



Developments Along the Overland Trail from the Missouri River to Fort Laramie, Before 1854

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

This article is copyrighted by History Nebraska (formerly the Nebraska State Historical Society). You may download it for your personal use. For permission to re-use materials, or for photo ordering information, see: <https://history.nebraska.gov/publications/re-use-nshs-materials>

Learn more about *Nebraska History* (and search articles) here: <https://history.nebraska.gov/publications/nebraska-history-magazine>

History Nebraska members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* annually: <https://history.nebraska.gov/get-involved/membership>

Full Citation: Robert W Richmond, "Developments Along the Overland Trail from the Missouri River to Fort Laramie, Before 1854," *Nebraska History* 33 (1952): 154-179

Article Summary: Emigrants following the Oregon and California Trails found little in the way of shelter and other facilities to aid them in their journey to the Pacific

Cataloging Information:

Names: William Sublette, Myra Eells, Francis Parkman, J G Bruff, William Clayton, William Lobenstine, Gilbert Cole, Henry J Coke, John Wood, John C Fremont, William Kelly, Howard Stansbury

Keywords: American Fur Company, Mormons, Fort William (later Fort Laramie), Fort Kearny, Rock Creek, Ash Hollow, Robidoux Pass, Fort Bernard, Fort Platte

Photographs / Images: outline map of Nebraska showing trails and crossings

DEVELOPMENTS ALONG THE
OVERLAND TRAIL FROM THE
MISSOURI RIVER TO FORT LARAMIE,
BEFORE 1854*

BY ROBERT W. RICHMOND

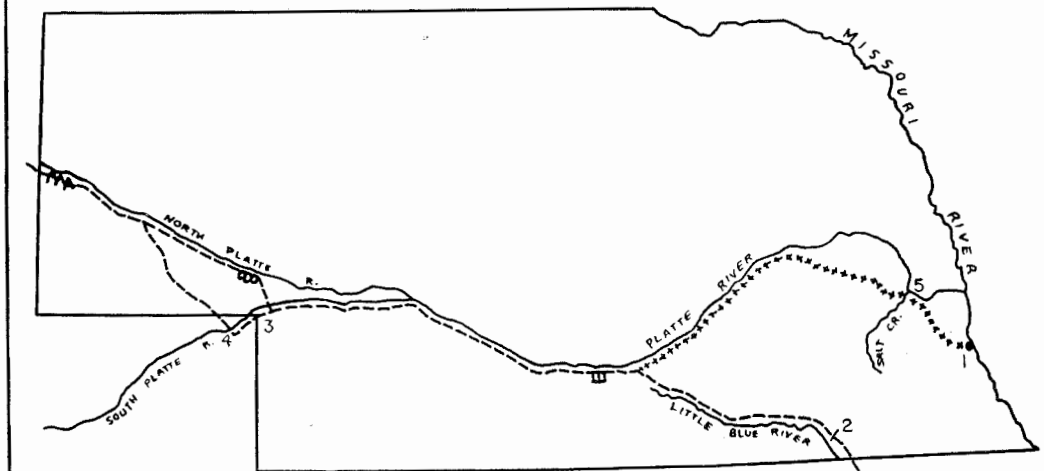
THE great highway to the West, the Overland Route, was known by many names. It was called the Platte Trail, the Central Route, the Emigrant Road, the Mormon Trail and the California Trail by the men who traveled it, while the Indians of the vast area through which it ran dubbed it the "Great Medicine Road of the Whites" and the "White-Topped Wagon Road."

From Independence and various points on the Missouri came the emigrants. They crossed the Wakarusa, the Kaw and the Big Blue and moved into Nebraska; or they came directly across the "Big Muddy" from the Iowa side. The valley of the Platte became a thoroughfare for thousands of homeseeking and adventure-hunting travelers.

The emigrants who followed the Oregon Trail encountered fewer streams to cross than did those who traveled the north bank of the Platte. The tributaries of the Little Blue offered little trouble to the travelers and the watershed was such that no difficult crossings were necessary until the

* This, the first of a series of two articles, is concerned with the Oregon and California trails. A second article will consider facilities along the Mormon Trail.

NEBRASKA



- KEY:**
- | | |
|------------------------------|------------------|
| 1- OLD FORT KEARNY | □ FORT KEARNY |
| 2- ROCK CREEK CROSSING | ⊙ ASH HOLLOW |
| 3- LOWER CALIFORNIA CROSSING | ⊖ SCOTT'S BLUFF |
| 4- UPPER CALIFORNIA CROSSING | --- OREGON TRAIL |
| 5- SALINE FORD | ⊕ OX BOW TRAIL |



fords on the South Platte were reached. West of the South Platte the Laramie River was the only major water barrier. Ash Hollow with its steep descent proved hazardous, but the grazing and water it afforded counter-balanced the danger. Salt Creek was the only troublesome stream in the paths of the pioneers who came across the eastern part of Nebraska to join the Oregon Trail.

The central route to the Pacific, of which the Nebraska trails were a part, followed the "line of least resistance." It was the shortest feasible way to the Oregon country and it avoided the deserts of the Southwest which lay between Santa Fe and California. Even though James Fenimore Cooper, in the introduction to *The Prairie* wrote of the Great Plains as akin to the "steppes of Tartary," the "desert" of his mind and writing was not so cruel to emigration as other areas might have been.

The emigrants found little in the way of shelter and other facilities to aid them in their journey to the Pacific. The purpose of these articles is to evaluate the extent and condition of those facilities which were available on the central overland route from the Missouri River to the Laramie hills prior to the organization of Nebraska Territory in 1854.

I

Prior to the spring of 1830, wagon traffic on the Oregon Trail was unknown. William Sublette took the first wagons along the Platte to the West in that year, and his trip opened the way for following vehicles. He showed the country that such a project was feasible, and two years later Bonneville's wagons went on to cross the Continental Divide. In that same year the Wyeth party headed for Oregon and between Independence and Walla Walla they found nothing in the way of facilities. A camp ground, a creek bank, a ford, or the lee side of a hill provided them with their only shelter or accommodation.

In 1834 some signs of help for the Pacific-bound travelers began to appear. Fort William had its beginning in June of that year near the junction of the Laramie and the Platte rivers. The establishment was located on the left bank of the

Laramie about one mile above its mouth.¹ The men who built this post and named it for William Sublette did not do it for the benefit of emigrants, but within a relatively short time it was to prove an oasis in the Great American Desert to the moving Americans.

The journal of Myra Eells who followed the trail in 1838 illustrates the lack of buildings along the route. She made no mention of any structures between the Big Blue river and Fort William.²

In 1835 the fort was sold to Tom Fitzpatrick, Milton Sublette, and Jim Bridger, who were in close contact with the American Fur Company and the fort was soon Company property. It was renamed Fort John, but this title never did remain with the establishment. The term Fort Laramie was coming into common usage and it stayed with the fort from the beginning of the 1840's.³

The great numbers of emigrants did not begin to cover the trail until the decade of the forties, and the first nucleus of settlement or help on the first leg of their journey was Old Fort Kearny. It was located on the Missouri River at the mouth of Table Creek—the site of the present Nebraska City. Construction of the fort was started in the summer of 1846 and a blockhouse, hospital, and barracks were completed.⁴

The government soon discovered that this location would serve little use for emigrant aid. While some travelers would pass this way, the government deemed it more logical to move the military post to the traveled highway of the main Oregon Trail. Consequently in 1847 Lt. Daniel Woodbury selected a new site on the south bank of the Platte, three miles from the head of Grand Island. The Lieutenant asked for a fifteen thousand dollar appropriation and also sug-

¹ Hiram M. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West* (New York, 1902), III, 967.

² Myra F. Eells, "Journal . . .," *Transactions of the 17th Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association* (Portland, 1889), 54-88.

³ Chittenden, *op. cit.*, p. 967; Leroy R. Hafen and Francis M. Young, *Fort Laramie and the Pageant of the West, 1834-1890* (Glen-dale, 1938), pp. 69-70.

⁴ J. H. Sweet, "Old Fort Kearny," *Nebraska History*, XXVII (December 1946), 235-239.

gested that material left at Old Fort Kearny could be used in the construction of the proposed installation.

In the spring of 1848 the move was made and "Fort Childs," as it was unofficially named, became the New Fort Kearny. The building program at the post proceeded slowly, but in the year 1849 the fort was able to render invaluable aid to the emigrants.⁵ The troops were insurance against Indian depredations and the military personnel brought with them a semblance of law and order in a country which knew no courts or judges.

J. G. Bruff was at the fort on June 17, 1849, and he wrote of adobe and frame structures and a "number of tents and sheds."⁶ One of the most outstanding features of Fort Kearny was that of a postal service. One traveler wrote of an emigrant post office which was furnished with seats and tables for writing. A register of the captains of passing companies was also kept here.⁷ Mail service was a rare thing on the trail and this opportunity to send or to receive a message was extremely welcome. The letters could be carried by east-bound travelers or by army courier.

Too, the blacksmith shop was in great demand and it did a thriving business.⁸ The long hard miles covered by the animals and vehicles of the pioneers made the necessity for blacksmith work and repair great.

Prior to the founding of Fort Kearny on the Platte, the pioneer found little on the trail east of the Scotts Bluff region. Rock Creek was recognized as a regular camping place on the Oregon route. This tributary of the Little Blue River was spring-fed with good water and good timber was plentiful on its banks. Wyeth camped on Rock Creek in 1832 as did Fremont and Carson ten years later.⁹

⁵ For complete coverage of the founding and functioning of Fort Kearny, see Lyle E. Mantor, "Fort Kearny and the Westward Movement," *Nebraska History*, XXIX (September, 1948), 175-207.

⁶ 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, 22.

⁷ M. E. D. Trowbridge, *Pioneer Days* (Philadelphia, 1895), pp. 101-102.

⁸ Mantor, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

⁹ Charles J. Dawson, *Pioneer Tales of the Oregon Trail and of Jefferson County Nebraska* (Topeka, 1912), p. 90; Rock Creek crossing was in what is now Jefferson county, near the city of Fairbury.

In 1844 a Frenchman, whose name is unknown, is supposed to have erected a building of cedar logs in the vicinity of the present Gothenburg. This building was to have been used as a trading station and was abandoned in 1848.¹⁰ This establishment is a mystery, as no contemporary reference to it is available.

The next well-known stopping place on the trail was Ash Hollow, northwest of what is now Ogallala. Those emigrants who used the "Lower California Crossing" of the South Platte River passed through this area.¹¹

The crossing of the South Platte was no mean task as there were no ferries on this fork of the river. E. A. Tompkins' diary contains a vivid picture of the project:

The Crossing of the South Fork formed an important era in our journey. As we neared the spot where we designed to cross we observed at least 400 waggons on the bank and at least 3,000 oxen and other animals. The shouting and holloing combined with the bawling of the cattle made a confusion of stunning sounds that rendered talking to each other almost impossible.

It was on the 15th day of June, the water was high and consequently we found it quite impossible to ford the river without swimming our horses as we rode them. Hundreds of Ox teams and droves of cattle were waiting in the act of crossing. Others in attempting to do so were often thrown into confusion, some would become un-yoked or get the chains over their backs instead of between them, and some would turn their heads in the opposite direction to that in which they desired to go. The waggons would swing about in the deep water, or one end would be almost out of water while the other was under. Often they would be submerged, and their contents greatly injured, or they would upset and thus destroy all they contained or float away with it to parts hitherto unexplored. . . . The stream is more than half a mile in width and is very rappid and turbid where the emigrants cross. . . . After a crossing is effected much time is usually required in preparing drying, repacking and trying to save damaged provisions.¹²

The descent into the hollow was hazardous as the following quotations point out:

¹⁰ A. T. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago, 1882), p. 1090.

¹¹ See map.

¹² Quoted in Owen C. Coy, *The Great Trek* (Los Angeles, 1931), pp. 133-134.

As we advanced the ridge gradually rounded, leading to such a long and abrupt descent that we debated the propriety of detaching the bodies of the waggons from the wheels, and sliding them down; but as the driver of the lead one volunteered to essay a trial with rough double-locking and holding back with ropes, we tried the experiment, taking out all but the wheel-spans, which were left in merely to guide, and succeeded admirably until the last, in the descent of which the frayed rope parted, and the waggon slid, or, more properly speaking, fell on top of the mules, upsetting and killing the one on the off side and breaking the collar-bone of the teamster, which was otherwise badly bruised; the bows were all smashed, and the contents sent hopping down the steep. The waggon miraculously escaped any disabling fracture, thus enabling us to reload it and proceed without much delay. Two more moderate descents brought us into a lovely wooded dell. . . .¹³

One will be only partially informed of the difficulties of a trip unless a description is given of how an entrance is made from the high plains down into Ash Hollow.

We reach the brink of a hill near one-third of a mile high which we have to descend to reach the level of the hollow. We detach all the oxen from the wagon except the wheel yoke, lock the two hind wheels with the lock chain attached to the body of the wagon, and wrap a log chain around the tire so it will cut into the ground when the wagon is in motion. Frequently the other five yokes of oxen are hitched with their heads to the wagon behind. They being unaccustomed to this treatment, pull back and help to slow down the wagon. . . . I cannot say at what angle we descend but it is so great that some go as far as to say "the road hangs a little past the perpendicular!"¹⁴

Edwin Bryant, bound for California in 1846, left this description of the valley itself:

We found near the mouth of "Ash Hollow," a small log-cabin, which had been erected last winter by some trappers, returning to the "settlements," who, on account of the snow, had been compelled to remain here until spring. This rude structure has, by the emigrants, been turned into a sort of general post-office. Numerous advertisements in manuscript are posted on its walls outside; description of lost cattle, horses, etc. etc.; and inside, in a recess, there was a large number of letters deposited, addressed to persons in almost every quarter

¹³ William Kelly, *Across the Rocky Mountains from New York to California* . . . (London, 1852), pp. 106-107.

¹⁴ Ethel M. Withers, ed., "Experiences of Lewis Bissell Dougherty on the Oregon Trail," *Missouri Historical Review*, XXIV (April, 1930), 359-378.

of the globe, with requests, that those who passed would convey them to the nearest post-office in the states. The place had something of the air of a crossroads settlement, and we lingered around it some time, reading the advertisements and overlooking the letters.¹⁵

Many of the pioneers stopped here to rest because timber and water were available and this deserted cabin did give them the opportunity to leave and to read news of their fellow travelers.

The wagons rolled westward from Ash Hollow with its trees, water, and good grass past Court House and Chimney rocks, famous landmarks of the trail, until they came to the Scotts Bluff country. This rugged area was traveled through by means of Robidoux Pass.¹⁶ Here were to be found, through the years, establishments to accommodate the pioneers. The pass had been used by the trappers and the "Mountain Men," by the Indians, and by the emigrants. Its springs flowed with clear, good water—a welcome change from the mud and sand of the Platte—and there was decent grazing for livestock. The first wagons on the trail in 1830 stopped here, as did Bonneville's expedition of 1832 and Wyeth's of 1834. In 1838 John Sutter passed this way en route to California and later fame. In the forties the famous Jesuit, Father De Smet, Dr. Elijah White, and John C. Fremont used the pass, while the home-seeking settlers accompanied and followed them.¹⁷

In 1849 or perhaps 1848, a mysterious Frenchman named Robidoux set up a business in the Pass. A blacksmith shop was established and a few items were offered for sale to the emigrants. In May of 1849 William Kelly recorded a vivid description of the post and its surrounding area:

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 fan-

¹⁵ Edwin Bryant, *What I Saw in California . . .* (Santa Ana, California, 1936), p. 78.

¹⁶ The spelling of this name in this article will be the same throughout. It has had many spellings, but this is the one used by Merrill J. Mattes in his exhaustive study, "Robidoux's Trading Post at 'Scott's Bluffs,' and the California Gold Rush," *Nebraska History*, XXX (June, 1949), 95-138.

¹⁷ Merrill J. Mattes, "A Tribute to the Emigrant Graves at Roubidoux Pass," *The Pony Express*, XVI (November, 1949), 8.

tastic cliffs, we found a rustic log-hut, the *country residence* of a Mr. Rouberdeau, 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 collision with the long dormant echoes of the neighborhood, and taking unto himself a Sioux spouse. . . .¹⁸

In that same month another diarist reported that the prices at the post were exorbitant—for both labor and goods.¹⁹

The next month Lucius Fairchild and Maj. Osborne Cross were through the Pass and both mentioned the existence and purpose of Robidoux's establishment.²⁰ Early in July Capt. Howard Stansbury stopped at Robidoux's on his way to the Great Salt Lake. He described the post as a "log shanty" which was divided into a smithy and "a grog-shop and sort of grocery." According to Stansbury the owner rented the shop and the tools for "the modest price of seventy-five cents." The officer also commented that the forge was being used extensively by emigrants.²¹ J. G. Bruff was also at the spot in July and he quoted two prices of the store: five dollars for a gallon of whiskey and ten cents for a pound of flour.²² These were undoubtedly prices which another person had called "exorbitant."

Robidoux was not alone in the Scotts Bluff area in 1849. In that year the American Fur Company, after selling Fort Laramie to the United States government, sent Bruce Husband to set up a trading post near the Frenchman's site. Probably in July or August a rude post was constructed. As Merrill J. Mattes has pointed out, it was built too late to take advantage of the '49 rush, but it did provide shelter for the ensuing winter.²³

¹⁸ Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

¹⁹ Vincent Geiger and Wakeman Bryarly, *Trail to California, the Overland Journal* . . . Edited by David M. Potter. (New Haven, 1949), p. 105.

²⁰ Joseph Schafer, ed., "California Letters of Lucius Fairchild," Wisconsin Historical Publications, *Collections*, XXXI (1931), 31; Major Osborne Cross, *March of the Mounted Riflemen*. Edited by Raymond W. Settle (Glendale, California, 1940), p. 93.

²¹ Howard Stansbury, *Exploration and Survey of the Valley of the Great Salt Lake of Utah* (Philadelphia, 1852), p. 52.

²² Read and Gaines, *op. cit.*, I, 32.

²³ Mattes, "Robidoux's Trading Post . . .," pp. 115-116.

Between Robidoux Pass and Fort Laramie were other establishments which provided stopping points for the migration. Fort Bernard and Fort Platte were in existence for a time prior to 1850. Fort Bernard, which stood a few miles east of Fort Laramie, was probably set up in the summer of 1845.²⁴

Edwin Bryant reached Fort Bernard on June 23, 1846, and had this to say:

We reached "Fort Bernard," a small building rudely constructed of logs, about two o'clock P.M. . . . I had a letter of introduction to Mr. Richard, the principal of this trading-post. . . . An inhabited house, although of the rudest construction and with accommodations far inferior to an ordinary stable, was nevertheless a cheering sight. Several traders from Taos and the headwaters of the Arkansas . . . were collected here. . . . They had packed flour, some four hundred miles, for the purpose of trading with the Sioux Indians.²⁵

Bryant also wrote that coffee, sugar, and tobacco were priced at one dollar a pound, whiskey at a dollar a pint, and flour at fifty cents a pint.²⁶

Francis Parkman also described Fort Bernard as a crude log structure—"a little trading fort." Parkman visited inside a room of the post which had walls and floor of mud and a large rock fireplace and a noticeable lack of furniture.²⁷ Several "Mountain Men" were present when Parkman was and he gave some description of them, but he made no mention of available commodities or prices.

Fort Bernard did not last out the decade. Its close proximity to Fort Laramie did not help its chances for success and it did not live to contribute much to the assistance of the emigrants.

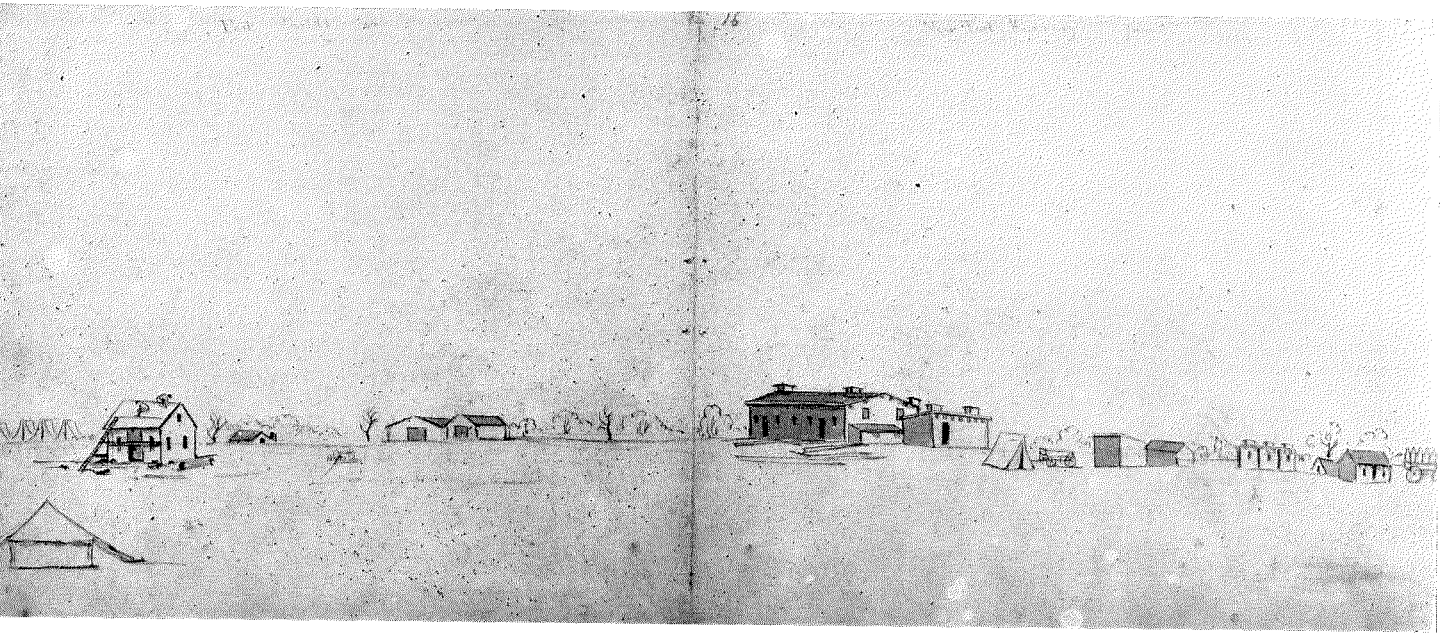
Fort Platte, built in the fall of 1840 or the spring of 1841, stood on the right bank of the Platte in the land between the Platte and the Laramie, about three-quarters of a mile above the mouth of the Laramie. L. P. Lupton, owner of a fort

²⁴ Hafen and Young, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-93.

²⁵ Bryant, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-86.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

²⁷ Francis Parkman, *The Oregon Trail, Sketches of Prairie and Rocky Mountain Life* (New York and Chicago, 1912), pp. 106-107.



FORT KEARNY, June 3, 1849

(From the sketch book of an unidentified artist accompanying the Mounted Riflemen. Photograph courtesy the Wisconsin State Historical Society.)

on the South Platte, was probably the builder of this post.²⁸ According to R. B. Sage, Fort Platte was a large post of adobe, two hundred fifty feet long and two hundred feet wide. It consisted of twelve buildings which included a blacksmith shop, a warehouse, and a carpenter shop. Its staff of employees usually numbered thirty.²⁹

By the summer of 1842 the fort had changed hands because, when Fremont reached it July 15, 1842, he reported the owners to be Sybille, Adams and Company. "The Pathfinder" wrote that the fort was "built of earth, and still unfinished, being enclosed with walls (or rather, houses) on three of the sides, and open on the fourth to the river."³⁰

In the summer of 1845 Fort Platte ceased to exist, forced out by the competition of Fort Laramie, and as Hafen and Young point out, this abandonment probably led to the beginning of the short-lived Fort Bernard. Fort Platte's shell remained to attract emigrant attention, to serve as a landmark, and to draw comment. Parkman recorded seeing the remains of the adobe walls in 1846 and he pointed out that the post had been deserted because of the Laramie competitors.³¹

William Clayton of the Mormon pioneers of 1847 also examined the ruins after he crossed the Platte at Laramie and gave the dimensions of the enclosure as one hundred forty-four feet east to west, and one hundred three feet north to south. He also gave the wall measurements—eleven feet high and thirty inches thick.³² Whatever the discrepancies in measurements of the fort may have been, it must certainly have been spacious and well equipped; and during its few years afforded some assistance to those traveling the Oregon Trail.

²⁸ Chittenden, *op. cit.*, III, 967-968; Hafen and Young, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

²⁹ Hafen and Young, *op. cit.*, pp. 72-73.

³⁰ John C. Fremont, *Narrative of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843-44*, (New York, 1846), p. 23.

³¹ Parkman, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

³² William Clayton, *Journal . . .* (Salt Lake City, 1921), pp. 208-209.

A few minutes' travel beyond the site of Fort Platte stood the well-known and eagerly awaited Fort Laramie. Its first erection has been discussed, but its development and great importance deserves close consideration.

On June 1, 1838, Myra Eells wrote:

... Fort William ... is a large, hewed log building with an opening in the center; partitions for various objects. It compares very well with the walls of the Connecticut State Prison. A fort, in this country, is a place built to accommodate the company as they go and come from the mountains to trade with the Indians.³³

A year later F. A. Wislizenus described the post as,

... a rectangle of about eighty by a hundred feet. The outside is made of cottonwood logs, about fifteen feet high. ... On three sides there are little towers on the wall that seem designed for watch and defense. In the middle a strong gate. ... Within, little buildings with flat roofs are plastered all around against the wall ... the store house; another the smithy; the others are dwellings. ...³⁴

It is probable that the building of Fort Platte helped stimulate the rebuilding of Laramie into a more substantial post. The logs were replaced with adobe and the place was given a more permanent appearance.³⁵ Fremont wrote that it had an "air of military construction" with "its lofty walls, whitewashed and picketed, with the large bastions at the angles. ..."³⁶

Parkman devoted many pages of his *Oregon Trail* to description of Fort Laramie, its occupants, and its setting. Perhaps his most vivid and interesting writing about the outpost was that in which he described the arrival of a train of emigrants in 1846:

... gaining a spot a quarter of a mile distant, they wheeled into a circle. For some time our tranquility was undisturbed. The emigrants were preparing their encampment; but no sooner was this accomplished, than Fort Laramie was taken by storm. A crowd of broad-brimmed hats, thin visages, and staring eyes appeared suddenly at the gate. Tall awkward men ... ; women

³³ Eells, *op. cit.*, pp. 73-74.

³⁴ F. A. Wislizenus, *Journey to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1839* (St. Louis, 1912), pp. 67-69.

³⁵ Hafen and Young, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-70.

³⁶ Fremont, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

with cadaverous faces and long lank figures, came thronging in together, and . . . ransacked every nook and corner of the fort . . . we withdrew in all speed to our chamber . . . hoping that it might prove an inviolable sanctuary. The emigrants prosecuted their investigations with untiring vigor. They penetrated the rooms. . . . They explored the apartments. . . . Being totally devoid of any sense of delicacy or propriety, they seemed resolved to search every mystery to the bottom.

Having at length satisfied their curiosity . . . the men occupied themselves in procuring supplies for their onward journey . . . buying them . . . or giving in exchange superfluous articles of their own.³⁷

Parkman pointed out that this behavior on the part of the pioneers did not bring good feeling between the personnel of the post and themselves. The fact that these people had traveled for hundreds of miles seeing few white faces other than those of their own party, and little in the way of settlement probably explains in great part why they acted as they did upon arrival at Laramie.

William Clayton, whose party of Mormon pioneers had come west on the Mormon Trail, visited Fort Laramie in June, 1847. He was looking for a way to cross the Platte from the opposite bank and learned that a flat boat was available for hire. The Mormons could either rent the boat for fifteen dollars or they could pay a ferrying fee to the post of twenty-five cents per wagon. Clayton went on to note the following prices: one dollar for a pair of moccasins, one dollar for a lariat, a dollar and a half for a pound of tobacco and thirty-two dollars for a gallon of whiskey. He also wrote that the fort's spring supplies had not yet arrived, and consequently no sugar, coffee, or spices were available.³⁸

In 1848 the Mormon emigration past the fort was heavy and approximately four thousand of them used Laramie as a way-station.³⁹ During that year Brigham Young conceived the idea that Mormon emigration should use Laramie as a "half-way station." He thought if loads were hauled to Laramie to be picked up there by teamsters from Salt Lake, teams would be saved. Those animals acclimated to low altitude and to high altitude could operate in their respec-

³⁷ Parkman, *op. cit.*, pp. 119-120.

³⁸ Clayton, *op. cit.*, pp. 209-211.

³⁹ Hafen and Young, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

tive areas. This plan was followed for several years and Fort Laramie had taken on another aspect for westward expansion.⁴⁰

One of the last adventurers to visit Fort Laramie as a fur company post was Alonzo Delano. He arrived there on June 12, 1849, and the white-washed walls were a welcome sight to him, and "the motley crowd of emigrants, with their array of wagons, cattle, horses, and mules gave a pleasant appearance of life and animation." He went on to say,

Around the fort were many wagons . . . sold or abandoned by emigrants. A strong, heavy wagon could be bought for from five to fifteen dollars. In ordinary seasons the company were able to keep some small supplies for emigrants, but such was the rush now, that scarcely anything could be obtained, even at the most exorbitant prices. Here was a deposit for letters to be sent to the States, and thousands left letters for their friends, to be deposited by a messenger in some post-office beyond the Missouri, on which the writers paid twenty-five cents. Although many of our company placed letters . . . not a single letter ever reached its destination.⁴¹

Here again in 1849 as in 1847 supplies which could have been sold to emigrants were not available. This situation was also reported by other passersby that spring. One wrote that the fort had nothing but buffalo meat for trade.⁴² William Kelly, who was disappointed in what he found at Laramie, reported giving to the post personnel some supplies to tide them over. Kelly's party did find the blacksmith shop a welcome facility for its use.⁴³ However untrustworthy the improvised mail service may have been, many emigrants took advantage of the opportunity to leave and to pick up messages at the fort.⁴⁴

Late June of 1849 saw Fort Laramie's era as a fur company post come to an end, because it was purchased by the United States government and its administration was taken over by the Army. In 1842 Fremont had written that the fort

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁴¹ Alonzo Delano, *Across the Plains and Among the Diggings* (New York, 1936), p. 29.

⁴² Geiger and Bryarly, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

⁴³ Kelly, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-115.

⁴⁴ Trowbridge, *op. cit.*, p. 107; Read and Gaines, *op. cit.*, I, 37.

would furnish an excellent site for a military post to help guard the western frontier and the Oregon emigration.⁴⁵

Maj. Winslow F. Sanderson of the Mounted Rifles was placed in command and Lieutenant Woodbury was given the task of rejuvenating the post. Stansbury and Bruff both reached the fort shortly after its transfer to the government and they reported the presence of Woodbury.⁴⁶ The fort was in need of repair and additions. The Army erected officers' and enlisted men's quarters, a bakery and stables.⁴⁷ Thus Fort Laramie, garrisoned by United States troops, began its long term of service as a frontier army post.

Although the bulk of the emigrants traveled the trail as it came up from Kansas, some did come across Nebraska from the Missouri River and join the main path in the vicinity of Fort Kearny. These people usually began their journey near the present Nebraska City or Plattsmouth where ferry service of sorts was available in the forties.⁴⁸

Bruff was one of those who traveled this alternate route and his description of crossing Salt Creek reveals dangers of overland travel:

. . . descent cut at an angle of about 45°, and 10 feet broad, with a large stump of a tree, worn smooth by ropes, at the head, lead to the upper end of a bridge, which was about 50 feet long, supported on several slender trees, for sleepers, and floored over with loose logs and sticks. No rail, and drift trees, lodging under the upper edge forced by the torrent below, had raised the upper side and end of the bridge, while it sagged in the middle, and was much twisted.⁴⁹

This crossing of the creek was made on June 7, 1849, probably in northeast Lancaster County. The rude bridge had undoubtedly been hastily built by some other party of pioneers who expected it to serve for only one crossing—theirs.

Meredith Moore also crossed the Missouri at Nebraska City in 1849 and proceeded west to Fort Kearny, taking with

⁴⁵ Fremont, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁴⁶ Stansbury, *op. cit.*, p. 53; Read and Gaines, *op. cit.*, I, 38-39.

⁴⁷ Hafen and Young, *op. cit.*, pp. 155-156.

⁴⁸ Read and Gaines, *op. cit.*, I, 15; Andreas, *op. cit.*, p. 472, states that Libeas T. Coon, a Mormon, established a ferry about 1848 in the vicinity of the site of Plattsmouth.

⁴⁹ Read and Gaines, *op. cit.*, I, 17.

him a sawmill. A difficult crossing of Salt Creek was effected near the present Saltillo, Nebraska. The mud of the creek bottom almost proved to be an insurmountable barrier to the crossing, but the wagon and the sawmill were hauled through.⁵⁰

The best crossing of Salt Creek was near Ashland in Saunders County. This was a rock bottom ford and it was used some in the forties. This ford was north of the routes followed by Bruff and Moore.⁵¹

When the season of 1849 closed there was not a great deal in the way of facilities and accommodations to be found by the emigrants who moved over the Oregon Trail. However, there were far more advantages than those pioneers of the thirties had encountered.

Old Fort Kearny had come and gone and new Fort Kearny was in its infancy, but it was a source of comfort to the travel-weary emigrants who viewed it after passing the "Coast of Nebrasky." It was beginning to provide a "shopping place" for the movers; it served as a post office, a court of law; and it had acquired Moore's sawmill.⁵² Ash Hollow and Rock Creek crossing provided established camp grounds with the best accommodations nature had to offer. Robidoux with his store and blacksmith shop met the wagons at Scotts Bluff and the American Fur Company had begun preparations to enter the business field in that area. Fort Bernard and Fort Platte were not of lasting existence, but Fort Laramie was only just entering an entire new age of service to the emigrants. The Platte was provided with a ferry service at Laramie, while the Laramie was forded or ferried by means of wagon boxes.

The United States Army had been patrolling the overland route to some extent since Maj. Clifton Wharton, with five companies of the First Dragoons, had covered part of the Oregon Trail in 1844. In the following year Col. Stephen W. Kearny led 250 dragoons over the trail from Fort Leavenworth to South Pass. The Army's presence on the

⁵⁰ E. D. H. Gempel, "An Early Nebraska Sawmill," *Nebraska History*, XXXI (December, 1950), 283-291.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 290.

Plains, coupled with the establishment of the new posts, helped insure pioneer safety.⁵³

Those who took the trail south and west of the Lower California Crossing of the South Platte to the Upper Crossing found nothing to help them on this branch and they even missed the pleasantness of Ash Hollow.⁵⁴

This trail of the Platte valley had little to offer of shelter and supply, but it was still in the process of becoming accustomed to the "prairie schooners" and the gold-seekers. It would grow.

II

In the fifties the emigration continued steadily. There were new gold strikes to be made in California and new homes to be built all the way from Puget Sound to Monterey. As in preceding decades the pioneers passed through Nebraska via the Oregon Trail.

The crossing on Rock Creek still provided a good camp site and it was, as before, well-known and used. To the east, the buildings of Old Fort Kearny were under the care of Col. Hiram Downs, a civilian, who took custody in 1850.⁵⁵ This cluster of buildings still provided a solid "jumping off place" for some of those emigrants who moved west to join the Oregon Trail on the banks of the Platte. A man named Samuel Martin built a two-story log trading post at the mouth of the Platte in the spring of 1853.⁵⁶ This also served as a point of origin for overland travel in Nebraska which would connect with the main route.

In the northwest part of present Fillmore County on Big Sandy Creek two men established a short-lived "trading post." This consisted of a tent containing an important (or popular) commodity of the trail—whiskey.⁵⁷ This was not

⁵³ For a detailed account of the army's early work on the trail see Henry P. Beers, "The Army and the Oregon Trail to 1846," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, XXVIII (October, 1937), 339-362.

⁵⁴ The "Upper California Crossing" was at a point on the South Platte near the present Julesburg, Colorado. The emigrants forded here as they did at the "Lower California Crossing."

⁵⁵ Sweet, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

⁵⁶ Andreas, *op. cit.*, p. 481.

⁵⁷ Gilbert L. Cole, *In the Early Days Along the Overland Trail in Nebraska Territory, in 1852* (Kansas City, Mo., 1905), p. 27.

on the main route either, but because of that it may have been more indicative of development. With only such an article of trade as liquor, whatever its value may have been, men were doing some sort of business in the country which was to become Nebraska Territory.

Fort Kearny was growing and offering greater benefits to travelers. The commanding officer at the fort was authorized to issue or sell stores of the government warehouse upon emigrant requisition to those whom he believed needed aid.⁵⁸ This was an important service because many of those people had planned unwisely regarding provisions at the time of their departure from an eastern outfitting post. C. W. Smith reached the fort in May, 1850, and gave this description:

At Fort Kearney there are several plain-looking buildings, mostly composed of unburnt bricks and turf, and some tents, though the best houses are wood. One hundred fifty soldiers are stationed here.⁵⁹

In the summer of that same year Fort Kearny acquired regular mail and passenger service. A stage coach run was begun between Independence, Missouri, and Salt Lake City. Coaches left the two points each month through the summer, while pack horses made the trip on the same schedule during the winter.⁶⁰ The pioneers who stopped at the fort could entrust their letters to a scheduled plan and they did not have to depend on the Army or other emigrant couriers. The complaints about money wasted on non-delivery of mail became less apparent in the contemporary journals.

The blacksmith shop at the fort continued to serve its useful purpose through these years. However, when Celinda Hines arrived in June of 1853 there was no smith on hand and the men of the wagon train had to do their own work. They were allowed to use the government facilities. She called attention to the store and to the lack of fortifications with the added comment that "it was probably built more

⁵⁸ Mantor, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

⁵⁹ C. W. Smith, *Journal of a Trip to California; Across the Continent from Weston, Missouri, to Weber Creek, California, in 1850* (New York, 1920), p. 29.

⁶⁰ Lyle E. Mantor, "Stage Coach and Freighter Days at Fort Kearny," *Nebraska History*, XXIX (December, 1948), 325.

for the accommodation of emigrants and to awe the Indians than for defense."⁶¹

In May, 1851, William Lobenstine took note of the fact that a place of worship existed at the fort.

. . . a church for the service of the Lord which is frequented by soldiers, civilized Indians and passing emigrants.⁶²

This added accommodation of the outpost was undoubtedly welcome to many of the travelers, who were eager for an opportunity to worship in some place other than a covered wagon or on the open prairie.

Although the great majority of the people who passed Fort Kearny looked on it as a welcome sight, one person was not particularly happy about the place. John Wood was there on June 3, 1850, and he wrote: ". . . upon the whole, I consider it a nuisance—just like some of the men stationed there."⁶³ Evidently some of the rougher men and buildings of the frontier had the same effect on Wood as they had on Francis Parkman.

Moving west from Fort Kearny approximately thirty-five miles, the emigrants found a good camping ground on Plum Creek. This location, like Rock Creek crossing, was an excellent place to stop even though there was no permanent shelter or post.

In 1853 Edward Morin, a former American Fur Company agent, set up a trading post. It was at the mouth of Box Elder Canyon, just west of the site of later Fort McPherson.⁶⁴

Ash Hollow continued to serve as a good trail camp with its timber and water, and in 1851 it contained a trading post. Lobenstine was there on June 2 of that year and he wrote: "There we met a kind of trading post where several articles for the remainder of the journey for a reasonable price can be got."⁶⁵ This business evidently lasted only one

⁶¹ Celinda E. Hines, "Diary of . . .," *Transactions of the 46th Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association* (Portland, 1918), p. 93.

⁶² William C. Lobenstine, *Extracts from the Diary of . . .*, (New York, 1920), p. 24.

⁶³ John Wood, *Journal of . . .*, (Columbus, 1871), p. 16.

⁶⁴ I. A. Fort, "Edward Morin," *Nebraska State Historical Society, Proceedings and Collections*, II, 2nd Series (1898), 51.

⁶⁵ Lobenstine, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

season for evidence of subsequent years does not mention it. One emigrant did record passing "Ash Hollow post office" in 1852, but it is to be assumed that he referred to the abandoned cabin which the travelers of the forties had seen.⁶⁶ The term "post office" had been applied to the cabin in the previous years.

A short distance west of Ash Hollow, John Wood came upon "a French and Indian trading post, of long standing."⁶⁷ That was in 1850, and Wood wrote as though the post was old and established. However, no other available material has described such a place between Ash Hollow and Courthouse Rock. Was Wood's "of long standing" really descriptive, or did he mean only that it was not set up during that same month? Perhaps he assumed that it was an older post but had no definite time of founding. This might have been the store which Lobenstine passed a year later, but the locations, in relation to Ash Hollow, do not coincide. This discrepancy reduces the possibility of the posts being one and the same.

Farther west along the route, Robidoux, well established in the Scotts Bluff area, made a change in late 1849 or early 1850. The trader erected a post "near the mouth of what is now called Carter Canyon, in the southeast corner of Gering Valley."⁶⁸ At this new location he traded with Indians and emigrants while he apparently kept the original blacksmith shop and store at Robidoux Pass. C. W. Smith, who came to the pass on May 28, 1850, reported "a place where blacksmithing was done."⁶⁹

Whatever the exact location of Robidoux's or the American Fur Company's posts, the emigrants of 1850 were able to stop and find some articles of trade and blacksmith facili-

⁶⁶ Mr. Davis, "Diary of . . . 1852," *Transactions of the 33rd Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association* (Portland, 1905), p. 374.

⁶⁷ Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁶⁸ Mattes, "Robidoux's Trading Post . . .," p. 115. Mr. Mattes has critically examined and discussed the various accounts referring in trading posts in the Scotts Bluff area. Reiteration of his findings seems unnecessary here; T. L. Green, "Scotts Bluffs, Fort John" *Nebraska History*, XIX (July-September, 1938), 175-188, also discusses the Scotts Bluff trading activity at some length.

⁶⁹ Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

ties. By the fall of 1850 both of these outfits had abandoned their original locations and a new trail had been blazed through the region. The "Mitchell Pass" route had been opened and it saw heavy use in the following season. This new trail pass angled northwest from a point near the present Melbeta. Here a post was built, but its founder is a mystery. William Lobenstine wrote of it in 1851 but gave no information about its stores or operators.⁷⁰ The Robidoux Pass was used in 1851 and after, but it declined in importance and the man Robidoux disappeared from the scene sometime after the 1851 season. Too, the American Fur Company's post, under Maj. Andrew Drips, did not live past the year 1852.

Near the mouth of Horse Creek, where the Mitchell and Robidoux Pass trails joined, trading business began. The post and smithy west of Scotts Bluff which Lobenstine mentioned in 1851 was on the stream.⁷¹ Lobenstine gave no description in his diary, but it is possible that the store described by Gilbert Cole in 1852 was the same.

When within a couple of days' drive of the fort we came to a building which proved to be a store, and which was surrounded by several wigwams.⁷²

Cole gave the location as thirty-six miles east of Fort Laramie and James McClosky as the name of the proprietor. McClosky had an Indian wife and an ample supply of Indian helpers who fed and watered the stock of Cole and his party. Cole made no remarks in regard to blacksmith facilities, so the posts may not have been identical, but the distance cited gives some basis for comparison.

Between Horse Creek and Fort Laramie sat Ash Point Station. Henry Coke had the following to say of it in July, 1850:

. . . several lodges and a mud building, on the south side [of the Platte]. . . Two or three old traders were gossiping together over their pipes on a wood bench outside the mud building. Close at hand were a quantity

⁷⁰ Lobenstine, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-30.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* This location is assigned by Mattes, "Robidoux's Trading Post . . .," p. 122.

⁷² Cole, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-52.

of Sioux Indians, squatting round their lodges . . . the name of this post was Ash Point, eighteen miles from Fort Laramie.⁷³

The next day Coke found that the traders brought their goods from Fort Pierre. The men also had animals for exchange, but their prices were exorbitant—"150 dollars for horses really not worth 15."⁷⁴

Howard Stansbury in his table of distances for the journey east in October of 1850, located "Richard's" trading post 19.56 miles from Fort Laramie. The post, according to Stansbury, belonged to the American Fur Company and so it would seem that "Richard's" and Ash Point were one and the same.⁷⁵

C. W. Smith also reported a trading post "within twenty miles of Fort Laramie." He wrote that the store lacked provisions, but that it did have clothing for sale.⁷⁶ James Mason took note of a post at this distance from Laramie on June 12, 1850.⁷⁷

On May 12, 1851, John S. Tutt wrote a letter to John Dougherty which indicates that the Ash Point post had changed hands:

Ward and Guerrier have bought and moved to Ash Point . . . all want to get up in the neighborhood of the post this year to trade with the emigrants.⁷⁸

Stansbury included two other posts in his table of distances. The first, "Bissonette's," five miles from Laramie, and the second, "Badeau's," 8.8 miles from the fort.⁷⁹ Badeau's, which the Captain labeled "a trading house, without pickets," would have been on the approximate site of old Fort

⁷³ Henry J. Coke, *A Ride Over the Rocky Mountains to Oregon and California* (London, 1852), pp. 144-145.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 148-149.

⁷⁵ Stansbury, *op. cit.*, p. 288. This conclusion is based on two points: 1) the similarity of the stated distances, "19.56" and "eighteen miles"; 2) Fort Pierre was an American Fur Company post, so the fact that Ash Point received stores from Pierre brings out another likeness.

⁷⁶ Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁷⁷ James C. Olson, ed., "The Diary of James Mason, Ohio to California, 1850," *Nebraska History*, XXXIII (June, 1952), 103-121.

⁷⁸ John S. Tutt to John Dougherty May, 1851, Dougherty Papers, Missouri Historical Society. Microfilm copy in Nebraska State Historical Society library.

⁷⁹ Stansbury, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

Bernard. Irene Paden quotes E. A. Tompkins as saying that Fort Bernard was in existence in 1850; a group of log buildings surrounded by a pile of buffalo hides.⁸⁰ It is probable that the post observed by Tompkins was the same one recorded by Stansbury, but the name of the place is in doubt. The original Bernard did not survive through the forties, but the name could have remained with the location easily enough, even though it may not have been official. Whether the place was named for the old fort by its owner or by the emigrants, it makes little difference, because the importance of the post lies not in its title, but in its existence as an emigrant stopping place.

There is no doubt about Fort Laramie. It was standing by the trail, ready to offer all possible assistance so often needed by the westward moving emigrants.

In May of 1850 emigrants were arriving at Fort Laramie where some of them purchased some supplies at the commissary. C. W. Smith approached the fort on May 29 with the comment that it looked "the most like civilization of anything that I have seen since I left Weston." He went on to say that "biscuit and bacon" were obtainable in small quantities by emigrants and he quoted the price of biscuit at fourteen dollars per pound.⁸¹

Earlier in the month a trader at the fort had written that his stock of coffee and sugar was exhausted and that if he had the latter commodity for sale it would be worth one dollar a pound.⁸²

For those emigrants who traveled the Mormon Trail there remained the task of ferrying the Platte if they chose to visit the fort. Leander Loomis and his company did so and paid one dollar a load toll. Loomis also went into some detail, in his illiterate way, about the appearance of the fort in the spring of 1850:

⁸⁰ Irene Paden, *Wake of the Prairie Schooner* (New York, 1944), p. 155.

⁸¹ Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁸² W. A. McCarty to John Dougherty, May 4, 1850, Dougherty Papers.

. . . this place insted of 6 or 8 little Log huts, we found 30 or 40 Buildings, and some of them a pretty fine style, some firstrate fraim buildings two-storys high and quite large,

the fort was enclosed by a wall . . . made of Adobys of spanish Brick, in the fort were plassed 2 Brass cannon of a pretty good size . . . the parade ground was situated Joing the Fort . . . their stabling Joined the parade ground . . . a long row of buildings or two long build-ings . . . evry thing about these stables were kept in splinded order . . . they were Drilling the soldiers, we saw them all dress in uniform, and marched on the parade ground . . . they looked splended. . . .

the Fort is situate about 1½ miles from the ferry.
 . . .⁸³

The ferry on the Platte was owned by the government and was managed by the officers at the fort.⁸⁴ The boat was sunk in early June, 1850, by "some Californians who were on a spree" and several persons were drowned while trying to ferry the river by means of wagon boxes.⁸⁵ The boat was replaced after a short period of time and operation was resumed.

Henry Coke visited Laramie in July of the same year. He bought eight mules at seventy-five dollars a piece and had the following comment on other prices:

The price of provisions and stores at the settlers' shop here is quite absurd; they know the emigrants are obliged to buy, there is no opposition, and they put fancy prices upon everything. Major Sanderson . . . has permitted us to purchase some of our stock at the govern-ment value, a saving to us of more than two-thirds of what our expenses would otherwise have been.⁸⁶

The blacksmith and repair facilities were hard pressed to meet the demands of the emigrants. Because of this situa-tion the post asked that an appropriation of five thousand dollars be given for expansion of those facilities. The assist-ant quartermaster believed that suitable shops could be built for the stated sum of money and that additional

⁸³ Leander V. Loomis, *A Journal of the Birmingham Emigrating Company*. Edited by E. L. Ledyard (Salt Lake City, 1928), pp. 30-31.

⁸⁴ Hafen and Young, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

⁸⁵ Jerome Dutton, "Across the Plains in 1850," *Annals of Iowa*, 3rd Series, IX (July-October, 1910), 447-483.

⁸⁶ Coke, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

expense of future years would be covered by the payments of the emigrants.⁸⁷

In 1850 and 1851 a few persons continued up the north bank of the Platte without crossing to the fort and the older trail. However, they did take advantage of the opportunity to mail letters at the fort.⁸⁸

Lobenstine wrote in 1851 that the hospital at the fort was open to the "broken-down travelers" who wished to use it and that the store carried a complete line of articles for use on the plains. He also reported the use of a toll bridge over the Laramie River for which his party paid the sum of two hundred dollars.⁸⁹

This bridge was to prove a welcome structure, for the emigration of 1852 was large and difficulty had been encountered in fording the Laramie in previous seasons. The toll in 1852 was set at two dollars and fifty cents per wagon.⁹⁰

Prices at Fort Laramie were still high in 1852, according to Thomas Turnbull who was there on June 8.

. . . there is a Blacksmith & waggon makers shop
 . . . at the Fort Hard bread \$13 pr C. Loaf bread worth
 10 cts. in Chicago 60 cts. here Tobacco 6s pr lb. Vinegar
 \$2 pr Gallon Tea \$2 pr lb. every thing very dear. . . .⁹¹

This situation prevailed. George Balshaw, one of the first pioneers of the 1853 season, wrote that dried apples were selling for twelve dollars a bushel, vinegar for two dollars a gallon, and "everything else in proportion."⁹²

Later in the summer William Sloan's party spent two days at the fort shoeing animals and repairing wagons. This

⁸⁷ Hafen and Young, *op. cit.*, pp. 165-166.

⁸⁸ Andrew Child, *Overland Route to California* (Los Angeles, 1946), pp. 20-21; John S. Zeiber, "Diary . . .," *Transactions of the 48th Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association* (Portland, 1920), pp. 315-316; Henry Allyn, "Journal . . .," *Transactions of the 49th Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association* (Portland, 1921), p. 401. Child passed in 1850, Zeiber in 1851, and Allyn in 1853. Allyn wrote that letters could be deposited on the north bank at the ferry where someone else took them to the fort for mailing.

⁸⁹ Lobenstine, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁹⁰ Cornelia A. Sharp, "Diary of . . .," *Transactions of the 31st Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association* (Portland, 1904), p. 176.

⁹¹ F. L. Paxson, ed., *T. Turnbull's Travels from the U.S. Across the Plains to California* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1914), pp. 170-171.

⁹² Quoted in Hafen and Young, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

group was not able to secure as many supplies as they wanted, because of low commissary stock.

We had to be content with two barrels of mushy pickled pork three sacks of flour and one sack of beans even with this supply added to our previous short rations made the prospect rather gloomy.⁹³

High prices and scarcity of supplies notwithstanding, Fort Laramie in 1853 was considered an important depot by the emigrant who prepared to move on through the Rockies.

On the branch trail from the Missouri River, the "Ox Bow Trail," traffic continued and Saline Ford on Salt Creek was used. However, not all the travelers crossed Salt Creek at the ford, but made other crossings as people in the preceding decade had done. John Wood went across the eastern part of Nebraska in May, 1850 after crossing the Missouri at "Hawk's Ferry," two days' journey from a crossing of the Nodaway River. He forded the Nemaha, and reached Salt Creek on the evening of May 24. The next morning he and his fellow travelers effected a crossing in the following manner:

This morning we prepared to cross this stream, in a large yawl—which we hauled along, for such purposes. This creek is 40 yards wide and 15 feet deep. We now launched our boat—tied a rope to her bow, which Baldwin Milligan carried across, by swimming the stream. We also tied one to the stern, and by this means was enabled to draw it backward and forward. Then we unloaded our wagons and went to shipping, and before night we had all things over the river. We crossed our cattle by swimming them; the banks being very miery, many came very near sticking.⁹⁴

Wood also found a bridge over Cottonwood Creek, twelve miles beyond Salt Creek.⁹⁵

⁹³ William K. Sloan, "Autobiography," *Annals of Wyoming*, IV (July, 1926), 245.

⁹⁴ Wood, *op. cit.*, pp. 9, 11-12.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 12. It is likely that the crossing of Salt Creek was made in the northeast part of Lancaster County. It would seem that the distance from Salt Creek to Cottonwood Creek stated by Wood is conservative and that it is more nearly twenty miles. Cottonwood Creek has its source in northwest Saunders County and joins with other small streams near the town of Wahoo to form Wahoo Creek.

The available accounts which deal with routes to the Oregon Trail are few and it is difficult to ascertain what facilities were available along them before 1854. One definite conclusion can be drawn: Salt Creek was difficult to cross if the rock ford was not used.

On the main "highway" conditions had improved over the three year period. More traders had set up business on the route and even though they may not have stayed more than a season or two, they were previews of future establishments. Too, the bridge across the Laramie River before Fort Laramie was to undergo a change. At the end of the 1853 season plans had already been made to raise the span four feet as insurance against future flood waters.⁹⁶ This plan illustrates the improvements which were to help the coming emigration of Nebraska territorial years.

The words of William Kelly who had reached Fort Laramie in 1849 might well have been applied to 1853 even though more troops were on the plains for protection and stores and repair facilities had increased:

... at a future day, when the track is more beaten, and the bad places bridged over and smoothed, it [the journey] can be accomplished in a much shorter time ... as traders, no doubt, will keep large stocks of supplies at the different points; caravans, instead of encumbering themselves with stores and necessaries for the entire trip, need only carry as much as will be necessary from post to post.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Albert Watkins, ed., Nebraska State Historical Society, *Publications XX* (1922), 253.

⁹⁷ Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 115.