

Reading Further

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Where Geography Meets History

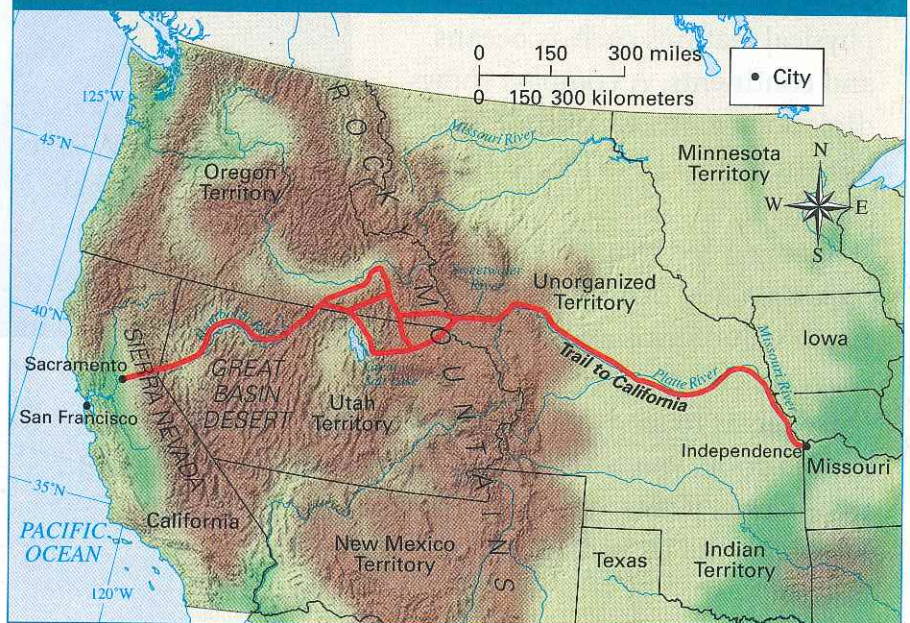
In the mid-1800s, thousands of people rushed to California, hoping to get rich by mining gold. Most were from the eastern United States. Many went west across the continent. What did people learn about the geography of the United States on their journey?

Luzena Stanley Wilson was sure of one thing. If her husband was setting off for California, so was she. The Wilsons' two children would also make the difficult trip.

Wilson was used to hardship. After all, she and her family lived in a log cabin in Missouri. For the past two years, they had struggled to carve a farm and a home out of their land on the plains. It had been backbreaking work. Now the Wilsons were going to leave it all behind.

Why would they give up what they had worked so hard to build? What made them willing to undertake the grueling, dangerous journey to the West Coast? In 1848, a man named James Marshall had found treasure in a California stream. It was gold! The yellow metal had formed in the mountains long ago. Over the centuries, wind and rain wore away the mountain rock—and the gold. Streams then washed the gold away. It collected in the streambeds.

Overland Route to California, 1849



Marshall's discovery touched off a frenzy. Around the United States—and around the world—people began dreaming of striking it rich in the California goldfields.

Luzena Stanley Wilson and her husband shared that dream. But first, they had to travel across many kinds of land to get to California. It would be no easy task.

Wilson was closer to California than many gold-seekers. Missouri was then one of the westernmost states. Many people heading to the West Coast in 1849 faced a long trip just to reach Missouri.

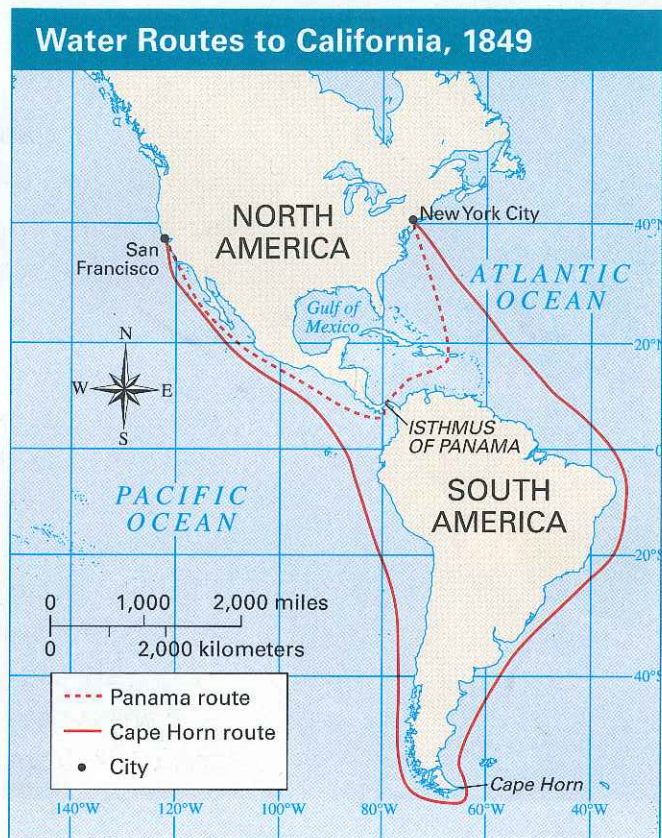
People with money could reach Missouri in some comfort in a matter of days. Railroads linked many eastern cities. Canals and steamboats provided water transportation. Then the real trip began.

From Missouri, the trip west got much more difficult. Between Missouri and the goldfields stretched a twisting trail of some 2,000 miles. Wilson and others who took this route had to start in the spring. They clattered along dusty, bumpy trails in wagons drawn by oxen. Usually, they had to walk beside their wagon. They crossed rivers, mountains, and deserts. On a good day, they might cover 15 miles.

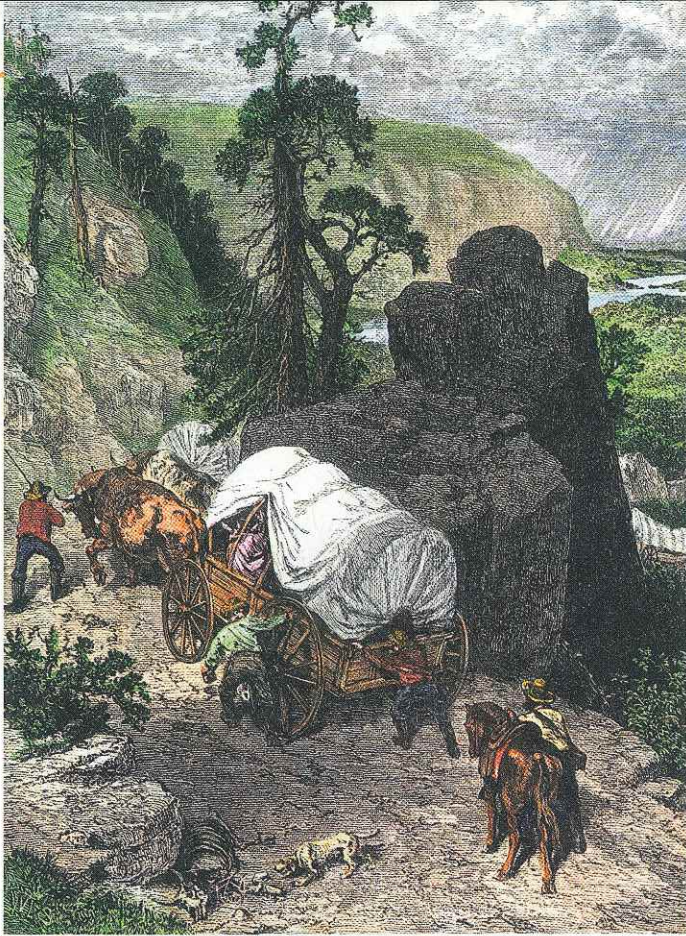
But many days were far from good. Animals got hurt, and wagons broke down. Tricky river crossings slowed progress. Weary travelers needed a day of rest now and then. The journey took months to complete. "Day after day, week after week, we went through the same routine," Wilson later recalled. Each day meant "breaking camp at daybreak, yoking the oxen, cooking our meager rations on a fire of sage-brush and scrub-oak, packing up again."

Some gold-seekers traveled by water. They took a ship around Cape Horn, on the southern tip of South America. Others sailed to the Isthmus of Panama. After crossing the **isthmus** (IS-mus) overland, they finished their trip by ship.

Sailing to California, like the trip by wagon, was a long and difficult journey. Going around South America could take six months or more. The trip across Panama was shorter. Both routes, though, were challenging.



isthmus a narrow strip of land connecting two larger land areas



The trip along the overland trail was very hard. Many died during the journey.

Luzena Stanley Wilson spent her first days on the overland trail on plains much like her Missouri farmland. Still, there were unexpected dangers. One was river crossings. There were no bridges or ferries. At Wilson's first crossing, she and her family made it safely to the other side. But the wagon behind her got stuck in the river. The oxen pulling the wagon sank into the sands of the riverbed. The poor beasts disappeared under the water, taking the loaded wagon with them.

The Wilsons would face more river crossings. They would also pass amazing sights. But they could not enjoy them. "There was not time to note the great natural wonders that lay along the route," Wilson later recounted. "Some one would speak of a remarkable valley, a group of cathedral-like rocks, some mineral springs,

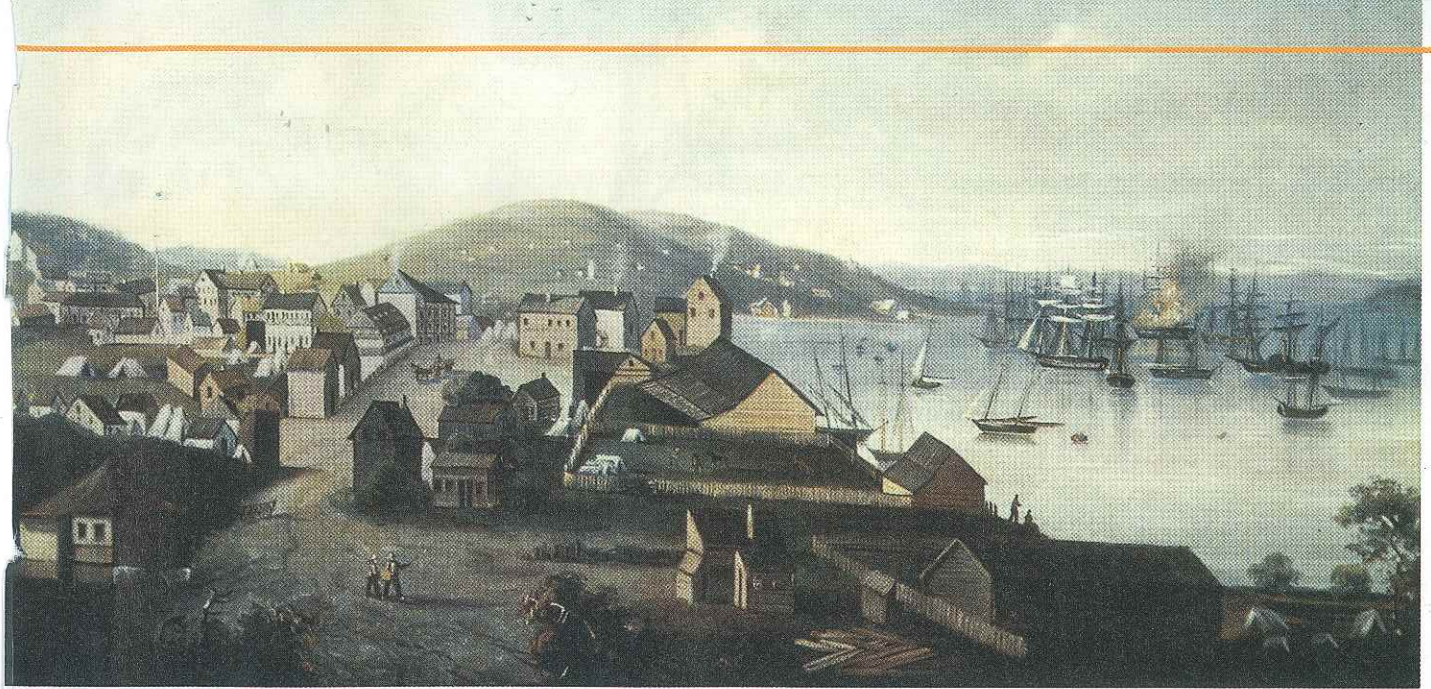
a salt basin, but we never deviated [strayed] from the direct route to see them."

After three months, the Wilsons had managed to cross the plains. Next, they made the grueling climb over the Rocky Mountains. Then, they entered the most dangerous region yet—the desert.

In the desert, the trail was littered with abandoned wagons. Wilson saw animal and even some human bones. She must have feared that her family would meet the same fate. The heat was terrible. A fine, dry dust covered them. Thirst tormented them. Their oxen seemed ready to collapse at any time. Still, the Wilsons kept going.

Finally, the ragged family reached a river. Their oxen drank eagerly. Wilson rejoiced. She and her family had survived. Their exhausting trip would soon be over. Once they crossed the high Sierra Nevada, they would reach the goldfields of California!

Life in California differed from the life Wilson had known in Missouri. On her first night there, a miner paid her \$10 for some bread. This was a great amount of money at the time. Wilson could see that she might get rich—but not in the goldfields.



“In my dreams that night,” she wrote, “I saw crowds of bearded miners striking gold from the earth with every blow of the pick, each one seeming to leave a share for me.” She could earn her fortune by cooking for hungry miners.

Why was the miner willing to pay so much? It was a matter of supply and demand. There were tens of thousands of miners. Most were men who could not cook. What Wilson offered—home-cooked meals—was in short supply. The men were willing to pay huge sums for her meals. Wilson spent her gold-rush years running a hotel and restaurant.

People kept coming. Cities sprang up quickly. Before the gold rush, San Francisco had fewer than 1,000 people. Soon, it had tens of thousands of residents. Many came from foreign countries, such as China. The Chinese people have been an important part of California’s population ever since.

Most of the gold-seekers did not strike it rich. Some went home, but many, like the Wilsons, stayed on in their new land. In fact, because so many newcomers stayed, California joined the United States in 1850.

Two decades later, a railroad linked California to the eastern part of the country. No longer would travelers to the West Coast have to endure a long, dangerous journey like that of Luzena Stanley Wilson and her family. Passengers could now watch the geographic wonders of the United States—broad plains, majestic mountains, deep rivers—rush by their train windows. California—and the rest of the country—had been transformed.

Thousands of people sailed to California during the gold rush. The San Francisco harbor was filled with ships.