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Article Summary: Robidoux set up his first trading post and blacksmith shop in 1848 at Carter Canyon. He sold whiskey and other supplies to emigrants and is said to have charged outlandish prices for his services as a blacksmith. He had a Sioux wife and several children, but his first name and other details of his personal life remain a mystery.

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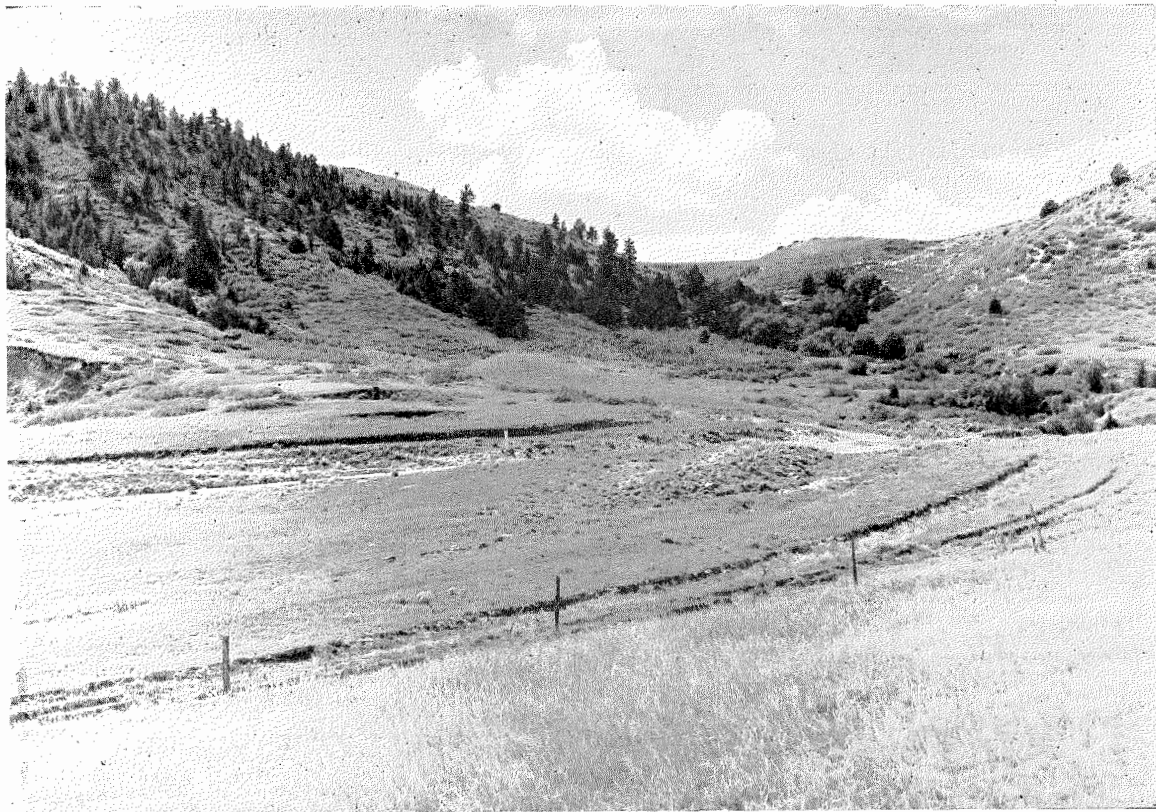
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Photographs / Images: Robidoux Pass, map of Robidoux and Mitchell Pass Routes



ROBIDOUX PASS

Remains of Oregon-California Trail in foreground. Site of Robidoux's blacksmith shop and trading post marked by granite monument, left of center. (Photo by George A. Grant, U.S. Department of the Interior, 1938.)

Robidoux's Trading Post at "Scott's Bluffs," and the California Gold Rush

By Merrill J. Mattes

I

CALIFORNIA is this year celebrating the centennial of the "Forty-Niners" and the famous gold rush which boomed the migration of Americans westward. Nebraska can share in this celebration for within its borders, along the Blue, the Platte, and the North Platte Rivers, lie several hundred miles of the trails which once teemed with ox-drawn covered wagons grinding steadily westward toward the Promised Land. One place which well symbolizes Nebraska's role in the colorful stampede to the Pacific Coast one hundred years ago is a remote point in Scotts Bluff County in westernmost Nebraska, now known as Robidoux Pass. Here, at the end of a most enchanting valley, at the foot of steep pine-covered bluffs, and adjoining one of the finest springs on the California Trail, the feverish gold-seekers paused to camp, just before gaining the heights from which the immense and soul-stirring vista of the Laramie Range and the Wyoming Plains burst upon them. And here, in this Sioux-infested wilderness of 1849, lived an adaptable, calculating Missourian of French ancestry named Robidoux,¹ operating a trading post and

¹In the literature this name, with three wobbly French vowels, is spelled every conceivable way. The original French spelling was "Robidou," which became "Robidoux" as the result of a signature flourish. This was apparently the correct legal spelling of the trader's name, and it is still the proper spelling used by his white relatives, although alleged Indian descendants have adopted "Roubideaux" or "Roubidoux." In between are such variants, gleaned from emigrant journals, as Roubadaux, Robidou, Robadou, Robedo, Robideau, Rubidue, Rubideux, Rubedere, Rouberdean, Roubideau, and even Robadove, Robedory, Thibbadoux, and Troubadore! See also Nebraska State Historical Society *Publications*, XIX (1919), 104-105; and J. T. Link, *Origin of the Place Names of Nebraska* (Nebraska Geological Survey, Lincoln, 1933), pp. 49, 140, 141, 157.

blacksmith shop which, with unlimited demand and practically no competition, was guaranteed to make enormous profits. Robidoux, the earliest settler in western Nebraska, and the only visible white resident in the three hundred miles between Fort Kearny and Fort Laramie, set an example of streamlined enterprise which has been faithfully emulated by latter-day citizens of the North Platte Valley.

In 1948 Nebraska celebrated the 100th anniversary of the founding of Fort Kearny, the first military post on the California Trail. The year 1949 seems to be a peculiarly appropriate time to take similar cognizance of Robidoux's trading post, a strictly unofficial, quite ephemeral and much less pretentious establishment, but one which played an equally interesting role in the great migration. What are the historical facts concerning Robidoux Pass? Who was Robidoux, and what became of him? What was his trading post like? After an extensive research of contemporary records, several interviews with local residents, historians, and Indian descendants of Robidoux, and detailed examination of the terrain, the writer, who lived for over ten years in the neighborhood, feels an obligation to collate his notes and tell the Robidoux story.²

²Few of the many Oregon-California Trail histories and editorialized emigrant journals contain any reference to Robidoux and his trading post at "Scott's Bluffs," which is all the more surprising when we consider that references to him in contemporary travel literature are plentiful. He is, for instance, absent from A. B. Hulbert's prize-winning *Forty-Niners* (Boston, 1931), and Jay Monaghan's *The Overland Trail* (Indianapolis, 1947), each being a skillfully woven compilation of overland journals; and in the Federal Writers' Project, *The Oregon Trail* (New York, 1939), on page 212, there is only passing mention. Good references to "Robidoux" at Scotts Bluff, found in two recent books, are distinct exceptions: Irene D. Peden, *The Wake of the Prairie Schooner*, (New York, 1945), pp. 148-151; and Georgia W. Read and Ruth Gaines, eds., *Gold Rush: The Journals, Drawings, and Other Papers of J. Goldsborough Bruff, 1849-1851* (New York, 1944), I, 480-482. Ten years ago the writer published a pertinent article entitled "Three Forgotten Trading Posts on the California Trail," *Pony Express Courier* (Placerville, California, 1938), IV, 1; and in 1943 he read a paper entitled "A Tribute to the Nameless Emigrant Graves in Roubideaux Pass," at a memorial dedication ceremony. Since then, considerable new data has been amassed, and the time seems ripe to bridge this gap in the literature of the Oregon-California Trail.

A knowledge of local topography is essential to gain a proper historical perspective. This is particularly true in this case where the peculiarities of Scotts Bluff and its neighboring hills and passes have caused much confusion among historians.

The main trail to Oregon and California, starting from Westport, Independence, and St. Joseph in Missouri, hugged the south bank of the North Platte, while on the the north bank was a trail emanating from Council Bluffs and Bellevue, known generally as the Mormon Trail, pioneered but not used exclusively by that sect. For those following the south bank, the monotony of the Platte journey was finally broken, first by the treacherous fording of the South Platte, near Big Springs, then by the precarious descent of Windlass Hill in Ash Hollow, and finally by the scenic attractions of the North Platte Valley which, though not spectacular by some standards, nevertheless greatly impressed the emigrants. This scenery consists of a series of ridges paralleling the river for about forty miles from near present Bridgeport to the Wyoming line, known now as the Wildcat Hills. Courthouse Rock, Chimney Rock, and Castle Rock, all so-named by early travellers, and almost always noted in their journals, are among the peculiarities of these sedimentary formations, erosional remnants of the Great Plains.

Just west of Gering is another high range of bluffs, closer to the river, which parallels the Wildcats. At its eastern end this range makes a sharp bend to the north, being separated only by a patch of badlands from the river. The massive north ridge, the summit of which is now accessible by a scenic road, is present Scotts Bluff, and the V-shaped cleft which separates it from the range is now called Mitchell Pass. Both are now contained within Scotts Bluff National Monument. At its western end the range approached the Wildcat Hills, being separated from it by a low sandy ridge, now called Robidoux Pass. The valley lying between the two ridges is now called Gering Valley.

Analysis of early journals reveals that Scott's Bluff or "Scott's Bluffs" meant different things to different

historical travellers. Some applied the term to all the hills surrounding the Gering Valley; others confined it unmistakably to the ridge extending from Robidoux Pass to the present monument area; still others limited it to the massive bluff of the national monument, as we do today. It is necessary to know just what "Scott's Bluffs" the traveller is talking about to determine which way he went; for after leaving the vicinity of Castle Rock, near present Melbeta, there are two distinct ways he could go—either down the broad Gering Valley and through Robidoux Pass, describing an arc of some twenty-five miles away from the river, or through Mitchell Pass, the narrow cut in the present Scotts Bluff, which required a detour of only about nine miles away from the river. These passes were not differentiated by name historically, although either or both might be referred to as "Scotts Bluff's Pass."³ Hence the only sure way to tell which route was used is by a careful study of topographic clues and mileage figures. The two alternate routes were reunited just below the mouth of Horse Creek, near present Lyman, Nebraska.⁴

³Analysis of the evidence for use of the respective passes appears in Merrill J. Mattes, "Hiram Scott, Fur Trader," *Nebraska History*, XXVI (July, 1945), 127-162. This local but not insignificant quirk in the Oregon-California Trail has not been generally recognized by historians, although it is clearly depicted in the journals, as well as in the original Land Office Surveys where the early trails are plotted, section for section. Dale L. Morgan, author of *The Great Salt Lake* (Indianapolis, 1947), suspected something here and corresponded with the writer on the subject in 1946. Mr. Paul Henderson of Bridgeport, Nebraska, has produced a set of old trail maps which show the correct situation. It was, however, missed by Dr. Donald D. Brand in his thumbnail mimeographed *History of Scotts Bluff, Nebraska* (Berkeley, 1934), pp. 42-47. As a result, he locates Robidoux's trading post in Mitchell Pass. It was also missed by a "Committee on marking historic sites," who in 1914 reported that "Mitchell Pass was the original trail" (Oregon Trail files, Nebraska State Historical Society).

⁴The emigrants were entitled to call it a "detour" but they were mistaken in their belief that they had to travel extra miles as the result of taking the Robidoux Pass route, instead of the Mitchell Pass route. From the point 4½ miles west of present Melbeta where the Oregon-California Trail first forked, to the point at Horse Creek where the two forks rejoined, the distance is approximately 25 miles by either route, according to detailed maps prepared by Mr. Paul Henderson of Bridgeport, Nebraska, an ardent Oregon Trail student. On these maps, on a scale of one inch to the mile, the early trails have been precisely plotted, on the basis of actual field studies as well as data found on early survey maps of the General Land Office. A map showing the divergent routes and related historical features accompanies this study.

Some journals are unmistakably clear on this point, others are vague, but after an examination of over one hundred such documents, the following facts emerge. Up to and including 1850 the Robidoux route was used almost exclusively by the successive waves of fur traders, missionary parties, soldiers, and emigrants.⁵ Scotts Bluff, lying across the valley like a gigantic whale, and surrounded by jagged badlands, seemed too much of a barrier, compelling travellers to "detour" inland. In 1850, however, some brave soul, possibly aided and abetted by military engineers, took the first wagon through Mitchell Pass. In the year 1851 travel was about equally divided between the two routes. From 1852 onward Mitchell Pass was heavily favored, although Robidoux continued in use occasionally, right up to the period of settlement.⁶ Thus while Mitchell Pass, at Scotts Bluff National Monument headquarters, can claim to be the main route of the military and freighting trains, the Pony Express, the first transcontinental telegraph and the stagecoach, it was Robidoux Pass which witnessed the coming of the fur traders, the missionaries, the Oregon migration of the 1840's, and, climactically, the unique, ballad-inspiring California gold rush.

Robidoux Pass, though a seldom visited spot today, accessible only by an indifferent county road, and much ignored by historians, can nevertheless lay claim to being one of the great milestones on the emigrant road. While Ash Hollow was famous for its treacherous hill, and Chimney Rock was notable for its weird contours, Robidoux

⁵There are a few rare instances of Mitchell Pass being used in the early days of the fur trade, when pack-trains were the rule. One of these was the Fontenelle trading expedition of 1835, accompanied by the missionaries Samuel Parker and Marcus Whitman. See Parker's *Journal of an Exploring Tour* (Boston, 1844), pp. 36-37. Then there were some, of course, who occasionally followed the north bank of the Platte, thus avoiding Scotts Bluff altogether. An example is the American Fur Company trading expedition of 1830, including an unidentified "Robidoux." See Paul C. Phillips, ed., *Life in the Rocky Mountains; The Journal of Warren A. Ferris* (Denver, 1940), p. 7.

⁶Documentary evidence for the use of the respective passes appears in the following pages.

Pass had several memorable features which crop up regularly in the journals: 1) romantic scenery, afforded by a lovely valley surrounded by illusionary cliffs and mounds; 2) an exceptionally good stretch of roadway in the valley, followed by a long tough pull over the pass, described by one traveller as "the first real hill since leaving Leavenworth;" 3) from the summit a spectacular view westward toward distant Laramie Peak, naively described by many exhausted emigrants as their "first view of the Rocky Mountains;" 4) the first good supply of wood, for campfires and for repairs, since leaving Ash Hollow; 5) a fine dependable cold spring at the head of a deep ravine sometimes attaining the proportions of a stream, described by the guidebooks as one of the best springs on the California Trail, making this a popular camp site; 6) evidence of locally torrential rains and flooding of the enclosed valley floor in the form of accumulated "driftwood;" and finally, 7) beginning in 1849, the remarkable Mr. Robidoux himself, complete with Indian squaw, children, and "poor relations;" likewise his "trading post" and blacksmith shop, at the head of a transverse draw. All of these features except the last are still strikingly evident today, surviving in their relatively unspoiled historical setting.⁷

⁷The physical setting of the pass is still impressively evident. Historical features, not so evident without a guide, include rutted remains of the Oregon-California Trail; the site of the trading post and blacksmith shop (with a memorial of granite and bronze erected by the Katahdin Chapter, D.A.R., in 1930); four "nameless emigrant graves" (with a memorial of granite and bronze erected also by the D.A.R., in 1943); the unmarked grave of John Dunn; and the unmarked site of the first American Fur Company post at Scotts Bluff (see below). George Mark, deceased editor of the *Mitchell Index* is generally given credit for the rediscovery of the Robidoux trading post site. The story is told in an article in that newspaper dated May 31, 1928, entitled, "Location of Robideau's Smithy." The area of the graves, the trading posts, and the big spring, occupying Secs. 8 and 9, T 21 N, R 56 W, has been owned for many years by Joe and Bill Oberlander. Among the items in their historical collection, which is now displayed in the museum at Scotts Bluff National Monument, are the following hand-forged tools: gun barrel, hide-scrapers, hoes, picket-pins, lantern hook, handcuffs, wagon bow staples, ox-shoes, wagon bolts, chain links, nails, currycomb, and heavy iron grating, presumably from the blacksmith shop itself. Other objects, left by travellers, include knife blades, gun parts, kitchen utensils, chinaware fragments, lead balls, bullet molds, lanterns, coins, religious insignia, and a curious European bronze lance point which might be traceable to the French or Spanish invasions of Nebraska in the 18th century.

Robidoux survives only in an unknown grave, on a memorial tablet, and in the mixed blood of numerous descendants.

II

No man can say who first trudged up Robidoux Pass to gaze upon Laramie Peak silhouetted against a Wyoming sunset. Thomas Fitzpatrick, James Clyman, Jacques La Ramee, and Jim Bridger were among the fabled characters of the early fur trade who perhaps first used this pass. It is possible that their associate, Hiram Scott, for whom the surrounding bluffs were named, died in this vicinity rather than at the Scotts Bluff within the present monument area, for here was the main trail and here were the life-giving springs.⁸ There were no journalists present, but it is almost certain that this was the route of the first wheeled vehicle up the Platte River road, being a small cannon conveyed to the rendezvous of the fur-traders near Great Salt Lake in 1826; likewise, the Smith-Jackson Sublette trading caravan of 1830, which included the first bona fide wagons to reach the Rocky Mountains.⁹ In 1832 the famous Captain Bonneville camped here with a sizeable company, and the first wagons destined to traverse South Pass, "among high and beetling cliffs of indurated clay and sandstone, bearing the semblance of towers, castles, churches, and fortified cities," and seemingly alive with bighorn sheep.¹⁰ The German explorer, Wislizenus, in his journal of 1839, gives perhaps the first distinct picture:

⁸Mattes, *op. cit.*, pp. 158-160.

⁹A. B. Hulbert, *Crown Collection of Maps* (Ms., Library of Congress); H. C. Dale, *Ashley-Smith Explorations and the Discovery of a Central Route to the Pacific* (revised, Glendale, 1941), pp. 172, 296.

¹⁰Washington Irving, *The Rocky Mountains; or Scenes, Incidents and Adventures in the Far West* (orig. ed., Philadelphia, 1837), pp. 34-35.

We travelled somewhat away from the river toward the left, and enjoyed a picturesque landscape . . . at noon we halted in a little valley where rocks from either side confronted each other at a distance of half a mile. A fresh spring meanders through the valley. We encamped on the hill from which the spring flows . . . from the top of the hill one enjoyed a wide prospect. On the one side the Chimney and the whole chain of rocks we had passed showed themselves; on the other side, fresh hills. Before us lay the Platte. . . ¹¹

In 1841 the first true emigrant settlers appeared, in the Bidwell-Bartleson party, guided by Fitzpatrick, and accompanied by the Catholic missionary, Father De Smet. John Bidwell writes:

We gradually receded from the river in order to pass through a gap in a range of high hills, called Scot's [*sic*] Bluff's, as we advanced towards these hills, the scenery of the surrounding Country became beautifully grand and picturesque—they were worn in such a manner by the storms of unnumbered seasons, that they really counterfeited the lofty spires, towering edifices, spacious domes and in fine all the beautiful mansions of Cities. We encamped among these envious objects having come about 20 miles.

Here were first found the mountain Sheep . . .

Passed through the Gap—came into an extensive plain, the beautiful scenery gradually receded from view. . . ¹²

Accompanying Captain John C. Fremont's report of his expedition of 1842 to Fort Laramie and the Wind River Mountains is a map of the country traversed, which may be the earliest map in which Scotts Bluff is so labelled. In this map he clearly traces the route of the detachment under Charles Preuss, assistant topographer, through Robidoux Pass. In the confirming journal, notes Preuss:

. . . Fifteen miles from the Chimney rock we reached one of those places where the river strikes the bluffs, and forces the road to make a considerable circuit over the uplands. This presented an escarpment on the river of about nine hundred yards in length, and is familiarly known as Scott's bluffs. We had made a journey of thirty miles before we again struck the river, at a place where some scanty grass afforded an insufficient pasturage to our animals. About twenty miles

¹¹F. A. Wislizenus, *A Journey to the Rocky Mountains* (St. Louis, 1912), p. 64.

¹²John Bidwell, *A Journey to California* (San Francisco, 1937), p. 8.

from the Chimney rock we had found a very beautiful spring of excellent and cold water; but it was in such a deep ravine, and so small, that the animals could not profit by it, and we therefore halted only a few minutes, and found a resting place ten miles farther on. The plain between Scott's bluffs and Chimney rock was almost entirely covered with drift wood, consisting principally of cedar, which, we were informed, had been supplied from the Black hills, in a flood five or six years since.¹³

With the "first great migration to Oregon" of 1843, diarists begin to crop up in quantity, to tell of hills "so washed by the rains of thousands of years, as to present, at a distance, the appearance of cities, temples, castles, towers, palaces, and every variety of great and magnificent structure," and of "a fine spring, at the foot of Scott's Bluffs."¹⁴ James W. Nesmith, in one mammoth company of 111 wagons and 254 men, reports that they "left the Platte. . . and turned to the left to avoid some high bluffs on the river. . . Get a view of the Black Hills 100 miles distant."¹⁵ Among the Oregon-bound in 1844 was Edward E. Parrish, an evident hypochondriac, who gave fervent thanks for reaching, two days beyond Chimney Rock, "the best kind of a spring running out of the bluff or sandy mountains some five miles from the river."¹⁶ Another visitor of 1844 was James Clyman, who had first seen Scotts Bluff twenty years before as a stray trapper-explorer, en route down river from South Pass to Fort Atkinson. As a present guide, he reports:

¹³J. C. Fremont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains, 1842-44* (Washington, D. C., 1845), pp. 38-39. From now until Stansbury's report in 1849 we get reports of "drift wood" on the valley floor, with a strange variety of speculation. The torrential rains which brought this debris of pine and cedar down from the hills, into an enclosed bowl, still plague Gering Valley. In the summer of 1948 a cloudburst rampaged through this area, causing heavy crop and property losses. See *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, June 17, 1948. Pruess describes the spring near the later blacksmith shop site, apparently having missed the famous big spring in the main ravine. The oversight was not uncommon.

¹⁴Overton Johnson and William Winter, *Route Across the Rocky Mountains of Emigration of 1843* (Princeton 1932), pp. 12-13.

¹⁵James W. Nesmith, "Diary of the Emigration of 1843," *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, VII (December 1906), 339.

¹⁶Edward E. Parrish, "Crossing the Plains in 1844," *Transactions of the Oregon Pioneer Association* (1889), p. 98.

. . . Left the River and struck S. of W. 14 miles and encamped in the midst of Scotts bluffs By a cool spring in a romantic & picturesque valley surrounded except to the E. by high & almost impassably steep clay cliffs of all immaginary shapes & forms supped on a most delicious piece of venison from the loin of a fat Black tailed Buck and I must not omit to mention that I took my rifle and (and) walked out in the deep ravin to guard a Beautiful covey of young Ladies & misses while they gathered wild currants & choke chirries which grow in great perfusion in this region and of the finest kind

Roled out over the last ridge of Scotts Bluffs which is a ridge or connection of highland commencing on the river & running Southwardly as far as visably rising in many places from 600 to 1000 feet high. . . these hills are finely stored with game Such as Black tailed deer antelope mountain Sheep & some times Buffaloe Elk & Grisled Bear I must not omit to mention a singularity on a vally we pased yestarday which was covered in all parts with Quantities of dry logs & wood. . . ¹⁷

In the "Table of Distances" accompanying Joel Palmer's journal of 1845 we find: "Chimney Rock to where the road leaves the river, 15 miles; thence to Scott's Bluffs (Good Spring), 10 miles; Scott's Bluffs to Horse Creek, 12 miles." These figures, similar to those of other travelers, roughly correspond with the Robidoux Pass route between Chimney Rock and Horse Creek, as measured on modern topographic maps.¹⁸ Rufus Sage, who accompanied a traders' caravan to Fort Platte on the Laramie, gives a romanticized account of the rich valley, watered by a beautiful stream, reached when "the trail bore leftward from the river, about seven miles."¹⁹ However, the most enticing descriptions of this valley thus far are furnished by two poetically inclined officers attached to the Mounted Dragoons, sent westward in 1845 under General Stephen Watts Kearny to impress the Indians. Lieutenant J. Henry Carleton writes:

The ground between Scott's Bluffs and the river, being too wet to be travelled over with wagons, we were forced to

¹⁷Charles L. Camp, ed., *James Clyman—American Frontiersman, 1792-1881* (Cleveland, 1928), pp. 81-83.

¹⁸Joel Palmer, *Journal of Travels Over the Rocky Mountains to the Mouth of the Columbia River* (Cincinnati, 1847), p. 158.

¹⁹Rufus B. Sage, *Rocky Mountain Life; or, Startling Scenes and Perilous Adventures in the Far West* (Boston, 1857), p. 91.

make a large detour to the left, to pass through a gorge in rear of them. This was a hard day's work, it being thirty miles around—that is, we were obliged to travel fifteen miles south-west to the gorge, and then fifteen miles northwest before we could find grass enough for a night.

The weather being extremely hot, and there being not a single drop of water to be obtained before we got to the gorge, we suffered a great deal from thirst, as did our poor animals. Our whole distance there lay up one of those beautiful bays before spoken of; and every rod we advanced, the bluffs seemed to assume some new and interesting shape—or, open to the view some pretty vista running away in perspective to a mere point. Arrived near the gorge, we found a little stream of tepid water that oozed from the marl, at the bottom of a ravine some forty feet in depth—and then, after running a half mile, lost itself in the hot sand, where the ravine debauched to the prairies. Here we found a little grove, consisting of stunted pines, scraggy cedars, diminutive hackberrys (*celti crassifolia*) with here and there a small ash, and wild cherry tree, with an undergrowth of wild currant bushes, and an over-growth of grape-vines, matted and snarled up, and running over the whole like a net. Such ravines are famous for grizzly bears when the cherries are ripe! . . .

When we arrived at the gorge, which the reader must understand was half-way up the bluffs, we caught our first view of the mountains. . . ²⁰

After a quite syrupy description of Scotts Bluff, "a Nebraska Gibraltar," Phillip St. George Cooke writes a parallel though more maudlin version:

It had been determined, rather than cross the river. . . to take to the hills and turn Scott's Bluff: accordingly we this morning marched three miles still nearer to that mysterious mountain—and, without being disenchanted of its colossal ruins and phantom occupants, turned toward the left, and ascended the wild sandy hills. I anticipated a dull ride over ground as uninteresting as barren; but a new surprise was in store for us: having ascended about sixty feet, we saw before us a plain, more than a mile wide, but narrowing, winding, and walled in: the ascent was slight, and it was apparently a river-bottom; in fact, it was marked everywhere with drift, cedar-logs, &c.—the thought, "Can this be the Platte bottom?" came intruding on us with its absurdity. Thus we continued, winding around "Gibraltar," ascending insensibly this smooth inclined plain, mile after mile, thirteen, fourteen miles! Then, before we were aware, or we hardly knew how, we found ourselves riding above—looking into—a deep glen, with large trees, cedars, shrubbery, rocks, and crystal waters! And where is its outlet?—nowhere, but high up, too, on the smooth grassy plain, on which, in flood times, it had cast its drift; yes, all

²⁰J. Henry Carleton, *The Prairie Logbooks: Dragoon Campaign to . . . the Rocky Mountains in 1845* (Chicago, 1943), pp. 243-244.

over its twenty square miles. We had got very high up, without observing it; but to complete even a faint idea of the remarkable scenery, I must add that this singular flat valley is walled in everywhere by lofty bluffs; their gray sand, and clay, and marly sides, often vertical; their tops crowned by cedar forests. This ravine is very precipitous; our horses could with much difficulty be led down to the water; wild fruits grew luxuriantly amid its rocks and trees. It heads very near the mountain top, at a spring of icy coldness, and without exaggeration.

Thus after winding, as one might have thought, through a strange opening around Scott's Bluffs, the surprise that we were at the top of a mountain gap came with an almost boundless view;—on our right—to which we must now direct our course—far below and twelve miles off, were the grassy meadows of Horse Creek: beyond, its blue hills—then, far away above many a treeless hill and plain, rose to view the famous "Black Hills," and Laramie Mountain, their highest peak, towering at eighty miles.²¹

In 1846, "the year of decision," three notable travelers, contemporary with the ill-fated Donner party, left a record of the pass. J. Quinn Thornton offers an extravagant and imaginative eulogy of the scenery, then clearly describes the route:

We left the north branch of the Nebraska, and wound round into a little valley presenting more of the extraordinary bluffs before described and characterized by the same general appearance of the ruins of numerous edifices, sometimes washed by the rains and winds into the most fantastic shapes . . . About 2 o'clock we found a little rainwater in a ravine. We encamped at a place known as Scott's Bluff. At this place are two small springs of excellent water, one of them is under a high hill, where the emigrant road crossed the head of a small ravine. The other is better, more abundant, but one mile farther on, and at the head of a very deep ravine. We also had an abundance of cedar wood here, which grew in the ravine last mentioned. Indeed, the whole plain was covered with dry cedars, which a tremendous flood is reported to have brought down from the Black Hills about ten years before.²²

The account of Edwin Bryant, destined to become mayor of San Francisco, is similar:

The trail leaves the river as we approach Scotts Bluff, and runs over a smooth valley in the rear of the bluff 7 or

²¹Phillip St. George Cooke, *Scenes and Adventures in the Army* (Philadelphia, 1859), pp. 328-329.

²²J. Quinn Thornton, *Oregon and California in 1848* (New York, 1849), pp. 106-107.

8 miles. From the level plain we ascended some distance and found a faint spring of water near the summit of the ridge, as cold as melted ice. I need not say that we refreshed ourselves from this beneficent gift of nature to the weary and thirsty travelers.

He correctly identifies Laramie's Peak at 100 or 150 miles," then spoils it by indulging in a fancy: "I think I saw the summits of the Wind River Mountains about 400 miles distant."²³

Francis Parkman, who was to become one of the great American historians, camped here with his party on June 13, 1846, by a singular coincidence having been joined on that very day by one "Roubideau" who had been travelling with some emigrants, quite possibly the same Robidoux who is the hero of our story, although thus far he awaits positive identification. Quoting from the recently discovered journal:

Robideau left the emigrants and joined us. Travelled 8 miles & nooned on Platte then came 15 or 16 farther and camped by the spring at Scott[s] Bluff. All these bluffs are singular and fantastic formations—abrupt, scored with wooded ravines, and wrought by storms into the semblance of lines of buildings. Midway on one of them gushes the spring, in the midst of wild roses, currants, cherries, and a hundred trees; and cuts for itself a devious and wooded ravine across the smooth plain below. Stood among the fresh wild roses and recalled old and delightful associations.²⁴

In his *Oregon Trail* Parkman writes that his party "encamped by the well known spring on Scotts Bluff." Near Horse Creek, on the following day, he came upon a band of Oglala Sioux led by Old Smoke, and feasted with them on buffalo meat before advancing upon adobe-walled Fort Laramie.²⁵

III

All previous migrations were dwarfed by the westward surge of the gold-seekers of 1849. For two months

²³Edwin Bryant, *What I Saw in California; being the Journal of a Tour* (New York, 1849), pp. 104-105.

²⁴Mason Wade, ed., *The Journals of Francis Parkman* (New York, 1947), II, 437-438.

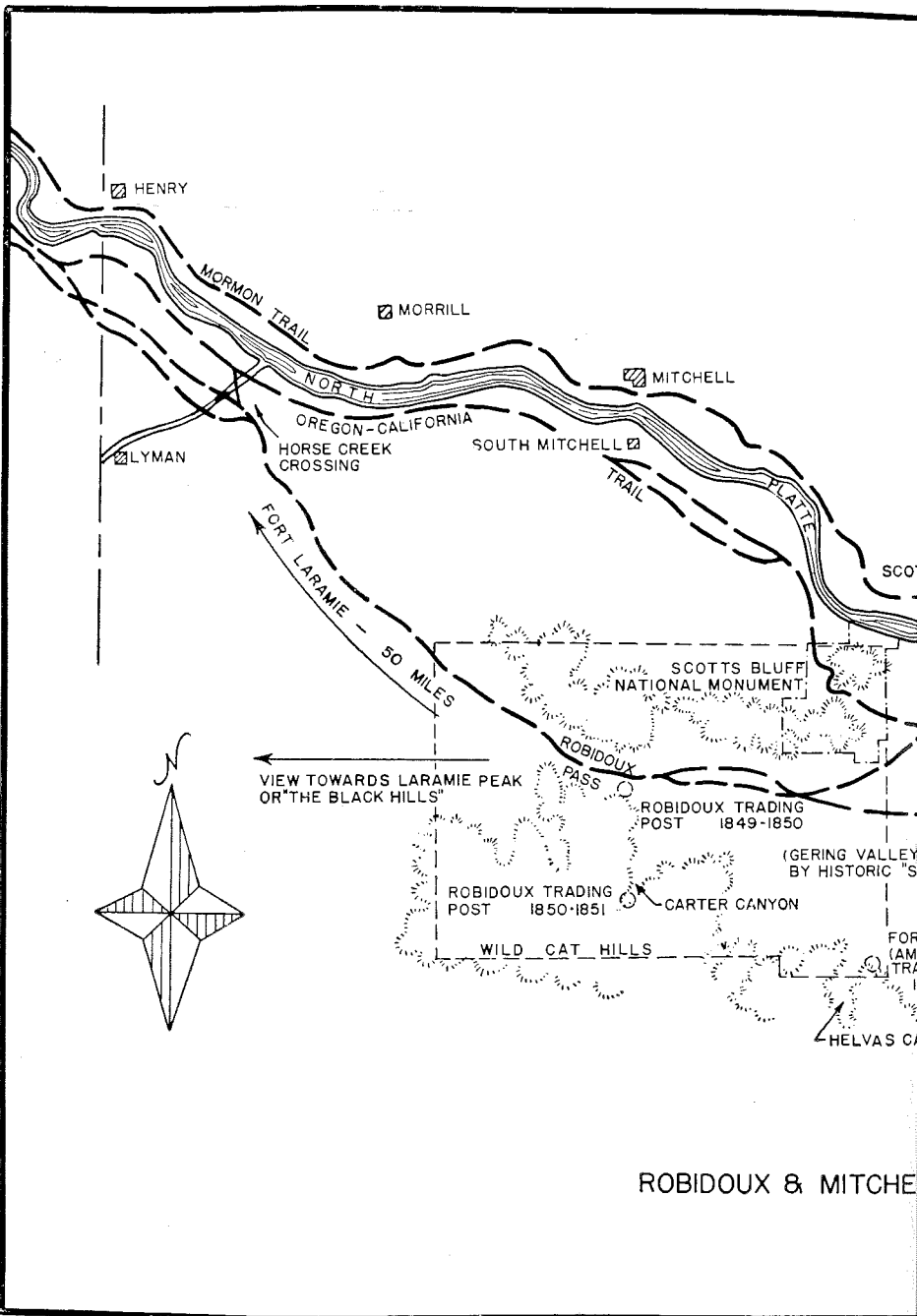
²⁵Francis Parkman, *The Oregon Trail* (Farrar & Rhinehart edition, New York, 1931), p. 85.

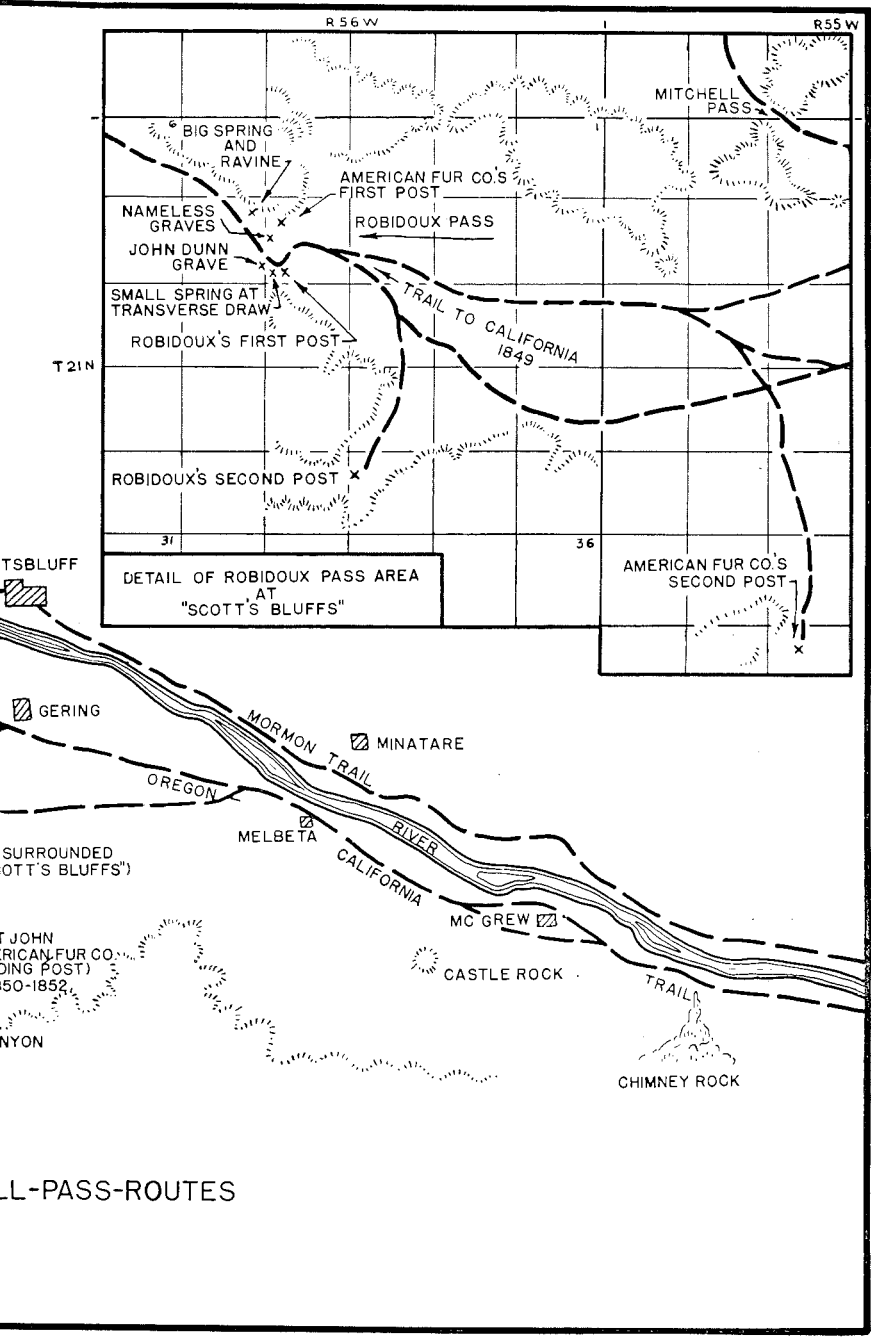
from the end of May until the end of July, there was a steady stream of covered wagon emigrants funnelling through Robidoux Pass.²⁶ We can scarcely imagine the noisy, hectic scene, the milling, shouting, cursing, and bel-lowing from dawn to dusk, then the flickering of dozens of campfires, perhaps some musical strains, then only the sound of heavy slumber, punctuated by the shrill yelp of the coyote.

At a strategic point below the famous spring, where the emigrants were compelled to go single file around the head of a transverse gully, Robidoux set up his trading post and a blacksmith shop, apparently well ahead of the first wagon train, possibly as early as 1848. From the numerous journals of the Forty-Niners we get fleeting glimpses of the man and his establishment. Some do not mention him at all. Some mention him, but not his name. Of those who do name him, no two spellings are alike. It appears, however, from these eyewitnesses, that he had a Sioux squaw and an indefinite number of children, that he sold whiskey and other supplies required by the emigrants, and that he charged outlandish prices for his services as a blacksmith, and later, when he got lazy and lackadaisical in the manner of all profiteers, he charged extortionate prices for the mere use of his forge. It further appears that his "post" at this time consisted of a log cabin, wherein the store, dwelling, and blacksmith shop were combined. Also, it seems established that he was a member of the prolific Missouri family of the same, or similar name, and that he had been knocking about this country for well over a decade. Finally, it is hinted that he was in league with other traders, but this point must remain for the moment conjectural. For the most part, in 1849, he looks and sounds like a "lone wolf" operator.²⁷ But suppose we let the travellers of that year—both sol-

²⁶No reliable statistics on the covered wagon migrations are available but, on the basis of clues in contemporary newspapers and diaries, and comparing the guesses of several historians, the writer suggests that something like 50,000 people crossed the Plains in 1849; around 55,000 in 1850; around 20,000 in 1851; and 40,000 in 1852. Thereafter there was a sharp decline in the annual rate.

²⁷As will appear in the following, it appears that this Robidoux was a North Platte Valley "resident" for many years before 1849.





ALL-PASS-ROUTES

diers and emigrants—tell their own story, in the order of their appearance.

The earliest apparent arrival was William Kelly, an enthusiastic Englishman, who hovered into view on May 25. Writes he:

... As we advanced into the bend of the crook, over a fine rich grassy lea, the scene became heightened in beauty and interest, until, close under one of those fantastic cliffs, we found a rustic log-hut, the *country residence* of a Mr. Rouberdean, of St. Louis, a blacksmith by trade, who, foreseeing an active business from the overland emigration, settled himself in this sequestered nook, getting into sharp collusion with the long dormant echoes of the neighborhood, and taking unto himself a Sioux spouse, a perfect queen of the wilderness, whom I beg leave to introduce as the sister of the Indians who accompanied us from South Platte.²⁸

On this same day William G. Johnston was below Courthouse Rock when he ran into "a man named Palliday, travelling with a one-horse rudely-constructed wagon. He lives at Scott's bluffs, about sixty miles farther up the valley, where besides his own are two other cabins inhabited by men of similarly retired habits." This is a puzzle, for we find no further reference to more than one cabin in the vicinity of Scotts Bluff and on May 27, when Johnston reached the bluff, he himself mentions only one structure. This was, of course, "a blacksmith shop, kept by a man named Bordeau [*sic*] who to supplement the income from the smithy, sold whiskey, at the rate of one dollar per pint." Concerning Edwin Bryant's report in 1846 of seeing "the Wind River Mountains," Johnston agrees that the hallucination would be entirely possible after a refill at the smith's shop!²⁹

Just where he resided before this year is uncertain. In the contemporary journals there is no positive evidence that he set up his trading post in the Pass before 1849. On the other hand we can't prove from these journals that he wasn't there in 1848 (as Mrs. Bettelyoun asserts below). It just doesn't seem logical since there was no traffic this way worth mentioning in 1847-8. These were the years when the Mormons held the spotlight on the north side of the Platte.

²⁸William Kelly, *An Excursion to California Over the Prairie, Rocky Mountains and Sierra Nevadas* (London, 1851), I, 152.

²⁹Wm. G. Johnston, *Experiences of a Forty-Niner* (Pittsburg, 1892), pp. 112-117. There were some Bordeauxs around Fort Laramie (see below) but this is the only "Bordeau" ever mentioned at Scotts Bluff by an emigrant. Could this be a corruption of "Robidoux"?

On June 8 George P. Burrall and Alex Ramsey both camped near the blacksmith shop. At the "excellent cold spring," reported the latter, lives "an old French trader named Troubadore. He has a wife and family. He is doing business for the fur traders."³⁰ On the following day, June 9, Amos P. Josselyn found at Scott's Bluffs "a trading house kept by a white man who is married to a squaw . . . There is a blacksmith shop here also."³¹ Alonzo Delano, of this same day, goes into ecstasies on the scenery, but mentions no squawman.³² Joseph Hackney's journal entry of June 10 is worth quoting at length:

. . . we left the river again soon after leaving camp this morning and struck for the bluffs there are two ranges of bluff here and the road runs between them we followed up till within two miles of where the road crosses the ridge when we camped grass is not very good wood plenty mostly pitch pine the first we have seen the water is first rate being spring water and as cold as ice it was quite a treat after being confined to the muddy water of the platt for two weeks there is a trading post here a man keeps it who has lived here for 15 years he has an Indian wife and three children he has a blacksmith shop and tin shop he told us that up till this morning one thousand and ninety wagons had passed his place there are nigh three hundred wagons camped within 2 miles of us this evening there has been no water on the road for the last 15 miles and they have been all a pushing to reach this place. . .

. . . Rockwell stoped at the blacksmith shop this morning to get his wagon tire set he got into camp about 9 o'clock they charged him seven dollars for setting the two hind tire and Jo boreme done most of the work³³

On June 12 Wakeman Bryarly gives a similar report:

Made an early start, and after a drive of about 3 miles left the river & took the bluffs, which we followed. These are called Scott's Bluffs. In about 8 miles we came to & ascended a very high ridge near the top of which we found several

³⁰Geo. P. Burrall, Ms. (Newberry Library, Chicago); Alex Ramsey, Ms. in family possession, excerpts reproduced in the *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, March 17, 1940.

³¹Amos P. Josselyn, Ms. (Newberry Library, Chicago).

³²Alonzo Delano, *Across the Plains and Among the Diggings* (New York, 1936), pp. 27-28.

³³Elizabeth Page, *Wagons West: A Story of the Oregon Trail* (New York, 1930), pp. 142-143.

small springs of cool water—as cold as ice. Here this is a store, blacksmith shop and trading post, kept by a Mr. Rouba-doe, who has been living with the Indians for 13 years. He is married to a Sioux squaw & has several children. For goods of every description he charges the most exorbitant prices, & for work, truly extortionate. For instance if an emigrant finds the mule shoes, nails &c. & puts the shoes on, he has to pay \$1 per pair and everything in proportion.³⁴

Of several arrivals on June 13, John Benson is the only one who refers to a blacksmith shop and trading house.³⁵ On June 14 Major Sanderson passed by with his Mounted Riflemen to garrison the old trading post of Fort Laramie, but no journalist appears to have been present on that notable expedition.³⁶

On June 20 Mounted Riflemen under Colonel William W. Loring, en route to Oregon territory, clattered past Robidoux's trading post. Fortunately two very conscientious eyewitnesses accompanied this expedition. Major Osborne Cross, Quartermaster, reported:

. . . After passing up the valley about five miles (we) ascended the first high hill since leaving Fort Leavenworth. This is partly covered with cedar, which was the first we had met on the march. There is also a spring of delightful cold water which we should have reached last evening, but from want of proper knowledge by the guide we failed to do so. Here is a blacksmith shop and trading-house, built in the true log-cabin style, which made us all feel as if we were in reality approaching once more a civilized race.

Shortly after ascending the hill we came, for the first time, in sight of Laramie's peak which belongs to the range of Black hills. The scenery is very beautiful from the top of this hill, presenting to view mountains, hills, and valleys in every direction, and entirely changing the scenery which we had been so long accustomed to. It convinces us that we were in reality approaching the Rocky mountains so long talked of. I do not know when I have witnessed a more beautiful sight. . . ³⁷

³⁴David M. Potter, ed., *Trail to California: The Overland Journal of Vincent Geiger and Wakeman Bryarly* (New Haven, 1945), p. 105.

³⁵John H. Benson, Ms. (Nebraska State Historical Society).

³⁶This date is deduced from the E. B. Farnham Journal (Ms. in family possession). Farnham, who oddly enough mentions no trading post, states that in the evening "Major Sanderson's company camped near us" at a point beyond Horse Creek.

³⁷Raymond Settle, ed., *March of the Mounted Riflemen* (Glendale, 1940), pp. 93-94.

This is supplemented by the account of Private George Gibbs:

. . . Near the head of the valley we encountered a brook of running water, up which we rode for two or three miles, the banks becoming higher and the ravine filled with ash trees and underbrush of rose, currants, and plum. On ascending toward the road we saw a little beyond us an Indian lodge, and riding towards it, to our astonishment, a log cabin. We amused ourselves with speculating whether some emigrant, tired of his journey, could here have established a "grocery" and on the probabilities of finding spruce beer and cakes under Scott's bluffs. It turned out to be the "fort" of an Indian trader, who with his half-breed family had settled himself here, posted up a sign "Tinware, by A. Rubidue," and occupied himself by doing blacksmith work for the emigrants in the interval of the trading seasons. As an appropriate memento I have posted up an enameled visiting card in the blacksmith shop. After sheltering ourselves from a passing thunderstorm we rode on. . . ³⁸

The history of June 20 is finally rounded out by emigrant Lucius Fairchild, who reported "the first house since we left Fort Childs [Kearny]—a Blacksmith shop, store, dwelling belonging to Rubudu a French trader of St. Jo." At the same time he files a complaint about the Mounted Riflemen: "The U. S. train. . . always in the way. . . the most perfect nuisance on the whole road."³⁹

Others conform to the pattern. We find John E. Brown on June 25: ". . . One of the finest valleys I ever saw. . . The best twenty miles of road we have travelled. By the spring at Scotts Bluff, there is a store and blacksmith's shop, kept by Rubedere, a trader who has resided among the Sioux Indians for thirteen years."⁴⁰ On June 29, Joseph Sedgley: ". . . Nearing the summit, a spring of pure, cold water. . . very refreshing. Here is a wigwam occupied by a Frenchman who married a squaw."⁴¹ On July 1, James Pratt: "A mile from the road, across a deep ravine in which there are several springs, a man has

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 323.

³⁹Joseph Schafer, ed., *California Letters of Lucius Fairchild* (*Wisconsin Historical Publications*, XXXI, Madison, 1931), p. 31.

⁴⁰John E. Brown, *Memoirs of a Forty-Niner* (New Haven, 1907), p. 12.

⁴¹Joseph Sedgley, *Overland to California in 1849* (Oakland, 1877), p. 31.

a blacksmith's shop, and keeps certain supplies for emigrants. In the ravine the largest cedars I ever saw flourish. The man has an Indian wife and family, and seems much at his ease, making money plentifully."⁴² And on July 4, James D. Lyon: "Near Scott's Bluffs there is a Blacksmith shop and store, owned by a Frenchman who says he has been there trading with the Indians for 14 years. He shoes horses for one dollar a shoe and sets the tires on a wagon for \$8; all other work in proportion. He sells flour at eight and Bacon at \$10. per hundred."⁴³

Two of our very best reporters on what went on in 1849 are now scheduled to appear. One of these was J. Goldsborough Bruff, "president of the Washington City and California Mining Association" who, on July 6, camped about one mile from "a trading-post and Blacksmith's shop kept by one of the Robedeaux's of St. Joseph, Mo. to trade with the Indians." On the following day, at the end of "Karante Valley," he observes:

This basin, among the singular and romantic bluffs, is a beautiful spot. It appears to extend E. & W. about 5 ms. and about 3 ms. wide. In a deep gulch lies a cool clear spring and brook.—Close by is a group of Indian lodges & tents, surrounding a log cabin, where you can buy whiskey for \$5 per gallon; and look at the *beautiful squaws*, of the traders, Flour here sells for 10c per lb At W. end of the Bluffs you have the 1st sight of Laramie peak, about 60 miles off. Small cactii, with white, and also with red flowers, and plums are here

3 Graves near the Spring:—

"Jesse Galen,
Independence, Mo."

"F. Dunn,
Aged 26"

"Joseph Blake."⁴⁴

⁴²James Pratt, "Letter from Camp, 56 Miles East of Fort Laramie, July 1, 1849," *Detroit Advertiser*, September 13, 1849, cited in Read and Gaines, *op cit.*, p. 481.

⁴³James D. Lyon, "Letter from Camp, 10 Miles East of Fort Laramie, July 4, 1849," *Detroit Advertiser*, September 10, 1849, cited in Read and Gaines, *op. cit.*, p. 481.

⁴⁴Read and Gaines, *op. cit.*, pp. 32, 480-482. The Dunn grave observed by Bruff is doubtless the same observed by U. S. Government surveyors and referred to by them in their field notes accompanying the original township surveys of this area, made in 1878. This grave is to be found today, unmarked, a few hundred yards west of the blacksmith shop site, and on the west side of the transverse gully where the emigrant wagons detoured. We can only speculate that the Galen and Blake graves may be among the four "nameless" ones to whom a memorial was erected in 1943.

Our second paragon is Captain Howard Stansbury, heading a Government expedition to explore the Great Salt Lake, who was at the trading post on July 9. His account, bringing the hectic season to a climax, follows:

. . . Three miles from the Chimney Rock, the road gradually leaves the river for the purpose of passing behind Scott's bluff, a point where a spur from the main ridge comes so close to the river as to leave no room for the passage of teams. There was no water between these two points, a distance of more than twenty miles, and we were consequently obliged to go on until nine o'clock, when we encamped at the bluff, on a small run near a delicious spring, after having been in the saddle sixteen hours without food, and travelled thirty-one and a-half miles. The march was a severe one upon the animals, as they were in harness, after the noon halt, for seven successive hours without water. The afternoon was oppressively hot, and the gnats and mosquitoes almost insufferable. There is a temporary blacksmith's shop here, established for the benefit of the emigrants, but especially for that of the owner, who lives in an Indian lodge, and had erected a log shanty by the roadside, in one end of which was the blacksmith's forge, and in the other a grog-shop and sort of grocery. The stock of this establishment consisted principally of such articles as the owner had purchased from the emigrants at a great sacrifice and sold to others at as great a profit. Among other things, an excellent double wagon was pointed out to me, which he had purchased for seventy-five cents. The blacksmith shop was an equally profitable concern; as, when the smith was indisposed to work himself, he rented the use of shop and tools for the modest price of seventy-five cents an hour, and it was not until after waiting for several hours that I could get the privilege of shoeing two of the horses, even at that price, the forge having been in constant use by the emigrants. Scott's Bluff, according to our measurement, is five hundred and ninety-six miles from Fort Leavenworth, two hundred and eighty-five from Fort Kearny, and fifty-one from Fort Laramie.

In his "Table of Distances—Outward Journey" we find this further significant entry:

SCOTT'S BLUFF—These bluffs are about 15 miles south of the river. The road up the bluffs steep, but on good, hard, gravelly ground. A small spring at the top of the first hill, Robideau has a trading post and blacksmith's shop here, but the post is to be removed to a creek south, and over the bluffs.⁴⁵

⁴⁵Howard Stansbury, *Exploration and Survey of the Valley of the Great Salt Lake of Utah* (Washington, D. C., 1853), pp. 52, 273.

IV

The last entry in the Stansbury journal portended a change. Robidoux was expanding. Sometime in late 1849 or early 1850 he built a more substantial trading post "south and over the bluff," near the mouth of what is now called Carter Canyon, in the southeast corner of Gering Valley. Here he went into the business of trading for buffalo robes with the Indians, and trading livestock with the emigrants. At the same time, at least during the 1850 season, he apparently retained his post and blacksmith shop at the original location in the pass.⁴⁶ Why was this move made? Certainly he could not guess that the emigrants, always anxious to take short-cuts, were about to abandon the Robidoux Pass route. We may speculate that things were getting too crowded in the pass, or that grass and wood were getting scarce there. These factors may have been present, but the main reason was probably political. The American Fur Company was muscling in on his territory!

The pioneering research of Mr. T. L. Green of Scottsbluff has thrown light on what happened to the American Fur Company after selling out to the U. S. Government at Fort Laramie on June 26, 1849. They moved their outfit to "Scotts Bluffs." Green has hypothesized that the first location was none other than Robidoux Pass, not at the blacksmith site at the head of the transverse draw, but at a point west of the mouth of this draw, where it enters the main ravine, and where remains of a post have been

⁴⁶Ruins of the so-called "Carter Canyon trading post" site, in the NW $\frac{1}{4}$, Sec. 27, T 21 N, R 56 W, were noted by U. S. Government surveyors in 1881 (Original Land Office Surveys, Bureau of Land Management, Washington, D. C.). The site, on the Emerson Ewing ranch, adjoining a county road which branches from the "Robidoux Pass" road, was rediscovered in recent years by T. L. Green, of Scottsbluff, an authority on the history of that region. In addition to scattered rocks marking building foundations and fireplaces, the following items were found by Mr. Green, and placed by him in the Scotts Bluff National Monument museum: drawer pulls, wagon bow staples, lead balls, gun flints, ox-shoe nails, key ring with keys, trade beads, and iron grate from a forge.

discovered. From company correspondence and the accounts of contemporary travellers, it appears that Bruce Husband, acting for Major Andrew Drips, moved his outfit fifty miles downstream to Robidoux Pass, probably in July or August of 1849, there constructing a crude trading post. It was set up too late to capitalize on the gold rush of that year, but apparently it served as shelter for the winter of 1849-50. Meanwhile, the leader, Andrew Drips, had returned and was most dissatisfied with the location. Accordingly, in the spring of 1850, the shift was made from Robidoux Pass to a site several miles east down the valley, at the mouth of so-called Helvas Canyon. Here this post, called "Drips' Trading Post" or "Fort John" (after the official name of its predecessor on Laramie Creek), remained for at least two years.⁴⁷

In 1850 the gold rush continued unabated, and again it swept through Robidoux Pass. Although crowded by the American Fur Company, and forced to retreat momentarily to his Carter Canyon location, Robidoux came back to the pass with colors flying as soon as the first white-topped wagon appeared on the horizon. On May 1 of this year George Keller arrived "at Roubidous'," amid a welcome abundance of red cedar timber and good water. "There is a blacksmith shop and stock market here. Ex-

⁴⁷T. L. Green, "A Forgotten Fur Trading Post in Scotts Bluff County," *Nebraska History*, XV (January 1934), 38-46; *Ibid.*, "Scotts Bluffs, Fort John," *Nebraska History*, XIX (July 1938), 175-190; Letter of December 2, 1948, from T. L. Green to Merrill J. Mattes. That relations between free trader Robidoux and Bruce Husband of the rival American Fur Company were strained is quite apparent from a letter dated May 24, 1849, at Fort John (Fort Laramie) from the latter, to Major Drips, which reads: "Mr. Robidoux is particularly mentioned [by the emigrants] as having told that we are all damned rascals and cheats at this place. I am not aware of having given any one any cause to say this of me and I shall make him aware of my opinion of his conduct if I ever see him. . . ." This letter from the Drips Collection, Missouri Historical Society, is cited by LeRoy R. Hafen and F. M. Young, *Fort Laramie and the Pageant of the West, 1834-1890* (Glendale, 1938), pp. 132-133. The tension arising when Husband moved his outfit to the site which Robidoux had preempted, including an exchange of epithets, can well be imagined. The move is also testimony to the acuteness of Robidoux in selecting this strategic bottleneck for a post in the first place.

orbitant prices were demanded for mules or horses. As an illustration, Mr. D. Hoover, of Dalton, gave a pretty good horse and seventy-five dollars, for a rather indifferent mule."⁴⁸ C. W. Smith arrived, on May 28, "at an Indian encampment, and also a place where blacksmithing was done."⁴⁹

On May 29 George Young mentions no shop, but camped by "the pass at Scotts Bluff." The next day he "crossed the hights, saw the Rocky Mountains."⁵⁰ On the 30th James Abbey stopped for breakfast at "Robidoux's trading post," finding the water excellent, but the grass scarce. At this point he records the death of "Mr. Jamison, a methodist preacher from Kentucky, who was accidentally shot by his own pistol."⁵¹ On the 31st Dabney Carr, without mentioning the trading post, gives an uncommonly adverse impression of the prospect from the summit: "On reaching the highest point of scotts bluff, you have one of the wildest and most dreary views of the Platte. . . but before us and in sight is the Black Hills with Guide Butte rearing its head above the clouds. . ."⁵²

On June 4 E. S. Ingalls passed "Robadove's trading post, at Scott's bluffs and camped about two miles [?] from it at a spring of clear cold water rushing out of a rock. — This ought to be called the Rock of Horeb, situated as it is in a desert land."⁵³ (The distance given here sug-

⁴⁸Geo. Keller, *A trip Across the Plains, and Life in California* (Massilon, Ohio, 1851, original in Huntington Library, San Marino, California), p. 14.

⁴⁹C. W. Smith, *Journal of a Trip to California; Across the Continent from Weston, Missouri to Weber Creek, California, in 1850* (New York, 1920), p. 41.

⁵⁰George C. Young, "Diary of a Trip from Barren County, Kentucky, to Middle Fork of American River, California, in 1850," *Hart County Herald*, Horse Cave, Kentucky, August 29, 1940.

⁵¹James Abbey, *California, A Trip Across the Plains in the Spring of 1850* (New Albany, New York, 1850), pp. 224-225. Abbey is almost the only emigrant of record who uses the correct original spelling "Robidoux." Mr. Jamison sounds like another candidate for one of "the nameless graves" in Robidoux Pass.

⁵²Dabney T. Carr, Ms. letter dated "May 31, 1850, from Platte River near Chimney Rock," in the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

⁵³E. S. Ingalls, *Journal of a Trip to California by the Overland Route Across the Plains* (Waukegan, 1852), p. 23. From photostat copy in Newberry Library.

gests but does not prove that the move to Carter Canyon was now completed.) On June 5 George W. Read records: "Passed Scotts Bluffs, also a trading post, kept by a white man. We could not procure any fresh meat at this point. They keep nothing which the emigrants stand in need of but some mockasons of an inferior quality."⁵⁴ On June 10 William Lampton camped 25 miles from Chimney Rock, half way along the 10 mile stretch between Scotts Bluff turn-off and the Robidoux spring, where the next day he filled his kegs. He does not mention the trading post here. (It was a dry season, the dust "3 inches in depth," and the emigrants were annoyed by the Sioux and Pawnee war parties, trailing each other.)⁵⁵

The account of James Bennett, on June 22, deserves recital in full:

Today at 9 o'clock a.m. we arrived at Scott's Bluffs. The road leaves the river at this point by a circuitous route for 30 miles. We met an Indian trader here with a two horse wagon, who pointed out to us an excellent spring, seven or eight miles ahead. He also stated that there was a regularly established trading post three miles to our left, where we could see a herd of cattle grazing. Having reached the spring in the afternoon, we found here an encampment of near a hundred Sioux Indians. The village contained 13 lodges and a row of rudely constructed huts. Removed from these, perhaps three hundred yards, were two Frenchmen with their Indian wives and children. They were having a dog feast. Near their camp fire was the head of a large mastiff; a bleeding evidence of the fact. We procured a good supply of wood and clear and cool water here and encamped three miles further in the bluffs.⁵⁶

According to Green "the regularly established trading post" would be the second location of the American Fur Company in Helvas Canyon, and thus the "row of rudely constructed huts" near the spring in Robidoux Pass would be the abandoned first location of the company, now occupied by vagabond Indians. The mileage points given

⁵⁴George W. Read, *A Pioneer of 1850: The Record of a Journey Overland from Independence to Hangtown* (Boston, 1927), p. 58.

⁵⁵Wm. Lampton, "Diary of a Trip to California in 1850," Ms., Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

⁵⁶James Bennett, *Overland Journey to California* (New Harmony, Indiana, 1906), p. 20.

do undeniably suggest the Helvas Canyon post of the American Fur Company rather than Robidoux's Carter Canyon post. Further we know that Robidoux's post in the pass consisted of only one log cabin in 1849, and it is logical to suppose, therefore, that the "row of huts" belonged to the bigger outfit.

Madison Moorman, a second eyewitness of events on June 22, does not describe the "row of huts" but comments rather freely on Robidoux himself, his squaw, his relatives, and the dog feast then in progress:

. . . A great many emigrants were soon crowding around, and as it was a rather romantic looking place as well as pleasant and a post of business, it seemed to be a general stopping point. A Frenchman who had found his way into this distant wild years ago and a Sioux squaw for his *better* half, had established a blacksmith shop in which he was doing well. Nearly every train had more or less work for him to do, so the savagized son of papal France was kept in a perfect hurly-burly, all the while. His squaw was the most uncomely in appearance I had seen — and how he managed to *love* just such a human being is past my divination. Their lodge was the most indifferent and uncleanly [*sic*] in the village. Many of the Sioux are fine looking, especially the men, who are large, portly, athletic, and intelligent [*sic*] looking.

We remained here several hours fixing an axle in one of our wagons — during which the little Indians were going about with their tin cups of *dog stew!* and seemed to relish it finely from the manner they would smack their lips and other modes they used in giving expression to their exquisite delight —⁵⁷

On July Henry A. Stine mentions only "a number of fine springs running out of the bluffs and a trading post here;" while on July 27, William Fouts records, "Travelled 12 miles to Scotts Bluff and camped at a trading post, kept by Mr. Rubideux."⁵⁸ Dr. Tompkins of the 1850 migration paid little attention to dates but he is strong on lyrical descriptions of the scenery. His comments on the Frenchman are uncomplimentary and unrevealing:

⁵⁷Irene D. Paden, ed., *The Journal of Madison Berryman Moorman, 1850-1851* (San Francisco, 1949), pp. 27-28, 104. According to Paden, John Wood also mentioned the stew, on June 21. To Indians, dog meat was a great delicacy. Parkman, *op. cit.*, pp. 112, 198-199, gives several realistic descriptions of such banquets.

⁵⁸Henry A. Stine, Ms. letter and journal of overland trip from St. Louis to Sacramento in 1850 (in family possession); William Fouts, Ms. diary (Newberry Library).

The emigrant road passes to the left of Scott's Bluffs (as we proceed westward) and leads to, and through a beautiful plain affording every possible facility for grazing and rest. Here we remained one day. At the west end of this valley lives a blacksmith by the name of Thibbadoux who has 3 squaws he calls his wives and a numerous progeny is the result of this association. This man is evidently of French descent and a desperado.⁵⁹

Franklin Street, who wrote one of the rare guidebooks of the California Trail, gives a most graphic account of the Robidoux Pass Route, based on his own trip westward in 1850:

Scott's Bluffs.—This is one of the most delightful places that nature ever formed. The lofty bluffs on each side of a low valley, form a handsome and striking contrast. Roubadoux's trading post is at the upper end of this valley, sheltered on each side and at the upper end by immense rocky bluffs, with here and there a cluster of small cedar and pine trees, growing among the rocks. From the top of the bluffs you have a fine view of Laramie Peak, in the Black Hills at the distance of one hundred miles.

The description here of the setting for the post now strongly suggests the Carter Canyon location.

In his postscript to the above, Street significantly points out that "Scott's Bluffs" is one of several obstructions to travel, necessitating long detours away from the river. "With but very little expense," he continues, "these rocky points could be removed, and the road continue along the bank of the river."⁶⁰ Although he probably never heard of Street, somebody in the late season of 1850 "removed the rocky points" and first pushed a wagon through Mitchell Pass, thus cracking the Scotts Bluff barrier and beginning the eclipse of Robidoux Pass. This is clearly implied in an entry from October 18 of that year in the journal of Captain Howard Stansbury, now returning from his exploration of the Great Salt Lake. Just below Horse Creek, he reports: "Old tracks—a road lies along the river, but it is not worn, said to be shorter than by Scott's

⁵⁹Owen C. Coy, *The Great Trek* (Los Angeles, 1931), p. 136.

⁶⁰Franklin Street, *California in 1850* (Cincinnati, 1851), pp. 60-61. Photostat copy in Newberry Library.

Bluffs. We ascend gently to the old track which leaves the river at Horse Creek." Lieutenant Gunnison, Stansbury's assistant, reveals that it was "Mr. Richard" of the trading post below Fort Laramie, who recommended the river (or Mitchell Pass) route: "not much of a trail but used last winter [and] at least 8 miles nearer." However, the explorers were unwilling to keep on the new route, so came again to Robidoux Pass. Here they found: "Scott's Bluffs—at a small rivulet, row of old deserted houses. A spring at the foot of Sandstone Bluffs, where the road crosses the ridge."⁶¹ Both Robidoux and the American Fur Company had now definitely forsaken the pass for their respective locations in Carter Canyon and Helvas Canyon, although it is impossible to determine precisely when these moves were made. They probably did not appreciate the irony of it all. Just as they got cozily resettled, the emigration took off on another tangent.

The emigration of 1851 was not as heavy as in the two preceding years, so that journalists are fewer in proportion. However, the record on Robidoux becomes less hazy. It is definite that the Mitchell Pass route rapidly gained popularity at the expense of Robidoux and now, in addition to the relocated American Fur Company post at Helvas Canyon, two other rival trading posts appeared on the Scotts Bluff scene. One of these anonymous posts was several miles below Scotts Bluff, apparently near the old Robidoux Pass turn-off and the later Pony Express station at Ficklin's Spring, just west of present Melbeta. The other post was several miles above Scotts Bluff, and just below the mouth of Horse Creek. This is all set forth with clarity by William C. Lobenstine:

Towards evening we arrived at a trading post, about eight miles before the pass of Scotch Bluffs, [*sic*] and encamped here for the night.

⁶¹Stansbury, *op cit.*, p. 288; Gunnison, Ms. journal, National Archives, Washington, D. C. The original Stansbury and Gunnison journals are being edited by Dale L. Morgan for publication (*letter of January 28, 1946*). Incidentally, the memorial tablet at the Robidoux trading post site is in error in dating Stansbury's homeward journey as "1852."

Sunday, set out with a cloudy sky and rain. It soon, however, cleared up and turned into a sunny day. We approached the Scotch Bluffs, which we saw the evening before golden in the light of the setting sun, and our whole attention was attracted by the grandeur of the former, still more beautified by the surrounding country. The appearance of these sand hills, although far off like solid rock, has a very accurate resemblance to a fortification or stronghold of the feudal barons of the middle age, of which many a reminder is yet to be met with along the bank of the Rhine. The rock itself is separated nearly at its middle, having a pass here about fifty to sixty feet wide, ascending at both sides perpendicular to a height of three hundred to four hundred feet. The passage through here was only made passable in 1851 and is now preferred by nearly all the emigrants, cutting off a piece of eight miles from the old road. We passed through without any difficulty and after having passed another blacksmith shop and trading post, which are very numerous, protection being secured to them by the military down at Fort Laramie, we encamped for the night.⁶²

Similar descriptions of the abrupt and steep-walled Mitchell Pass, and its much shorter detour away from the Platte River, are found abundantly hereafter, notably in the journals of Gilbert C. Cole and Jno. H. Clark in 1852, J. A. Wilkinson in 1859, Richard Burton in 1860, and William H. Jackson in 1866.⁶³ The trickiness of Scotts Bluff topography would make the correct interpretation difficult were it not for the mileage figures given. For instance, in one of the emigrant guidebooks based on a trip of 1852 we find:

CHIMNEY ROCK	13
SCOTT'S BLUFFS	19½
These Bluffs do not appear to be so far ahead; but you will find they are. Good camping along the river before reaching the Bluffs; but you cannot pass between them and the river, so keep the road, and after passing the steepest ravine you have yet encountered, and the narrowest gorge, pass down to the trading post, where there is good spring water, and on to	
HORSE CREEK	18 ⁶⁴

⁶²William C. Lobenstine, *Extracts from the Diary, 1851-1858* (n.p., 1920), pp. 29-30.

⁶³Gilbert C. Cole, *In the Early Days Along the Overland Trail in Nebraska Territory* (Kansas City, 1905), p. 41; Jno. H. Clark and J. A. Wilkinson *Ms. Journals* (Newberry Library); Richard F. Burton, *City of the Saints* (New York, 1862), pp. 75-79; W. H. Jackson, "Diary of a Bullwhacking Trip in 1866," *Ms., Nebraska State Historical Society*.

⁶⁴W. Wadsworth, *The National Wagon Road* (San Francisco, 1850), p. 80. Original in Huntington Library, San Marino, California. It is 18 miles from Mitchell Pass to Horse Creek; 13 miles from Robidoux Pass to Horse Creek.

One is tempted to leap to the conclusion that this is the Robidoux route and trading post, but the mileage corresponds more closely to Mitchell Pass. Further, there is the clue of the "narrowest gorge," and the passage "down" to a trading post, which is clearly the one near Horse Creek. This new trading post is indicated on the map accompanying this guidebook, while the Robidoux alternate route is omitted. This post below Horse Creek, "kept by an old Frenchman with a squaw for a wife," is mentioned also in the Cole, Wilkinson, and Burton journals, and it appears also on Burton's map and the Wadsworth map of 1858.⁶⁵

Despite the new trend, the Robidoux Pass route was by no means entirely forsaken in 1851 nor in the years that followed. At least two emigrants of 1851 went this way. On June 2 P. V. Crawford "reached the Bluffs at 9 o'clock at night. . . Here we found a trading post belonging to Rubedo, a Frenchman." And on June 11 Robert Robe "passed Robedory trading post . . . he informs me he is acquainted with Rev. Mr. Hamilton the missionary and has two daughters in that school."⁶⁶

Although they did not seem to do a lot of business with emigrants this year, Robidoux and the neighboring Company post did a land-office business with the natives, trading robes and horses. Also, they were honored by the visits of several distinguished travellers. To some extent this was incidental to the fact that on Horse Creek, just west of Robidoux Pass, was held, in September 1851, the greatest assemblage of Plains Indians in history. This was the first Fort Laramie Treaty Council, where the fate of the Plains tribes was sealed. Sergeant Percival G. Lowe records that the U. S. Dragoons who policed the Council camped near "a trading post belonging to Major

⁶⁵Cole, *op. cit.*, p. 43; Wilkinson, *op. cit.*; Burton, *op. cit.*, p. 79, and frontispiece; Wadsworth, *op. cit.*, endpiece.

⁶⁶P. V. Crawford, "Journal of a Trip Across the Plains," *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, XXV (June 1924), 143; Robert Robe, "Diary While Crossing the Plains in 1851," *Washington Historical Quarterly*, XIX (January 1928), 55.

Dripp," which would be the Helvas Canyon site.⁶⁷ Robidoux does not figure in his account. Father Pierre J. De Smet, the renowned Catholic missionary who officiated at the conference, reached Horse Creek from the west, having gone overland to Fort Laramie from Fort Union. However, of his subsequent journey he writes:

Quite late in the afternoon of the 23d of September. . . I directed my course towards the springs situated about 14 miles distant in the vicinity of Roubideaux trading house, for Colonel Mitchell had named this as the rendezvous for all those who proposed going directly to the United States. On the 24th, before sunrise we set out in good and numerous company. I visited on my way two trading houses, in order to baptize 5 half-blooded children. In the course of the day we passed the famous Chimney Rock, so often described by the travellers.⁶⁸

The two trading-houses visited were clearly those of Robidoux and Major Drips. There were half-breed children at both posts and the good priest never lost an opportunity to save a soul. Furthermore, there were no other posts in the stretch described, except the anonymous one at the forks of the road (near Melbeta), mentioned by Lobenstine, of which we know virtually nothing.

Before or shortly after De Smet left the Drips establishment, he ran into an old friend, Prince Paul Wilhelm of Wurtemberg, whose journal was only recently resurrected. In August 1851 the Prince had left St. Louis with a fellow countryman, Heinrich B. Möllhausen, a sketch artist, as his companion, travelling with a wagon to gather scientific specimens. His account of the two long-forgotten posts at Scotts Bluff is most intriguing:

The Scott's Bluffs are also a most peculiar group, in the form of a vast oval which, toward the north, slopes down to the La Platte. It encloses a perfectly level plain some ten miles broad at its widest.

* * *

⁶⁷Percival G. Lowe, *Five Years a Dragoon* (Kansas City, 1906), p. 70.

⁶⁸Hiram M. Chittenden and Albert T. Richardson, *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre Jean DeSmet, S. J., 1801-1873* (Cleveland, 1905), pp. 193-194.

I arrived in Scott's Bluffs on October 1. Nearby is Fort John, one of the trading posts of the American Fur Company. Here I was most cordially welcomed by my old friend, Major Tripp, who is in sole charge of this important establishment. I was also overjoyed at meeting again my beloved and reverend old friend, the missionary Pere de Smet.

There were a great number of leather tents close by, along a little brook that issues from a gorge some distance back from the establishment. These sheltered a body of Ogalalas, a tribe related to the Sioux nation.

* * *

October 3 we left the hospitable roof of Major Tripp and travelled up the La Platte along the California route. The valley is honey-combed with prairie-dog holes. . .

* * *

About the beginning of October I had concluded my journey of explorations as far westward as I had originally planned, and without a day's delay for the sake of rest I started [from Fort Laramie] on my return to civilization. But I found to my great disappointment that I had to make a longer stay than I had intended, both at the settlement of the fur-trading company at Fort John, and at that of my friends of thirty years' standing, the Brothers Robidoux at Scotts-bluff.

One reason was that the purchase of new horses and the exchange of my lighter wagon for a stronger, more dependable one, consumed much more time than I had counted on.

The other was my concern over Mr. Moellhausen's health. That gentleman had been well and strong until about the time of our departure from Fort Kearney. He had been at all times a most willing and useful helper. Then he succumbed, as do most all young people who have lived cleanly, to an attack of intermittent fever. I say again that I had cause to regret that I did not take in his stead a stout, clever French-Canadian.

* * *

On account of the delays I have mentioned our return journey was retarded a full fortnight. It was with good reason, therefore, that I was looking forward with considerable apprehension to the countless hazards to which travel in winter was exposed from now on, perhaps with death itself in the path.

More than all did I dread what might befall Mr. Moellhausen in his weakened condition. And, indeed, all these somber fears were to become fulfilled. The return journey proved to be from the very first a series of terrible hardships, sufferings and misfortunes. On the very day of our departure from Fort John it was our misfortune to have our front axle broken in two as we were driving up a steep slope. I rode back to Major Tripp and he sent out several men. These lost their way and I did not find Moellhausen's camp till late in the night. Then I had to send a man with the broken axle to Mr. Robidoux, and the latter's blacksmith was able to repair the damage quickly and in a most workmanlike manner.

We continued our journey, after a full day's delay, down the narrow valley of the La Platte, leaving Chimney Rock far behind us. . . ⁶⁹

⁶⁹Louis C. Butscher, "A Brief Biography of Prince Paul Wilhelm of Württemberg (1797-1860)," *New Mexico Historical Re-*

Despite his illness at the time, it develops that Möllhausen made a sketch of Robidoux's establishment in Carter Canyon. Although the original was destroyed in the bombing of Berlin in 1945, it was providentially photographed in 1939 and a copy secured by Dr. Robert Taft of the University of Kansas, who has graciously given permission for its reproduction here. This shows a row or open square of crude log cabins at the edge of a canyon, surrounded by rugged bluffs. A field study made with a copy of the picture in hand, coupled with previous archeological discoveries, proves that the trading post site in Carter Canyon was definitely the Robidoux post of 1851.⁷⁰

After 1851 the Robidoux Pass route declined in importance, but it was never abandoned altogether. Several emigrant journals of the 1850's clearly describe the *fork* in the road, several miles below Scotts Bluff, and just west of present Melbeta. Helen Carpenter in 1856, after passing Chimney Rock, writes: "Here the road forks, one

view, XVII (July 1942), 205-215. See also Heinrich B. Möllhausen's *Diary of a Journey from the Mississippi to the Coasts of the Pacific*, Mrs. Percy Sinnett, tr. (London, 1858), p. 119; H. M. Chittenden and A. T. Richardson, eds., *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873* (Cleveland, 1905), pp. 193-200; and Paul Wilhelm, Duke of Wurttemberg, "First Journey to North America in the Years 1822 to 1824," Wm. G. Bek, tr., *South Dakota Historical Collections*, XIX (1938), 348-349. Father De Smet confirms the meeting, but a discrepancy as to the time and place arises. The missionary states that he left the treaty ground on September 23, and the next day visited two trading-houses and then passed Chimney Rock. He subsequently met Prince Paul at the crossing of the South Platte River, presumably around September 27, according to the usual rate of travel. The missionary was noted for his fidelity to fact. Possibly Prince Paul's reminiscences were a bit hazy on these details. Now as to "my friends of thirty years standing, the Brothers Robidoux," only one reference to a "Robidoux" is found in Prince Paul's account of his trip up the Missouri River in 1823. At a "trading post of the Otoes" near the mouth of the Platte River he encountered "the agent of the French Company, Mr. Robidoux." Whichever Robidoux this was, he was apparently present also at the Carter Canyon post near Scotts Bluff in 1851.

⁷⁰Robert Taft, "The Pictorial Record of the Old West; Part VI, Heinrich Balduin Möllhausen," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, XVI (August 1948), 225-244. Möllhausen's sketch is the only known contemporary picture of Robidoux's trading posts, either the one in the pass or the one in Carter Canyon. J. Goldsborough Bruff dashed off a sketch of a Scotts Bluff scene "near Rubideau's Trading Post," but neglected to put in the post itself (Read and Gaines, *op. cit.*, p. 571). Private George Gibbs of the Mounted Riflemen in 1849, says

going over the hills and the other following the river a few miles farther . . . the left . . . said to be the best road, but not travelled yet this year . . . we took the other which goes through the bluffs."⁷¹ Concerning the Utah military expedition of 1857, Captain Jesse A. Gove writes, "Tomorrow we pass through celebrated Scott's Bluffs. It is a cut of some 7 miles from the old road," and in 1858 bull-whacker T. S. Kenderdine reports, "The road forks before we reach the bluffs, one trail passing around its southern end and rejoining the main road at a distance beyond it, the other passing directly over its summit. The latter is the worse road of the two, but it being shorter, we chose it."⁷² Thus from travellers we get a clear picture of alternate routes available in the 1850's, the Mitchell Pass route being rougher but shorter, and therefore preferable. This interpretation fits in with the testimony of Mrs. Susan Bordeaux Bettelyoun, a daughter of the Bordeaux who traded near Fort Laramie at this period: "All the men dealing in the fur trade moved to the Platte, when most of the travelling was done along the river road. At other times when the roads were bad, the travelling went on on higher ground, back of Scotts Bluff by Rubideaux's place."⁷³

Only two overland journals have been found, dated subsequent to 1851, which clearly describe the Robidoux

he did some sketching in this neighborhood, but his sketches do not survive (Settle, *op. cit.*, p. 322). An unidentified artist of this same expedition also did some sketching hereabouts, but his "First View of the Rocky Mountains," supposedly looking westward from the summit of Robidoux Pass, is the nearest he comes to our subject (Schafer, *op. cit.*, opp. p. 66). Schafer, writing in the *Wisconsin Magazine of History* VII, 98-108, suggests that this artist was Lt. Andrew Jackson Lindsay, but Settle, when editing the *March of the Mounted Riflemen*, expressed an opinion that he was William H. Tappan, a companion of diarist George Gibbs (*Letter of December 2, 1948*, from Josephine L. Harper, Manuscript Librarian, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison).

⁷¹Helen M. Carpenter, Ms. Diary, California State Library.

⁷²J. A. Gove, *Utah Expedition, 1857-1858* (Concord, 1928), p. 48; T. S. Kenderdine, *A California Tramp* (Newton, Pa., 1888), p. 65.

⁷³Bettelyoun Mss., Nebraska State Historical Society (see below).

Pass route, and both cite evidence of its former occupation.⁷⁴ In 1853 Celinda E. Himes reports:

... Went up the valley about six miles and camped in a most romantic spot near a spring brook. Martha and I went ... on up the ravine, expecting every moment to find a spring. At length we came upon what we supposed to have once been a trading post. There were several log buildings connected together. In them were remnants of wagons and other things which emigrants would want. In one had been a blacksmith shop. The whole was now deserted. Near by was one of the most beautiful springs I have ever seen. . .

In 1856 R. J. Brown "passed an old trading post (Robidoux's) it is now in ruins."⁷⁵ It is probable that the "ruins" observed by these two travellers were the same "row of deserted houses" observed by Stansbury in late 1850, which Green theorizes were the first Scotts Bluff post of the fur company, not to be confused with the original Robidoux cabin.

Other late references to a Robidoux trading post are confusing, for they clearly do not relate to the location in the pass. In 1853 John B. Haas found a "rock house" near the crossing of the South Platte (near present Julesburg) which he was told "was owned by a trapper by the name of Ronidous." [sic]⁷⁶ In that same year Dr. Timothy Flint, travelling along the Mormon Trail on the *north bank* of the Platte, came to a trading post and blacksmith shop "a little way below Scotts Bluff" run by a French Cana-

⁷⁴Paden, *Wake of the Prairie Schooner*, p. 151, quotes the Margaret Stuart Bailey diary entry of June 22, 1852 (Ms., Huntington Library, San Marino, California), as an incident in Robidoux Pass: "Passed a Frenchman's blacksmith shop. His wife, a squaw of the Sioux tribe, sat in the door of their hut rolled in a scarlet blanket. Looked rather sober but well. Another squaw was on horseback chasing a drove of horses and mules. She was only half dressed." Robidoux may well have retained his blacksmith shop (as distinct from his trading post) in the pass as late as 1852. However, without knowing the context of this journal and in the absence of further evidence of the 1852 situation, the writer wonders if this odd "blacksmith shop" might not have been one of the several rival establishments which had cropped up in the neighborhood.

⁷⁵Celinda E. Himes, "Diary," *Transactions of the 46th Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association* (Portland, 1918); Brown, Ms. Journal, in family possession.

⁷⁶John B. Haas, Ms., in possession of the editor, *The Pony Express Courier*, Placerville, California (Letter of February 9, 1938).

dian "living with a Sioux wife or wives."⁷⁷ In 1860 Richard Burton, travelling by stage, observed several miles east of Mitchell Pass a ranch called "Robidoux Fort, from the well-known Indian trader of that name," where there was a Frenchman with the usual complement of squaws and dusky progeny. (From Burton's context, it cannot be inferred that this was Robidoux himself.) Another trading post, previously mentioned, was observed just below Horse Creek.⁷⁸ Whether these various establishments were in any way related to the original Robidoux of Scotts Bluff fame, or if there was another Robidoux in circulation locally, or if his name was merely adopted by imitators, are questions which arise to plague the historian.

Just exactly what did happen to our man after 1851, when we last catch of glimpse of him repairing Prince Paul's wagon axle, and having his place in Carter Canyon sketched by Möllhausen? The evidence, though negative, suggests that Robidoux's second post was abandoned after 1852 or 1853 at the latest. A trader had to have somebody to trade with, and the Platte Valley travellers were now all moving through Mitchell Pass. An experienced operator like Robidoux would not let a situation like this go unchallenged. He would move once more to a strategic position. (He might even move more than once. After all, his "trading post" did not represent much of an investment.) The most likely trading post site No. 3 was just below Horse Creek, only a few miles westward from Robidoux Pass, which appears on the Wadsworth (1858) and Burton (1860) maps. Here the alternate Scotts Bluff routes were rejoined. Here there was still a satisfactory supply of wood and grass. Here travellers reported "an old Frenchman with a squaw," and here, according to Captain

⁷⁷Thomas Flint, *Diary. . . California to Maine and Return, 1851-1855* (Los Angeles, 1923), p. 32.

⁷⁸Burton, *op. cit.*, p. 75. Brand, *op. cit.*, p. 45 supposes that Flint and Burton referred to the original trading post at Scotts Bluff. Such an interpretation is not in accord with topographic facts.

Gove in 1857, was a stretch called "Robideaux Sloughs."⁷⁹ Further speculation on the exact whereabouts of his later establishments seems fruitless. This leaves us with the mystery of Robidoux himself.

V

As far as contemporary literature of the California Trail is concerned, Robidoux himself simply vanishes after 1851, leaving unanswered the pertinent questions of who he was and what became of him. We do not yet have definite answers, but it appears that much of the mystery may be dispelled by a consideration of family genealogy, brought up to date by Indian descendants of the famous Scotts Bluff trader, who recently made themselves known to the writer. With this is coupled the confirming testimony of Mrs. Bettelyoun, aforementioned, whose father was a fellow trader on the California Trail.

The name of "Robidoux" (and its countless variations) appears with monotonous frequency in the literature of the trans-Mississippi frontier, and it is seldom easy to determine which of a practically infinite number of Robidoux the writer has in mind. We are told that the original Robidoux was Andre, who migrated from France to Quebec in 1667. Fourth in lineal descent from this patriarch was Joseph I (d. 1809), at one time an Indian trader at Fort Dearborn (now Chicago), who married Catherine Rollet (*dit* Laderoute), who presented him with ten children, including the following six survivor sons: Joseph II, Francois, Isidore, Antoine, Louis, and Michel. It was these sons of the fifth generation who spread themselves all over the map of Western America.

⁷⁹Gove, *op. cit.*, p. 237-238. Paden, *Wake of the Prairie Schooner*, repeats a rumor which crops up frequently, but the origin of which the writer has been unable to learn, that Robidoux's shop was burned by the Kiowas in 1852. Quite plausible, but confirmation is lacking. In any event Paden errs in stating that it was in 1852, after this supposed disaster, that Robidoux moved "one canyon south."

Joseph II (1783-1868), the eldest, perhaps achieved the greatest fame. Associating himself with energetic St. Louis traders of similar ancestry, he first ascended the Missouri in 1799. In 1803 he established a trading post at the Blacksnake Hills in the wild Indian country, being in league with the Chouteaus and others who ultimately formed the American Fur Company. In 1833 he became an independent trader, and in 1835 he helped to bring off the Fort Leavenworth Treaty whereby the Missouri-Kansas Indians were dispossessed. In 1843 he founded the city of St. Joseph at his trading post site, promoting its growth and being highly honored at the time of his death.⁸⁰ The brothers were all far-ranging traders, at various times indebted to Joseph for capitalization. Louis and Antoine went to Santa Fe in 1822, thereafter becoming prominently identified with the early Southwest. Louis became the founder of San Bernadino, California, while Antoine had a colorful career as a trader in the Colorado-Utah country before guiding Kearny's expedition westward to San Pascal.⁸¹ Francois is prominently identified with the early social and civic history of St. Louis, and was closely in league with brother Joseph. He seems to have had a career also on the Plains and on the Upper Missouri.⁸² Michel has been identified with the early history of Fort Laramie, Wyoming. Isadore, about whom we know the least, seems to have vacillated between St. Louis and Santa Fe.⁸³

⁸⁰Orral Messmore Robidoux, *Memorial to the Robidoux Brothers* (Kansas City, 1924). Here is the apparent source of most of the biographical data on the various "Robidoux's" which crop up in sundry editorial notes. The author reveals herself as the wife of Louis, who was a son of Julius, who was a son of the Joseph Robidoux (II) who founded St. Joseph. She obtained her data from "family tradition" rather than documentary sources, and the work tends to be repetitious. It is labelled "unreliable" by some critics, although the basic genealogy seems accurate.

⁸¹*Ibid.*; W. J. Ghent, *Road to Oregon* (New York, 1929), pp. 61-52; Charles Kelly, "Antoine Robidoux," *Utah Historical Quarterly*, VI (October 1933), 115; A. Reed Morrill, "Site of Fort Robidoux," *Utah Historical Quarterly*, IX (January-April 1941); Joseph J. Hill, "Antoine Robidoux, Kingpin in the Colorado River Fur Trade, 1824-44," *Colorado Magazine*, VII (July 1930), 125-131; *Letter to the writer*, March 1, 1938, from Theodore E. Merritt, Oakland, California.

⁸²Stella M. Drumm, ed., *Luttig's Journal of a Fur-Trading Expedition on the Upper Missouri, 1812-13* (St. Louis, 1912), p. 34.

⁸³Robidoux, *op. cit.*, p. 87. Michel's connection with Fort Laramie is not clear, but we may speculate that he was in league with Pierre

In the foregoing contemporary accounts we noted references to Robidoux "of St. Joseph" or St. Louis. The connection is inescapable. However you may spell the name, what other "Robidoux" were there? Well then, which one of the brothers was the Scotts Bluff Robidoux? We can eliminate Isadore and Louis, who were apparently never in that country. Joseph II may have had a family connection with the post, but his career does not resemble that of the trader and blacksmith at Scotts Bluff. That leaves Michel, Francois, and Antoine. For each, some kind of a case can be built.

We don't know much about Michel. If, as the family biographer states, he was a trader at Fort Laramie and if, as we further suspect, he was the "Roubideau" who caught up with Parkman at Scotts Bluff in 1846, he seems like an ideal candidate. What's more natural than that, in 1849, he should move down river to skim the cream from the emigrant trade? But opposed to this, we have the testimony of an emigrant in 1849 that he met "Mr. Robodoux a fur trader, who lives at Fort Laramie" on his way west "to meet his train of pack mules, coming in with furs."⁸⁴ This sounds like Michel, but it does not sound like the stationary blacksmith at Scotts Bluff. Furthermore, his name doesn't fit the pattern. Grant Shumway, pioneer historian of western Nebraska, has it that a fictitious "Basil Robideaux" of Fort Laramie was indeed the blacksmith of Scotts Bluff, moving there in 1848 and retiring some years later to his home in St. Genevieve, near St. Louis, "with abundant means to put in the rest of his life without fear of poverty."⁸⁵ Michel may have been the man whom Shum-

Chouteau, Jr. and Company (popularly known as The American Fur Company), who operated the fort from 1835 to 1849. The writer found Michel described as "one of the early settlers of Fort Laramie" on a signboard erected at the residential "Site of the Robidoux Family, Developers of Western U. S.," a plot of ground on the old St. Louis waterfront, now contained within the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial.

⁸⁴Letter of May 13, 1849, "on the banks of Big Nemaha," from Henry Page to his wife, quoted in Page, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

⁸⁵Grant L. Shumway, *History of Western Nebraska and Its People* (Lincoln, 1921), pp. 26-27; Brand, *op. cit.*, p. 43; *Federal Writers' Project, op. cit.*, p. 212. There was a Robidoux at Fort Laramie.

way actually had in mind, thus supplying the grain of truth in what otherwise appears to be a romantic misconception.

What about Francois? In two vital respects he fits right into the picture. After Joseph II re-established the trading post on the Missouri, in 1833, Francois disappears from the historical records. Thus his coming to the Plains would fit in with the story the Scotts Bluff Robidoux told emigrants that he had been in those parts for fifteen years or so. At the other end, tradition in the St. Joseph Robidoux family has it that Francois "died on the plains of Nebraska on May 30, 1857."⁸⁶ This is enough to give Francois a claim, but there are yet stronger contenders for the identity of the Scotts Bluff trader.

Take the case of brother Antoine. In 1849 George Gibbs of the Mounted Riflemen personally observed a sign on the blacksmith shop which read "A. Rubidue," and there was only one Robidoux then current with the initial "A". Antoine is known to have had an early trading post in the 1830's at the junction of the Uncomphagre and Gunnison Rivers in Colorado, so he would be the logical man to set up another trading post, at a later date, on the California Trail. This is enough to convince at least three writers who have flatly stated that Antoine was the man we are looking for.⁸⁷ But even though it is difficult to explain

mie in the capacity of blacksmith reported there in 1846 by Francis Parkman (*op. cit.*, p. 131). His first name is not given, and we have no way of knowing which Robidoux he was or whether he was the same Robidoux earlier referred to in Parkman's journal (Wade, *op. cit.*, pp. 47, 438). Although Michel has been specifically tied to Fort Laramie by the family biographer, it is possible that other members of the family frequented the place.

⁸⁶Drumm, *op. cit.*, pp. 34, 147.

⁸⁷Lilian L. Fitzpatrick, *Nebraska Place Names* (Lincoln, 1925), p. 130; Potter, *op. cit.*, p. 105; Paden, *Wake of the Prairie Schooner*, pp. 148-151. It is possible that to some the existence of three Robidoux trading posts (in Missouri, in Colorado, and in Nebraska) has been confusing. A footnote on Antoine Robidoux in Burton, *op. cit.*, leads to the erroneous inference that he was the proprietor of the "Robidoux's Fort" to which Burton refers. Read and Gaines, *op. cit.*, who are almost alone among Western historians who have hitherto seriously attempted to identify the man, support the writer in his belief that Antoine does not answer all the specifications.

away the "A." on the sign (except as a careless "J"?), and even though Antoine is a strong candidate, he does not seem to quite fill the bill.

Joseph II or Michel or Francois or Antoine might have had some connection with the post, and might even have resided there temporarily. Several clues, in addition to the sign seen by Gibbs, suggest this. For instance, Bennett in 1850 refers to two Frenchmen with Indian families in the pass. In 1851 Prince Paul speaks of the "Brothers Robidoux" at Scotts Bluff. Also in that year Robert Robe was informed that "two daughters" of the Robidoux then present were back East in school, and practically all of the brothers had at least two daughters. Nevertheless, *the* Scotts Bluff Robidoux we are looking for was apparently not Joseph II or any of his brothers. It was, we strongly suspect, one of this Joseph's sons.

In 1800 Joseph II married Eugenie Deslisle. She died a year later with a twin girl, leaving a twin brother, Joseph III. In 1813 Joseph II married Angelique Vaudry, who bore him two girls and six sons, Julius, Farron, Francis, Felix, Edmond, and Charles.⁸⁸ Of the seven sons, only Joseph is eligible for consideration, for the others led genteel lives and apparently never saw the wild Indian country. According to the family biographer, Joseph III or "Joseph E." or "Young Joe," under his father's stern tutelage, became an expert in the Indian trade, talking various dialects. He made frequent journeys to the Upper Missouri country and out on the Great Plains. The biography is a bit confused on this point, but it appears that "Young Joe" retired from the trade about 1857, married an Iowa woman named Jennie, raised a family, and settled down on the "No Heart Indian Reservation," near White Cloud, Kansas, where he died about 1888. It is noted parenthetically that he raised "two Indian families," the inescapable inference that family No. 1, wherever located, was abandoned.⁸⁹

⁸⁸Robidoux, *op. cit.*, p. 138 *et. seq.* It appears that all ten children were born in St. Louis, where the ancestral mansion was located.

⁸⁹Robidoux, *op. cit.*, p. 226. Read and Gaines, *op. cit.*, I, 480-482, footnote a similar story, offered by Mr. A. W. Toole of St. Joseph who thinks "Joseph E." is the Scotts Bluff trader. In A. T.

There is little enough in the official biography to connect Joseph II with Scotts Bluff, but his candidacy for the honor has been given a big boost by the testimony of four alleged descendants of the Scotts Bluff Robidoux who have made themselves known in recent years to the writer, as Superintendent of Scotts Bluff National Monument. All are intelligent Indians of the Rosebud Indian Reservation of South Dakota. All knew of the original trading post site and purposely made a pilgrimage to it. All spell their last name "Roubideaux." Their respective stories agree substantially in all major details but one—the given name of their white ancestor. On August 22, 1942, came John of Mission, South Dakota, about age 50 (who in June 1945 was killed in an automobile accident). Delphine, also called Josephine, about 55, John's sister of Wood, South Dakota, visited the Scotts Bluff Museum early in July 1943 (and died also in 1945). On July 18 of that same year a lengthy interview was held with Joseph Earl, age 57, also of Wood and brother of John. On February 14, 1946, Richard, about 21 years old, son of Joseph Earl, appeared and filled in some of the gaps. John and Joseph stated that their grandfather's name was "Sylvestre," while Delphine and Richard were confident it was Joseph. Since there is no "Sylvestre" of record on the white family tree, and since Mrs. Bettelyoun has independently identified the Scotts Bluff Robidoux as Joseph, the writer is inclined to believe that the man was indeed Joseph, that is Joseph III, the eldest son of the founder of St. Joseph.

According to John's basic story, Grandfather "Roubideaux" was born at St. Joseph, and left there while quite young and drifted to the Platte Valley region. He got a

Andreas, *History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago, 1883), p. 73, we find: "The Iowas and Missouri Sacs and Foxes were assigned by Treaty of September 17, 1836 . . . the small strip of land on the south side of the Missouri River, lying between the Kickapoo northern boundary line and the Grand Nemahaw River . . . By the treaty of 1854 . . . they ceded to Government a large portion of their reserve and . . . in 1861, their reservation was reduced to a still smaller dimension. They have now a small village called Nohart on their reservation in the northern part of Doniphan County."

job herding Indian ponies for a chief of the Brule band of Sioux and married an Otoe girl who had been captured somewhere in Kansas. After serving with the emigrants as a guide, he set up shop at the strategic pass at Scotts Bluff, as we have seen. His wife's relatives located close by, as was the custom. There were three children — Louise, who died in infancy, Louis (1850 - c. 1930), and Charles (1854 - c. 1930). Louis and Charles each had large families, "Roubideaux" now being a common name in the Pine Ridge country. John, Delphine, and Joseph Earl are children of Charles. Louis and Charles were baptised by Father De Smet, according to family tradition, thus verifying the historic account of 1851. What happened to grandfather? The story is that one day he was found dead in his shop, having been kicked in the stomach by a mule which was getting shod. This happened "around 1860." The assumption has always been that he yet lies buried in Robidoux Pass, though no grave has been identified.

Delphine subsequently identified the grandmother as Mary Eagle Bull. She understood that the grandfather was killed about 1859. Joseph Earl averred that he arrived at the pass in the 1840's, and confirmed the manner of his death, "when Father Charles was about six years old." However, he did not understand that Mary Eagle Bull was an Otoe. When married she was a widow of a warrior named Eagle Bull, one of Big Mouth's band, the same Big Mouth who was killed by Spotted Tail in order to become chief of the Brules. Concerning Grandfather "Sylvestre," whose nickname was "Slick," he never heard of him being associated with Fort Laramie. (However, Father Charles, a witness at the Battle of Horse Creek in 1865, was for many years a scout at Fort Laramie, and was the interpreter present at the time Crazy Horse was bayoneted to death at Fort Robinson. He also put in time as a blacksmith.) Horse trading was the prime business conducted by "Sylvestre" in later years. Young Richard, representing the third generation removed from Robidoux Pass, largely confirmed the outlines of the story.

Strong support for the story given by the Brule-Sioux

descendants comes from another Indian of mixed blood, who was almost but not quite herself an eyewitness. Susan Bordeaux, daughter of James Bordeaux, a prominent trader of the Fort Laramie country, was born at that fort in 1857, witnessed the historic events culminating in the removal of the Brules to Whetstone Agency in 1868, received a good education, and married Isaac Bettelyoun, who had a respectable career as a trader, clerk, soldier, and banker. Mrs. Bettelyoun was undoubtedly an intelligent observer and listener, and we feel that we are getting a first-hand glimpse of the "genuine" Robidoux in this excerpt from the Waggoner interviews:

Joseph Silko Rubideaux was another interesting character in early days. He built the first log houses at St. Joseph, Mo. He was married to a Yanktony Sioux woman. He had two sons from the widow of John Baptiste Bordeau. After coming up northwest to Wyoming, he ran a blacksmith shop on the Oregon Trail on a branch of Horse Creek. His place was a little southwest of Scotts Bluff. It was near the creek with quite a good deal of timber. His two sons have many descendants on the Rosebud Reservation. In the olden days there were many Rubideaus in St. Louis and Kansas City where the original families came from.

Joseph Silko Rubideau lived on Horse Creek for twenty years and died there. . .

Rubideau was pretty well to do. He had five or six hired white men. Some of these looked after his stock. Some helped in the shop. . . ⁹⁰

⁹⁰Isaac Bettelyoun, a war veteran, died at the South Dakota State Home for Soldiers at Hot Springs, in 1934. Mrs. Bettelyoun remained there, and around 1936 she was interviewed by Mrs. J. W. Waggoner of Hot Springs, who is responsible for the valuable manuscripts now in possession of the Nebraska State Historical Society. James Bordeaux had three trading posts at various times—at "Sarpy's Point," 8 miles below Fort Laramie; on Horse Creek, near Scotts Bluff; and on Rawhide Creek, north of the Platte. The first place was the most important, being frequently mentioned by travellers. One dramatic episode is related by Mrs. Bettelyoun. While Bordeaux was absent, cholera struck. Mrs. Bordeaux took the children and relatives to "Rubideau's ranch on Horse Creek." One infected and crazed Indian who attempted to approach the ranch was shot. One of the Bordeaux boys came down with the cholera but was saved when Bordeaux finally showed up with "a gallon of medicine," obtained in St. Louis. Mrs. Bettelyoun reports this incident as 1848, but it sounds like a later date. As indicated, she herself was not born until 1857, so did not know Robidoux or his "ranch" personally.

Note the substantial agreement here with the testimony of descendants, as to identity, location, and family. The reference to the white hired help is illuminating, probably explaining occasional references we have noted to more than one white man living on the premises.

Mrs. Bettelyoun apparently confirms the man's identity, although the "Silko" is a puzzler. It may be a corruption of "Sellico," which was a given name in vogue among the French; but this conflicts with the middle initial "E" assigned to Joseph III in the family biography. However, a much greater discrepancy stands in the way of final identification of the Scotts Bluff trader with "Joseph E." This man supposedly left the trade in 1857 and went to Kansas; and we are reliably informed that Indian "Roubidoux" are to be found today in northeastern Kansas, just as they are in South Dakota!⁹¹ The hint that the Kansas "Roubidoux" left another Indian family behind somewhere leaves the door open. But the assertion by the South Dakota Indians that their "Roubideaux" died in western Nebraska in the late 1850's does not sound like the man who went to Kansas, dying in 1888. The coincidental dates of the reported "death" and the reported "retirement" are, however, intriguing.

There are only two ways out of the dilemma. One or the other of the Josephs in question is not authentic. Or, if he is one and the same man, having consecutive families at Scotts Bluff, Nebraska, and at the reservation near White Cloud, Kansas, the report of his death "on Horse Creek" is not authentic. It is possible that more intensive research may solve this genealogical enigma.

⁹¹This information is supplied by Mr. T. L. Green, aforementioned, whose father, one-time Indian agent for the Otoes, was personally acquainted with members of the "Roubidoux" family. It is confirmed by Mr. George H. Osgood, banker of White Cloud, Kansas; Senator Harold C. Prichard of Falls City, Nebraska; and James H. Hyde, Superintendent, Potawatomi Agency, Horton, Kansas, all in recent correspondence with the present writer. Further evidence of a sort was supplied the writer in *letter* of October 1, 1943, written at Bel Air, Maryland, from Mrs. Marguerite Robidoux Robirds, a great granddaughter of Joseph II, the founder of St. Joseph. She writes: "There was one Robidoux a Blacksmith. I do not know his name. Also one of the Brothers married an Indian, so it is just possible it is your Sylvestre [alias Joseph III]."