

Death Valley



The wagon train set off from Salt Lake City on the last part of the long journey across America to California. There were a hundred wagons with about four hundred men, women and children, and their horses and oxen. The year was 1849, the year of the gold rush.

It was late in the year. There

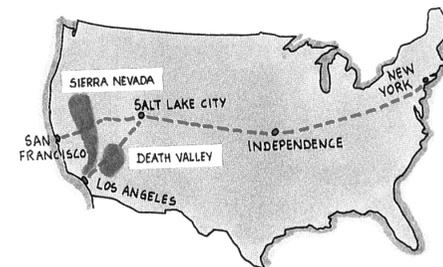
was already snow on the usual trail. The wagons were trying to follow a horse-trail where wagons had never been before. It wasn't easy. When they met with a group of men on horseback who told them about a short cut to California, twenty-seven wagons decided to leave the wagon train and try to find it. Among these was the wagon with Louis Nusbaumer and his friends. Louis Nusbaumer, twenty-nine years old, had emigrated from the Black Forest in Germany to New York a year earlier, and when he had heard about the gold in California, he had left his wife and baby in New York and set off west.

At first travelling was pleasant, and there was enough to eat and drink for the horses and oxen. But then it became hotter and drier. There was no more water and grass, only sand and rock. Some wagons began to fall behind, and soon there were only seven wagons together. The weeks that followed were terrible. The ground was so hot that the people had to tie pieces of leather not only around their own shoes but also around the hooves of the animals. And if they had not met Indians who showed them where there was good water, they would have died.

Shortly before Christmas, seven months after Nusbaumer had left New York, the wagons moved over a hill. In front of them they saw a huge valley, long and deep with tall mountains on every side. And in the valley was a huge lake. Water at last! They hurried on, but they found that the water was only a mirage. And on Christmas Day one of the two oxen that were pulling Nusbaumer's wagon became sick. Nusbaumer and his friends had to leave it and the wagon and go on foot with one ox, which carried as

much as possible. Sometimes they found water, but often they were terribly thirsty. Nusbaumer once tried to exchange his last two shirts and his coat for a drink from a man who still had water, but the man just turned away. Later Nusbaumer and his friends killed the ox and drank its blood.

They could find no way out of the valley that was later called 'Death Valley'. On January 14th, 1850, the people who were still together decided that the two strongest men should try to find a way out, and the others would stay in the valley. The two men planned to come back in ten days. But when they still had not come back after twenty-three days, Nusbaumer and his two friends joined a family called Erhardt and set off in their wagon.



And for the first time on the whole journey luck was on Nusbaumer's side. Two weeks later, on February 22nd, they at last came out of the desert and saw the Mojave River in California. On March 1st, almost a year after Nusbaumer had left New York, he had a meal at a Spanish ranch. It was the best food and drink he had ever tasted.

Words and what they mean

wagon train - a number of wagons that travel together

to set off - to start a trip

journey - trip

ox, oxen - a kind of bull

trail - path, narrow way

on horseback - riding a horse

short cut - a shorter way

to emigrate - to leave one's home country and live in another

leather - material that shoes are made from

to fall behind - to become slower and slower and then be the last

mirage - something you see when it's very hot, but it isn't real

to exchange - to give something away so that you get something else instead