

The Bidwell-Bartleson Emigrant Party

In 1841, a wagon train made up of over 70 men, women and children began to form near Independence, Missouri. They decided to join another small party after hearing that they were being led by famous mountaineer Thomas "Broken Hand" Fitzpatrick, who was leading a small group of Catholic Missionaries to Flathead County, Montana.

The larger group was led by self-appointed "Captain" John Bartleson, who insisted on leading the group despite his relative inexperience with wagon travel. After threatening to pull out of the journey if he did not get his way, Bartleson was appointed to be the "Captain".

On May 15th, 1841, the group set out with 15 wagons and 2 solid-wheel red river carts. This was a historical movement of people from the eastern and central plain states to California, as this party was the first to turn left off of the Oregon Trail and travel into Nevada and California. With the guidance of Fitzpatrick, the group made it to Soda Springs, Idaho by August.

This occurred when the party reached Fort Hall, Idaho where it split into two smaller groups. One continued to head west towards Oregon. The second group headed into uncharted territory that would ultimately lead them to California. From this point, the Catholic Missionaries proceeded north to their originally planned destination of Flathead County, Montana. A second group decided to proceed on to Oregon via the Oregon Trail. Bartleson's group, consisting of 32 people and 9 wagons, decided to head south-west towards California.

One of the people in the California-bound party was John Bidwell. During the trek, he kept a detailed journal of the paths they traveled, landmarks and the surrounding geography. He carried with him a book on celestial navigation and his journal would later serve as a comprehensive guide to moving settlers from the east into California. For his contribution, historians have dubbed this group of travelers the "Bidwell-Bartleson Party".

Bartleson and two others headed west to Soda Springs, Idaho to seek out trail directions while their wagon party began a slow trek south-west towards California. The plan was for Bartleson to catch up with the slow-moving convoy at Cache Valley, Utah. The wagon train headed towards the Bear River and in mid-August became the first such group to travel into Northern Utah. There the group wandered for several weeks, finding themselves lost due to there not being an experienced guide. They apparently passed their destination without even knowing it, as Bidwell noted in his journal:



General John Bidwell

"This is the fruit of having no pilot -- we pass through cash valley, where we intended to stop and did not know it", he wrote.

Bartleson and his two companions finally caught up to the group in late August at a place now called Connor Springs. They traveled on past Locomotive Springs and through Park Valley without fresh water for themselves nor grass for their horses and livestock. Food was scarce, as Bidwell noted in his journal:

"We travelled about 10 miles a day in a southwest direction and camped on a small brook. Today we killed some rabbits and an antelope. Game being scarce here we were compelled to kill oxen."

One week later, the party was the first to arrive at Pilots Peak where there was a watering hole and abundant plant life. Refreshed, the party tried to move through the Pequop Range in Nevada. They battled the terrain for 5 months before having to abandon what was left of their wagons and proceed on

horseback and by foot. It wasn't until November that the party finally crossed the Great Western Divide of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. They emerged at John Sutter's camp in the foothills near what is now the capital of California, Sacramento. At that time, the California Gold Rush was still seven years away and the territory was inhabited mainly by native Americans, Spanish Missionaries and a few English-speaking ranchers like Sutter.

After arriving in California, Bidwell worked for rancher John Sutter in various capacities. He explored much of northern California. When gold was discovered at Sutter's Fort near Sacramento, Bidwell was the man who delivered the news to San Francisco. The Gold Rush began, literally, with the utterance of his words.

Bidwell also served in the civil war, earning the rank of General, and went on to become one of California's first United States Senators. During his time in Washington, he met and married Annie Ellicott Kennedy; the daughter of a prominent government official. They were married in 1867 in the presence of President Andrew Johnson and General Ulysses S. Grant.

He was a presidential candidate and also ran twice for Governor of California. He narrowly lost both times. His defeat has been contributed to the fact that the Union Pacific Railroad did not take a liking to his populist views. Their candidates ended up winning both elections.

Marriage was good for Bidwell. His wife persuaded him to stop drinking and introduced him to the Presbyterian religion. The duo explored California and founded the city now known as Chico.

There he delved in agricultural projects that included the introduction of Bermuda Grass as a means to strengthen levees and prevent them from eroding. He experimented with new crops and introduced the Casaba Melon to California. He founded the Chico Roller Flouring Mill. Both he and Annie were amateur botanists and geologists who loved exploring the rugged wilderness. They became close friends of John Muir after joining him on a camping trip to Mount Shasta.



Chico Roller Flouring Mill

In their later years, they funded and volunteered for many community causes including education, women's rights, Indian rights, environmental protection and election reform. They also explored Alaska and Europe. Each summer, they would camp in the Sierra Nevada Mountains and re-discover their love of California.