

Otis James

Martha of California: A Story of the California Trail



James Otis

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Story of the California Trail**

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FOREWORD

The author of this series of stories for children has endeavored simply to show why and how the descendants of the early colonists fought their way through the wilderness in search of new homes. The several narratives deal with the struggles of those adventurous people who forced their way westward, ever westward, whether in hope of gain or in answer to "the call of the wild," and who, in so doing, wrote their names with their blood across this country of ours from the Ohio to the Columbia.

To excite in the hearts of the young people of this land a desire to know more regarding the building up of this great nation, and at the same time to entertain in such a manner as may stimulate to noble deeds, is the real aim of these stories. In them there is nothing of romance, but only a careful, truthful record of the part played by children in the great battles with those forces, human as well as natural, which, for so long a time, held a vast portion of this broad land against the advance of home seekers.

With the knowledge of what has been done by our own people in our own land, surely there is no reason why one should resort to fiction in order to depict scenes of heroism, daring, and sublime disregard of suffering in nearly every form.

JAMES OTIS.

A CHANGE OF HOMES

In case one should ask in the years to come how it happened that I, Martha Early, who was born in Ashley, Pike County, in the state of Missouri, and lived there until I was twelve years old, journeyed across the prairies and deserts to California, the question can be answered if I write down what I saw when so many people from our county went to make new homes in that state where gold had been found in such abundance.

For my part, I used to wonder why people should be willing to leave Missouri, enduring the many hardships they knew awaited them on the journey of two thousand miles, in order to buy land in a country where nearly all the inhabitants were Spaniards and Mexicans.

I suppose the stories told about the wonderful quantity of gold which had suddenly been found in California caused our people to think particularly of that far-off land. When the excitement of getting rich by digging in the earth a few weeks or a few months had in a measure died away, there came tales regarding the fertile soil and the beauty of the country, until nearly every one in Pike County, as well as in the county of the same name just across the Mississippi River in the state of Illinois, much the same as had a fever for moving.

Perhaps that is why the people we met while journeying called all the emigrants "Pikers." You see there were so many from both the Pike counties who went into California in the year 1851, that it appeared to strangers as if every person on the trail had come from Pike County.

"JOE BOWERS"

Then, too, fully half of all these emigrants were singing or whistling that song of "Joe Bowers," which was supposed to have been written by a Piker, and to represent a man from Missouri or Illinois.

Surely every one remembers it. The first verse, and if I have heard it once I certainly have a thousand times, goes like this: —

"My name it is Joe Bowers
And I've got a brother Ike.
I came from old Missouri,
Yes, all the way from Pike."

The song was intended to show that this Joe Bowers came from our county, and, perhaps, because so many of the emigrants were singing it, all of us who went into California in the year 1851 were, as I have said, called "Pikers."

However the name came about, I was a Piker, and before we arrived in this wondrously beautiful country, I wished again and again that I had been almost any other than an emigrant, for the way was long, and oh! so wearisome.

I must always think of Missouri as being one of the best of all the states in the Union, because it was there I was born and there I went to school until father caught the California fever, which resulted in our setting out on a journey which, for a time, seemed endless.

My father had no idea of going so far simply to dig for gold. He had seen many who went across the country in 1849 believing they would come back rich as kings, yet who returned home poorer in pocket than when they left; therefore he came to understand that only a few of all that vast army of miners who hastened into California after the discovery at Sutter's Mill, got enough of the precious metal to pay for the food they ate.

Father thought he could buy better land in California than was to be found in Pike County, for to have heard the stories told by some of the people who had come back disappointed from the land of gold, you might have believed that one had only to put a few seeds at random in the ground in order to gather marvelous crops.

THE REASONS FOR MOVING

Nor was my father the only man who put faith in at least some of the fanciful tales told concerning the land of California which had so lately been given up to the United States by the Spaniards. Our neighbors for miles around were in a state of unrest and excitement, until it was decided that nearly all would undertake the long journey, and I could not prevent myself from wondering if Pike County would not feel lonely to have the people abandon it, for it surely seemed as if every man, woman, and child was making haste to leave Missouri in search of the wondrous farming lands.

Mother looked woefully solemn when, on a certain evening, father came home and told us that he had sold the plantation for about half as much as it had cost him, and was going to join the next company that set out from Pike County.

It was a long time before mother would have very much to say about the journey, but as the days passed and the neighbors who were going with us came to our home that they might talk over the preparations for moving, she became interested in making plans, although again and again, when we two were alone, she told me that this trailing over two thousand miles of deserts and mountains was not to her liking.

MOTHER'S ANXIETY

It was only natural she should be worried about making such a great change, for all father's worldly goods consisted of the Pike County plantation and the live stock, and if, after selling the land and spending very nearly all his money to provide for the journey, we found that California farms were no better than the one we were leaving, it would be the saddest kind of mistake.

"Your father has set his mind on going; the homestead has been sold, and we must make the best of it, Martha, hoping that half the stories we have heard about California are true," she said to me so many times that I came almost to believe it was a foolish venture upon which we were about to embark.

Then, when I began to wonder how we were to live during such a long journey, and asked mother if it would be possible for us to cook and churn and do the family washing while traveling in an ox wagon, she would say with a sigh: —

"Don't, Martha, don't ask questions that I can't answer! It seems to me almost certain that we shall starve to death before getting anywhere near California, even if we are not killed by Indians or wild beasts, without having had time to get very hungry or dirty."

Yet we did travel the two thousand miles, walking the greater part of the way, and although there were many times when all of us were hungry, none actually starved to death; nor were we killed by wild beasts or Indians, else I could not be here in this beautiful place writing this story.

Father spent days and days getting ready for the moving. After he had finished the preparations, I thought the journey would not be so terribly hard, because he had arranged everything so snug and cozy for mother and me, that it really seemed as if we might take actual comfort in case we could make shift to do housework in a wagon.

HOW WE WERE TO TRAVEL

We owned only four yoke of cattle, but with some of the money received from the sale of the plantation, we bought as many more, which gave us sixteen oxen. We were to take with us all five of the cows and both the horses, on which father said mother and I might ride when we were tired of sitting in the wagon; but I knew what kind of animals ours were under the saddle, and said to myself that it would be many a long day before I would trust myself on the back of either.

It would have done you good to see our movable home after father had made it ready, and by that I mean the wagon in which mother and I were to ride. It was small compared with the other, in which were to be carried enough furniture for a single room, farming tools, grain for the cattle, and a host of things; but I did not give much heed to the load because I was so deeply interested in what was to be a home for mother and me during many a month.

That wagon was enough to attract the attention of any girl, for, fitted up as I first saw it, the inside looked really like a playhouse, and when I said as much to father, he declared that I was indeed the right kind of girl to go into a wild country, if I could find anything like sport during the tramp from Pike County to California.

I surely must tell you about that wagon before setting down anything concerning the journey. It was what is known as a Conestoga, and one may see many of the same kind on the Santa Fe or the Oregon trail. Imagine a boxlike cart nearly as long as an ordinary bedroom and so wide that I could stretch myself out at full length across the body. The top and sides were covered with osnaburg sheeting, which is cloth made of flax or tow. Some people really sleep between sheets made of that coarse stuff, but it is so rough and irritating to the flesh that I had far rather lie on the floor than in a bed where it is used.

Osnaburg sheeting makes excellent wagon covers, however, for the rain cannot soak through the cloth, and it is so cheap that one can well afford to use it in double thickness, which serves to keep out the wind as well as the water.

OUR MOVABLE HOME

The front of the wagon and a small window-like place at the end were left open, but could be securely closed with curtains that buttoned at the sides.

Around the inside of the wagon were hung such things as we might need to use often during the journey. There were pots and pans, towels, clothing, baskets, and two rifles, for father believed weapons might be required when we came upon disagreeable savages, or if game was to be found within shooting distance.

Our cookstove was set up at the rear end of the wagon, where it could be pushed out on a small shelf fastened to the rear axle, when we wanted to use it. A most ingenious contrivance we found that shelf to be, for mother and I could remain inside the wagon and do our cooking in stormy weather; but those women of the company whose husbands had not been so thoughtful were forced to stay out of doors while preparing a meal, no matter how hard it might be raining.

Our beds were laid in the bottom of the wagon and covered with the bedclothes to save them from being badly soiled, as would be likely if we slept upon them at night, and cooked, ate, and did the housework on them during the daytime.

We did not try to carry many dishes, because there were so many chances they would be broken, but nearly everything of the kind we used was of metal, such as tin or iron.

Underneath the cart were hung buckets, the churn, lanterns, and such a collection of articles that I could not but fancy people might believe we were peddlers carrying so large an assortment of goods that they had overrun the wagon body.

What puzzled me before we started on the journey was how we could persuade the cows to travel as we would have them; but I soon came to understand that it was a simple matter.

LEAVING ASHLEY

You must know that father was not the only man in Ashley that intended to build up a new home in California. More than half of the people were making preparations for the journey, and when we finally set off the procession was very imposing, with more than fifty wagons, not one of them drawn by less than three yoke of oxen or four pairs of mules; there were cows almost without number and a flock of thirty or forty sheep.

I said to myself then, that we need have no fear the savages would try to make trouble for us, because when they saw so many people, the poor, ignorant things would believe everybody on the banks of the Mississippi was heading for California, and it would be a very brave Indian who dared be other than polite to such a large company.

Even though you had never before heard of Pike County, it would have been most interesting to see the people of Ashley on the morning we set off. As Ellen Morgan, a particular friend of mine who was going to California also, said to me just before we drove away, "It is much as if all the folks in the world had come to see us leave town."

The streets were actually thronged, as I have heard it said the streets of a large city oftentimes are, and what with the shouts of the men, the screams of the children, and the lowing of the cattle, it was quite as much as I could do to make myself heard when I tried to tell Ellen that at the last minute mother had given permission for her to ride in our wagon.

Of course the noise in the street could not have been as great as I fancied, for Ellen had no trouble in hearing me, as was shown when she came running back to our wagon with her Sunday frock and other valuable things neatly done up in a corn sack.

Then it seemed to me that no improvement could be made upon our manner of traveling, for we two girls were to be together all the while, and even when the weather was stormy, it would seem really cozy under our double thickness of osnaburg cloth.

It surprised me very much because mother acted as if it saddened her to set off on what could not fail to be a delightful journey. I saw tears in her eyes when she came out of our old home for the last time, and wondered if she was sorry because she was leaving the house where we had lived so long, or whether she believed we would never find another such delightful town as Ashley.

Of course I felt just a little tearful when those people who were to remain at home gathered around the wagon to say "good-by"; but there were so many of our neighbors in the company we would not have a chance to be lonely, and I was certain that all the friends we were leaving behind would soon join us, having come to realize, as had father, that California was the only proper place in which to live.

EBEN JORDAN

If I could have had everything arranged exactly to please me, I would have insisted that Eben Jordan be left in Ashley. He is a boy about six months older than I, who always seems to take the greatest delight in teasing us girls. I had no doubt but that he would be very disagreeable at times, and felt, on that first day, as if there could be no cloud on the California skies if Eben had remained in Pike County.

It is no more than fair for me to say, however, that, much as I disliked the boy, Eben Jordan was one who ever kept his ears open to the conversation of his elders and was more than willing to repeat to Ellen and me whatever he learned.

Even before our company had left Ashley, he told us the journey was to be begun by first going to Independence, a town on the Missouri River where the Santa Fe traders and those who would journey by the Oregon trail made ready for the long march.

Up to this time I had had no idea of how we were to get to California, save we drove directly across the prairies and over the mountains, always in a westerly direction.

But I must have understood that we could not strike off across the country in any direction we fancied, because we must follow some trail in order to find a plentiful supply of grass for the cattle and mules and sheep, as well as water for ourselves.

Eben said that the leaders of the company, among whom was my father, had talked not a little regarding the country through which we should pass. Thus he learned that we would journey over what is known as the Oregon trail as far as Fort Bridger, after which, striking off to the southward somewhat, we would go along the shores of the Great Salt Lake, past Ogden's Hole, to the land of the Bannock Indians. Then the course was to be as nearly westward as the foothills would permit.

"It will be a rare time for us all," Eben said gleefully, after having told us girls that we would journey nearly two thousand miles before coming to that land for which we sought. "There will be game until a fellow can't rest, and after we are once well on the way, we shall come upon Indian tribe after Indian tribe, when you girls will be only too glad to shelter yourselves under my wing, for there is no knowing what the savages may take it into their heads to do, providing the opportunity offers."

Ellen was not a little displeased because Eben seemingly believed we would be glad of his protection, and I really felt uneasy in mind when the lad left us to go to his father's wagon, saying: —

"It isn't well for you girls to be so high and mighty, because before this journey has come to an end you may be glad that I am willing to lend a hand."

Ellen laughed at the idea that the time would ever come when we might accept a favor from Eben Jordan. She seemed so certain nothing disagreeable could happen to us while our company was so large, that I soon put away all forebodings and gave strict attention to what was before us.

ON THE ROAD

It had taken our fathers considerable time to get the people and the cattle in proper marching order; but once this was done, they gave the word for the procession to move forward, and the people at Ashley whom we were leaving behind cheered us wildly as we went slowly out from the town.

It seemed much like taking part in some wondrous celebration, to be riding thus amid those who were cheering and, I dare say, envying us.

Mother was content to sit inside the wagon, where father had placed a short-legged chair for her convenience, but Ellen and I remained on the front seat where we could see all that was going on, and until we were well clear of the town it did seem to me that I was a very important person.

It was late in the forenoon before we started, therefore no halt was to be made for dinner, but this gave me little uneasiness, for mother had an ample supply of cooked provisions on hand.

Our neighbors at Ashley had spoken again and again of the hardships which we would encounter before arriving at the shores of the Pacific Ocean, and I said to Ellen, when we were two or three miles from the town, that I could not understand how any one could believe such a journey might be either wearisome or dangerous.

EBEN'S PREDICTIONS

Surely we were as comfortable as two girls could be, with a covering over our heads in case it rained, and enough food to satisfy our desires.

Therefore what difference did it make, as I said to Ellen, whether we were five months or six on the march? Eben Jordan, who had come back from his father's wagon along the line of procession as if to see that everything was right, overhearing my words, replied with a laugh, which sounded to me very disagreeable: —

"You may well say, Martha Early, that this portion of the journey is easy. We are now traveling on a beaten road, with nothing to prevent our going forward at the best pace of the oxen. Wait until we have really started, after having come to Independence, and leave the highway to take to the trail. You will find the wagon tumbling and pitching over the rocks, or floundering across fords, where watch must be kept sharply against the Indians, and every man needs to have his eyes open lest he be attacked by wild beasts. Then you shall say to me whether it makes no difference to you if this journey requires five months or six."

I refused to listen to the lad, who seemed to find the greatest pleasure in making other people uncomfortable in mind, and I turned toward Ellen, as if speaking to her very earnestly in whispers, thereby causing Eben to believe I had not heard what he said, whereupon he went off laughing.

WHAT WE HEARD ABOUT CALIFORNIA

We had heard people talking about the wonderful fortunes to be found in California, until it seemed as if we might become rich simply by digging in the ground a bit; but, as you shall hear, before our journey had come to an end we understood that however much valuable metal there might be in the earth, it was not to be gathered like pebbles.

We met on our way hundreds of people who had gone into California with great expectations and were coming back poorer than when they set out; but on the first day we were ignorant of all this, and quite convinced that it was a simple matter to become wealthy by a very little labor.

Before night came there was to me less pleasure than during the first hour or two. The wagon jolted over the roads roughly, making it necessary to hold firmly to the seat, lest I be thrown off, and it became wearisome to sit so long in one position.

Mother, who stretched herself out upon a bed in the bottom of the wagon when she was tired of sitting upright, did not weary so soon of this kind of traveling; but nevertheless she was quite as well pleased as Ellen and I, when, about four o'clock in the afternoon, word was given that we should halt and make camp.

THE FIRST ENCAMPMENT

We were yet in a fairly thickly settled portion of the country; but the leaders of our company determined to make the encampment exactly as if we were on the prairie or among the mountains, where there might be danger from wild beasts or wilder savages, and you may well fancy that Ellen and I were on our feet as soon as the wagon came to a stop, for we had heard so much of this camp making that both of us were eager to see how it was done.

All the wagons were drawn up in a large circle so that the tongue of one came close to the tailboard of another, and just inside this ring of vehicles were set up small tents, which many of the company were to use at night because their families were so large that every one could not be given room in the wagons.

Inside this row of tents were picketed the horses, or, at least, they were to be picketed as soon as night should come; but when we first halted they were fastened out upon the plain where they might eat the grass, while the oxen, cows, and sheep were turned loose with half a dozen of the men and boys watching lest they should stray.

Because the people were not accustomed to thus making an encampment, no little time was spent in getting everything into what the leaders of the company believed to be proper order, and then our mothers set about cooking supper.

In our wagon the stove was pushed back upon the shelf made expressly for it, short lengths of pipe were run through the osnaburg cloth and tied by wire to the topmost part of the rear wagon bow, so they might be held straight, and then mother set about her work much as if she had been at home.

It was most pleasant camping in the open air, and before we had been halted an hour the place was quite homelike.

At nearly every wagon one or more women were making ready for supper; a short distance away the men and the boys were herding the cattle, and near by, inside or out of the inclosure, were scores and scores of idle ones, who, their work being done, were now enjoying a time of rest.

There was much talking and shouting, but above all one could hear that song of the true Pikers:

—
"My name it is Joe Bowers,
And I've got a brother Ike.
I came from old Missouri,
Yes, all the way from Pike."

NIGHT IN CAMP

How Ellen and I enjoyed the supper on this first night of the journey! Mother made sour-milk biscuit; the stove worked to perfection, as if delighted because it was being carried to California; and what with cold meat and steaming hot tea it seemed as if I had never tasted anything better than that meal.

Although we had enjoyed ourselves hugely, especially during the first part of the day's march, both Ellen and I were tired, and when mother said we might make up our bed on the bottom of the wagon, we were not only willing, but eager to do so, for after the hearty supper it seemed as if sleep had become a necessity.

Once we had crossed over into Dreamland, our eyes were not opened again until the sun was near to rising; then the shouts of the men and the lowing of the cattle caused us to spring up suddenly, almost fancying that the camp had been attacked by savages, even though we were not yet out of Pike County.

If I had the time, it would please me to describe the journey from our home in Ashley to a town known as Independence, on the Missouri River, where the Oregon trail begins; but since, as father said again and again, we did not really start until we had struck the Oregon trail, it is best that I leave out all that happened while we were coming from Pike County to the Missouri River.

THE TOWN OF INDEPENDENCE

We traveled slowly, because the cows were not easily herded, and, as Eben Jordan said, none of our people were accustomed to such kind of marching.

We did, however, finally arrive at the real starting point after eight days, during which time Ellen and I came to understand that, however pleasant it was to sit in the wagon and look out upon the country through which we passed, it might grow wearisome.

Ellen and I had fancied we would see something very new and wonderful at Independence, and yet, while everything was strange and there was much to attract one's attention, it was not so very different from other settlements through which we had passed.

There was, however, a constant bustle and confusion such as one could not see elsewhere. Enormous wagons, which Eben Jordan said belonged to the traders who went over the Santa Fe trail, were coming into town or going out, each drawn by eight or ten mules and accompanied by Spaniards or Negroes, until one could but wonder where so many people were going.

There were trains, much like our own, belonging to settlers who were going into Oregon, or, like ourselves, into California. Those were halted just outside the town, until the entire settlement was literally surrounded, while among them all, near the wagons of the traders as well as those of the emigrants, lounged Indians, nothing like the people I had imagined the savages to be.

KANSAS INDIANS

As Ellen said, if that was the kind of Indian we should meet with during the journey, then we need have little or no fear, for the savages we saw at Independence were nothing more nor less than beggars, who would greedily pick up and devour anything eatable that was thrown at them. Eben Jordan made himself ridiculous by marching around armed with a rifle, and a huge knife thrust in his belt, as if expecting each instant to be called upon to defend his life.

We were tired of the settlement, even before we had fairly arrived, and after Ellen and I walked through the town, wondering not a little at seeing a number of the houses and stores built entirely of brick, we were content to return to our own encampment, which was about half a mile out on the prairie.

LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE FOR TROUBLE

Up to this time mother and I had but little trouble in preparing the meals whenever we came to a halt; but I heard some of the men say that within a few days after we were once on the trail, all this would be changed. There would be many times when we might not find sufficient fuel to keep a fire in the stove, when we would feel the pangs of thirst because of not being able to get enough water, and when, the stock of provisions which we had brought with us having been consumed, we would know what it was to be hungry.

When I repeated to mother what I had heard, she nodded her head sadly, replying that she had thought of all these things when father first determined to seek a new home in the California country, and she doubted not that we would come to know much suffering, before we arrived at our journey's end.

As may be supposed, I was not in a cheerful mood when Ellen and I went to bed that night. During the half hour or more while we lay there wakeful, we spoke of all the possibilities of the future, and almost regretted that our parents had decided to leave Pike County, for surely they could find nowhere on the face of this earth a place more agreeable in which to live.

A STORMY DAY

When another morning came, it surely seemed as if all my fears were about to be realized, for the day dawned dark and forbidding, the rain came down in torrents, while the wind sighed and moaned as it drove floods of water from one end of the wagon to the other, wetting us completely even before we were awake.

I could not believe father would set off on the journey at such a time as this, and was wondering how we should be able to cook breakfast, when he called to mother that she make ready the morning meal, for in half an hour the train would be in motion.

No one had been sufficiently thoughtful to store beneath the wagon a supply of dry fuel, and the consequence was that we had nothing with which to build a fire, save a few armfuls of water-soaked wood which father and Eben Jordan succeeded in gathering, for where so many emigrants were encamped, fuel of any kind was indeed scarce.

I almost forgave Eben for having appeared so ridiculous when he strutted around fully armed, as I saw him striving to gather wood for us when he might have remained under the cover of his father's wagon; indeed, before many days passed both Ellen and I saw that there was much good in the boy's heart, even though he was too often disposed to make matters disagreeable for us girls.

A LACK OF FUEL

Mother and I made our first attempt at cooking while the stove was beneath the wagon cover and the pipe thrust out through the hole in the rear.

If we had had plenty of dry wood, I have no doubt but that the work could have been done with some degree of comfort; but as it was, we were put to our wits' ends, even to get sufficient heat to boil the water, and when word was given for the company to start, we had not really begun to cook the breakfast.

Of course it would have been dangerous for us to attempt to keep a fire burning while the wagon was moving. Therefore we would have been forced to set off without breakfast, had not Ellen's mother kindly sent us some corn bread which she had baked the night before, and this, with fresh milk, made up our meal.

At the time I thought I was much injured because of not having more food; but before we had come to the land of California I often looked back upon that morning with longing, remembering the meal of corn bread and milk as though it was a feast.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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