



An 1850 Gold Rush Letter from Fort Laramie by A. C. Sponsler, a Thayer County Pioneer

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Article Summary: Sponsler began this letter to his wife on June 1, 1850, after passing Fort Kearny, Nebraska. (The editor notes that "the writer seems to have been innocent of any knowledge of punctuation" and that he used "rather curious spelling.")

Cataloging Information:

Names: Alonson Chandler Sponsler

Place Names: Fort Laramie, Wyoming; Chimney Rock, Nebraska

Appendix: Registry of Emigrants at Fort Laramie

AN 1850 GOLD RUSH LETTER FROM FORT LARAMIE BY A. C. SPONSLE, A THAYER COUNTY PIONEER

EDITED BY DAVID L. HIEB

POSTAL service, although not as essential as supplies of food or protection from the Indians was one of the most widely used and appreciated services rendered to the emigrants by such guardians of the overland trails as Fort Laramie. Many of the diarists to whom we are indebted for accounts of their experiences during the great overland rush to the gold fields of California in 1849 and 1850, mention receiving and mailing letters at Fort Laramie.¹ And, while it is probable that thousands of letters were mailed to apprise loved ones in the East of the good or ill fortunes of the Argonauts, very few of these letters have been added to the growing catalog of first-hand accounts of the daily doings and thoughts of participants in that great trek to the gold fields of the Sierras. How many of these letters still exist and may some day be brought to light, through circumstances more or less curious than those which have enabled us to bring this letter to you, we cannot guess, but we hope a great many.

Thanks to my official position as Superintendent of Fort Laramie National Monument, I was able, in January, 1950, to persuade the local postmistress to turn over to me for

¹ For a comprehensive account of the part played by Fort Laramie in the conquest of the West, see L. R. Hafen and F. M. Young, *Fort Laramie, and the Pageant of the West, 1834-1890* (Glendale, California: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1938).

answering, a letter, rather oddly addressed to "Hall of Records, to whom it may concern, Fort Laramie City, Wyoming." The writer told briefly how his father had passed through Fort Laramie nearly a hundred years before and had there mailed a letter to his mother. A letter which described part of the journey to California and noted certain interesting facts about the emigration past the fort. As the result of correspondence with the writer of that curiously addressed letter there became the property of the American people through Fort Laramie National Monument on June 18, 1950, a letter mailed at Fort Laramie exactly a century earlier.

Mr. Edward M. Sponsler of Santa Cruz, California, the donor of this gold rush letter and only surviving child of its author, also supplied us with brief biographical notes on his Argonaut father.

Alonson Chandler Sponsler was born in Hagerstown, Maryland, on August 29, 1823. At Richmond, Indiana, on December 29, 1842, he married Miss Sarah Sandres Boswell who was to bear him five sons and five daughters and share with him the following sixty-five years. They soon moved to nearby Hagerstown, Indiana, where young Sponsler was variously employed as harness maker, cooper and farmer until he succumbed to the lure of the gold fields.

In the spring of 1850 he left his wife and growing family in Indiana and set out for California. He became a member of a company having some fifty wagons drawn by oxen, horses and mules, and appears to have been chosen a scout for the party as he rode ahead on horseback much of the time watching for Indians, the best route, and camping places.

This party reached Fort Kearny, Nebraska, on June 1, 1850. There Sponsler posted a letter to his wife in Indiana and began writing another, the historic letter presented here. His company traveled well and by early fall had reached the vicinity of Sacramento, California. Sponsler staked a mining claim, but soon found it more profitable to work as a teamster for the then fabulous wages of \$300 a month. However, after only a few months of such work, A. C. Sponsler, like so many other disillusioned Argonauts, shook the

dust of California from his boots on the deck of a ship which carried him homeward around Cape Horn to become a Hoosier farmer again.²

But A. C. Sponsler was unable to shake off the lure of the West and in 1871 he set out on a second pioneering venture which his son Edward has described for us:

My father and mother with four of their 10 children; my sister Luana, 9 years; brother Howard, 3 years; brother Albert, 20 years; and myself, 5 years; left Hagerstown, Indiana by rail for Des Moines, Iowa in 1871. There father bought a team, wagon and harness, and fitted up the wagon as a covered wagon and we left for Beatrice, Nebraska arriving there in October.

We also met my brother Charley (Little Charley in the Letter) and his wife Mary in Beatrice. They had come from Missouri to take a claim near us.

My father and brother left their families in Beatrice and went out to Thayer County 60 miles west of Beatrice . . . and took two homesteads joining. They were on what is called Big Sandy Creek, 160 acres each.

[We interrupt Edward's account to remark that it seems more than a coincidence that Sponsler should seek out and settle on land he may well have seen in 1850 as he rode with his company on the Oregon Trail which crossed the Big Sandy and headed west up the Little Blue River in what is now Thayer County, Nebraska.]

There was a sod house three miles east of the claims owned by Bill Long. He had a small store in the sod house where my folks traded. Bill Long became Judge Long a few years later at Hebron, Nebraska.

Father and my brother returned to Beatrice after picking out their claims and filed on them. We stayed in Beatrice until spring. Then going out to the claims and built two sod houses $\frac{1}{2}$ mile apart.

We had all the material for the houses except windows and doors. Plowed the sod for the building. Went down to the creek and cut ash poles for the rafters and ridge pole, put on brush and hay on the poles and sod and dirt on the hay for shingles and moved in. Built the house where they plowed the sod for the house so we had a nice level dirt floor. The walls were two feet thick.

Then that winter, came the big snow storm, lasted three days with no let up. The storm was so bad father had to tie the clothes line from the house to the stable to see to get back and forth to attend to the horses and cow.

The stable was made of two sets of poles with hay stuffed in between. The horses would eat the hay out between the poles and the snow blew in. The horses kept tramping it down and father had to go out three

² E. M. Sponsler to David L. Hieb, July 8, 1950.

times during the sorm and dig the snow out from under the horses when their backs were up against the roof. Father turned the cow loose thinking she would stay around as we had the young calf in the house so it would not freeze, but we found her three days later six miles south on the Little Blue River with some other cattle.

We lived in the sod house for two years, then father built a frame house. . . . Our closest neighbor was three miles to the east or six miles to the south. Father had to haul his grain 16 to 35 miles to market for several years. Then the St. Joe and Grand Island Railroad came through and ran right through our farm.³

The year 1890 found A. C. Sponsler looking westward again and about that year he sold his Nebraska farm and with his wife moved to Vacaville, California, where they made their home until Sarah Boswell Sponsler died in 1907 at the age of eighty-two, and Alanson Chandler Sponsler followed her in 1912 as he neared his eighty-ninth year.⁴

The letter which A. C. Sponsler began writing to his wife after passing Fort Kearny, Nebraska, on June 1, 1850, is written in good black ink, little faded after 100 years, on blue-gray folded letter paper common at that period.⁵ Every inch of space on both sides of the double sheet is closely written and a torn sheet was added to hold part of the closing entry. The writer seems to have been innocent of any knowledge of punctuation or capitalization and wasted no space by paragraphing. But in spite of such omissions, and rather curious spelling, he set down for his loved ones in Indiana an interesting account of eighteen days travel and his reaction to the experience.

A. C. SPONSLER'S LETTER TO HIS WIFE

Fort Larime June 18 1850
excuse my mistacks

Saturday June 1 past fort carney and put a letter in the office for you⁶ went about 3 miles and camp close to the plat

³ E. M. Sponsler to David L. Hieb, July 8, August 1, 1950.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Several of the contemporary letters in the Sutter's Fort Museum, Sacramento, California are written on similar paper.

⁶ Fort Kearny, Nebraska, established in 1848 as the first of three forts located to guard the overland trails. The others, Forts Laramie and Hall, were garrisoned the following year. Abandoned in 1871, the site of Fort Kearny, now a state park, was south of

river and we had one of the storms you read about that night the wind blew several of the tents down and we most all got wet as we could be.

Sunday—June 2 it was a beautiful morning we traveled up plat it is one of the prettiest [prettiest] streams i ever saw it is about one mile wide and no timber on the side we are on we have to cook with willow sticks and weeds and buffalo chips we past about 500 waggon^s that was laying by to day.

Monday June 3 crossed Plum Creek⁷ it was up pretty high we had to block our beds up to keep things dry we camped on plat and went in and washed we had another storm to night the river is not more than 1 foot to 3 feet deep and water always muddy.

Tuesday 4 traveled up plat all day and had a storm to night.

Wednesday 5 traveled up the river all day nothing very interesting [interesting]

Thursday 6 traveled up the river all day camped at a good spring about 2 miles of the river⁸ the water a little salt i saw a great many graves along the road there is lots of folks got the colary [cholera] along the road.

Friday 7 got to the crossing of plat about 12 o'clock this is called the south fork where [we] cross it gets a bow wave there both come together⁹ i think it is about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile wide we had a very time a crossing i tell you it is a sandy bottom and we had to keep moving we hitched 7 yoke of cattle to our wagon and 4 drivers i waded it and Jack rode one of the oxen and some a horse back i seen some have 12 yoke of cattle hitch to their wagons the bank just below where we crossed is about 20 ft high and the swallows is as thick in it as bees in a hive.

the Platte River about seven miles southeast of the city of Kearney. See Lillian M. Willman, "The History of Fort Kearny," *Nebraska State Historical Society, Publications*, XXI (1930), 215-315; and Lyle E. Mantor, "Fort Kearny and the Westward Movement," *Nebraska History*, XXIX (1948), 175-207.

⁷ Plum Creek flows from the southwest into the Platte River south of modern Lexington, Nebraska. It is best known today for the massacre to the victims of which a monument is inscribed, "The Pioneer Men and Women who lost their Lives by Hostile Indians in the Plum Creek Massacre, Aug. 7, 1864."

⁸ Probably the well known Cottonwood Springs where Fort McPherson was to be established in 1863.

⁹ Sponsler's party apparently followed the example of John C. Fremont and other earlier travelers fording the South Platte just about the forks of the Platte instead of following the crowd to the more popular "Upper" and "Lower" California Crossings near Julesburg, Colorado and Brule, Nebraska respectively. For a discussion of these crossings see Irene D. Paden, *The Wake of the Prairie Schooner* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), pp. 101, 106-111.

Sautarday 8 crost over to north plat it is not quite as big as the other thare is a big rige between the two rivers and i can ride along the rige ang [and] see both streams we have not had as good gras on the north side as on the south one of our company kiled a buflo to day another storm last night

Sunday 9 we traveld on the riges part of to day i seen the pritest rase after buflo you beter bleave [believe] thare was a bout 50 men on horsback after theme a [and] tha onley kiled one of them and we had some for supper it is better than any beef stake i ever eat

Monday 10 traveld up plat a bout 15 miles and crost over to ash hallaw and campd at the mouth of it on plat¹⁰ this hallaw is ful of ash tres and busles [bushes] i went on some of the hi blufs in the evning tha ar some hills tha ar

Tuesday 11 past an indian vilage thare was a bout 25 tents we got som mockisins from them tha wouldent take monney for them but we could get them for 2 cups of shugar i got one pare thare are trimed of with beads

Wensday 12 saw a grate many sick folks to day with the dire [diarrhea]

Thursday 13 we can see the chimley rock this morning we past a nother vilage to day tha war about mooving tha take thare pols that tha have for thar tent and fason on thar horses like shaves [shafts] and pack thare things on them tel little andres and charler that the little indians had thare little dogs packed and tha was pasing along right funny¹¹

Friday 14 past the chimney rock to day it is a bout 2 miles of ov the road and looks like it was onley 2 hundred yards o i road over to it and went upon it and put my name most as hi as any of them it is a bout 1 mile around at the bottom and runs up to a pint a bout 100 and 50 ft and then wat tha cal the chimney on top of that is a bout the same highth it is

¹⁰ Ash Hollow, one of the famous and favored camping spots on the Oregon-California Trail, could be reached from the North Platte Valley to the east only by crossing a range of hills. This approach, however, is much less spectacular than that down the famed "Windlass Hill" on the trail from the "Lower" California Crossing near Brule, Nebraska. A description of another party's experiences on the route used by Sponsler's party may be found in Merrill J. Mattes and E. J. Kirk, eds., "From Ohio to California in 1849: The Gold Rush Journal of Elijah Bryan Farnham," *Indiana Magazine of History*, XLVI (September, 1950), 307-308.

¹¹ Here, little Andress and Charles, two young sons of A. C. Sponsler, are treated to a description of the use of horse and dog drawn travois as carry-alls on moving day by the Brule and Og-lala Sioux who had taken over the North Platte Valley.

cald rock but it is nothing but sand and dirt it is worth seeing thare is 1000 [thousands] of names cut on it¹²

Saturday 15 past up between scotts blufs thare is severel good springs along her tha have a trading house her it belongs to the french and indians have a black smith shop charge \$4 for shoing a horse we have bin travling through som deslate loocking country for the last 6 or 7 days but we have got in som prity country now thes blufs looks like houses of on som hill tha loock like we aint fer of of them but tha ar 4 and 5 miles off¹³ campt on hors crick [Horse Creek] to day one of the muclen [?] brothers past us the other day on the way to california on pack miles [mules] he ses thar dying 4 or five out of every train back on the south side of plat thar was lots of sickness back thare wen we came along thare we have lost non out of our train yet but thare has bin severl very bad with the dyre [diarrhea] for the last 2 [?] weeks i could count 10 and 12 graves a day but i dont see many now i think we have got prity well out of the sickness now¹⁴

Sunday 16 past a nother traiding house to day campt of the road about 1 mile grass not very good¹⁵

Monday 17 travled a bout 6 miles had to stop on a count of the watter being so hy in larmis [Laramie's] forke we are a bout two miles from fort larme [Fort Laramie] i have got a long fine so fer i have not bin sick sins i left the states i have not had the least attact of the dire yet but if i was back home with you again and no [know] wat i now know i would stay with wou [you] sarten¹⁶ we have paste a grate

¹² Chimney Rock, one of the great landmarks and scenic curiosities of the North Platte Valley, is mentioned by virtually all journalists traveling the nearby trails. However, very few describe it as accurately or mention the carving of names on its sides.

¹³ Sponsler was describing Robidoux Pass in Scott's Bluffs and adds to the evidence on Robidoux's Trading Post and Smithy which is presented by Merrill J. Mattes in, "Robidoux's Trading Post at 'Scotts Bluffs', and the California Gold Rush," *Nebraska History*, XXX (June, 1949), 95-138.

¹⁴ He was correct. West of Fort Laramie, Asiatic Cholera, which killed hundreds on the trail across the plains in 1850, was almost unknown. See Hafen & Young, *op. cit.*, pp. 161-163.

¹⁵ This trading house may have been that of James Bordeaux, near which in August, 1854 Lieutenant John L. Grattan and 29 men from Fort Laramie were slain by Indians in a fight resulting from their rash attempt to arrest a Sioux warrior for the alleged theft of a Momon emigrant's stray cow. See Hafen & Young, *op. cit.*, pp. 220-235.

¹⁶ Here Sponsler voices the nostalgia and growing disillusionment which were to bring him home the following year and which were no doubt shared by many of his fellow Argonauts.

many indians tha are the sews [Sioux] and very good loock-ins indinans tha have lots of horses and dogs and live very dirty it seems more like a town of a night out her than out in the wild parrar [prairie] tha are campt around us of a night as thick as a camp meeting it does not seem so wild as i expected it would i have bin sidind [riding] a horse back most all of the way i ride 4 or 5 miles a hed and wate til the wagons coms up the pares [prairies] ar covered with pricley pars [cactus] and the pritest floures i ever saw

Fort larime June 18 1850 we arived her this morning it is a butifel plase tha ra [there are] som fine frame houses her¹⁷ it loocks like a town we had quite a time crosing the crick [the Laramie River] this morning it was swimming we had to take our things out of the waggon and pile them up above the bed the watter run over the top of the hind weels i rode a horse back and did not get much wet thar was two waggons washed down the other day and one man drowned i am well and hope you ar the same so farwell dear wife and children¹⁸

This is a corect a count of them that past fort larime up to June 16 men 24.930 women 4.22 Children 480 waggons 6.817 horses 19.268 mules 6262 oxen 16844 Cows 19.99¹⁹

i will rite from fort hall if we go by thare we talk som of taking the other road²⁰ i have not seen any body i now [know] on the roat. [road] wen you right tel me how many of the boys went from there dont be on easy about me for i am giting a long fine tel mother i am wel and harty mi love to all so farwell dear tel becky i seen the elaphants tale this

¹⁷ The building which inspired Sponsler's reference to "fine frame houses" was undoubtedly the large frame officers' quarters later known as "Old Bedlam" which was begun by the Army in 1849, completed in 1850, and still stands. See Hafen and Young, *op. cit.*; and Merrill J. Mattes, *Fort Laramie and the Forty-Niners* (booklet published by the Rocky Mountain Nature Association, Estes Park, Colorado, 1949).

¹⁸ Sponsler evidently intended to end his letter here being at the bottom of the fourth page, but fortunately he decided to add a torn part sheet bearing the balance of the letter.

¹⁹ Here we are given another of the rare glimpses of the total emigration past Fort Laramie as recorded by the Army probably from data obtained from train captains as well as actual registrations by some individuals. See Appendix A for a comparison with similar tabulations from other sources.

²⁰ The "other road" which would prevent him from posting a letter at Fort Hall, Idaho was, no doubt, the Hudspeth Cut-Off from just west of Soda Springs, Idaho due west to the Raft River which was becoming popular in 1850. See Paden, *op. cit.*, 308-309.

morning²¹ there is a grate many mistakes but you must make it out if you can tel John²² to right i will right to him the next chance i have not kiled any game yet but have seen right mart [smart] of it

APPENDIX A

THE REGISTRY OF EMIGRANTS AT FORT LARAMIE

The fate of the actual records of the emigration past the fort kept by the officers at Fort Laramie is unknown to us and references to it by emigrant diarists are relatively rare. Of over twenty-five overland journals for the year 1850 in the library at Fort Laramie National Monument only one, that of Orange Gaylord, mentions the register. However, other references to the recorded totals for certain dates are known and are tabulated below to present a statistical picture of the overland emigration at its zenith.

1850	June 3 ²³	June 16 ²⁴	July 5 ²⁵	August 14 ²⁶
Men	11,443	24,930	37,171	39,506
Women	119	422	803	2,421
Children	99	480	1,094	609 [2,609]
Wagons	3,188	6,817	8,998	9,927
Horses	10,900	19,268	22,742	23,172
Mules	3,588	6,262	7,472	7,548
Oxen	3,428	16,844	30,616	36,116
Cows	233	1,999	5,720	7,323

²¹ Becky Wiggins, his wife's sister, is jestingly told that Sponsler is beginning to see "The Elephant" as the Argonauts chose to refer to the heaped up hardships and terror of the trail. (E. M. Sponsler to David L. Hieb, August 1, 1950.)

²² John Boswell, his wife's brother, who was a photographer in Richmond, Indiana. (*Ibid.*)

²³ On June 4, 1850, Orange Gaylord wrote that "the register kept by the officers of the Fort of immigration that passed was as follows, up to June 3, 1850 . . .". Orange Gaylord, "Diary of First Trip to California and Oregon," *Transactions of the 45th Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association* (Portland, 1920), 406.

²⁴ A. C. Sponsler to his wife, Fort Laramie, June 18, 1850. Mss., Fort Laramie National Monument.

²⁵ "Letters and Journal of Henry Atkinson Stine . . ." Mss., Missouri Historical Society; transcript in California State Library, quoted by Paden, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

²⁶ Correspondence from Fort Laramie, August 26, 1850 to the

Only one discrepancy is apparent in these comparative tabulations. The figure of 609 children on August 14 is obviously an error for in order to bear the same relationship to the totals for women as on the earlier dates a figure of at least 2,609 is indicated.

These seemingly cold figures reveal many things about the emigration of 1850 which might otherwise escape our attention, but we shall point to only an example or two.

Obvious is the confirmation of the fact that few women accompanied the Argonauts of 1850, but here is proof that this was most true of those who got an early start and who also preferred horses or mules to oxen and did not bother with milch cows. Similarly, the late arrivals at Fort Laramie were obviously families, probably bound for Utah or Oregon, and they showed a decided preference for oxen and averaged almost one cow per man. The reader may draw out similar data *ad infinitum*.

Missouri Republican, reprinted in Nebraska State Historical Society, *Publications*, XX (1922), 230; and quoted by Hafen & Young, *op. cit.*, 164, who questioned, but did not confirm the inaccuracy of the total for children. This "Correspondent" also estimated the total emigration of 1850 at 55,000 averring that less than 4/5 of the emigrants were registered.