



NEWS

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Kansas Troubles: This Week in Territorial History April 18 - 24, 1854 (2004)

On April 22nd, Sarah Sutton and her family crossed the Missouri River into Kansas on a ferry, an old steam boat with the cargo area remodeled into a barn of sorts for livestock. The ferry carried the nine wagons, 100 head of cattle, ten horses and “36 souls” in their party. Once across the river, they “camped on the bank, and felt very thankful that we were landed there safe. We had some oats to feed our horses, but the cattle had nothing to eat. We felt a little doubtful [sic] that night, it being the first we spent in the Indian nation, and so many strangers was tented near us.”

Sarah, her husband John and seventeen of their children and grandchildren left Cass County, Illinois, a month earlier, on their way to the Oregon Territory. John and eldest son James had scouted ahead, riding mules to Oregon and back in 1853. They assured the family that Oregon was a healthy land free of the “Illinois ague”(malaria) that had laid Sarah low all winter. “There is warm winters and the easiest country in the world to make a good living in,” she wrote a neighbor. [“Ague,” the old-fashioned name for malaria and its intermittent fevers and chills, was probably pronounced like *egg-you* by the Suttons.]

The Sutton party spent three days in St. Joseph, resting their animals after the trip across Missouri and branding them for identification on the overland trail. St. Joseph was one of the primary “jumping off places,” where easterners stocked their wagons for the five-month journey across the plains and mountains. “A great many are gathering here for California and Oregon,” Sarah wrote in her diary. She was one of 10,000 travelers camped that spring in the river towns from Council Bluffs, Iowa, south to Westport. The year 1854 turned out to be rather slow for western migration; nearly 20,000 had set out across the Indian territories the year before, many of them crossing the northeast corner of Kansas en route to the Platte River road.

The Suttons left St. Joseph a bit early, probably to avoid the enormous rush in the first days of May, the date when the conventional wisdom dictated that travelers leave. Later departure could result in being trapped in October’s mountain snows. Earlier departure meant that prairie grasses were yet too sparse to feed livestock, a problem the Suttons immediately encountered. On

Sunday the 23rd, they were “obliged to travel about 5 miles back to find grass for our cattle.” Sarah seemed displeased about traveling on that Sabbath, a common attitude when men’s ideas of necessity overruled women’s religious sensibilities. In that five mile backtrack, the Sutton party “passed three or four white families that were clearing a wide road” through the timber. These people were probably squatters illegally making claims on Indian land near what is now Doniphan County, Kansas. (480 words)

Merrill J. Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road*, (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society: 1969, Vol. XXV) Pg. 17.

Sarah Sutton, “A Travel Diary in 1854.” Kenneth L. Holmes, editor. *Covered Wagon Women*, Volume 7, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987) Pp. 16-33