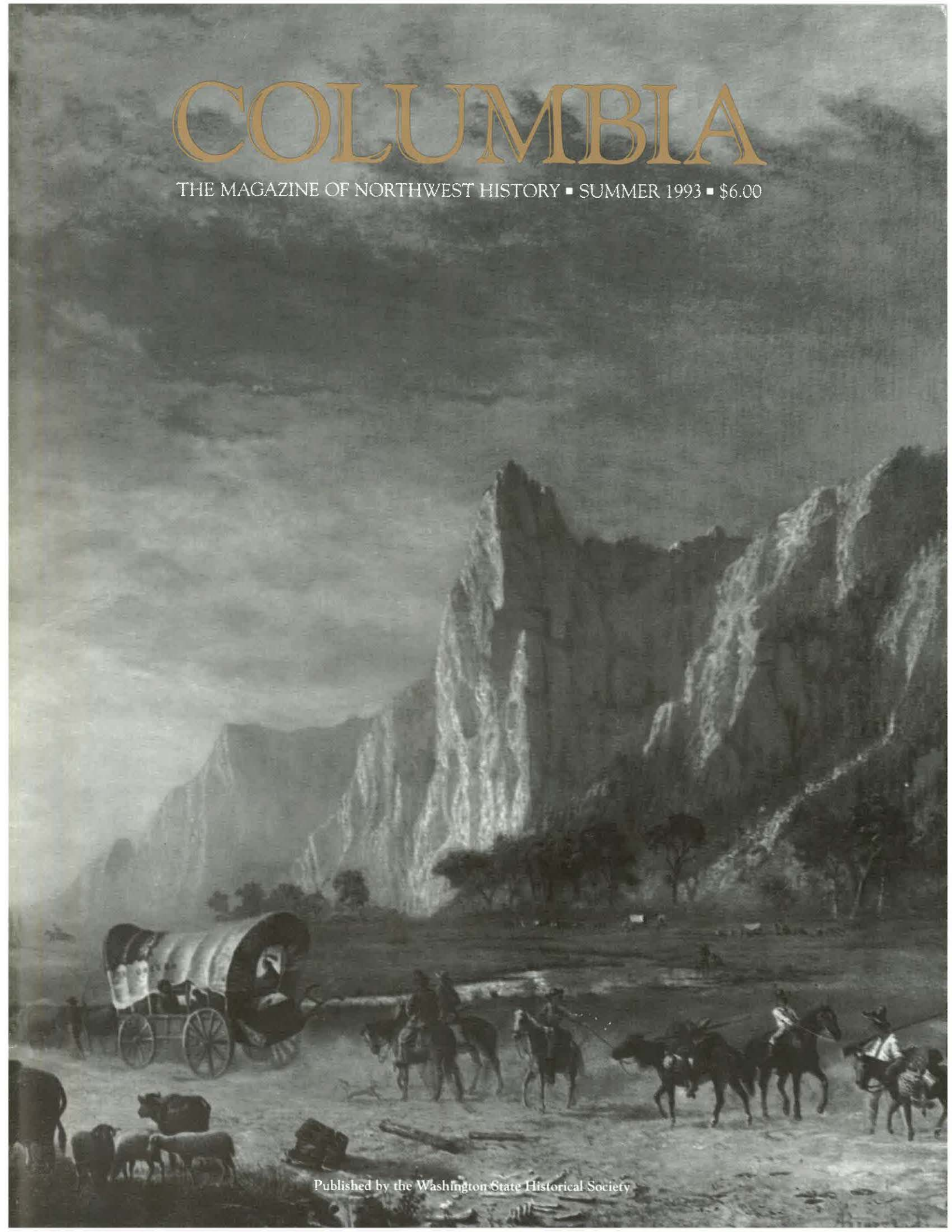
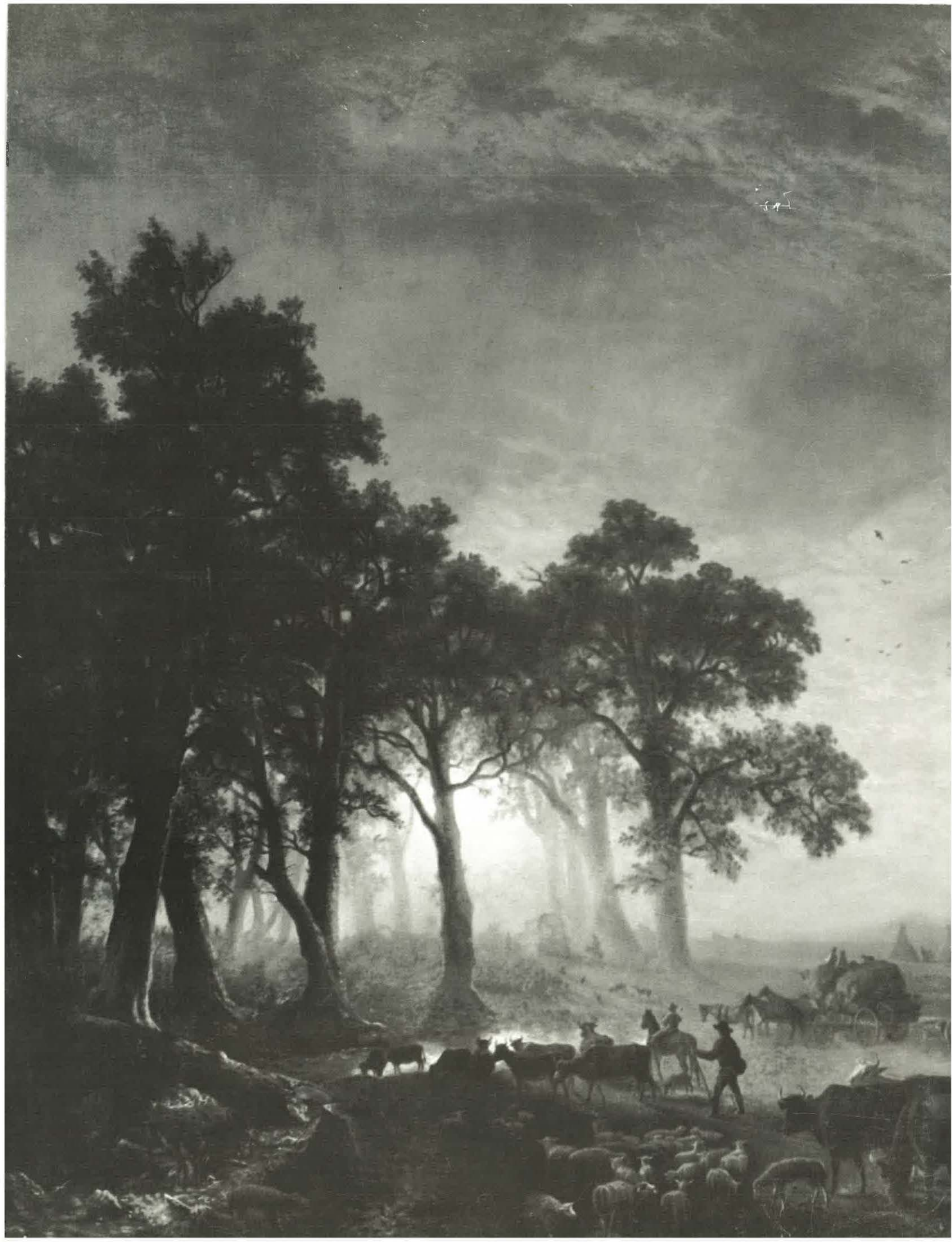


COLUMBIA

THE MAGAZINE OF NORTHWEST HISTORY ■ SUMMER 1993 ■ \$6.00



Published by the Washington State Historical Society



Overland Trail

150 YEARS

Nor Any DROP to DRINK

The Search for Water on the Journey West



By Jacqueline Williams

Water, water, every where. Nor any drop to drink,” complained the ancient mariner, marooned on a ship in the middle of the sea. He would have found many a sympathetic ear among the emigrants who were going to the gold fields of California or the lush farmlands of Oregon Territory in the middle of the 19th century. Even though their route followed the Missouri, Platte, and Sweetwater rivers, keeping the water keg filled was not an easy task. “Camped without water” was a recurring phrase in the emigrant’s diary. Going without affected the mood of the travelers, as Charles Gray, an emigrant on the way to California, so graphically tells us:

At a wood, we took in quite a lot and also some water, & before I could get the casks full, the train moved on. Gen. Darcy had no reason for this great haste to get to the diggings! So the consequence was that although we had supper & a little water to wash dishes with—yet we had nothing to drink during the evening when we were thirsty—nothing to wash in the next morning, or cook with till 12’ Oclock [sic] the next day, when I luckily fill’d 2 canteens with dirty water to drink. This may appear a very small matter, but it was a great annoyance & I merely mention it to show how great a deprivation the loss of a few gallons of water is on the plains.

Guidebooks advised the emigrants on where to camp and find fresh water, but they were not always up to date or checked for accuracy. For example, if in the year a guide was written numerous storms had filled the rivers, plenty of water could be found. A year later the travelers might find streams dried up and the expected water long gone. The stopping places suggested in a guidebook did not always prove practical either. A loose wagon wheel, a missing cow or a sick child often delayed the journey, and an unplanned stop had to be made.

At other spots along the trail no water was obtainable because the river followed terrain that would not accommodate the covered wagons. Sometimes the water simply disappeared under a sandy bed or became a dirty drizzle. “[I]mpossible to get water on account [sic] of the banks of the river being so high & difficult to ascend,” bemoaned Celinda Hines, who traveled to Oregon Territory in 1853. Then the only thing to do was to grab a pail and go looking. “We had to get our water out of the river and carry it up a hedge of rock sixty or eighty feet high and very steep & then a quarter of a mile to our wagons,” recalled Basil Longworth who came to Oregon in 1853 with a large wagon train. “Very laborious,” observed Abigail Scott, another early Oregon pioneer, after she had toted water for camp up a half-mile-long river bluff.

In certain areas of the trail, particularly along portions of the Platte River, the water was sullied with noxious bacteria and contained “salt or alkali substance, white as snow and half an inch thick.” Many attributed the recurrent diarrhea to the polluted water and doctored themselves with vinegar, an all-purpose drink that was said to cure any ill. They even fed it to the cows that became sick from drinking too much alkaline water. One such remedy that was supposed to work every time was credited to Captain John Frémont, the noted explorer and author of the first reasonably accurate emigrant guidebook for the Great Platte River Road: “REMEDY FOR COWS. Take one-half pint each of lard and syrup; warm just sufficient to mix good, and if the animal is bloated, add to this one-half pint of good vinegar and drench them immediately.”

Finding fresh water was a daily task. When the water keg was empty dinner was cold hardtack with nothing hot to wash it down. Emigrants devised many schemes. When the streams and rivers dried up or ceased to appear the crafty travelers obtained water “from the road.” They would make a “well” by digging a hole two to four feet deep in the sandy

“About one hundred yards from the road . . . we saw several wells, but all the water was salt.”

Even the hardy oxen could succumb to exhaustion and thirst on the long journey west.

• soil near the river or stream, lower a pail and haul out water. “Traveled about 19 miles & camped without water or wood. Got some water out of the road. Cold cold cold,” bewailed Mary Burrell. Some overlanders considered this water source superior to that obtained from rivers. Others disagreed and believed the so-called “well water was more apt to be warm, dirty, and often alive with tiny creatures.” S. H. Taylor, an early Oregon pioneer who left detailed journals about his trip west, took this view and warned that “everyone ought to have too much sense to use water from the stinking holes dug by some foolish persons in the margins of ‘slews’ and alkaline marshes.”

• To get rid of river water mud and silt the emigrants used cornmeal as a makeshift filter. A drinking vessel was filled to the top with the muddy water and a handful of cornmeal added. After 20 minutes the mud, or at least most of it, was carried to the bottom with the cornmeal. The water on top would be reasonably clear and, with care, could be siphoned off. When cornmeal was not available, alum (aluminum ammonia sulfate) was substituted. If there was no time to wait, the water was drunk, mud and all.

• **I**t was commonly said among the emigrants that before they reached Oregon territory everyone had eaten a “peck of dirt.” One diarist wrote that they “generally get a pint of mud out of every pail of water.” Though we don’t know the size of the pail, a pint of mud is an enormous amount of dirt. Speculating on what would happen if someone “swallows twice his allotted amount of dirt (one peck),” a young bride named Helen Carpenter took the philosophical attitude that their overland struggles made them “impervious to what would kill ordinary mortals.” The Carpenters journeyed to California in 1857.

• Cornmeal was also used to remove the sulfurous taste of the water in the Humboldt Sink. James Hutchings reported:

• *About one hundred yards from the road . . . we saw several wells, but all the water was salt. One being a little fresher than the rest I took a quart of it, and mixing it with a little panola [dried ground cornmeal], drank every drop, and was not thirsty after it altho the day was hot.*



Charles Nahl painting, Stanford University Museum of Art

- To make the alkaline water palatable the pioneers mixed it with vinegar or citric acid,
- sugar and essence of lemon and had an instant lemonade. Extracts of various flavors were
- available and emigrants usually included one or two in their provision box. An advertisement in a St. Louis newspaper described the product.



United States Fish and Wildlife Service

For making at any moment pure and rich lemonade of excellent flavor, not distinguishable from that made with the fresh fruit.

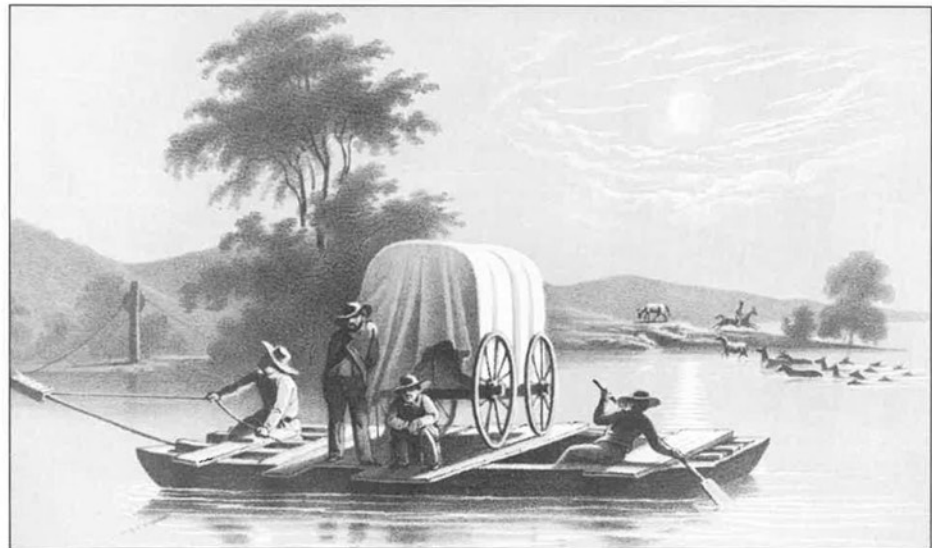
Lemon extract plus sugar turned river water into a refreshing lemonade.

- the Ice Springs in present-day Wyoming. Here the emigrants used large chunks of ice
- that when melted back at the camp site made water for cooking. The preferred method
- for obtaining the pure ice was to dig down four to six inches, cut a piece about as large as
- a pail, wrap it in a blanket and bring it back to camp. The ice was "as clear as any I ever
- saw and more so," reported one satisfied emigrant." Others said it had a bad smell and
- "tastes strongly of alkali." To counteract that problem one group of men "gathered
- several buckets full [of ice], from which we have had Mint Juleps in abundance." These
- travelers from Kentucky were obviously carrying on the Bluegrass State's tradition of
- banishing the cares of the day with a tall, frosty drink.

- Besides using ice from the Ice Springs, ingenious cooks took advantage of snow in the
- mountains. Several Fourth of July celebrations featured ice cream desserts. Thanks to
- Charles Parke and his detailed diary, an explicit recipe for snow ice cream survives:

Having plenty of milk from two cows we had with us, I determined to [do] something no other living man ever did in this place and on this sacred day of the year, and that was to make Ice

Although this picture shows a calm crossing, river crossings were risky. Taking the wagons across rivers often meant that much of the goods became a soggy mess or ended up on the river bottom.



Stansbury's Expedition to the Great Salt Lake, Washington State Historical Society



Covered wagons were nicknamed prairie schooners. For four to six months the wagon was the emigrant family's living room, kitchen, bedroom and storage room.

“With [the] aid of a clean stick to stir with, I soon produced the most delicious ice cream tasted in this place.”

Cream at the South Pass of the Rockies. . . . I procured a small tin bucket which held about 2 quarts. This I sweetened and flavored with peppermint—had nothing else. This bucket was placed inside a wooden bucket, or Yankee Pale [sic], and the top put on. Nature had supplied a huge bank of coarse snow, or hail, nearby, which was just the thing for this new factory. With alternate layers of this, and salt between the two buckets and aid of a clean stick to stir with, I soon produced the most delicious ice cream tasted in this place.

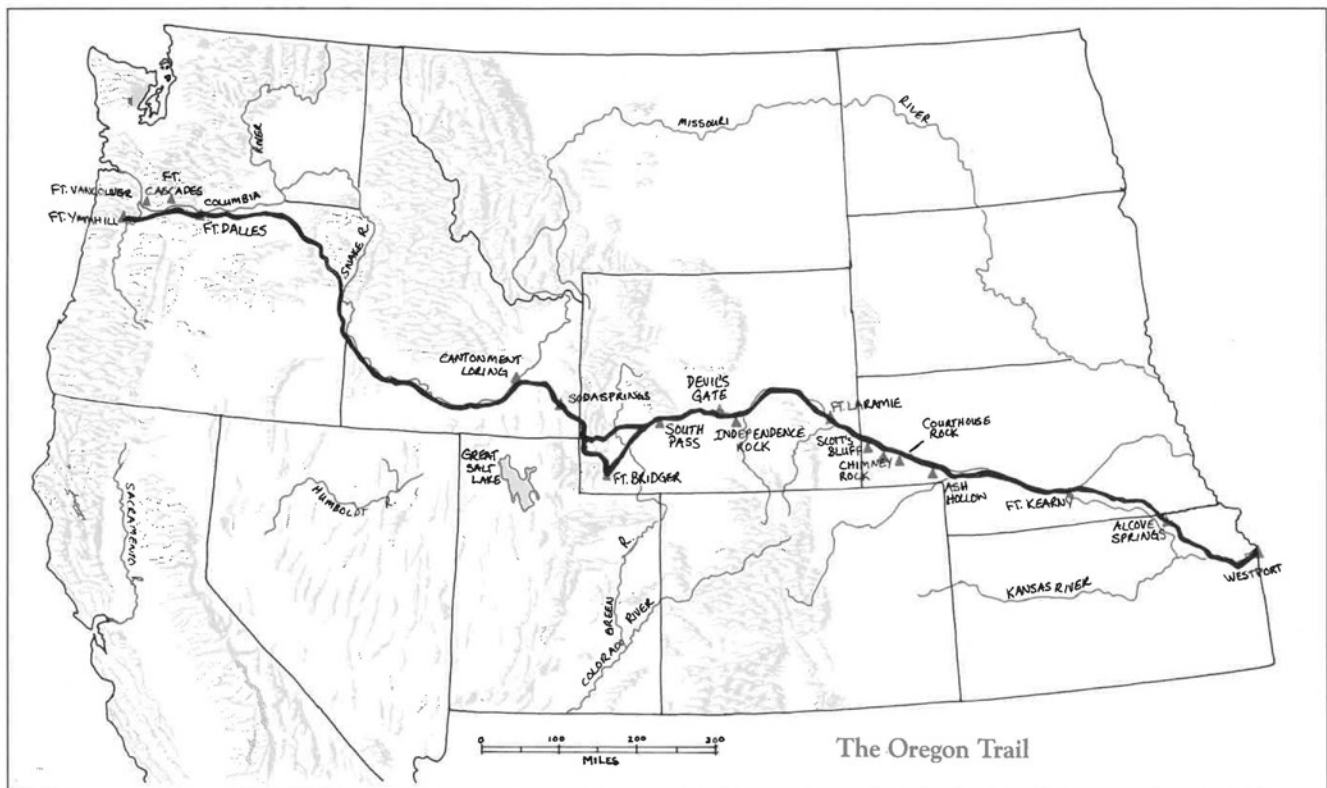
The various types of natural spring water that appeared in Wyoming, Idaho and Utah also provided water. Soda Springs, now beneath the waters of the Soda Point Reservoir in Idaho, was especially popular. That natural marvel was described in several diaries as

springs of water of an alkaline taste bubbling up through the rock and forming mounds of the mineral from 2 to 20 feet high and with bases of proportional size and gas sufficient coming up to keep them constantly boiling . . . and the opening at the top resembles a large kettle.

The springs were surrounded by natural stone walls. In some the water had a reddish cast. Celinda Hines maintained it “equalled the best soda water. . . . It boiled up out of the solid rock—as they all do. . . . The vapors has the same effect which the inhaling of hartshorn [smelling salts] produces.” Enterprising pioneers mixed the spring water with sugar and vinegar and considered it “makes a drink equal to any prepared soda in the States.”

Another popularly named water source, Beer Springs, reminded some of the taste of “small beer,” a weak brew that has a long history in this country. According to one account, Beer Springs was different because the water “is not forced up by gas, like the Sodas, but runs spontaneously.” Henry Allyn said he “drank nearly a pint and it had no bad effect, but set me to belching wind from the stomach, on which it set very light.”

Captain John Frémont speculated that “Beer [S]prings received their name from the



“... drank nearly a pint and it had no bad effect, but set me to belching wind from the stomach, on which it set very light.”

voyageurs & trappers . . . who, in the midst of their rude & hard lives, are fond of finding some fancied resemblance to the luxuries they rarely have the fortune to enjoy.” That variety of beer first gained notoriety as part of a prison diet of bread and water or bread and small beer. It was served to prisoners when there were no prisons and men were incarcerated in their own houses. By the mid 19th century, when the emigrants were making history, small beer had acquired a new status and was served at social outings as we would serve carbonated drinks. It was considered harmless.

Other springs that fascinated the emigrants and provided water were those in present-day Utah that emitted hot or boiling water. A few unbelievers had burning lips or hands when they fetched a cup of water. Always ready to try something new, emigrants collected the water and used it for cooking. Since it was hot enough to boil an egg or cook “meat perfectly done in a few minutes,” it saved on precious fuel. Mary Bailey, an enterprising cook, used the boiling water in a makeshift double boiler. She placed an egg in “fresh water and that in a tin bucket in the hot water,” and in a few minutes had a cooked egg. The Bailey contingent had just spent several days in Salt Lake City where they got “plenty of vegetables to eat & milk & eggs.”

Finding water for cooking and drinking was but one of the difficulties the emigrants encountered on their long journey west. Observing that period from the safe distance of 150 years we marvel at their courage, ingenuity and tenacity, their ability to “get water from the road” or enjoy a mint julep made with last winter’s snow. That they persevered and found ways to cope with such a fundamental challenge to survival made it possible to withstand their long, strenuous camping trip. Their ability to adapt and “make do” not only made the trip successful, it helped prepare them for an arduous life in the new territories. Certainly a bit of Yankee ingenuity was tucked into those all-purpose provision boxes.

Jacqueline Williams is a free-lance food and nutrition writer/educator and co-author of four cookbooks. This article is based on material from her new book *Wagon Wheel Kitchens: Food on the Oregon Trail* (August 1993).

COLUMBIA

The Magazine of Northwest History

A quarterly publication of the
Washington State Historical Society

VOLUME SEVEN, NUMBER TWO

David L. Nicandri, *Executive Editor*

Christina Orange, *Managing Editor*
Robert C. Carriker, *Book Review Editor*
Carolyn Simonson, *Copy Editor*
Suzanne Keller, *Editorial Assistant*
Christopher Lee, *Business Manager*
Marie De Long, *Circulation Manager*

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

William L. Lang
Elaine Miller
Edward Nolan
Joy Werlink

FOUNDING EDITOR

John McClelland, Jr.

OFFICERS

President: Peter Simpson, *Port Townsend*
Vice-President: David Lamb, *Hoquiam*
Vice-President: Robert C. Carriker, *Spokane*
Treasurer: David R. Edwards, *Tacoma*

EX OFFICIO TRUSTEES

Mike Lowry, *Governor*
Daniel K. Grimm, *State Treasurer*
Ralph Munro, *Secretary of State*

BOARD OF TRUSTEES

David Ammons, *Olympia*
Philip H. Ashby, *Bainbridge Island*
Judith A. Billings, *Puyallup*
Robert A. Clark, *Spokane*
Arthur Dwellley, *Tenino*
Brian Ebersole, *Tacoma*
Charles Fowler, *Olympia*
Jean Gardner, *Seattle*
Joshua Green III, *Seattle*
Kathryn W. Haley, *Tacoma*
John Hewitt, Jr., *Tacoma*
Ruth Kirk, *Lacey*
Charles LeWarne, *Edmonds*
William W. Philip, *Tacoma*
Doris Pieroth, *Seattle*
Margarita Prentice, *Seattle*
Eugene Prince, *Thorton*
T. Les Purce, *Olympia*
James B. Rhoads, *Bellingham*
Kent D. Richards, *Ellensburg*
Lewis O. Saum, *Seattle*
David H. Stratton, *Pullman*
Michael S. Sullivan, *Tacoma*
Joe A. Taller, *Olympia*
Paul F. Thomas III, *Woodinville*
Charles Twining, *Federal Way*
Peter von Reichbauer, *Dash Point*
George H. Weyerhaeuser, *Tacoma*
Elizabeth A. Willis, *Seattle*

Columbia (ISSN: 0892-3094) is published quarterly by the Washington State Historical Society, 315 N. Stadium Way, Tacoma, WA 98403; (206) 593-2830. Entire contents © 1993 by the Washington State Historical Society. All rights reserved. Nothing may be reprinted in whole or in part without written permission from the publisher. *Editorial contributions:* All unsolicited manuscripts and photographs submitted must include return postage (in stamps) and suitable packaging to ensure their safe return. Although reasonable care will be taken with materials received, no responsibility can be assumed for unsolicited materials, including photographs. *Postmaster:* Please send address changes to Columbia, 315 N. Stadium Way, Tacoma, WA 98403.

COLUMBIA

THE MAGAZINE OF NORTHWEST HISTORY ■ SUMMER 1993

Nor Any Drop to Drink 2

Potable water was not always easy to find on the Overland Trail.

By Jacqueline Williams

The Old Skagit Tour 7

The J. D. Ross brainchild that successfully promoted the concept of public-owned utilities in Seattle.

By Paul C. Pitzer

From the Collection 16

"If a fire bomb hits the house . . ."

The Wreck of the Valencia 17

Tragedy struck this Victoria-bound steamship when it went aground on the coast of Vancouver Island.

By John Frazier Henry

Brookfield 24

The town that vanished.

By Ray Fadich

What's in a Name? 26

How local industry and trade influenced the naming of some of Washington's schools.

By James D. Keyser

History Album 34

Sea Haven, the terminal metropolis.

Timber & Water 35

Lumbering in Cowlitz County.

By Robert Ficken

Thorp Gristmill 43

A grassroots restoration project that grew . . . and grew.

By Yvonne Prater and Robin Schmith

Columbia Reviews 46

Recent books of interest in Northwest history.

Edited by Robert C. Carriker

Correspondence/Additional Reading 48

COVER: "The Oregon Trail" by Albert Bierstadt (1869) depicts a pioneer caravan headed into the glorious, cloud-banked glow of the westering sun. (Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio) See related story beginning on page 2.