

May 12, 1846

Independence, Missouri

“Today I embark on a great journey.”

That’s what Mr. George Donner told me to write down when I bought me a vellum-bound journal from the stationery store but I didn’t know what to say.

“The first sentence is always the hardest,” Mr. Donner said. “The rest is up to you.”

Thank you, Mr. Donner, for thinking up that first sentence, and for letting me tag along on your wagon train even tho I ain’t got no kin and no wagon, but only poor old Barny, who don’t want to leave Missouri if he can help it.

Barny is my horse, which I got when my paw passed. The horse and one hundred dollars in gold from selling the farm, that’s all I have in the world, but it’s enough to get me there, if I’m careful.

Last thing I did before leaving Independence was pay my respects to Maw and Paw. I went to the little churchyard with all the pretty white markers and prayed over ’em and explained how before long my prayers would be coming from California. Maw didn’t know about California, she’s been gone so long, but Paw did. Before he died, he talked about how there were valleys where it never snowed and crops that grow all year long. California is where a man can eat a fresh peach in December and never be cold, Paw said. Which is probably what gave me the idea to join up.

May 13

Our expedition is big and getting bigger. Two hundred wagons and more every day! When folks hear where we're headed, they sell their land for ten cents on the dollar and buy a wagon and follow along. George Donner and his brother, Jacob, organized the train in Springfield along with Mr. James Reed and Colonel Russell. Mr. Donner says he don't mind all the extra folks. He says there's safety in numbers and plenty of food along the way. All the game we can hunt and good water for the horses.

Ho! For California!

May 14

We are already two long, hard days from Independence, but have made less than ten miles progress. Mr. Reed says a few more days and we'll be clear of these dense, dark timberlands and out in the open plains where the going will be easier. I asked him how many times he's led settlers through to California, and he gave me a funny look, like I was trying to be insulting, which I wasn't. I have the greatest respect for Mr. Reed and the Donner brothers, even if none of them has never actually been west before. Paw always said there's first time for everything!

I made a new friend today. His name is Edward Breen. His family has three wagons and twelve good horses. The way Edward's mother dotes on him reminds me how

much I still miss my own maw, even tho I was but five years old when she passed. I am fifteen now, so I pulled my hat brim down so nobody'd see me cryin'. I felt considerable better afterwards when Mrs. Breen insisted I hitch up with them, and eat with them and so on. She's a real nice lady, and I like the soft way she talks, which I suppose is how everybody from Ireland talks.

There's a number of other young single men in the party, and mostly they stick together. Some of the bachelors drink hard liquor, which I made a vow never to touch, so I'm glad of the kind invitation to accompany the Breens.

While we were walking along, guiding the teams of oxen that pull the wagons, I entertained my new friend, Edward, by recounting all the Missouri whoppers I could recall (they work better if you give them a honey-mouth drawl). He laughed so hard he spit water through his nose! He especially liked the one about the catfish that swallowed the bear.

Edward says when we get to California maybe me and him can partner up and be surveyors. He says with all the free land being cut out by new settlers there'll be a shortage of surveyors, marking out the property lines and so on, and we'll prosper. He was so excited about the idea I didn't tell him I've got my heart set on farming dairy cows, which is what my paw tried to do until he had his run of bad luck.

Nobody has ever seen anything like the Donner

expedition. It is two miles from the first wagon to the last, and the ground shakes as we go by. We make such a racket it sounds like every pot and pan in the world is falling downstairs at the same time. All us men helped cutting trail today, and at first the track was firm and the wheels didn't sink. But by the time the last wagon passed, the trail weren't nothing but soggy mud, and we had to set down straw and pry the wheels clear. It is hard work, but I don't mind. Everybody is so friendly and grateful for our common purpose.

Mrs. Tamsen Donner saw me scribbling in this journal and said to be sure to put in some stuff about rations, so here goes. We got a ration of a hundred and fifty pounds of flour and seventy-five pounds of salted meat per person. You got to buy that much, or you can't join up. Seventy-five pounds of meat won't last for such a long journey, but we expect to hunt game on the way. We got rice and beans and lard for frying. Every wagon has at least one spare wheel and the fixings to make more. Each family has a tent and gear for cooking, and many have spare horses. Most every man has a rifle, and mostly they're pretty handy, even if they never shot anything but rabbit and squirrel.

That won't matter, as we expect to find buffalo near the Platte River, and they say buffalo are a mighty big target and hard to miss. I never ate buffalo steak and am looking forward to it.

May 15

We are free of the forests! This morning, three hours after dawn, we came at last to the end of the timberlands, and saw the sun rising clear over the great prairie. In Missouri I never seen anything so wide open to the sky. Just fields of tall grass as far as a man can see. No, I lie, much farther than a man can see. More like what an angel might see, looking down from Heaven.

Mr. George Donner says if all goes well it will take no more than two months to traverse the prairie lands and that, come August, we'll cross over the Sierra Nevada mountains and find ourselves in California.

Right off, things have improved considerable. Colonel Russell, who is helping to lead the party, rode ahead to spot for Indians. He didn't find any, but he did locate a fine hard trail that is in such splendid condition it can almost be called a proper road. No more wheels bogging down in the mud! By Mr. Donner's reckoning we made better than ten miles in a single day and should expect to do even better tomorrow.

I shot a pheasant and Mrs. Breen praised me so, I'm sure it made my face as pink as bunting. She says the Breens will never go hungry so long as I'm there to help provide, and she hopes I'll teach Edward to shoot as good as me. I didn't have the courage to tell her the pheasant just happened to light on a tree stump so close by nobody could have missed. Anyhow, Mrs. Breen made up

a batch of fine biscuits and gravy, and that pheasant sure tasted good!

Later Mr. Patrick Breen (Edward's paw) made a fuss over putting a pheasant feather in the brim of my hat. He don't say much but when he does, it means something. I count my lucky stars to have such friends.

No buffalo yet, but birds and small game are plentiful.

May 16

Mr. James Reed kindly invited me to admire his Palace today. I never seen anything like it. The Pioneer Palace Car ain't no ordinary wagon. It's so big it takes four yoke of oxen to pull it. The Palace has got a real door and steps to get up, and inside it's all fitted out like a little house on wheels, with a woodstove to keep it warm, and a stovepipe that goes up through the canvas top. They got built-in beds below, and a loft where the children sleep, and a special feather bed for their grandma, who is ailing. She don't complain, but just lies in her bed and sighs a little. They even got a library in there, with a bunch of books!

Their daughter's name is Virginia. She's twelve years old and has a pony called Billy. When she saw me scribbling in my journal, she told me she was keeping one, too. Hers will be better, I guess, 'cause she's had more learning than me, and books to read and stuff.