# THE EMIGRANT PARTIES TO CALIFORNIA FROM 1841 - 1846

(Gathered by Genie Barry, Sequoia Elementary School, Oakland, California)

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For brief biographies of the notable members of these emigrant parties, plus brief biographies of other people who lived in California in the 1840s, see the BIOGRAPHIES handout.
The Bidwell-Bartleson Party - 1841
Information Sources: Pioneers of California (Donovan Lewis), Pioneer Children on the Journey West (Emmy Werner), ELP Information Packet

In May of 1841, a motley crew of adventurers under the name of "The Western Emigration Society" left Sapling Grove, Missouri for the golden land of California. They had heard it was a Garden of Eden, with open land and a blessed climate the likes of which had to be seen to be believed. An American doctor, John Marsh, had settled there in 1836. His letters were enthusiastic and encouraged many to make the journey.

They really had no idea how to get there. They thought they could simply follow the sunset and the rivers along the general direction of the Oregon Trail as far as they could. Luckily, a party of Catholic missionaries met up with them. They had with them an experienced mountain man, Thomas "Broken Hand" Fitzpatrick.

Even with Fitzpatrick along, the emigrants had a hard time of it. Most of them learned the skills of westward travel the hard way: they were rained on, hailed on, fried by the sun, powdered by the ever-lasting dust, swamped by hip-deep mud and high river crossings, and tortured by bugs. They lost gear and animals to roving young Indians, too.

At Soda Springs (south of Fort Hall) some emigrants set off for Oregon, toward which folks knew there was a "road." Fitzpatrick urged the rest to make for Oregon, too, but 32 of them were game to find their way to that Garden of Eden.

However, they hadn't reckoned on the great salt desert of Utah, which lay in their way. They had only vague instructions about a "Mary's River" that would lead them into California, over the Sierra Nevada Mountains. They wandered about, looking for this "signpost" river. Their supplies were low. Food for themselves and their animals was getting harder and harder to find. Their scouts did the best they could, but they didn't know which way to go, either.

With no sign ahead of water or fodder, the emigrants simply left the wagons near the present-day border of Utah and Nevada. They packed what they could carry on pack animals and set out. One party member, Cheyenne Dawson, later described this scene:

I looked back and saw Mrs. Kelsey (Nancy) a little behind me, with her child in her arms, barefoot and leading her horse -- a sight I shall never forget.

They were so hungry and thirsty that they had to shoot their animals for food and had great difficulty finding drinkable water.

Finally, they staggered over the crest of the Sierras near Sonora Pass. They were so starved that when they came across an acorn cache (belonging to Indians) they devoured the acorns without proper preparation. Several (including Ben Kelsey) suffered severe stomach cramps as a result.
They followed the Stanislaus Rivershed down into the San Joaquin Valley, where they rested and hunted deer. Then they felt able to make their way to John Marsh's ranch at the foot of Mt. Diablo. They reached the ranch on November 4, 1841.

Marsh was dismayed at the sight of such poorly supplied emigrants. These were not the prosperous, healthy settlers he was hoping for! He fed and sheltered them, then he told them they would have go to San Jose to get passports. When they did, they were promptly arrested and jailed.

The Mexican authorities asked Marsh to guarantee their good behavior, then gave them passports and released them. Though the passports were free, Marsh charged each emigrant $5.00. By that time the emigrants were disgusted with him and couldn't wait to get to Sutter's Fort.

They traveled in small parties up the Sacramento River and across the broad Central Valley, most arriving at the Fort around Christmas Day.

Captain Sutter welcomed them and let them stay until they were ready to move on, giving many of them jobs and supplies. He was so generous in part because he needed help in building his New Helvetia.

Notable Members:
- Elias Barnett
- Josiah Belden
- John Bidwell
- Joseph Chiles
- Grove Cook
- Nicholas "Cheyenne" Dawson
- Charles Flugge
- Talbot Green (Paul Geddes)
- Charles Hopper
- Henry Huber
- Benjamin and Nancy Kelsey
- Andrew Kelsey
- Samuel Green McMahan
- Michael C. Nye
- John L. Schwartz
- Charles Weber
The Workman-Rowland Party - 1841

Information Sources: From Wilderness to Empire (Robert Cleland), Everyman's Eden (R.J. Roske)

The Workman-Rowland Party left Santa Fe or Abiquiu (accounts differ) in September 1841.

The leaders, William Workman and John Rowland, decided to emigrate to California because there was a rumor that they wanted New Mexico to be part of the United States, instead of Mexico. The Mexican government was getting nervous about all these Americans in what was part of Mexico. Lots of Americans in Texas, for example, talked about Texas becoming part of the United States. They were not interested in becoming Mexican citizens.

Even though they had become Mexican citizens and had married Mexicans, William Workman and John Rowland decided to leave before they were thrown out. They invited others to join them. They were joined by some men who had been too late to join the Bidwell-Bartleson Party and had decided to head for California by way of the trail to Santa Fe. About 25 people made up this party, which headed out along the familiar trading trail to Los Angeles (the old Santa Fe Trail). The party had both American and Mexican citizens in it. They drove a flock of sheep ahead as a source of food.

Notable Members:
- William Gordon
- Maria Lucero Gordon
- Isabel Gordon
- Rufina Lucero
- William Henry Knight
- Thomas Linder
- William Moon
- John Rowland
- Benjamin Wilson
- William Workman
The Walker-Chiles Party 1843

Information Sources: Everyman's Eden (R.J. Roske), Pioneers of California (Donovan Lewis)

The Walker-Chiles Party was organized in 1843 by Joseph Chiles, who had traveled to California with the Bidwell-Bartleson Party in 1841. In California he met an old friend, George Yount, who had a land grant in Napa County. He and Charles Hopper (of the Bidwell-Bartleson Party) decided to also settle in California and set up a water-run gristmill, to grind wheat and corn into flour.

Joe Chiles returned to Missouri to persuade his family and friends to join them in the venture. In Missouri, he realized his children were too young for the trip, but he was able to recruit a friend, Billy Baldrige (who was a millwright) to come along, as well as two of Yount's daughters and a son-in-law.

By the time they left Missouri in May 1843, the party consisted of 30 mounted men, six women and three wagons. For part of the way, the mountain man, Thomas Fitzpatrick traveled with them. At Fort Hall those bound for Oregon headed northwest. The California party divided to conserve the remaining provisions. Joseph Chiles led a group of nine or ten men along a route that led from the Boise River to the Sacramento River by way of the Malheur and Pit Rivers. The date they arrived at Sutter's Fort is not recorded.

Meanwhile the seasoned mountain man and scout Joseph Waller took charge of the rest of the group, which included the families and wagons of the men who'd gone with Chiles. He decided to travel south along the route he'd traveled east from California in 1834. This took them south from Mary's River (the Humboldt River), into present-day Owen's Valley. However, they found the route rougher than he remembered. By the time they reached the Owen's Valley, the livestock gave out and they had to abandon their wagons.

They buried their heavy tools and milling equipment in the sand (hoping to come back later for them), then packed the rest of their supplies on their horses. They rode toward the Salinas Valley near Mission Soledad, reaching John Gilroy's ranch in January of 1844. From there they split into small groups and headed north, some to Sutter's Fort.

Notable Members:
- Joseph Rutherford Walker
- William Baldrige
- William Bradley
- Joseph Chiles
- Samuel Hensley
- Charles McIntosh
- Julius Martin
- Elizabeth McPherson Martin
- Pierson B. Reading
- Frances Yount Vines
- William Bartlett Vines
- Elizabeth Ann Yount
The Hastings Party 1843 (from Oregon)
Information Source: Everyman's Eden (R.J. Roske), ELP Information Packet

This party consisted mostly of recent settlers to Oregon, including Lansford Hastings and two of his young brothers. Oregon was not exactly paradise. It was very wet and cold. When folks heard of the dry warmth of California, they often began packing. Lansford Hastings was an adventurous, far-sighted dreamer who also saw many opportunities in what seemed the wider expanses of California. The party probably traveled by way of the Siskiyou Trail to California. They had several close calls with hostile Indians. They also met with cattle drovers going north who told them that the Californios were not well disposed toward Americans. About a third of the group turned back at this point. The rest continued on, reaching New Helvetia on July 10, 1843. Note: Three years later, because of Hasting's inaccurate directions for a short-cut, the Donner Party went tragically astray.

Notable Members:
- James C. Coates
- Nathan Coombs
- John Daubenbiss
- George Davis
- Lansford Hastings
- Thomas Shadden
The Kelsey Party 1844 (from Oregon)
Information Sources: Pioneers of California (Donovan Lewis), Everyman’s Eden (R.J. Roske)

The Kelsey Family was originally from Kentucky. They were backwoods folk, hardy and rough in speech and manner. Four brothers and their families had left Kentucky a few years earlier, with David and Samuel going to Oregon, while Andrew and Ben chose California (with the Bidwell-Bartleson Party).

Ben and Nancy had driven some cattle up to the Willamette Valley, and the rest of the Kelseys decided to go to California on their return.

Notable Members:
- David Bird
- David Kelsey
- Mary Frances Kelsey Buzzell
- Rebecca Kelsey Fowler Cook
- America Kelsey Wyman
- Samuel Kelsey (son of David)
- Samuel Kelsey (brother of David)
- Ben and Nancy Kelsey
Stevens-Murphy Party 1844

Information Sources: Pioneers of California (Donovan Lewis), The Old Trails West (R. Moody), Pioneer Children on the Journey West (Emmy Werner)

In mid-May of 1844 a large party of emigrants gathered at Council Bluffs, Iowa, on the Missouri River. Some wagons were bound for Oregon, but eleven of them (with about 50 people) were bound for California. Most of these were members of the large Murphy family, who had heard of the mild climate and the presence of Catholic churches and missions from a Father Hoekens. Other members included Elisha Stevens, an ex-trapper and blacksmith, mountain-man Caleb ("Old") Greenwood and his two half-Indian sons, Isaac Hitchcock (who claimed to have travelled to California in the '30s) and his widowed daughter and her children, a wealthy doctor, Dr. John Townsend with his wife and her teen-aged brother, and a young -gunsmith, Allen Montgomery and his wife, Sarah.

They ferried the wagons and supplies across the Missouri, while the livestock were made to swim across, with some difficulty. They then traveled along the north side of the Platte River. By the time they reached Fort Laramie, they had gotten used to river-crossings, which were tiresome and dangerous. Each time they had to cross a river, all the wagons had to be taken apart and everything loaded onto a wagon which they water-proofed with cowhides and used as a ferry. Sometimes the water was rough and animals panicked, supplies fell into the water and were ruined or lost, and small children had to be watched carefully.

At Fort Laramie they came across several thousand Sioux camped outside the fort. At first, the emigrants were nervous at the sight, but "Old" Greenwood explained that the Sioux were there with their families, to trade and were not a threat. The party rested for several days, trading for moccasins and horses before moving on.

When they reached Independence Rock, James Miller's wife (Mary Murphy Miller) gave birth to a baby, whom they named Ellen Independence in honor of the landmark rock. They rested there a week, hunting buffalo and curing the meat. They celebrated the Fourth of July with a great feast, before heading up the Sweetwater River to South Pass.

About this time, Isaac Hitchcock, suggested a shortcut to the Green River that he thought would save them nearly a hundred miles of traveling. However, it turned out to be twice as far as he estimated, and they had to make an overnight stop. The party did not have enough water, thinking they could make it to the river in one day. Many of the cattle and oxen panicked in their thirst, and got loose. Valuable time was spent gathering them. In later years, the shortcut was widely used by those better prepared.

At Fort Hall, those bound for Oregon bid farewell. The California-bound stocked up on what supplies they could buy, and tried to get information about the trail ahead. Neither Greenwood nor Hitchcock had been past Fort Hall.

They decided to follow the tracks of the Walker-Chiles Party of the year before, though no one knew whether that party had gotten through. They headed southwest along the Snake River,
turning south at the Raft River, into what is now Nevada, searching for "Mary's River," which is now called the Humboldt River.

The Humboldt leads into the Great Basin area, a broad desert. Any mistaken direction might lead them into disaster. Fortunately, a friendly Indian, whom they named Truckee, guided Dr. Townsend, Mr. Stevens, and Joseph Foster to a sweet water river about forty miles (and a day and a half) to the south. This became known as the Truckee River.

The journey was hard. They barely made it before the oxen and horses gave out. But trouble was just beginning. The river travel was a great relief at first, but the constant walking in the water as the trail became steeper softened the oxen's hooves. They began to be lame from the gravel and stones. Then came snow, which covered the grass and bushes that the animals could eat. The oxen began to suffer terribly. The men doubled and tripled the yokes of oxen for each wagon to ease the animals' load.

Finally, they reached a fork in the river, where the snow had melted enough to allow the animals to feed. (This is now the town of Truckee.) They decided to divide up. The wagons would go up a small stream to the west, while a small party of six on horseback would follow the main stream south. They were to look for possible passes across the mountains to the west. This party of adventurers included Mrs. Townsend and her servant, Francis, John and Daniel Murphy, their sister Ellen Murphy and one of the young bachelors, Oliver Manent.

This group traveled up the stream to Lake Tahoe, a wondrous sight. They followed the west shore of the lake to a pass that crested the Sierras near the headwaters of the Rubicon River, which they crossed many times as they headed down to the Sacramento River and the ranch of John Sinclair, across the American River from Sutter's Fort.

Meanwhile, the wagons struggled up along the narrowing stream to a lake, which they named after the Indian, Truckee. (Later; this became Donner Lake.) Deep snow lay upon the ground, so after scouting possible trails ahead, they decided to leave half the wagons behind and return later for them.

Since some of the emigrants had valuables in the wagons, three young men - Moses Schallenberger, Allen Montgomery, and Joseph Foster - stayed behind to guard them. The men built a small log cabin with a fireplace as their shelter, and two weakened cows were left behind as a food supply.

The main party struggled on. They unloaded the wagons and everyone, even young children, carried what they could to the summit. Then by using rocky ledges as though they were the rungs on a ladder, they pushed, pulled, and hauled the wagons up to the crest of the pass. By that time it was Thanksgiving.

Twenty miles further on, they came to the headwaters of the Yuba River. They followed the river for several miles before camping at a place which became known as Big Bend. A storm was coming, and there at Big Bend, Mary Murphy, Martin Jr.’s wife gave birth to Elizabeth Yuba Murphy. The group decided that the men would ride ahead to Sutter's Fort to get help to bring the party down into the Sacramento Valley. The women and children, with James Miller and Patrick Martin, would
remain at the campsite. Most of the remaining cattle were killed to provide meat until the men returned, and a log cabin was built for shelter.

The men arrived at Sutter's Fort in mid-December, where they met up with the other group who had travelled on horseback past Lake Tahoe. This group had arrived shortly before them. But now a dilemma faced the party. They had arrived in the midst of preparations for war.

John Sutter had agreed to raise a military force to help the then Mexican Governor, Manuel Micheltorena, fight against forces led by ex-Governor Juan Alvarado and General Jose Castro, who were trying to overthrow him.

When twenty-one healthy American men arrived at the Fort, Sutter persuaded them that there was no point in trying to rescue the wagon train until spring. The weather and the snow were just too unpredictable. Better to wait until spring. So with that idea, along with Sutter's promises of help, supplies, money and a few threats (maybe Castro and Alvarado would throw all the Americans out of California if they won), the men of the Stevens party went off to war.

Meanwhile, Allen Montgomery and Joseph Foster, had arrived at Big Bend, having decided that the wagons were safe and they could better help by joining the main party. Moses had been too weak and unskilled to manage the crude snowshoes they had made to travel over the deep snow. Montgomery and Foster thought he'd be fine in the cabin until they could send help. The two men left for the Fort to get supplies and help, but they, too, were caught up in the energy of going to war. The group left the Fort on New Year's Day, 1845.

However, as soon Sutter's little army left New Helvetia, men began to have second thoughts and deserted, some of them returning to the Fort. One of these was Dennis Martin, a son of Patrick Martin, who was behind at the Yuba River. At the Fort, Elizabeth Townsend begged him to check on her young brother Moses, left behind at Truckee Lake.

As he approached Big Bend he was surprised to find James Miller and his son William walking out. Food was getting very scarce and people were reduced to eating boiled cowhides. By this time it was February and snows were light, so Dennis Martin advised the group to get ready to leave. He continued on over the summit to see about young Schollenberger. To his surprise, he found Moses not only alive, but in good spirits and health.

Martin made snowshoes for Moses and patiently guided him in their use. The two men made it safely to Big Bend. By March 1, 1845 the entire party was at Sutter's Fort. By March 15, 1845, the men who'd gone with Sutter's force returned as well.

The cabin Moses stayed in was later used by the Breen family of the Donner Party.
Notable Members:
- Elisha Stevens
- Isaac Hitchcock
- Isabelle Hitchcock Patterson
- Patrick Martin Sr.
- Dennis Martin
- Patrick Martin Jr.
- James Miller
- Mary Murphy Miller
- Allen Montgomery
- Sarah Armstrong Montgomery
- James Murphy
- Ann Martin Murphy
- Martin Murphy Sr.
- Bernard, Daniel and John Murphy
- Ellen Murphy
- Martin Murphy Jr.
- Mary Bulger Murphy
- John Sullivan
- Marry Sullivan Sherrebeck
- Dr. John Townsend
- Elizabeth Schallenberger Townsend
- Moses Schallenberger
- Caleb Greenwood
- Brittain Greenwood
- John Greenwood
Grigsby-Ide Party 1845
Information Sources: Pioneer Children on the Journey West (Emmy Werner), Pioneers of California (Donovan Lewis)

In early May of 1845 a large train of 100 wagons left Independence, Missouri. The party broke up into three companies, one of which was piloted by Joe Meek and captained by John Grigsby and William Ide. The companies traveled along the Platte River, then to South Pass and onto Fort Hall. They camped for several days at Fort Hall, trading horses with Native Americans and resting. There they met Caleb Greenwood, a mountain man who persuaded them to head for California, instead of Oregon. The Ide family, among others chose the newer trail to golden California. They continued along the Humboldt River and across the 40-mile desert, finally reaching the Truckee River, which young Sarah Ide reports they crossed 32 times!

Benjamin Bonney (who was about 7 years old at the time) later wrote:

At the foot of the Sierras we camped by a beautiful, ice-cold, crystal-clear mountain stream. We camped there for three days to rest the teams and let the women wash the clothing and get things fixed up. My sister Harriet was fourteen, and with my cousin Lydia Bonney, Truman Bonney, myself and other boys of the party, we put in three delightful days wading in the stream. It was October and the water was low. In many places there were sand and gravel bars. On one of these gravel bars I saw what I thought was wheat, when I picked it up I found it was heavy ... I took one of the pieces about the size of a small pea into camp with me. (One of our companions) Dr. Gildea asked me for it. That evening he came to my father, and showing him the dull yellow metal I had given him, said "What your boy found today is pure gold. Keep the matter to yourself: we will come back here next spring and get rich."

When the party began their ascent of the Sierras, many took apart the wagons and hauled them up ledge by ledge to the summit. At this point the large party began separating into several smaller parties, with each group determined to solve the problems of mountain travel in their own way. One of these groups, made up of young men without families or much gear became known as the Swasey-Todd Party. Instead of laboriously taking the wagons apart, Mr. Ide and other men built road "bridges" to connect one level spot to the next. Even so, it took a long and strenuous effort to travel two miles to reach the summit of the Sierra Nevada. Nearby they found evidence of a pioneer party from the year before. The party had emptied their feather beds, unloaded the wagons, and "packed" the oxen. Their wagon tracks were still visible from the year before. Sarah Ide tells how the group made their way down the western slope to Sutter's Fort.

In driving down into "Steep Hollow, " the men cut down small trees to tie to the hind of each wagon, to keep it from turning over ... and also to hold it back. In attempting to ride my pony down, the saddle came off her head. She was so gentle as to stop for me to alight, and I led her the rest of the way down. We camped that night in "Steep Hollow. " Our best milch cow died the next morning. We did all we could to doctor her. We supposed she was poisoned by eating laurel leaves--grass being so scarce.
The emigrants straggled into Sutter's Fort over a two week period. The Ide group reached the Fort on October 25, just about the last party, with 65 cattle left of the huge herds with which they'd started the journey. Both animals and people were exhausted and in need of plentiful food and rest. Sarah, nevertheless, remembered the trip fondly.

To me the journey was a pleasure trip, so many beautiful wild flowers, such wild scenery, mountains, rocks and streams--something new at every turn, or at least every day!

In observing events at the Fort Benjamin Bonney wrote

There was a large cookhouse at the fort, where we children liked to watch them doing the cooking. They cooked here for a large number of Indian laborers. In addition to the Indian workers, there were a lot of Indian boys who were trained to do the work. The Indian boys were fed in a peculiar way. They ground barley for them, made it into a gruel, and emptied it in a long trough. When the big dinner bell rang, the Indian boys would go to the trough and with their fingers pick up the porridge and eat it.

So many emigrants were crowded into the fort that winter that as a result there was a good deal of sickness ... A large number of the native died as well as some of the emigrants, mainly children.

Notable members:
- Jarvis Bonney
- William Elliott
- Elizabeth Patton Elliot
- James and Eliza Gregson
- Nancy Griffeth Taylor
- William and Sarah Ann Smith Hudson
- William Brown Ide
- Susan Haskell Ide
- Henry Marshall
- William Scott
- Anne Hughes Marshall Smith
- William Isaac Tustin
- Lucinda Hudson York
McMAHON-CLYMAN PARTY 1845 (from Oregon)

Information Sources: James Clyman's Memoirs and published travel diaries, Pioneers of California (Donovan Lewis)

This party consisted of 35 men, 1 woman, Mrs. Payne, and her 3 children. They left the Willamette Valley in Oregon Territory on April 2, 1845, on what was called the Siskiyou Trail. An experienced traveler, Joel P. Walker, gave them these instructions:

- Be careful to never camp in the timber if it can be avoided.
- Be careful to never let any Indian come amongst you.
- Never let the Indian have any ammunition on any account.
- Keep close watch both night and day.
- Never neglect camp guard on any account.
- Never fire a gun after crossing the Umqua mountain until you cross the Siskiyou mountain, perhaps five days travel.
- Keep yourselves close as possible in traveling through the Brush.
- Never scatter after game or make any other division.
- Keep your guns in the best firing condition.

You can see they were worried about attacks from Indians. In fact, they were the ones who attacked Indians, for no particular reason. When they reached the Sacramento Valley, Franklin Sears killed two Indians and later another man shot an Indian as if he were target shooting!

Otherwise, the journey was uneventful. They stopped at the William Gordon ranch on Cache Creek to rest their horses. There they heard about the local politics and the Mexican-American War. After a few days, they traveled on to Sutter's Fort, which they reached on July 10, 1845. Of the group, only 12 or so stayed on in California.

Notable Members:
- James Clyman
- Samuel Green McMahon
- James Marshall
- William Northgrave
- J.D. Perkey
- Allen Sanders
- Franklin Sears
The Donner Party 1846

There are many accounts of The Donner Party's journey. Two books are suggested for background and character information. For elementary school age readers, *Patty Reed's Doll* by Rachel Laurgaard and the chapter called “Children of the Donner” in *Pioneer Children on the Journey West* by Emmy Werner both provide good research material.

Donner Party Survivors:

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<td>Mary Graves (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Fosdick (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda McCutchen (30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harriet Pike (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Foster (23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Foster (?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Eddy (28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. (Doriss?) Wolfinger (19)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>