Disaster At The Colorado

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Appendix B

Copy of Letter from John Udell to His Brothers, Published in the Ashtabula (Ohio) Sentinel, April 7, 1859

Some months ago we gave a little notice of the arrival of our old friend at Albequerque, on his fourth trip to California. By the following extract from a letter to his brothers in this place, it will be seen that he has not finished up his “Life and Travels” yet. He seems to live on in the midst of adventures, more interesting than ever, and, as heretofore, getting through his difficulties with a light heart and full trust in Providence.

Alberquerque, New Mexico, March 5, 1859.

Through the protection and grace of God we are still inhabiting our earthly tenement in this wicked world, and are at present dwelling, I think, in the most wicked part of it. My wife and I are here separated more than one thousand miles from children or relatives, among entire strangers, a large majority of which are black, uncivilized creatures, only in the shape of human-kind, our constitutions worn out and quite feeble with old age, hardship and suffering.

On account of the Mormon difficulties we took the road through Kansas and New Mexico. Our company numbered near 100 persons, 60 of whom were women and children. We pursued our journey through Kansas, and nearly through New Mexico, without any serious interruption, When we cam to this place (Alberquerque) we were advised to take a newly explored route. It was said to be much the nearest, safest and best, and all of the company except myself, immediately concluded to take the new route. I had once suffered extremely in taking a new cut off, when crossing the plains; so I used every reasonable effort in my power to prevent taking it, but to no effect. I was compelled from circumstances to travel on with the company, for protection in a savage country. We had already traveled one thousand miles in an Indian country. We traveled on near five
hundred miles farther, before we were molested. When we were within one hundred miles of the Colorado River, we were considerably annoyed by the Cosenos Indians. Arrows were shot among us, killing some of the company's cattle and one man was dangerously wounded, so that he did not recover for more than two months. We pursued our journey until within a few miles of the Colorado River, in sight of the mountains in California, and in the bounds of the Mohava Indians, we supposing them to be friendly and kind.

Our cattle were all in good plight. Our hearts beat high with the thought that in a few days the perils of our long and tedious journey would be over. A part of our company had gone on before to the river; and we concluded to leave our wagons and a few of our oldest men, together with the women and children, and let our stock be driven down to the river to water and graze with the others, as we calculated to remain there several days to build a raft to cross on, and recruit our stock. My wife and I being the oldest persons in the company, we remained with the wagons, and our young men went with our stock to the river; consequently we were not in the battle with the Indians which took place at the river after our men had been there two days. On the third day, the 30th of August, 1858, the Mohava Indians, to the number of three or four hundred, (as our men judged,) gathered themselves together in the brush and came upon them in surprise, and began pouring their arrows furiously into the encampment, while some of the men were herding the stock and some were engaged in building a raft. As soon as those who were out heard the alarm in camp, they rushed in to the relief of the men, women, and children, forcing their way through the body of the Indians, — in doing which Mr. Brown, the Captain of the train, was killed. Our men fought the Indians for two hours, (as they supposed,) and it was a close, hard fought battle. One of our men was killed and fourteen wounded, besides a German family of seven persons, supposed to be all killed, as they were some two or three miles distant from the camp, and the body of one was found badly mutilated.—

One of the Indian Chiefs, and about fifty (as was supposed) of their men being killed, they dispersed, so that our company made good their retreat. But the Indians had succeeded, in the meantime, in driving off our stock, amounting to near 400, and had made them swim the river, and they all swam after them, leaving it impossible for us to retake them; and thus our wagons were left teamless, and about fifty women and children not able
to walk, in the midst of merciless savages. Death seemed to stare us in the face. It was six hundred miles back to this place, (Albequerque,) where the first white settler lived, and two hundred and forty miles to go forward to white settlers in California. We had nothing to expect but immediate death from the hands of merciless savages, or a more lingering death from starvation, when our provisions should be consumed. We were entirely despondent; no team or means to move ourselves from the spot. But, through the favor of Divine Providence, just at this juncture, aid came. A train was discovered coming from behind us. It proved to be from Iowa, going to California. In it were some of our acquaintances. They, hearing of our misfortunes, concluded to turn back; but their teams were not sufficient to carry anything except our provisions and small children,—all the women and children who could walk at all, had to walk.

In this plight we all started back, and our progress under these circumstances was slow. I had kept a pony with me at the wagons, which the Indians did not get; my wife rode upon it and I walked. We had two blankets for a covering at night, while we slept on the ground in the open air—not having a wagon or tent to go into, for we had left all behind, and those who came to our relief had no room in theirs for us. Thus were we aged and infirm people exposes for many long nights to cold rains, dew and snow,—one of us in the 64th and the other in the 65th year of our age.

But we were not yet released from fear of starvation, for there was not half provision enough in the company to support us back to where we could get any.

In travelling back through the Cosenenos we were again much annoyed, and another of our men so badly wounded that his life was despaired of for many days.

After several days of travel, we met a large train of wagons, cattle, horses and mules, owned by Messr. E. O. and T. O. Smith, brothers, and 40 men, all bound for California. These, after hearing of our misfortunes at the Colorado, also turned back. This to us was another token of Divine Providence, on our behalf; for our provisions were nearly all exhausted, and had we not met with these generous-hearted gentlemen, in all human probability we must have perished before we could have reached a place where we could get relief.

These gentlemen immediately called their men together, whom they had contracted to provision and take through to
California, and put the question to them: ‘Now are you willing
that we should divide our provisions among these unfortunate
people, also to give up our seats in the wagons for heir women
and children?’ adding at the same time—‘We have horses and
mules for you to ride, and when our provision is exhausted our
cattle shall be butchered to supply us with food’. I think every
one voted in the affirmative. The Messrs. Smith were honest
and true to their word; for our provisions were soon exhausted,
and they butchered their cattle, and we lived on the beef, with-
out other food, for near forty days.

Our company now numbered about 200, nearly one-half
women and children. On our return journey, when within six
days travel of Albequerque, we came to Zana [Zuñi], an Indian
town of friendly Indians, where we remained fourteen days,
until some of our men went forward to Albequerque. The
Officers of the American Army stationed there and at Santa Fe
sent us two wagonloads of provisions, which lasted us through.

We all arrived her on the 13th of November, having been two
months and a half on our return trip, and suffered much from
frost, snow, cold rains, hunger, and much from anxiety. Here
the officers of the army, and American citizens did us no small
kindness. They granted us thirty days rations of provisions, and
gave us many presents of clothing, and necessaries to make us
comfortable.

The county is mountainous, sterile, and many portions of it
are entirely barren.—They all live in adobe housed, but they are
the most comfortable things you see here. They bring their wood
twenty-five miles to supply this large place with fuel, and it is pine
and cedar when you get it. It was frozen ice here this winter, from
eight to ten inches thick, and the snow was six inches deep for a
long time. We have remained here now nearly four months, and
our situation is not an enviable one for a Christian, I assure you.
I have been laboring in government employ most of the time at
$1.5 per month, and a soldier’s ration.

Since I commenced writing this, Lieut. Beal has arrived here,
and is on his way to California, with a company of men to
improve the new road. He has agreed to take my wife and me
through upon his own expense, and we expect to start in three
or four days, so we have to try the same rout over again, but we
hope we have a force sufficient to protect us from the Indians.
At any rate we are thankful to get from her.