<u>Putting the "Death" in Death Valley</u>
<u>Paul Withers</u>

In 1849, gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill in California and people from all over the United States packed their belongings and began to travel by wagon to what they hoped would be a new and better life. Since most of these pioneers began their exodus to California in 1849, they are generally referred to as 49ers. One of the supply points along the trail was Salt Lake City, where pioneers prepared for the long journey across the Great Basin desert before climbing over the High Sierra Mountains to the gold fields of California. It was important to leave Salt Lake City and cross the desert before snow began to fall on the Sierra Mountains, making them impassible. Only a couple of years before, a group of pioneers called the Donnor Party left late out of Salt Lake City and was trapped by a storm, an event that became one of the greatest human disasters of that day and age. The stories of the Donnor Party were still fresh on everyone's mind when a group of wagons arrived at Salt Lake City in September of 1849. This was much too late to try to cross the mountains safely, and it looked like these wagons were going to have to wait out the winter in Salt Lake City. It was then that they heard about the Old Spanish Trail, a route that went around the south end of the Sierras and was safe to travel in the winter. The only problems were that no pioneer wagon trains had ever tried to follow it and they could only find one person in town who knew the route and would agree to lead them. As this wagon train left Salt Lake City, some of these people would become part of a story of human suffering in a place they named Death Valley. [From here on, historical sources have a tendency to disagree on many details. Just enjoy the show.]

For $10 per wagon, Captain Jefferson Hunt of the Mormon Battalion led approximately 200 people, 110 wagons, and 500 horses and oxen south at ten miles per day. This slow pace (Hunt would only go as fast as the slowest wagon in the group) infuriated some of the more impatient gold seekers in the group. Remembering stories of a more direct route due west, and being overtaken by a party who had a rough map which showed such a route, many of the party swung west near Mountain Meadows in Nevada, confident that they could find Walker Pass, cutting 500 miles off their route. Since no Anglo had been that way before, the inevitable disasters followed. Cutting a long story short, most of the wagons decided to rejoin Captain Hunt and the well-travelled trail, though one jointly owned wagon was sawn in two as its two owners wished to go their separate ways. The bulk of the party eventually reached San Bernardino after an arduous journey. The remaining 50 people, not including the owner of the rough map, continued due west to discover Death Valley...

They were composed of three groups: thirty young men from Illinois, called the Jayhawkers; the Brier family, parents with their three young children; and the Bennett-Arcane group of thirteen men, two women, and four children. The three groups travelled in loose contact. They went west for weeks, struggling through the frequent mountain ranges. Springs and cattle feed were scarce. Around Christmas of 1849 they entered Death Valley. It had been two months since they had left the Spanish Trail. They spent Christmas at Furnace Creek, where, for the first and last time in many months, they found plentiful water. Their prospects were dismal. They were in uncharted territory, on an arid desert plain, with the Panamint mountains obstinate on the western horizon. The Jayhawkers abandoned their wagons, killed their oxen, divided their food and prepared to walk out, each man for himself. Several of them died in the mountains, though none in the Valley itself. The Briers were also on foot, having burned their broken wagons. They trudged after the Jayhawkers;

all survived. In the rear, the wagons of the Bennett-Arcane group struggled on. Many of their young men deserted them to race with the Jayhawkers, and one died from dehydration in the Valley. The wagons could not be dragged south over the salt flats to avoid the mountains, and no pass through the Panamints could be found. Exhausted, the group camped on the western floor of the Valley to decide their next move. Two young men, Rogers and Manly, were sent foward, with much of the food, to find a pass and bring food. They were expected to be gone for no more than fifteen days. Two families, with four young children, remained and waited to die.

When the men had been gone for twenty-five days, the families summoned up their last reserves of strength and prepared to attempt the walk out unguided. As they made ready their meagre supplies, a shot boomed out across the silent Valley. Their saviours, Rogers and Manly, had returned with supplies and a mule. They had travelled to within 30 miles of Los Angeles before finding the Rancho San Franciscito and the much needed supplies, including the first oranges the children had ever seen. The group fed and rested the next day, then began the slow journey across the Panamints. On the second day, they crested the range and turned to look back at the Valley that had been their prison for a month. "Goodbye, Death Valley," said one of the women, thus giving the Valley the name it still bears today.

It took three arduous weeks before they reached the end of the trail.

If you’re still awake and interested, there now follow some tales of the wild borax days...

Borax was first found in Death Valley in 1873. Aaron and Rosie Winters were in their sixties and living near Las Vegas when a prospector stopped with them for the night. During the fireside conversation, the prospector told them about the rich borax deposits then being exploited in Nevada and how to recognise and test for borax. The next day Aaron and Rosie loaded up their burro and raced to Furnace Creek in Death Valley, where Aaron remembered seeing "cotton ball" deposits like those described by the prospector. They powdered the soft, white fluff, poured on sulphuric acid and alcohol, struck a match, and saw a green flame. "She burns green, Rosie! We’re rich, by God!" exclaimed Aaron. Preoccupied with other deposits and the perennial problem of working in Death Valley, investors waited until 1881 before buying out their claims for $20,000.

The Pacific Coast Borax Company built the Harmony Borax Works a mile north of Furnace Creek in 1881. In traditional style, Chinese gathered the fluff from the floor of the Valley, Natives cut mesquite for the boilers, and the backers made fortunes. In winter at least. Summers were too hot for the refined product to crystallize and production shifted to other deposits at higher elevation. The refined borax was hauled out by twenty mule teams. A train of twenty mules pulled two huge wagons and a 1,200 gallon water tank, a total load of 36 1/2 tons. Each wagon, costing $900, was sixteen feet long, four wide, and six deep. The rear wheels were seven feet high, banded with iron tyres an inch think. Driving such a mule train was one of the most highly skilled jobs of the day. The 120 feet long mule train was controlled using a whip with a 6-foot handle and 22-foot lash. Only the railroads could beat them.

References

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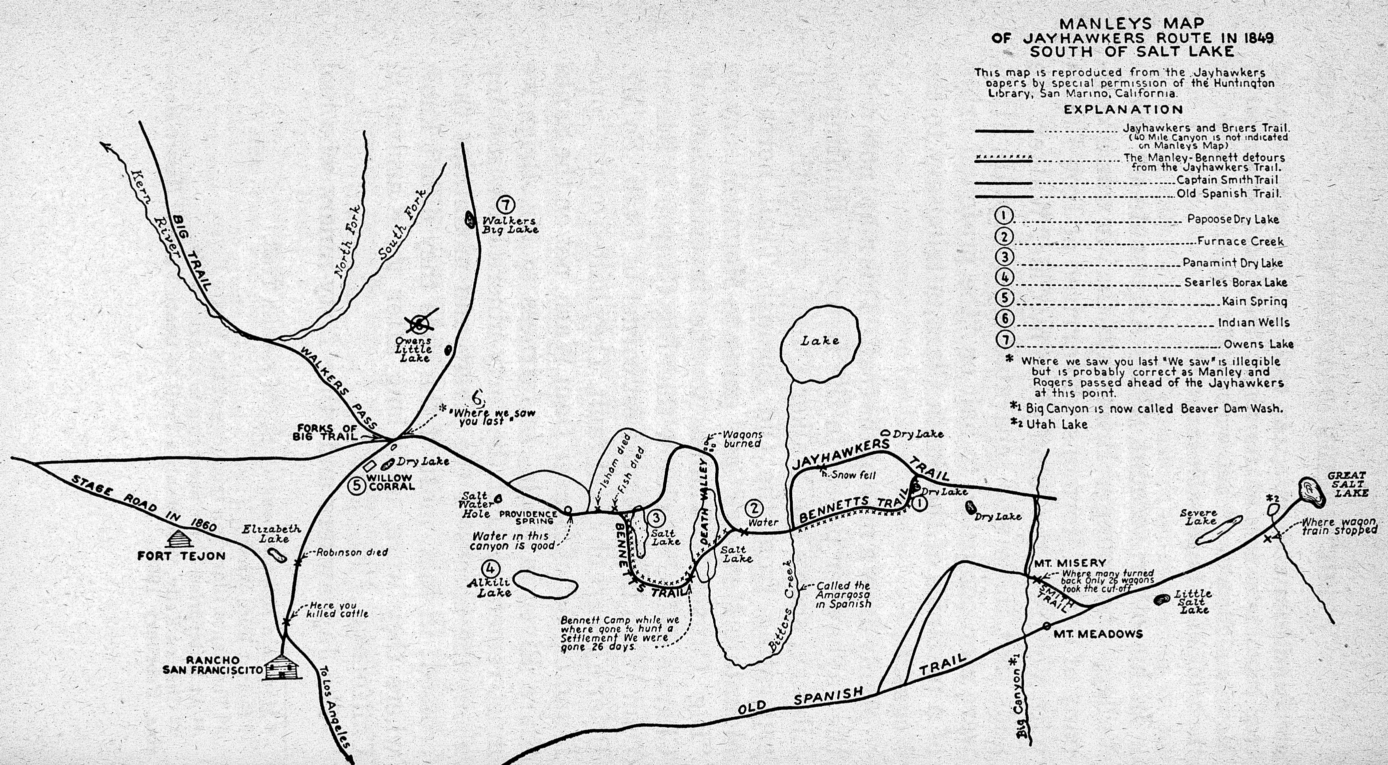
MANLEYS MAP
OF JAYHAWKERS ROUTE IN 1849
SOUTH OF SALT LAKE
This map is reproduced from the Jayhawkers papers by special permission of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
EXPLANATION
Jayhawkers and Briers Trail. (40 Mile Canyon is not indicated on Manleys Map)
The Manley-Bennett detours from the Jayhawkers Trail.
Captain Smith Trail
Old Spanish Trail.
1 Papoose Dry Lake
2 Furnace Creek
3 Panamint Dry Lake
4 Searles Borax Lake
5 Kain Spring
6 Indian Wells
7 Owens Lake
* Where we saw you last "We saw" is illegible but is probably correct as Manley and Rogers passed ahead of the Jayhawkers at this point.
*1 Big Canyon is now called Beaver Dam Wash.
*2 Utah Lake
Kern River
BIG TRAIL
North Fork
South Fork
7 Walkers Big Lake
Owens Little Lake
WALKERS PASS
6 * Where we saw you last
FORKS OF BIG TRAIL
Dry Lake
5 WILLOW CORRAL
STAGE ROAD IN 1860
Elizabeth Lake
Robinson died
FORT TEJON
Here you killed cattle
RANCHO SAN FRANCISCITO
To Los Angeles
Salt Water Hole
PROVIDENCE SPRING
Water in this canyon is good
4 Alkili Lake
Isham died
Fish died
3 Salt Lake
BENNETTS TRAIL
Bennett Camp while we where gone to hunt a Settlement We were gone 26 days.
DEATH VALLEY
Wagons burned
2 Water
Salt Lake
Lake
Bitters Creek
Called the Amargosa in Spanish
JAYHAWKERS TRAIL
Snow fell
Dry Lake
BENNETTS TRAIL
1 Dry Lake
Dry Lake
OLD SPANISH TRAIL
Big Canyon *1
MT. MISERY
Where many turned back Only 26 wagons took the cut-off
SMITH TRAIL
MT. MEADOWS
Severe Lake
Little Salt Lake
*2
GREAT SALT LAKE
Where wagon train stopped