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Article Summary: Mary Mahoney, her family and several other families made a wagon journey from Alliance to Colorado in search of irrigable land just when railroads were about to replace covered wagons. Her journal consists of daily reports written to her parents back in Alliance, emphasizing the difficulty of obtaining basic items like bread and water on the way.

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#### Cataloging Information:

Names of Travelers in Mahoney's Party: John and Mary Mahoney, Martin Mahoney, Maurice Mahoney, Wren Flowers and Mrs Flowers, Andy Oleson and Mrs Oleson, George Parrot, Mr Nye, Mr and Mrs Heath and son Charlie

Place Names: Alliance and Ascosh (Oshkosh), Nebraska; Julesburg, Holyoke and Burlington, Colorado

Photographs / Images: Mary and John Mahoney's wedding picture, 1893; their golden wedding picture, 1943

## END OF AN ERA: THE TRAVEL JOURNAL OF MARY MAHONEY

EDITED BY DONALD MAHONEY

NEBRASKA celebrated its thirty-fourth anniversary of statehood in 1902. The state was becoming a bustling, growing force in the Midwest. Electricity, the automobile, and modern communications were just beginning to make an impression on the common people. The state was in an intense period of change. Old ways and customs were quickly being discarded as a cloak of mechanization, and communications were slowly woven across the land.

Transportation was undergoing a drastic and complete transformation. Covered wagon journeys had just about seen their last as a useful means of travel. Their replacement, the railroads, were soon to make this method of travel absurd. However, covered wagon journeys, though rare, were not completely extinct at the turn of the century. The following diary describes, day by day, one of these wagon drives. The conditions that were present in that time sixty-four years ago become very evident from reading this diary.

*Donald Mahoney, a grandson of Mary Mahoney, is a student at St. John's Seminary, Elkhorn, Nebraska.*

The trip itself lasted twenty days and covered approximately two-hundred and eighty miles. The journey was made by seven families (fourteen adults and eighteen children) from Alliance, Nebraska. Heading for Colorado looking for better land, land they could irrigate, they hoped they could obtain more fruit from their labors than had been possible in western Nebraska. Reports had filtered in, that land, located next to irrigation canals, was available in Colorado, straight south of Alliance. It was toward these "fertile" lands that the pioneers were headed.

The diary was written by Mary Mahoney,<sup>1</sup> the wife of one of the leaders of the expedition. This diary is in the form of daily reports written to Mrs. Mahoney's parents, who remained in Alliance.

The diary describes many interesting characteristics of the writer and of pioneers in general. In an era when a great society was not even visualized, people's worries were basic. Instead of being troubled over the source of the money for the next payment on the second car, these people worried about the source of the next loaf of bread and the next cup of water. This was especially true for those travelling. Since few provisions could be carried with them, there was always a constant search for food which might be bought from some of the settlers who lived on the trail. And since houses were few and far between, there was always a race between the various families to obtain all the food available in the vicinity. The search for water along the trail also played a major role as rivers were scarce. It was necessary to find water daily, as water for seventy-five head of horses could not be carried.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Mahoney, the daughter of Martin and Jane Manion, was born in Edwardsville, Illinois in 1874. She was married to John Mahoney at Hemingford, Nebraska, on November 6, 1893. They had five sons and three daughters. Mr. Mahoney died in 1953 at the age of ninety-one years. Mary Mahoney died at Cedar Rapids, Boone County, Nebraska on December 7, 1964 at the age of ninety years and ten months. She was survived by her eight children, fifty-three grandchildren and ninety-four great grandchildren.

Horses were almost as important as food on the trip. In the diary there is as much emphasis on horses as there is on people. The problems they caused, the feed they ate, the water they drank, all are considered only a small price to pay for the help they provided. With this in mind it is easy to see why horses hold a central position in the following diary.

The diary was written by a woman who had only the equivalent of a third grade education. This can readily be seen from the simplicity of the writing. The diary is a simple narrative describing the journey as the author saw it; it includes only those incidents which she thought interesting. It's simple and direct style reflects her enthusiasm, wonder and vigor.

Eight typed copies of the original diary were made; one for each of Mrs. Mahoney's children. One of these copies was used in the preparation of this article.



Monday, May 6, 1901

This is the way—Wren Flowers on the lead with six horses pulling a big rack, loaded heavy. Next comes Andy Oleson with a rack; he is loaded heavy. He has four horses and is pulling his buggy behind his rack. Next comes Mrs. Oleson with her new buggy; she has it loaded so heavy that she broke her buggy. Then comes Mrs. Flowers in her buggy, followed by George Parrot. He is not leaded heavy. He has four horses and two wagons. Next comes Mr. Nye with three horses. He hasn't any load as he is going to stay until fall to work. Then comes Mrs. Heath and son Charlie with four horses. Next in line are Mr. and Mrs. Heath pulling horses and a top buggy behind their wagon. Then comes Maurice Mahoney carrying some household goods in the wagon. He is followed by John Mahoney with a covered hayrack containing two beds. Last is Martin Mahoney with a loaded wagon. There are about 75 head of horses in all.

We did not have any trouble finding water yet. The children are having a big time.

Tuesday, May 7, 1901

The first day we traveled until 3 o'clock, then we camped for the day. Jim McFarland, the agent, came up to us but said he could not stay as he had to go back to Alliance to wait for the train. He did not overtake us until dark. All the small kids were crying. We all stopped at the Blackburn Ranch. It is a desolate place. We are inside of a big pasture. There is nothing but sagebrush here.

They turned the horses loose. Jack and Mart<sup>2</sup> got up at 1 o'clock at night and some of the horses were gone; they had to follow them 8 miles with the half dozen dogs or so that are along chasing them. Jack's pony got up on the highest hill and had a colt and it rolled to the bottom, but it is all right.

We got up real early because Jack and Mart were up since 1 o'clock looking for the horses. When they got back, Jack hooked up to his buggy and went after his colt. Wren Flowers is hauling it for him. Upon his return we started out. Every 5 or 6 miles there is a gate. It seems like we are inside of a big fence. We have some bad roads. There are cattle as far as the eye can reach. We camped at Cuto Mulley's old ranch for dinner. It was awful hot for awhile. We had bad roads again this afternoon. I was wishing I had one of those sheet stoves as I can't do anything with my oil stove in the wind. Mr. McFarland came up to us about 5 o'clock as we pulled into the camp. We had a good place for the horses tonight. There is lots of grass and it's a nice night. The children enjoy it so far. They are all having lots of fun. Flowers and Oleson put up tents. The rest of us are sleeping in our wagons as we have beds fixed up in them.

Thursday, May , 1901

This is a nice morning. We all enjoyed camping last night. We had plenty of feed for the horses and lots of chips to burn. We struck on a lovely valley. This is the Elridge Ranch. The valley is 1½ miles wide and 5 miles long. The grass is waving with the wind and there are nice houses and barns. We filled all of our cans and kegs with water and pulled on a mile to the Post Office on the Avery Ranch. We sent you a card from there. Maurice's Posey had a colt at noon. We waited about an hour and then Wren Flowers hauled the colt and Maurice led the

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<sup>2</sup> Mahoney brothers.

mare. We pulled through the sand all afternoon and the smell of those lakes is terrible. For awhile the mosquitoes were bad. We went out of our way a half-mile.

You ought to see the sandhills. Girls ride horseback. They go just as hard as the horses can go. When we got lost a girl came over the hill on the lope and told us we were wrong and went with us four or five miles to show us the way.

Friday, May 10, 1901

Well, we are all near froze to death. Through the night a big wind came up. We sure thought our wagons would upset, so we got up and dressed. I bet you would like to see us humped around a camp fire. We sure thought about the old soddy.

Jack, Wren, and Andy are loaded too heavy. It takes 8 horses to pull up some of those hills. We can't go over 2 miles today. It is nothing but doubling back every half mile, since the roads are terribly bad. Jack's pony is the meanest one in the bunch. She kicked Jack this morning and now he is lame. We pulled into camp about 5 o'clock. This is a nice camping ground with lots of grass. The kids have lots of fun and the women are having a good time visiting back and forth, but the men have to rush and hurry. We are not going to travel Sunday, for the horses need a rest and we will wash some.

Saturday, May 11, 1901

Maurice's Nell had a colt last night; that leaves him only two horses. Jack gave him Balley so he is using three horses. The roads are good now as we are out of the hills. There are more horses down in this country than cattle, and you ought to see the cactus. The banks of the river are covered with cattle. They are watering out of the river. We did not make any headway today as we went four miles out of our way. Wren made a horse trade so we stopped there about three o'clock.

Sunday, May 12, 1901

We layed over today. The young ones are on the war-path. They all are bawling. They had a prayer meeting in Andy's tent this morning. They wanted us to come in but

we told them that we had to get the babies to sleep.<sup>3</sup> We heard Andy offering a prayer for our trip and they sang half a dozen songs. Grandpa was in listening to them. Mrs. Flowers said they sang longer than they intended as Mr. Mahoney enjoyed the singing.

Monday, May 13, 1901

We got up at half past four this morning as it takes so long to get started. We thought Dolly was going to have a colt. They waited a little while but they won't wait long for her. Mr. Nye was intending to leave us and go ahead as he had no load but when he got up his horses were gone and he is still after them as we leave camp. He can overtake us if he finds them. We were very foolish to start out with such loads. They won't give Dolly time to have her colt.

Tillie has the toothache. I put some medicine in it. Now they call me the dentist. We have lots of fun. Jack is trying to get a sheet iron stove when to get to Ascosh.<sup>4</sup>

Tuesday, May 14, 1901

We went through Ascosh today. It is a small place, one store, a Post Office, a saloon, and a blacksmith shop. We bought 10 dozen eggs there at 8 cents a dozen, but we couldn't buy any butter. After we left the town we travelled 2 miles, then crossed the North Platte bridge. It is  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile long. Maurice's colt swam across the river. I was sure he would drown but he didn't. We camped after crossing the river. Such a time we had eating dinner. The sand was blowing so you could not see. The men went out to see Dolly but her colt was dead. After we hitched up we drove three miles through canyons before we got on the table land again. After that we struck good roads. Then it started thundering and lightning. We were sure there was hail coming. The men unhitched the horses from the wagons. I covered the children up but it was only a heavy shower. The bed clothes got a little wet. We did not make any fire for supper. It was wet and cold. It thundered and lightninged all night. I said if I was back home I would never start out this way again. But it did not rain so I guess we will live through it.

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<sup>3</sup> The Mahoneys were Catholics; the rest of the settlers were not. The Mahoneys did not consider it proper to attend the Protestant services.

<sup>4</sup> Oshkosh.

Wednesday, May 15, 1901

We hitched up and drove three miles to Julesburg. We had great racing to get bread. We sent Jim Mahoney on ahead to get \$2 worth to do for Marts and us. He could only get 6 loaves for ten cents a loaf. You would laugh to see George Parrot fly around town looking for bread but he could not find any. Eva made him understand that she was not going to bake biscuits. When they got outside of town Charlie Flowers went to every house he could see for miles around and got 6 loaves. I think Eva is mad at us because we got the bread ahead of her. We have enough bread until we get to Holyoke. We will get there tomorrow.

Thursday, May 16, 1901

We had a light shower last night. There is lots of grass but we had to buy the water this morning for the horses. Jack and Wren gave a half dollar each. Trotter hitched up and started ahead.<sup>5</sup> He has 3 wagons and 2 buggies and all of his cattle and horses. Then we joined and made a procession 2 miles long. Every one for miles came to see what was the matter. I guess they thought it was a town moving.

Thursday afternoon, May 16

We got into Holyoke about 2 o'clock. George went ahead and searched the town but could only get four loaves of bread; we were left without. It is not a very good town. I got some eggs. They are 10 cents a dozen. I could only get 1 lb. of good butter. It is 15 cents a lb. We were quite a curiosity in Holyoke, as everybody in the town was out looking at us. The photography man came out and took a picture of the outfit. He is going to send them to us and if we like them we will give him 50 cents a picture.

We are going to go about 20 miles out of our way to avoid the sand hills as the road is terrible through them. We have a good road this way.

Friday, May 17, 1901

We are traveling over the nicest level country one has ever seen. We went about 30 miles today. It is the best milage we have made. The roads were so good. At noon we came to some sand and the men dug down two feet and got a lot of water for the horses. We got ahead of Wren

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<sup>5</sup> Mr. Trotter was driving 300 head of cattle on a cattle drive. He joined the settlers outside Julesburg.

Flowers this afternoon. We went to three houses and between us we got 10 loaves of fine bread, just out of the oven, but that does not last long as Mart's use from 2 to 3 loaves at every meal. We use 1. We have a long road ahead of us to get bread. We got some nice butter this afternoon at a farmer's house at 20 cents a lb., and also 10 dozen eggs.

We are camped near a tree claim and there are nice little trees on it. I am going to get some switches as the boys are crying. They have driven me almost crazy. John Edward<sup>6</sup> always wants to ride on the wagon tongue, but since they all keep well I guess we can't complain. Tillie suffers with the toothache all the time.

Saturday, May 18

We lost our dog; a horse kicked him and he started back. That is the last we saw of him. Then Mart's dog got run over and he left. They killed two rattlesnakes this morning.

Mary got 9 more loaves of bread this morning so we will be alright for another while.

Sunday, May 19

Eva, Tillie, Mary and I washed a lot of clothes. We took our tubs and board down along side of the river and spread them on the grass and it was only a little while until they were dry.

They did not have a prayer meeting today. Old Mrs. Flowers and Mrs. Heath visited us this afternoon. I baked biscuits for supper tonight. It is a big job to bake for 15 in a small oven. Mary and I wanted to go ahead so we could beat the rest getting bread but the men would not do it.

Wednesday

We have not seen any town like Alliance yet and I don't think we will. It is the best town in the west. We did not go far this afternoon as the clouds looked so bad we were afraid of rain. They stopped in time to unhitch but the rain did not amount to much. It is nice after the shower, and since we had lots of time to cook, we fixed meat and potatoes for supper and boiled meat for dinner tomorrow. We have not suffered for water yet. Jack says

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<sup>6</sup> The five year old son of John and Mary Mahoney.

it is a good thing we have church members as we have had good weather. There are lots of jack rabbits down here. They have black tails. We camped near a river; the big boys caught fish and now whenever we stop near a hole of water, Walter, Maurice, Arthur, and Allen get a string with a pin on the end of a stick and go fishing.

### Thursday

This is a nice morning. We camped about 3 miles from Burlington. This is a great country to run stock as it is all buffalo grass about 2 inches high. We traveled all afternoon, have not seen a house as far as the eye can reach. Once in a while we see some cattle. I don't know where they belong. I guess it is government land. There is water in the draws as we go along. Our horses are getting fat. They say they have to go 150 feet to water here. This is a lovely place for cattle. We went 25 miles today. We never saw but one house. We have camped for the night. At last we have struck a settlement called Smokey Creek. They raise millet and cane for feed.

### Friday

I can't keep track of the date. It is hard work to keep track of the days. This is a cold morning. We are 6 miles from a town, Chiene. There are 5 or 6 houses around here. It is a small place. We could not get but 2 loaves of bread in the town but I believe Parrots got three loaves. We will have to go 18 miles now before we come to a house. We are stopped at a sheep ranch to water the horses but we will have to go 2 or 4 miles farther to get grass for the horses. We are nine miles from the Sheridan Lakes. This is a hard trip on the children and the parents.

### Saturday, May 26<sup>7</sup>

This is a cold morning. The next time I travel I am going to wait for warmer weather. The young ones are all crying with the cold. Maurice wants to know if we are going near Grandma's. He says he is going to run in and get warm if we do. We have good roads and are making good time. Wren says we will camp on the Amity Cannal tonight.

### Sunday

Well we have arrived at the end of our journey. We are at Mart's place. We will stay there tonight and go to

<sup>7</sup> Actually Saturday the 25th.

our place Monday. We will be 12 miles from them. Mr. McFarland is going to stay here with the kids. The rest of the people have gone to their places. We will live in a tent for awhile until we get a shack built. The rattle snakes are bad here. I don't like it on that account. We will live close to Andy Oleson and not far from school. Each one has just 40 acres. I guess that is enough to irrigate.



The Mahoneys stayed in Colorado for eleven months, mainly supported by work on the railroad. Water for irrigation could be obtained only at great expense. In April of 1903, disgusted with the high prices, they decided to leave Colorado. Having no particular place to go, Mr. Mahoney took out a map of Nebraska, closed his eyes and stuck a pin into it. The pin stuck at Fullerton, so a one-way ticket was bought to Fullerton, furniture and livestock were loaded on the same railroad car, and the Mahoney family headed on another journey to a destination more permanent.



Mary and John Mahoney—Wedding picture, 1893.



Mary and John Mahoney—Golden Wedding picture, 1943.