

Edward Smith Diary

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Descriptive Summary

Title: Edward Smith Diary

Dates: April 29 – November 11, 1848 and 1851-1853

Collection Number: MSS 18

Creator/Collector: EdwardSmith

Extent: One Volume 12.75 in H x 8 in W x 0.5 in D

Repository: Fresno City and County Historical Society
Fresno, California 93706

Abstract: This diary is one of only seven known California Overland Trail accounts that chronicled the westward trail experience prior to the 1849 Gold Rush.

Language of Material: English

Access

Collection is open for research by appointment only. Email archives@valleyhistory.org with inquiries. Visit www.valleyhistory.org for researcher policies and instructions.

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Preferred Citation

Edward Smith Diary. Fresno City and County Historical Society

Acquisition Information

Unknown

Biography/Administrative History

Edward Smith was a native of Ulster County, New York. His wife, Jane Whitaker, was a native of Kingston, Ulster County, New York. Edward and Jane were married in Kingston and four of their children were born there, the others were born in Illinois. One of Smith's daughters, Leah Margaret, married John Breen, a member of the Donner Party. Smith and his family came overland from Springfield, Illinois to California in 1848, leaving Springfield in April of that year. He kept a diary of the journey beginning in Missouri on April 29, until November 11 when he and his family arrived in San Francisco. In San Francisco, he worked as a merchant until November of 1849, and then moved to live a short time in Santa Cruz. In January 1850, he and his family then moved to San Juan. He practiced law, since he had previously studied English and American law. In July of 1850, with a Colonel Allen, he established the San Juan post office, and became the area's first postmaster. He also worked as a land surveyor of Monterey County. Edward Smith died in 1853 probably at the end of September or early October.

Scope and Content of Collection

The diary itself is roughly twenty-one pages where Edward Smith chronicled the six month overland wagon trail journey westward from Independence, Missouri to San Francisco, California from April 29 to November 11, 1848. The entries end once his family arrives in San Francisco and do not start up again until 1851. The diary is mainly concerned with basic facts and daily experiences with few personal thoughts. Smith documents nearly every day things like distance traveled, campsites, encounters with Native Americans, weather, crossing rivers and mountains. Edward Smith originally left from Independence, Missouri with four other wagons and during the journey he joined the Kelly party lead by Reverend Clinton Kelly. He originally wished to set off with the Joseph Chiles wagon party, which he joined once they met up in Fort Laramie. Joseph Chiles was an experienced wagon leader that made the trip several times, and it was the last wagon company of the migrating season that was travelling to California for the year. Some entries of note include passing Chimney Rock and meeting celebrated mountain man, Joseph Walker. Smith also describes forging a new trail with Joseph Chiles known as the Carson Trail. During the journey, Smith was accidentally shot by another member of the wagon train while guarding the camp at night. Only about four-hundred known emigrants traveled west overland in 1848. This diary is one of only seven known overland trail accounts that chronicled the westward trail experience prior to the 1849 Gold Rush. The diary notes the surveys taken between March 1851 and September 1853. The second half of the diary also lists goods bought for the overland journey, and includes a record of overall miles covered, and drawings of different brands used by acquaintances of Smith. The diary itself is written in old style cursive with dates labeled on the side of each new entry. There are only twenty-one pages of written content with many empty pages in the end.

Indexing Terms

California Overland Trail, westward migration

Western United States

diary

[Guide to Edward Smith Diary](#)
