

Painting by John Mix Stanley

Blazing a Trail to Oregon

Jumping-Off at St. Joe

by Morris Werner

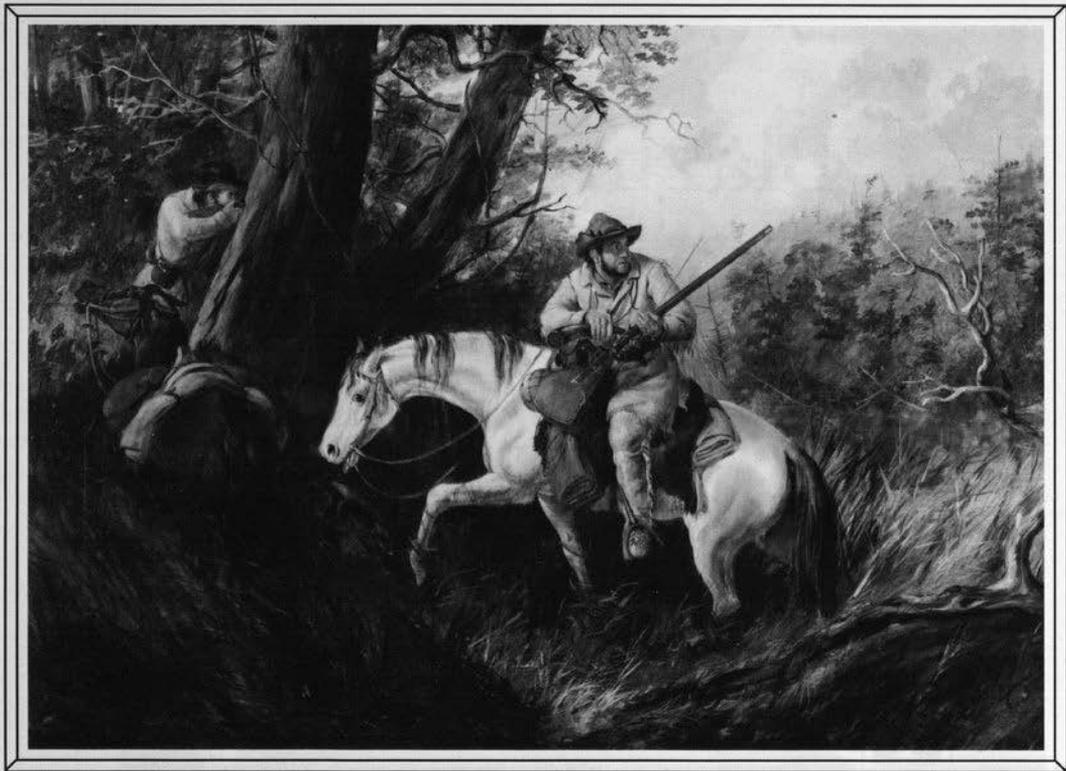


The year 1844 marked the beginning of emigration to the West Coast from the St. Joseph, Missouri area. St. Joseph was founded in 1843 by Joseph Robidoux near his 1827 trading post. In 1844, it was a new and rapidly growing town and offered many advantages over the Independence/Westport rendezvous of 1841-1843. The route was many miles shorter and eliminated the major hazard of the Kansas River crossing. Moreover, many families participating in the westward movement were from the Platte Purchase counties of northwestern Missouri in the St. Joseph and Weston vicinity. Added to the state of Missouri in 1836 by a treaty with the resident Indian tribes, the Platte Purchase attracted many restless, dynamic, and ambitious frontiersmen from the states west of the Alleghenies. Now, less than ten years later, some were ready to push on. Oregon and California were foreign countries in 1844 but the new settlers confidently expected to change all that; Manifest Destiny was in the air. Oregon was up for grabs under a joint occupation treaty with Great Britain, and the first settlers expected to be rewarded with a free section of land, although legislation had not yet been passed by Congress.¹

In 1844, the Cornelius "Neal" Gilliam party blazed a completely new wagon road from St. Joseph westward to intersect the original Oregon and California road from Independence. Popularly known as the Oregon Trail, the emigrant road to Oregon and California branched from the Santa Fe Trail west of present Gardner in Johnson

Morris Werner retired in 1988 after twenty-five years with the architectural firm of Earl Swensson Associates, Nashville, Tennessee. He grew up on a farm near Corning, Nemaha County, and received his B.S. in architecture in 1948 from Kansas State College. His membership with the Oregon and California Trails Association inspired him to pursue research for this article.

1. John D. Unruh, Jr., *The Plains Across* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979); Merrill J. Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1969); Merrill J. Mattes, *Platte River Road Narratives* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988).



Painting by Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait

County and was pioneered by the fur traders in the 1830s. It variously was known as the Independence or Westport Road to distinguish it from feeder trails serving later Missouri River rendezvous points. Members of Gilliam's company called it "Burnett's Trace" with reference to Peter Burnett who had led the "Great Migration" to Oregon in 1843.²

Gilliam had advertised in the summer of 1843 that he would lead an emigrant party to Oregon in the spring, and that the rendezvous would be on the Missouri River's right bank opposite Owen's Landing (present Amazonia, Missouri). Camp was set up on March 9 as scheduled, and the journey

commenced on May 9. Eventually the party consisted of eighty-four wagons and 370 persons when organized west of the Iowa, Sac and Fox Presbyterian Mission.³

Neal Gilliam was a leader of the type frequently encountered on the frontier. According to his daughter, Martha Elizabeth (Gilliam) Collins (five years old in 1844), he was a personal friend and political ally of Presidents James Monroe and James K. Polk. Gilliam had served in the Black Hawk and Seminole Indian wars, and he had held elective office in Missouri as a sheriff and a state legislator. He was also an ordained minister, and as Martha Collins said, "he was used to

2. Burnett's "Great Migration" consisted of almost a thousand persons and large herds of livestock. For major sources on Cornelius Gilliam see E. E. Parrish, *Diary of Rev. Edward Evans Parrish: Crossing the Plains in 1844* (Fairfield, Wash.: Ye Galleon Press, 1988) (reprinted from *Transactions of the Sixteenth Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association*, 1888); John Minto, "The Oregon Trail in 1844," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 2 (June 1901); and Louise Barry, *The Beginning of the West* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1972).

3. Barry, *Beginning of the West*, 578-79, 1071. Amazonia is the locale of the Savannah Landings. Nicholas C. Owens started a tobacco warehouse here in 1842 and was succeeded by Charles and William Caples in about 1846. A ferry began operation after this date and the area was known as Caples' Landing until Nodaway City was platted in 1849. In 1851, the settlement was officially renamed Boston. Several veterans of the Gilliam party refer to "Caples' Landing" in their memoirs.

having people do what he wanted." No doubt Gilliam expected to further his political ambitions in the new territory and take advantage of the free land offered to settlers who would help secure Oregon for the United States. Probably Gilliam's selection to command also can be attributed to the fact that the party was composed of several related families, including Gilliam's married sons, daughters, and brothers-in-law who could be counted on to support him.⁴

Extensive rainfall and consequent flooding of 1844, which have become legend, caused delays and hardships from the beginning. The topography of the area was only vaguely understood, although general knowledge existed as to the course of Wolf River and the Big Nemaha. West of the South Fork of the Big Nemaha was a largely uncharted region. James Clyman, traveling west on the Independence Road in 1844 with Nathaniel Ford's party, speculated in his journal on June 4 that a better route might exist "Taking the high lands between the Kansas and wolf river still Keeping west after passing wolf river between the Nimihaw and Kansas untill you pass the heads of the Nimihaw."⁵ This was precisely the plan that Cornelius Gilliam was in the process of carrying out.

During the almost continuous rainfall of the first six weeks, small creeks became raging torrents, and larger streams overflowed their banks and covered their floodplains from bluff to bluff. A week was required to get the entire party across Wolf River east of the Great Nemaha Subagency when Gilliam's temporary bridge washed away on May 12. Once beyond the subagency, Gilliam was on his own.⁶ His route from the head of Wolf River to intersect the Independence Road south of the Black Vermillion is not certainly known. Maj. Clifton Wharton, however, followed part of Gilliam's trail in August of the same year and Col. Stephen W. Kearny's expedition in May 1845, also sheds light on this area.⁷

John Minto, a member of Gilliam's company, approximated their route many years later as follows:

We followed the Nimahaw [*sic*] divide to near the southern head, where we came to the main Oregon Trail from Independence, Missouri, on the drainage into the Blue Fork of the Kansas. Colonel Ford's company had just passed westward, and had driven across a small stream called the Black Vermillion.

The nearest I can now trace the route by names or position is by towns on or near the route. Leaving the agency of the Sacs and Foxes, we passed via Hamlin, Fairview, Woodlawn, and Centralia, crossing Black Vermillion River near Bassett [*sic*]; thence to crossing of Big Blue, north of its junction with Little Blue; thence west and north to Hanover. . . .⁸

In August 1844, Wharton followed Gilliam's trail from the head of Wolf River to the South Fork of the Nemaha. The map accompanying Wharton's report is quite vague. He was as ill informed of the geography of the region as Gilliam, although he was accompanied by Jim Rogers, a seventy-two-year-old Delaware Indian guide.⁹ Supposing that Gilliam knew where he was going, Wharton followed his trail into a cul-de-sac formed by the South Fork of the Nemaha and an eastern tributary. Wharton's description of this dead-end pocket conforms perfectly with the point of land formed by the intersection of Harris Creek and the South Fork. In his report for August 17, 1844, Wharton stated:

the timber . . . was that of the *Nemehas*, which we had on either hand, and that we had got by following the Emigrants into a sort of *Cul de sac*. Yet, it was but reasonable to follow them . . . [since] it is understood they always start with Guides perfectly acquainted with the country. . . . Early after starting this morning we found ourselves on a ridge with evidently plenty of water, as indicated by timber, on each hand—

4. Fred Lockley, ed., "Reminiscences of Mrs. Frank Collins, nee Martha Elizabeth Gilliam," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 17 (December 1916): 358-60, 366.

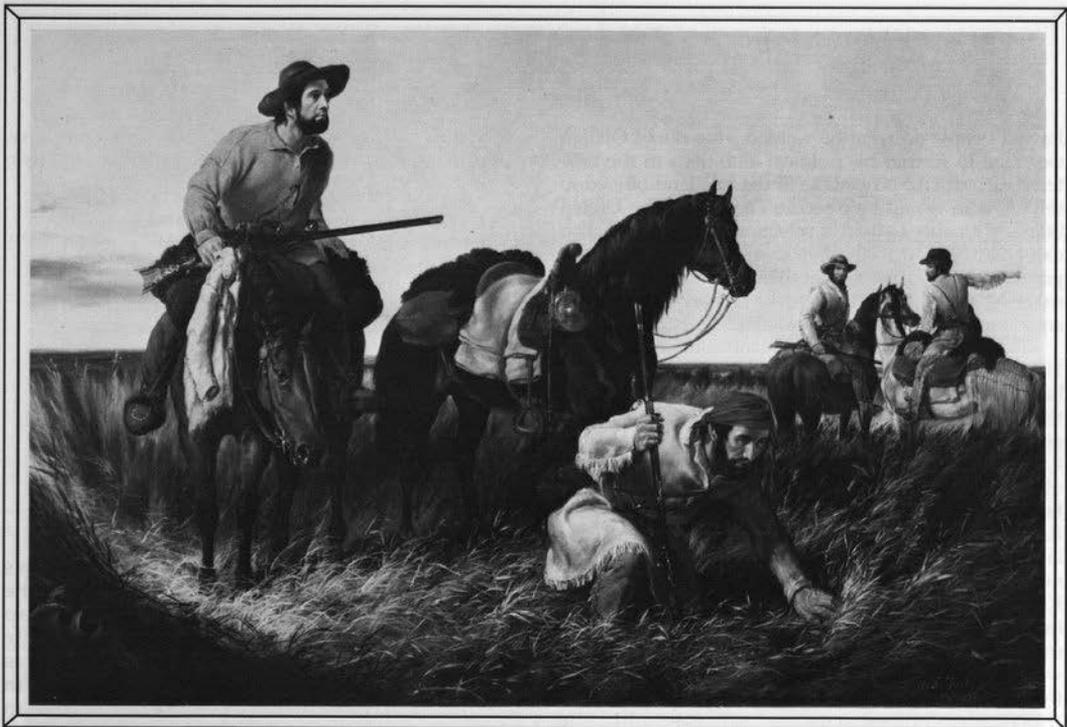
5. James Clyman, "His Diaries and Reminiscences," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 4 (December 1925): 313. Nathaniel Ford's company formally organized on May 25 at the Wakarusa River crossing, south of present Lawrence. Gilliam's company and components of Ford's company were intermixed during much of the journey to Oregon.

6. Barry, *Beginning of the West*, 508-11.

7. Clifton Wharton, "The Expedition of Major Clifton Wharton in 1844," *Kansas Historical Collections 1923-1925* 16 (1925): 272; Barry, *Beginning of the West*, 545-46, 608-9.

8. John Minto, "The Oregon Trail in 1844," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 2 (June 1901): 134. The location of the Black Vermillion crossing should have been Barrett, not "Bassett."

9. J. Henry Carleton, *The Prairie Logbooks* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983): 17. Jim Rogers had accompanied Lt. John C. Fremont's expedition to the Rocky Mountains in 1842, but was totally unfamiliar with the area they now were traversing. He was, in all probability, a Shawnee rather than a Delaware Indian. See Barry, *Beginning of the West*, 483.



Painting by Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait

the timber of the right and left sometimes not being more than three quarters of a mile apart.¹⁰

Although a suitable crossing of the South Fork was later established at future Richmond, Kansas, about two miles north of present Seneca, the steep bluffs on the east side and high water which Wharton estimated at twenty feet above bank-full, caused Gilliam to retrace his course and locate a crossing higher up stream (farther south).¹¹

Wharton estimated that the emigrants lost two days' travel time in this area and noted two recent graves, one was that of a child. Wharton then ascended the river "three or four miles" to a crossing where the course of the river was from southeast to northwest. He

camped between two small waterfalls, probably near Maxwell Spring, east of present Seneca. Crossing the South Fork, Wharton abandoned Gilliam's trail and attempted to travel due west to the Big Blue. This route cut across the extensive northern tributaries of the Black Vermillion, and his report reflects the attendant problems and tortuous winding of his course, sometimes south, sometimes north, and at other times even eastward, to find a suitable passage for his wagons. After seven miles, Wharton regretted his decision and considered a detour to the south to "regain the great ridge which we here left." Estimating that this would cost him twenty miles' travel, he decided to proceed, no doubt painfully aware that Gilliam had taken the longer southern route.¹²

10. Wharton, "The Expedition of Major Clifton Wharton in 1844," 277.

11. The Richmond mentioned here was located in Nemaha County from 1855 to 1859 and should not be confused with present Richmond, Franklin County, Kansas. See Robert W. Baughman, *Kansas Post Offices* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1961), 108.

12. Wharton, "The Expedition of Major Clifton Wharton in 1844," 277-78; Barry, *Beginning of the West*, 509; Carleton, *The Prairie Logbooks*, 30. Both Wharton and staff member Lt. J. Henry Carleton believed that the South Fork of the Big Nemaha wrapped around the head of Wolf River from the southeast, perhaps mistaking heavily timbered Tennessee Creek as the course of the South Fork. Interpreting E. E. Parrish's journal in the same light suggests that he mistook Tennessee Creek for the main river, and actually crossed the South Fork near the mouth of Illinois Creek on June 1.

Gilliam's route from the South Fork of the Nemaha to the Independence Road is not known. Because of high water and muddy lowlands, he probably passed southwest around the head of the Black Vermillion east of present Centralia and traveled west on the divide south of the river. A more direct route, known as the Ohio Settlements Road, was developed during territorial days, but this route, even if known to Gilliam, required two crossings of the Black Vermillion and heavy going in the creek bottoms.

The delay between May 31, when Gilliam crossed the South Fork on a temporary bridge, and June 7, when he finally moved up to attempt a crossing of the Black Vermillion, was not caused by high water but by lack of leadership. The birth of a baby in the Sager family on the thirty-first caused two days' delay at the South Fork, and the illness of one of Gilliam's married daughters, Mrs. Alec Gage, delayed them another day and a half after reaching Burnett's Trace (Independence Road) on June 5.¹³ Ten wagons of Nathaniel Ford's company from Independence successfully forded the stream on the fifth, but two weeks were to elapse before Gilliam was able to construct rafts and cross his wagons on June 17, 18, and 19.¹⁴ The Rev. Edward E. Parrish, John Minto, and others were unhappy with Gilliam for not pursuing a more aggressive course. Although Mrs. Gage was pregnant and delivered a baby on August 3 just beyond Ft. Laramie, individual illness was not considered a reason to delay the whole caravan. Later, on the South Platte River in Nebraska, Gilliam was to resign his command, and the party split into several smaller companies, without an overall commander.

Colonel Kearny's expedition in 1845 crossed the St. Joseph Trail at only one place, but it clearly establishes the point on the divide between Wolf River and Walnut Creek where the emigrants turned nearly due south to head the Walnut Creek tributaries. It might be argued that Kearny encountered the emigrant trail again in the vicinity of present Fairview. As Lt. J. Henry Carleton of Kearny's staff wrote on May 21, 1845, they had

crossed a divide late in the afternoon and camped on a Nemaha tributary (perhaps Walnut Creek).

On this divide . . . the Oregon trace from St. Joseph runs, and where we intersected it, it bore due south: evidently making an immense detour to avoid the branches of the Nemaha that here cut up the country in every direction like the sticks of a fan. Our course is nearly the chord of the arc it describes, but that trace [the emigrants'] keeps clear of the streams, while ours passed them with but little trouble.¹⁵

K

earny's troops continued northwest to the rock bottom crossing later known as Baker's Ford on the South Fork, which became the established route of the St. Joseph and California Road. Carleton described:

[C]rossed the main river [South Fork] on a smooth limestone ford, several miles higher up than we did on the Pawnee Campaign. We fell into the trace made at that time from the left at 11 o'clock a.m. and followed it for eight miles, when we came to a very miry creek running to our right [Negro Creek?], which we were obliged to bridge. The old trail crosses the same creek two miles higher up by bearing away to the south and describing a half circle. We fell into it again from the right [?] about two o'clock p.m. and kept it then till we arrived at the 'sulphur spring,' where we encamped.

Carleton apparently meant that the crossing of the South Fork was farther north than in 1844; it is actually downstream from the confluence of Harris Creek and the South Fork. From this point, Kearny continued west until he intercepted Wharton's 1844 trace and camped at the same sulphur spring that Wharton had encountered the previous year. He then turned south over a "vast elevated and nearly level plain" to cross the Big Blue River near present Marysville.¹⁶

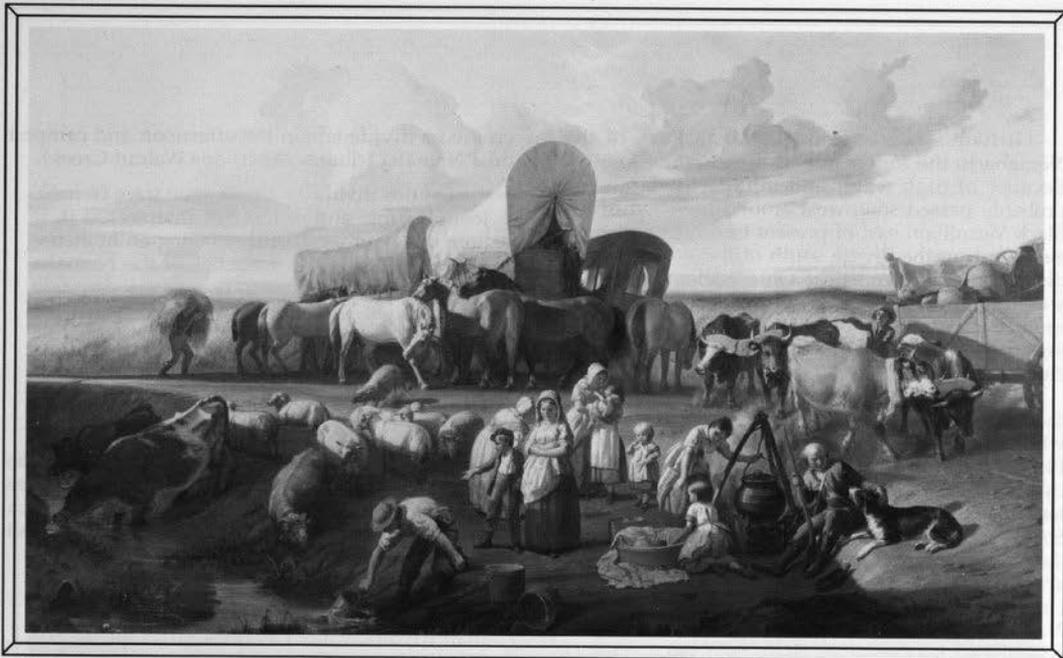
The 1845 and 1846 emigrants may have followed Kearny's new route. In any event, William Findley's journal shows that the Abraham Hackleman company from St. Joseph crossed the Big Blue River

13. Parrish, *Diary of Rev. Edward Evans Parrish*, 10-11. Both Henry and Naomi Sager died en route to Oregon, and their seven children, including baby Henrietta, were turned over to Marcus and Narcissa Whitman. Tragedy continued to stalk the orphans. The two boys were killed in the Whitman Massacre, and Louisa, age six, died during captivity. The rest of the girls were rescued by Peter Skene Ogden in December 1847. See Catherine Sager Pringle, *Across the Plains in 1844* (Fairfield, Wash.: Ye Galleon Press, 1989).

14. Barry, *Beginning of the West*, 509-11.

15. *Ibid.*, 545-46.

16. Carleton, *The Prairie Logbooks*, 176. The crossing Carleton described is on the farm now owned by Jim and Betty Sudbeck of Bern, Kansas.



Painting by Benjamin Franklin Reinhart

before intersecting the Independence Road, probably near present Marysville. Some of the 1845 emigrants, however, were ahead of Kearny, and their route beyond the head of Wolf River cannot be positively identified. It is probable that the William T'Vault, Solomon Tetherow, and Samuel Parker companies from St. Joseph followed Gilliam's trace in 1845.¹⁷ Word of the difficulties encountered by Gilliam and Wharton no doubt convinced later parties to seek a better route, and knowledge of Kearny's mission to explore a less difficult road probably induced emigrant companies after 1845 to follow his lead.

Francis Parkman, accompanied by his cousin, Quincy Shaw, three British sportsmen and five assorted servants, set out from Fort Leavenworth in May 1846 for a summer of adventure.¹⁸ Their intention was to follow the trail of Wharton and Kearny to its intersection with the St. Joseph emigrant trail, and proceed west to Fort Laramie. A detachment of the First Dragoons was one day ahead of them, on

their way to Table Creek on the Missouri River just below Council Bluffs. Their mission was to meet a boatload of supplies from Fort Leavenworth and construct Old Fort Kearny. This is approximately the same trail Marcus and Narcissa Whitman followed in 1836 to meet the fur trader caravan at Belvue, Nebraska. After passing near the Kickapoo trading post north of Ft. Leavenworth, Parkman lost the trail. He found it again near Pascal Pensineau's trading post on Stranger Creek, at present Potter. He looked in vain for Clough Creek (South Fork of Wolf River) where Wharton and Kearny had diverged to the left.¹⁹ Following the dragoons on what Wharton and Parkman called the "Council Bluffs Trail," they were eventually overtaken by four dragoon deserters who told them they were on the road leading to the Iowa village and subagency. In fact, Sac and Fox Indians occupied villages on Wolf River south of the subagency, which was located on the boundary line between the two reserves. These villages existed at

17. Barry, *Beginning of the West*, 538-41.

18. Mason Wade, ed., *The Journals of Francis Parkman*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947), 2: 423-24.

19. Clough Creek was named for Private Clough, a member of Maj. Clifton Wharton's expedition to the Pawnee villages in 1844. He died on August 14 at Wharton's first campsite west of Independence Creek. The creek's name has not survived to the present.

future Hooper's Ford, about one mile east of present Leona, and at future Bayne's Crossing, three miles northeast of present Severance. No doubt the dragoons had one of these villages in mind.²⁰ Sometime in 1844, these Sac and Fox villages were attacked by Pawnee Indians who claimed the land that had been granted in 1836 by the federal government as a reservation for the Iowa, Sac and Fox Indians.²¹

On Sunday, May 16, Parkman wrote that they crossed a deep creek (Wolf River) and had great trouble with the wagons. "Nooned here—a beautiful spot. . . S[haw] and I set out in advance to find the Iowa village, but without success. Struck the St. Joseph's trail. Followed it for many miles over a vast, swelling prairie with scarcely any trees in sight. . . . Camped on a spot occupied about a week since by the Mormons."²² The Mormons, driven from their homes in Nauvoo, Illinois, in February, were thought to be en route to Utah in the summer of 1846. The only organized Mormon company, however, to cross the plains in 1846 was the Mormon Battalion, enlisted by General Kearny to fight in the Mexican War. But overlanders in 1846 were extremely wary of Mormons, fearing reprisals for the brutal treatment meted out by the mobs in Illinois and Missouri.²³

Very little tangible evidence of the 1844 emigration can be positively identified today. The Missouri River has changed course and destroyed Gilliam's campsite in Burr Oak Bottoms opposite present Amazonia and his road to the mouth of Smith Creek. The trail up Smith Creek has since been replaced by a modern county road, a portion of which lies very close to the original route.²⁴

A water powered grist mill was constructed in 1838 by the U.S. government north of Troy, Kansas,

near the emigrant trail crossing of Mill Creek (now Mosquito Creek). Iowa treaty funds in the amount of \$2,800 were expended on this project, but in a few years Indians burned the mill in a gesture of defiance. It was probably destroyed before 1844, since neither Minto nor Parrish mentioned it in their journals.²⁵ Only the millstone has been preserved, and it is now exhibited at the Iowa, Sac and Fox Presbyterian Mission. Later emigrant parties reported treetop platforms of Indian dead at Mosquito Creek, but this practice was discouraged by the missionaries who constructed caskets for their communicants.

The Kansas territorial surveys record the old California Road westward from the top of the bluffs at the head of Smith Creek. About one-half mile of this trail, where it descends to the crossing of Wolf River in S27 T2S R20E, still exists as a dead-end farm road. Except for the addition of a thin layer of crushed rock, this road probably looks much as it did in emigrant days. No grader ditches, culverts, or fences mar the landscape. All evidence of the Wolf River crossing was destroyed when the river was dredged and straightened just prior to World War I.

The log buildings of the subagency, constructed in 1842, have long since disappeared, and only part of the brick and stone Presbyterian Mission, built the following year, still stands. A large communal bark house east of Wolf River, belonging to the Iowa Indians and visited by Minto, also is gone. The five double log houses, constructed by the U.S. government in 1842 for selected Iowa tribesmen, survived only a few years before their owners removed doors, windows, and hardware in exchange for liquor and trinkets.²⁶

A member of Gilliam's party named Bishop, traveling alone for health reasons, died on May 12 at Wolf River and was buried at the mission. (Death occurred at Mosquito Creek, according to Parrish.) The Rev. William Hamilton, one of the missionaries, conducted the funeral while some of the more unruly members of the company noisily raced their horses with Indian braves nearby.

20. P. L. Gray, *Gray's Doniphan County History*, pt. 2 (Bendena, Kans.: Roycroft Press, 1905), 136.

21. *Ibid.*, pt. 1, 34.

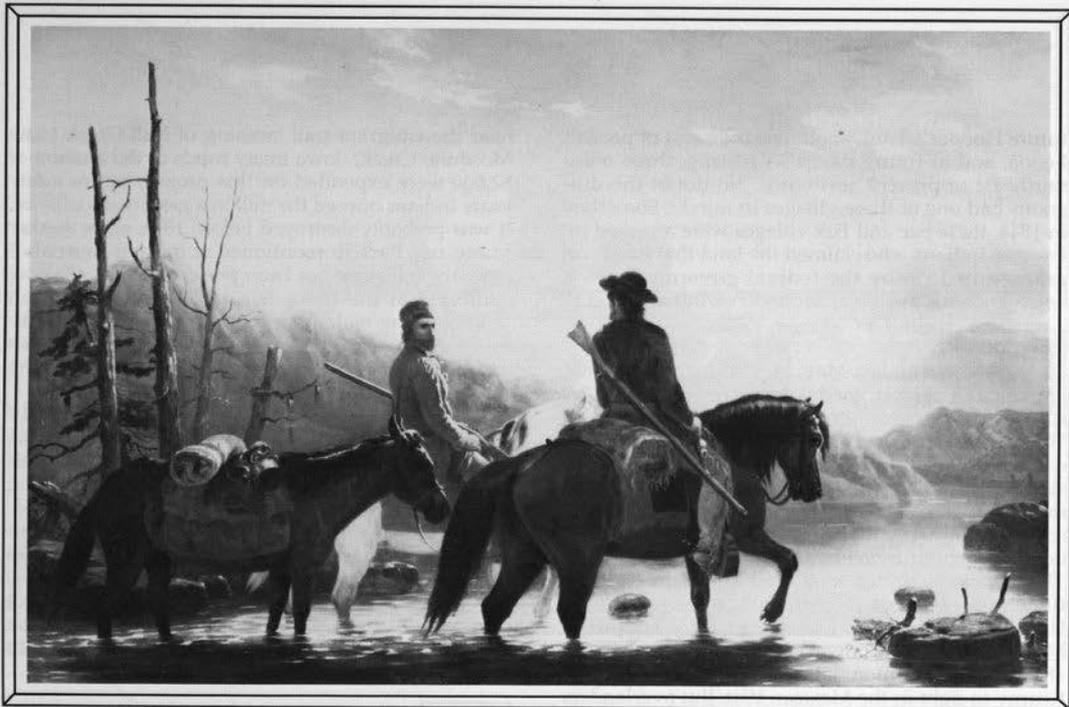
22. Wade, ed., *Journals of Francis Parkman*, 2: 423-24. Several individual Mormon families traveled the Oregon Trail in 1846, and Parkman states in his book, *The Oregon Trail*, ed. E. N. Feltsgog (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969) that he was aware of rumors to this effect.

23. Emigrant attitudes toward Mormons in 1846 are covered in some detail by J. Kenneth Davies, "Thomas Rhoads, Forgotten Mormon Pioneer of 1846," *Nebraska History* 64 (Spring 1983): 81-95.

24. Smith Creek empties into the Missouri River at the foot of the Kansas bluffs. It provided a relatively easy wagon access to the interior. It was named for John E. Smith who founded Smithton in 1855, a small village which catered to emigrant needs in the 1850s and 1860s. J. S. Bird, *Historical Plat Book of Doniphan County, Kansas* (Chicago: 1882), 44.

25. A. R. Graves, "Reminiscences," in *Illustrated Doniphan County: Supplement to The Weekly Kansas Chief* (Troy, Kans.: *Kansas Chief*, 1916), 344. See also the statement by the Rev. Samuel M. Irvin, *ibid.*, 8.

26. Roy W. Meyer, "The Iowa Indians, 1836-1885," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 28 (Autumn 1962): 276.



Painting by William Ranney

Bishop's "costly and complete outfit" was turned over to the mission and subagency for their use.²⁷

Breaking camp on May 15, the emigrants moved out on the prairie about eight miles, probably at the head of Roy's Creek, known by early settlers as Prairie Springs.²⁸ Here, on May 20, they organized as a civil and military body, electing Cornelius "Neal" Gilliam, general; Michael T. Simmons, colonel; and Willard H. Rees, adjutant. The party was divided into three companies captained by Robert W. Morrison, William Shaw, and Richard Woodcock. A fourth company was founded under Capt. Allen Saunders on May 26.²⁹ Apparently the four compa-

nies did not always travel together. Both Parrish and Minto confirmed that the Woodcock company moved out ahead of the others, setting a quicker pace. Samuel Black Crockett noted in his journal on May 27 that the Woodcock company had "missed the way and turned back," and had camped "on the main Nimihaw" while "the other three companies had encamped on the same stream." Apparently the Woodcock company traveled well in advance of the others for most of the journey, although the question remained how the group was able to consistently maintain its lead.³⁰

On May 21, the Gilliam parties moved farther out on the prairie and celebrated the wedding of Martin Gilliam and Elizabeth Asabill, the Reverend Parrish performing the ceremony. On the twenty-second, at a camp on a Nemaha tributary (probably Walnut Creek), they were robbed of six prime beef and their stock was stampeded by Indians from the subagency. Pursuing the culprits on horseback for

27. Minto, "The Oregon Trail in 1844," 132; Barry, *Beginning of the West*, 508.

28. George A. Root, "Ferries in Kansas. Part XI—Great Nemaha River," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 5 (November 1936): 378-80. Roy's Creek was named for John Baptiste Roy (or LeRoy) who married an Iowa Indian woman and in 1844, succeeded Jeffrey Dorney (or Dorion) as interpreter for the Iowa Indians. He operated a trading post and ferry at the old Pawnee village near the confluence of Roy's Creek and the Big Nemaha on the Kansas-Nebraska border.

29. Parrish, *Diary of Rev. Edward Evans Parrish*, 9.

30. Thomas Rumer, *The Wagon Trains of 1844* (Spokane, Wash.: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1990), 154-55.

eight or ten miles, they found where the Indians had butchered four animals and killed the other two. Proceeding on to the subagency, and arriving about dark, the emigrants demanded replacement of their stock, to which agent William P. Richardson agreed. As insurance, Gilliam demanded the surrender of the guilty parties. Upon their surrender, Gilliam held them hostage at the camp until all stampeded stock was rounded up. The return to camp took all day, indicating that they were at least twenty-five miles from the subagency.

On the ridge separating Harris Creek and the South Fork of the Nemaha are the two graves Wharton identified, exact location unknown.³¹ These were the first of many overlanders buried nearby in the next twenty-five years. Death was a constant companion of emigrant parties, and the major trails became bordered with graves thickly clustered at campsites such as Maxwell Spring.

Wharton did not cross the South Fork at the same place as Gilliam. Gilliam's temporary bridge of logs, brush, and earth probably had been swept away by high water within a few days, although his approach ramps should have remained. Wharton found twenty-foot perpendicular banks which required several hours to cut down and make passable for his vehicles when he crossed on August 18, 1844.³² If the two waterfalls he described could be located, they would define his crossing, but this portion of the South Fork also has been dredged and straightened in recent years.

Somewhere on the divide south of the Black Vermillion it may be assumed that the Gilliam company's rut swales still exist. Even though no other emigrant party may have followed their tracks, Gilliam's wagon wheels cut deeply into the rain soaked earth. The subsequent heavy rains most certainly left scars still visible on virgin prairie hillsides. Unfortunately, Gilliam's swales cannot be distinguished from those of more recent origin.

31. Carleton, *The Prairie Logbooks*, 28. The adult's grave was encountered somewhere east of the South Fork, perhaps near the head of Tennessee Creek. Carleton was mistaken in believing that it was the grave of "General" Gilliam's wife. Neither Minto nor Parrish recorded these deaths in their journals.

32. *Ibid.*, 31. Wharton camped at Gilliam's campsite and crossed the South Fork at this point. Carleton says that Gilliam's party "turned back and 'headed it' (South Fork), bearing off to the south and circling around between it and the Blue."

The Black Vermillion has two major southern tributaries, and Gilliam probably crossed them in their upper reaches. If he was lucky, he found the excellent crossing of Irish Creek (South Fork of Black Vermillion) one mile south of future Wyoming (present Lillis). A good crossing of the Clear Fork also existed at future LaGrange, but if Gilliam crossed here he would have intercepted the Independence Road much farther from the Black Vermillion than the reported distance. Apparently this portion of the journey was made without incident, covering the estimated thirty-five mile distance in two and one-half days, about average for ox teams.

The next point on Gilliam's itinerary that can be identified with certainty is where he intersected Burnett's Trace within two miles of the Black Vermillion crossing. John Minto's description of the area confirms that this was, indeed, the trail as mapped by the public land surveys. Minto roamed the countryside during the two-week rain delay and commented upon a dome-shaped hill which he called "Blue Mound." This is probably the hill located about one-half mile east of the ford, but Parrish speaks of "Blue Mounds on Flint Ridge," apparently on the west side of Clear Fork. Probably covered with cedars in 1844, "Blue Mound" had a man-made appearance to Minto. He also reported firing into flocks of passenger pigeons and noted seeing two red deer. He remembered seeing two wild turkeys in the bottoms of the South Fork of the Nemaha, and prairie chickens were plentiful, but in general, he reported that game was scarce.³³

James Clyman, veteran fur trader and a member of Ford's company, crossed Burr Oak Creek (Black Vermillion) on June 24 and "found the date of Mr. Gillham's company having crossed four days previous." North of the Black Vermillion he wrote: "Today struck our old trail made on our return from the mountains in 1827. . . . Some points look quite familiar . . . our evening camp in particular." This creek was designated "Middle Camp Creek" by Clyman, who stated that it was about five miles from the Big Blue River.³⁴ Presently called "Elm Creek" on modern U.S. Geological Survey maps, it was known as "Mosquito Creek" on the survey's 1886 Marysville 30-Minute quadrangle.

33. Minto, "The Oregon Trail in 1844," 137.

34. Clyman, "His Diaries and Reminiscences," 318.



attended him to his grave in this greate wilderness of Prairie which stretches in all most all directions beyond the field of vision."³⁷

Gilliam's further travels followed the original Oregon Trail and will not be discussed in the context of this article. It was June 25 before his party finished crossing the Big Blue River near Alcove Spring. Although Minto was nearly drowned in swimming the cattle over the flood-swollen stream, Richard Woodcock had left rafts which made their ferrying operations simpler than at the Black Vermillion.³⁸

In spite of the fact that floods and indecisive leadership delayed Gilliam's party nearly six weeks, they were able to cross the Blue Mountains of Oregon and enter the Willamette Valley in late October and early November without major hardships. In future years, overlanders who reached the Blue Mountains later than September could count on severe problems with snow and freezing weather.

The Oregon pioneers of the 1840s formed the nucleus of the civil and economic life of the region for the next thirty years, although not all remained in Oregon. In 1848, Gilliam was chosen by his neighbors to lead them against the Cayuse Indians, and he lost his life in an unfortunate firearms accident. With his untimely death, his wife was granted only half of the 640 acres promised by the U.S. government when the time came to prove up. Given Gilliam's patriotic service, the family bitterly resented this loss.³⁹

In the years following 1844, St. Joseph became an important outfitting point for emigrants. By 1849 it was admirably positioned to service the thousands of gold seekers who poured across the Missouri River at Duncan's Ferry and up-river points. Following several years of gradual decline, the discovery of gold in Colorado in 1859 coupled with completion of the Hannibal and St. Joseph Railroad, produced another boom in St. Joseph's economy. Because of the rail connection, St. Joseph became the eastern terminus of the Pony Express in 1860-1861. Railway construction and decline of river traffic after the Civil War meant the end of overland emigrant travel, but while it lasted, St. Joseph claimed more millionaires per capita than any other city in the United States. KLI

upper limits to include the trail crossing, but the normal water level is forty feet below the floor of the valley. Timber has been cleared and the neighboring villages of Barrett and Bigelow have been demolished, as well as many farm structures. Truly, the scene has reverted to the solitary grandeur that Clyman had described.

On June 30, another of Sublette's invalids, a Mr. Ketchum, died ten miles west of the Big Blue River crossing and was buried on a small stream known during emigrant days as Ketchum's Creek or Ten Mile Branch. The grave is some five miles southeast of the intersection of the road that Kearny established in 1845 and the original Oregon Trail from Independence. Clyman stated that "Mr. Ketchum was [a] young man his Brother came with him and

37. Clyman, "His Diaries and Reminiscences," 322.

38. Barry, *Beginning of the West*, 509.

39. Lockley, "Reminiscences of Mrs. Frank Collins," 365.