat, starting down the Green River nearly 20 years before John Wesley Powell began his famous river expedition from the same place.

Part way down the river, while portaging their supplies, the ferry boat was lost to the raging stream. Two large logs nearby, after several day and night work shifts, became canoes and the men continued their journey. Further downstream, they met Chief Walker's band of Ute Indians camped by the river during a hunting expedition. Walker convinced Manly that it would be foolish, even deadly, to continue down the river, and gave directions to Salt Lake City.

A week later, Manly and his group emerged into Utah Valley and found some wagons preparing to take the southern route to California via the Old Spanish Trail. Leading the wagon train was Jefferson Hunt, a veteran of the Mormon Battalion, who had traveled the route before. To Manly's surprise, friends from Wisconsin, Asahel Bennett and family, were among the emigrants.

Traveling south with 107 wagons led by Hunt, Manly wrote that their wagon train was overtaken by a small wagon party led by a Captain Smith. Smith had a recent map which showed a shortcut to Tulare Valley, much closer to the gold fields of Sacramento.

At a point a few miles southwest of what is now Newcastle, Utah, the wagon train divided. Manly remembered the fateful date: November 4, 1849.

Although Hunt discouraged taking an unproven route, few chose to follow him on the Old Spanish Trail. Most of the wagons turned west in search of the alleged shortcut.

After three days and some rough going, many of the wagons turned around and followed Hunt. But the Bennett family and Manly were among the twenty-seven wagons that continued west on the "shortcut".



Jefferson Hunt Monument 5 miles southwest of the town of Newcastle, a half mile south of Bench Road on the Old Spanish Trail. According to the marker, 118 wagons from the Hunt and Smith wagon trains turned west from here in search of a shortcut to the California goldfields in 1849. Jefferson Hunt led the remaining wagons south from here on the Old Spanish Trail to Los Angeles.

As the days wore on, the mountains and plains became more barren and water and game became extremely scarce. Those able to travel faster moved on ahead. Manly stayed with the Bennett family, who traveled with the Arcane family, John Rogers, the Earhart brothers, Mr. Culverwell, Mr. Fish, and a few others.

Three days after Christmas Day, the Bennett-Manly group arrived at what is now Furnace Creek in Death Valley. A party ahead of them killed their oxen, drying the meat over fires built from the wood of their wagons, and set out on foot over the mountains to exit Death Valley. Being the first white emigrants to visit the area, they had despaired of finding a viable wagon route to the California settlements, leaving everything behind but what they could carry.

After searching in vain for a wagon trail toward safety, Bennett determined that his group's best hope for survival was to send William Manly and John Rogers ahead on foot to find a trail to the settlements, while the Bennett and Arcane families would wait at the good springs and grass that later became known as Bennett Wells. It was hoped that Manly and Rogers could be back in about 10 days with food and directions for escaping the crisis.

Manly describes several fortunate breaks, some he considered miraculous, that allowed them to survive an incredible ordeal. Time was not on their side. After 22 days and hope running out for the families remaining in Death Valley, Manly and Rogers returned with a pack mule and some supplies. With considerable difficulty, the larger group made their way over the trail Manly and Rogers had taken, finally arriving to safety at a ranch just north of Los Angeles.

Mr. Culverwell and Mr. Fish did not survive. They had started out on their own from the Bennett camp and did not have the wherewithal to make it out of the desert by themselves. Others of the 49ers met the same fate.

It was March 1850 when the Death Valley 49ers made it back to civilization. Their "shortcut" had led them to disaster, cost them valuable time and possessions, leaving them at Los Angeles, where Hunt had arrived months before. Most did not get rich at the gold fields, but they left a legacy of grit and determination.

Asahel Bennett did not prosper in California. He later moved to various places in California, Nevada, Idaho, and Utah, including Cedar City for a short time. He was part of an exploring party in April 1858, looking for possible settlement sites in the Nevada desert. It was feared that federal troops preparing to enter Utah at the time could make relocation necessary for Utah residents, should a possible war turn them into refugees.

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