

FIRST DRAFT

THE UNKNOWN COUNTRY

Guidebook provided a DIY manual for emigrants traveling in the Old West

If you're heading into the wilds for the first time, it's good to have a guidebook that offers practical information on potential routes, how to prepare for your trip and the gear you need.

For instance: "Each ox wagon should be provided with a covered tar-bucket, filled with a mixture of tar or resin and grease, two (ox) bows extra ... and six open links for repairing chains." Also: "A little blue mass (mercury pills), quinine, opium, and some cathartic medicine (laxative), put up in doses for adults, will suffice for the medicine-chest."

This advice is from Capt. Randolph B. Marcy's book "The Prairie Traveler: A Hand-book for Overland Expeditions," which was published in 1859.

Marcy was an experienced soldier who had traveled for 25 years in the West when his book was published, with approval of the War Department.

His book was released in the middle of the era when tens of thousands of emigrants headed west on the Oregon Trail, or to California, or the Salt Lake Valley. The rush to Colorado gold fields was just beginning in 1859.

The mass emigration by covered wagons began slowly in the 1840s, reached its peak in the 1850s and continued through the Civil War. Large wagon trains all but disappeared after the transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869, although some small parties continued to travel by wagon.

Marcy's book provided well-tested information for westbound travelers. Prior to its publication, emigrants had to rely mostly on the journals written by other travelers in the West. But these were largely personal narratives, not manuals that gave specific advice for travelers.

There was at least one earlier guidebook: "The Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California," by Lansford W. Hastings, published in 1845. It had one fatal flaw, however.

Members of the Donner Party followed its recommendations and took a detour, known as the Hastings Cutoff, from the main Oregon Trail. Instead of providing a speedy shortcut, the detour past the Great Salt Lake actually

delayed their journey. Consequently, the party reached the Sierra Nevada Mountains just as heavy snows closed what's now called Donner Pass. That led to the disaster in which 42 people died and several resorted to cannibalism.

Hastings had made only one journey to the West, and he had never been on the Hastings cutoff before writing his book. Also, more than half of his book is devoted to observations about the scenery, mineral and agricultural potential of Oregon and California,

rather than specific recommendations for travelers.

Hastings suggested emigrants take more provisions than Marcy later recommended. For each adult on the journey, Hastings said travelers should pack 200 pounds of flour, 150 pounds of bacon, 10 pounds of coffee, 20 pounds of sugar and 10 pounds of salt, plus "such other provisions as he may prefer, and can conveniently take."

Marcy recommended the following items for adults: 150 pounds of flour, 25 pounds of bacon, 15 pounds of coffee, 25 pounds of sugar, yeast for making bread and salt and pepper. He also said travelers should bring dried vegetables, which were light, could be easily cooked on the trail and would ward off scurvy.

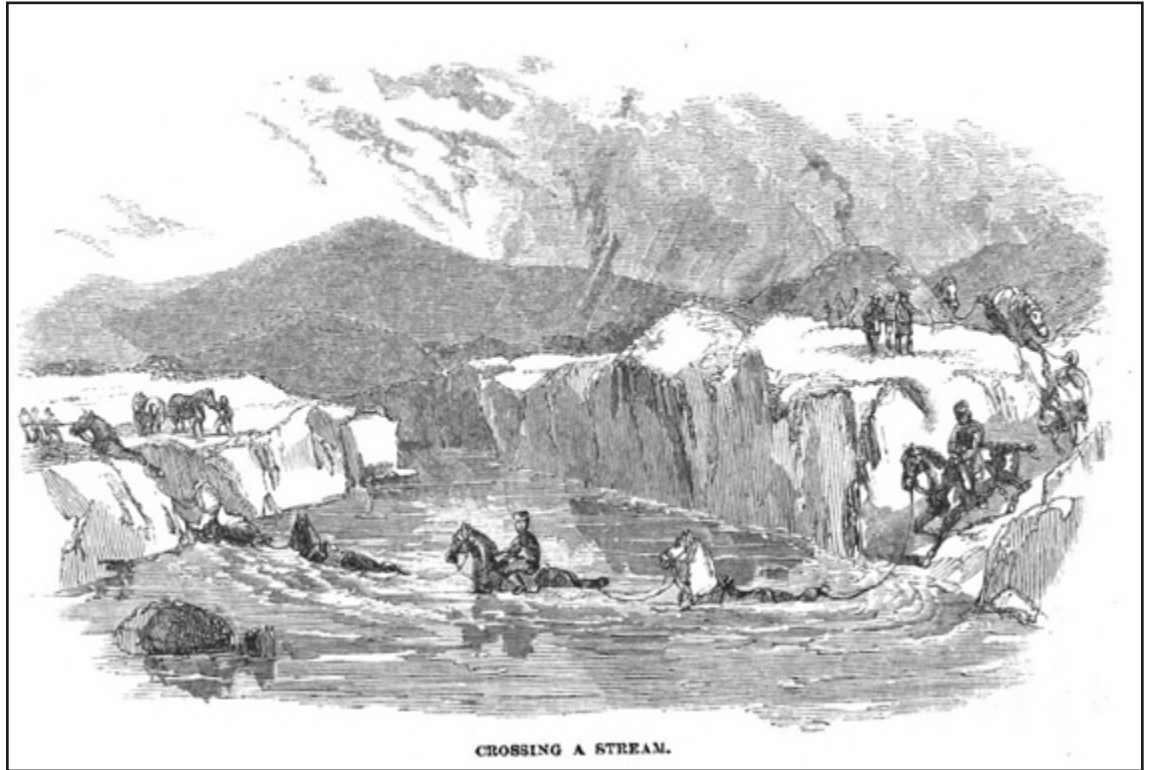
But Marcy was adamant that people on the journey not take too much gear.

"I once traveled with a party of New Yorkers en route for California," he wrote. "They ... had overloaded their wagons with almost everything except the very articles most important and necessary; the consequence was, that they exhausted their teams, and were obliged to throw away the greater part of their loading."

Both Marcy and Hastings recommended taking live cattle to butcher as needed, in addition to oxen pulling the wagons. And both warned travelers not to plan too heavily on hunting buffalo or other wildlife, because while such animals were abundant, they weren't always easy to find.

Both men also said each adult male on the journey should have a rifle and a pistol for killing animals and fending off Indians.

Marcy offered specific ad-



PUBLIC DOMAIN, "THE PRAIRIE TRAVELER," ONLINE VERSION

In this drawing from "The Prairie Traveler," Randolph Marcy showed the recommended means of crossing a stream with a string of pack horses.

vice on the merits of different draft animals. If the roads were firm, and grass was abundant or grain available, Marcy said, "I should unquestionably give the preference to mules, as they travel faster, and endure the heat of summer much better than oxen."

However, on journeys of 1,500 miles or more, with sandy or muddy roads, he said, "I believe young oxen will endure better than mules." They cost less to buy than mules, were less liable to be stolen by Natives, and made better meat if they had to be eaten.

Randolph Marcy has appeared in my columns before. During the winter of 1857-1858, he led an expedition of 65 men from Wyoming to New Mexico, through Western Colorado, to obtain supplies for Gen. Albert Sydney Johnston's Utah Expedition, which was wintering near Fort Bridger in Wyoming. Marcy and his men nearly starved after becoming snowbound and lost in the San Juan Mountains, but he eventually got them through safely.

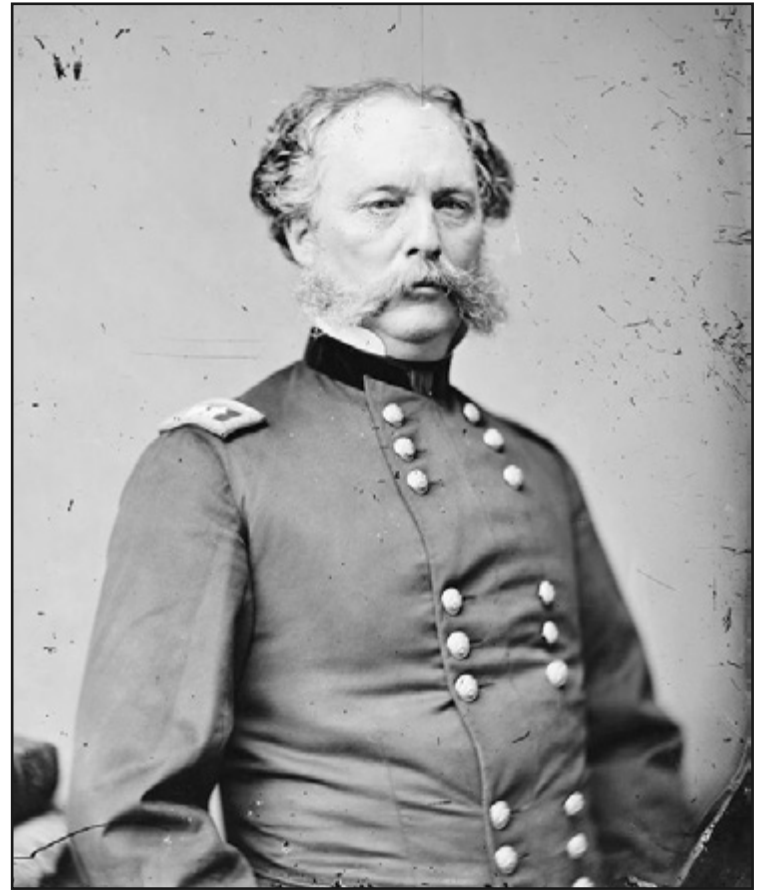
In his 1859 guidebook, Marcy paid scant attention to that earlier expedition. But it did prompt him to offer one key piece of advice to would-be travelers.

"My men, who were dressed in the (Army) regulation clothing, wore out their pants and shoes before we reached the summit of the mountains, and many of them had their feet badly frozen in consequence," he wrote.

The men covered their feet with fresh hides from cattle or mules they butchered, sewing the rawhide together with an awl and buckskin strips.

"Without the awl and buckskins we should have been unable to have repaired the shoes," he added. Those items "should never be forgotten in making up the outfit for a prairie expedition."

Marcy's guidebook was much better organized than Hastings'. By scanning the table of contents, one can



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Randolph Marcy as he appeared in 1860.

easily find information on everything from the different routes available, to ways to mend wagons to identifying friendly and antagonistic Indians.

When it was published, "The Prairie Traveler" received considerable publicity. A number of newspapers reprinted lengthy sections from it. The New York Times said, "Capt. Marcy is an excellent authority on all subjects pertaining to travel on the great plains, and instruction may be gathered from his pages."

It soon became a best seller, and is still available today. It was released the same week that Charles Dickens' "A Tale of Two Cities" reached the United States.

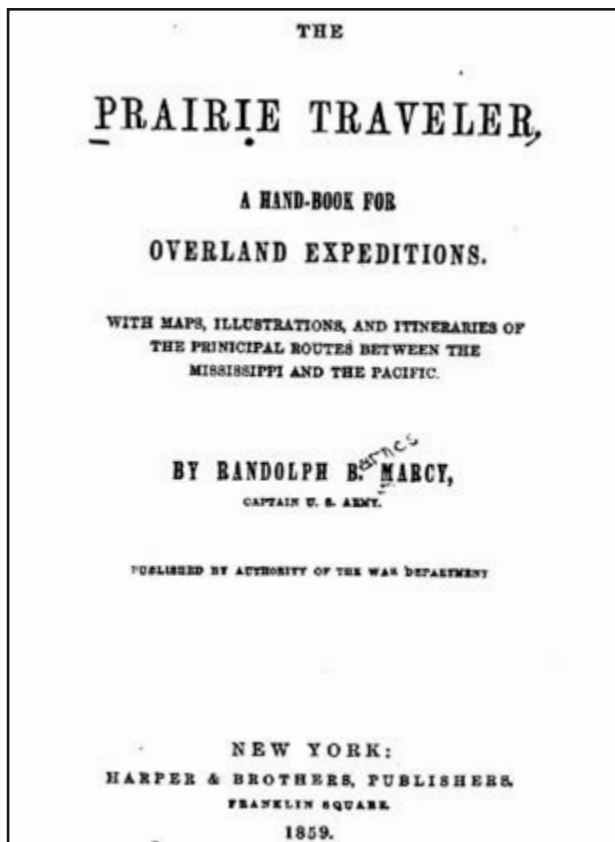
Marcy became chief of staff to his son-in-law, Union Gen. George McClellan, during the Civil War. Later, he was appointed inspector general

of the Army. He retired as a brigadier general in 1881, and died in 1887 in New Jersey.

Lansford Hastings became a major in the Confederate army and prepared a plan, which was never acted upon, to have the Confederacy grab control of California. After the war, he briefly joined other Confederate veterans at a pro-slavery colony in Brazil. He contracted yellow fever and died in the Virgin Islands in 1870.

Sources: "The Prairie Traveler," by Randolph B. Marcy; "Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California," by Lansford W. Hastings; "The Donner Party," at www.digitalhistory.uh.edu; "Oregon Trail Chronology," at www.historicalcoregoncity.org; early newspaper articles from www.newspapers.com; Wikipedia.

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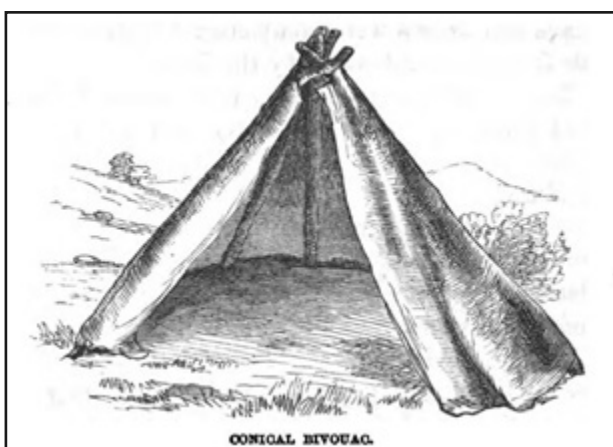
PUBLIC DOMAIN

Title page of Captain Randolph Marcy's handbook for overland travelers.



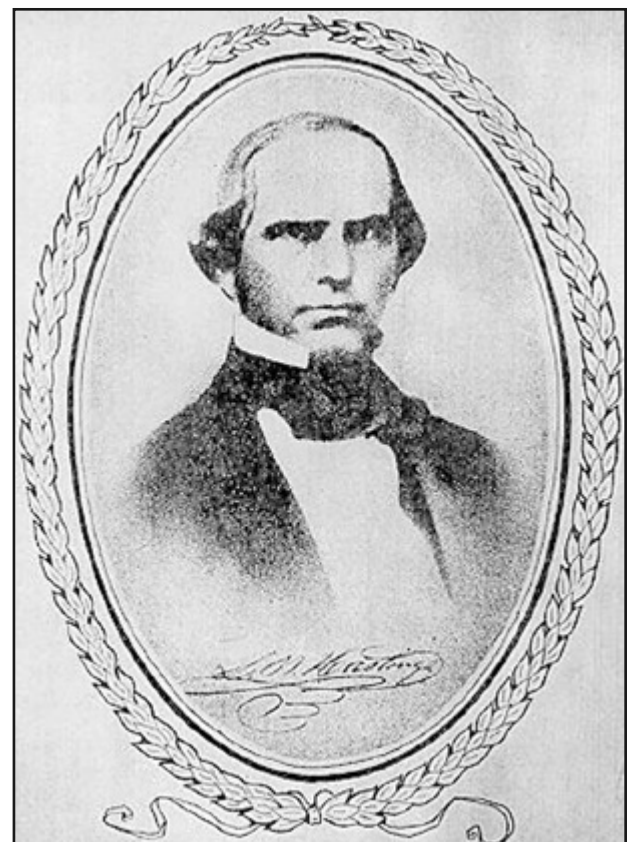
PUBLIC DOMAIN, "THE PRAIRIE TRAVELER"

One example of an easily constructed shelter for travelers.



PUBLIC DOMAIN, "THE PRAIRIE TRAVELER"

Another easily constructed shelter for travelers.



PUBLIC DOMAIN THROUGH WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Lansford Hastings as he appeared at the time his guidebook was published in 1845.