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Lewis Dent

From the St. Louis [Weekly] Reveille.

The Mormon Battalion. — We have not yet had a detailed account of the march of Col. Cook and his command, to California, and the following letter, from an officer in the pay department, now with the battalion, will be found very interesting. We are indebted for it to Mr. G. W. Dent, of our city.

SAN DIEGO, Upper California
Feb. 1st, 1847

Dear Brother: — I wrote to you last from a point on the Rio Grande, about two hundred and fifty miles south of Santa Fe, designated on Mitchell's Map as Fra Christobal. (I referred you to this map in the letter.) About forty miles south of this place, we left the river, and directed our course towards the setting sun. As we rose upon the most prominent point of our course in the neighborhood of the river, we saw spreading from our feet an extended plain, and on the remote horizon, chains of blue mountains lifting formidable barriers to our further march.

The battalion had been reduced, the day previous to half rations. Knapsacks, containing a scanty supply of clothing and bedding, were secured to their shoulders, and in addition, heavy muskets, with the usual accompaniment of bayonets, cartridge boxes, belts, &c., constituted the equipments for this ardu-

LEWIS (LOUIS) DENT, author of the above letter, was a non-Mormon civilian clerk to paymaster Major James H. Cloud of the Mormon Battalion. After receiving the letter, Dent's brother, George Wrenshall Dent, of St. Louis gave the letter to the *St. Louis Reveille* newspaper for publication on 12 and 14 June 1847. One week later, on 19 June 1847, the letter was reprinted in the *Democratic Telegraph & Texas Register*. This letter is referenced in the following article, pp. 56-57, also fns 20-23.

ous undertaking.

Our animals were hardly fit for service; many of them had been taken out of the harness about ten days before, after crossing the prairies and plains from Fort Leavenworth. The provision wagons were heavy and unwieldy, too many in proportion to the animals, yet insufficient for the amount of provisions called for, even at the "half ration rate."

Thus was commenced our march through a wilderness, known only to the wandering tribes of Siera de Acha, or the daring and adventurous pioneers of Sonora; and thus commenced a scene of privation and hardships, that I am persuaded, remains without a parallel.

I saw athletic and vigorous men reduced, by thirst and fatigue, to the imbecility of children, their bodies attenuated and feeble; their faces bloated; their eyes sunken; their feet lacerated and bruised, mechanically moving forward, without a murmur and without an object; the latter having been lost sight of in the gloomy contemplation of their present helpless condition.

I remember, on one occasion, after having marched two days without water, while leisurely riding about a mile in the rear of the troops, to have espied, a short distance in advance, a soldier of the battalion. My attention was not attracted by his slow and uneasy step, for it was a time of general suffering, and such a thing was to be looked for; but when, in passing, he turned upon me his ghastly visage, I involuntarily checked my mule, shuddering at his horrid picture of human misery! I was about to pass him, but my heart reproved me, and I offered him my mule. The poor fellow lifted his eyes to mine, but dropped them as suddenly; he was a Mormon and had been unused to favors. He made no further reply, but continued on his weary tramp, apparently careless whether each succeeding step was leading him to destruction or safety.

But the old proverb, that all things must have a termination, was realized in the case of our sufferings; and we may date that happy period at our arrival in the valley of San Barnadin, although we afterwards had many long marches without water, before reaching our ultimate destination.

San Barnadin is the name of what once was an extensive "rancho," embracing several leagues of land and stocked with seventy or eighty thousand head of cattle.

The owner of this ranch paid an annual stipend, in cattle, to the tribe of Apaches, in whose territory it was situated; but they shared the common fate of all ranches attempted to be established in this part of Sonora. A want of punctuality in furnishing the stipulated supplies afforded to the Indians, who were desirous of such an excuse, an opportunity for making themselves master of the herd. Such of the Mexicans as were fortunate enough to escape the merciless scalping knife made their way into the garrison towns of the frontier, preferring poverty and peace to fortune and the midnight serenade of the Apache bands.

This valley of San Barnadin is about thirty miles in width and blocked in

on either side by ridges of lofty mountains.

When we arrived at this place and the broad plain of waving grass, watered by refreshing streams and dotted with numerous herds of wild cattle, opened before us; man and beast in that weary and dispirited company, by words and looks acknowledged the auspicious prospect—it promised a prodigal abundance and a welcome rest.

We remained in the valley several days recruiting our animals and providing ourselves with meat. During our stay we were attended by deputations from the neighboring tribe and entered into terms of amity with them.—When they learned the object of our march and the great number of warriors, they appeared much rejoiced and expressed a hope that we would take many scalps. These Indians are expert horsemen and well skilled in the use of the lance, which, together with the bow and arrow constitute their only implements of war.

At the valley of San Barnadin, and for twelve days travel after leaving it, we had an abundant supply of fine fresh beef.

A few dilapidated houses and the immense herds, now scattered over an area of more than two hundred square miles, are all that remain of the once rich San Barnadin.

Killing these wild animals afforded us an amusement at once exciting and dangerous, and in pursuit of this sport, several men were severely wounded and five mules killed. It became a matter of remark that these “horned heroes” of San Barnadin made a more formidable resistance to our march through their territory, than did the soldiers of Sonora who had at stake their “altars and their homes.”

We passed through Tusone, a small garrison town or “presidio,” situated near the northern frontier of Sonora. Our approach had been communicated to the commandante. When within a few days march we were favored with a message from the officer in command *directing* us to “take a circuitous way to the Gila river,” (for that he had learned was our intended route,) “or pass through the garrison at our peril.” To this threatening letter the Colonel made no reply. No sooner had this disappeared than another messenger, bearing a second dispatch from the blustering commandante, rode into camp.. This was more conciliatory than the other, stating that he had been directed by his government to oppose our march, but from the small force furnished for this purpose he had been induced to abandon the intention, and concluded by saying that the American officer would *confer an immense favor* if he would march his forces around the place. To this proposition, Col. Cook, of course, did not accede; and the answer being returned, we fully expected to have an engagement, nor was this expectation lessened when we learned that the population, including the soldiery, could muster a thousand strong—more than twice our number.

The second day after the *order* was received, to march *around*, we marched *through* the garrison, cheered and enlivened by the merry strains of Yankee

Doodle.

The enemy had decamped a few hours before, and we were left in quite possession of the place.

Remaining two days at this garrison, we concluded to march to the river Gila, where we encamped on the 23d December. The Gila (pronounced Hela) empties into the Colorado of California about eighty miles east of the gulf. In Mitchell's map both rivers are represented as emptying in to the gulf.

On the 25th December we continued our journey down the Gila, passing through the villages of the Pimas Indians. We did not forget the day, that it was Christmas, nor the pleasant associations connected with that word.

The Pimas Indians number a population of ten thousand, and live in villages on the Gila. They are without an exception the noblest Indians in appearance I have every seen. The average height of these fellows, is about six feet three inches, and I remember one in particular, by whom the Kentuckian, Porter, would appear a child.

These Indians are peaceable and harmless people, cultivating their small "patches" of corn, and living without coveting the Spanish ranches, or extending their wants beyond the examples left by their fathers.

On the morning of the 25th of January, we saw for the first time, the Pacific ocean. To me, independent of the sublime picture it presented, spreading in its illimitable extent, nothing could have been more gratifying. It was a promise of rest from our long, long pilgrimage. Two days after, we arrived at this place, San Diego, on the shores of the Pacific. I am now writing, *literally*, under the shadow of the flag of civil and religious liberty; they ought to have added—territorial to these other qualifications, for I think we are taking more of that liberty than Mexico will be willing to submit to.

We arrived in California the "day after the fair," that is, two weeks after Gen. Kearny; and it was in that way we were prevented from being present *at the fights*.

Major Cloud and myself are domesticated quite comfortably together at this place, and it is my hope to return in his pleasant company; of this, however, I cannot, at present, wright any thing definitely. &c., &c.