

NARCISSA WHITMAN LETTERS APRIL 1836

by Crystal Calhoun



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April 1st 1836. - Nothing of much importance occurred to-day. My eyes are satiated with the same beautiful scenery all along the coasts of this mighty river, so peculiar to this western country. One year ago to-day since my husband first arrived in St. Louis on his exploring route to the mountains. We are one week earlier passing up the river this spring than he was last year. While the boat stopped to take in wood we went on shore, found some rushes, picked a branch of cedar, went to a spring for clear water (the river water is very rily at all times), and rambled considerably in pursuit of new objects. One of these circumstances I must mention, which was quite diverting to us. On the rocks near the river we found a great quantity of the prickly pear. Husband knew from experience the effects of handling them, and cautioned me against them, but I thought I could just take one and put it in my india-rubber apron pocket, and carry it to the boat. I did so, but after rambling a little I thought to take it out, and behold, my pocket was filled with its needles, just like a caterpillar's bristles. I became considerably annoyed with them; they covered my hands, and I have scarcely got rid of them yet. My husband would have laughed at me a little, were it not for his own misfortune. He thought to discover what kind of mucilage it was by tasting it - cut one in two, bit it, and covered his lips completely. We then had to sympathize with each other, and were glad to render mutual assistance in a case of extermination.

April 2nd, evening, ten o'clock. - We have come on well since we left St. Louis. Sailed all night last night, which is a rare thing on this river, on account of snags and sandbars. We are now at Jefferson City, about half way to Liberty from St. Louis. How long we stop here I do not know - perhaps all night.

Monday, 4th. - We passed the wreck of the Steamboat Siam to-day about noon. It is indeed a melancholy sight. She was not quite a year old. She ran upon a snag and sank, last winter. No lives lost. We stopped to-day at Chariton, about an hour. We went on shore and visited a steam sawmill. It was quite a curiosity, as well as the great engine that propels the boat upon the mighty waters.

Thursday, 7th. - Very pleasant, but cold. This morning the thermometer stood at 24 at nine o'clock. I have not seen any snow since we left the Allegheny mountains, before the 15th of March. I should like to know about the snow in New York. Is it all gone? How did it go, and the consequences? Mary, we have had a sick one with us all the way since we joined Dr. Satterlee. Mrs. Satterlee has had a very bad cough and cold, which has kept her feeble. She is now recovering, and is as well as can be expected. The rest of us have been very well, except feeling the effects of drinking the river water. I am in exception, however. My health was never better than since I have been on the river. I was weighed last week, and came up to 136 pounds. I think I shall endure the journey well - perhaps better than any of the rest of us. Mrs. Spalding does not look nor feel quite healthy enough for our enterprise. Riding affects her differently from what it does me. Everyone who sees me compliments me as being the best able to endure the journey over the mountains. Sister S. is very resolute - no shrinking with her. She possesses much fortitude. I like her very much. She wears well upon acquaintance. She is very suitable person for Mr. Spalding - has the right temperment to match him. I

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think we shall get along very well together; we have so far. I have such a good place to shelter - under my husband's wings. He is so excellent. I love to confide in his judgment, and act under him, for it gives me a chance to improve. Jane, if you want to be happy get as good a husband as I have got, and be a missionary. Mary, I wish you were with us. You would be happy, as I am. The way looks pleasant, notwithstanding we are so near encountering the difficulties of an unheard-of journey for females. I think it would do your health good, as well as Lyman and Brother J.G., too.

This letter is free plunder. Jane, I will write to you again. What I say to one, I say to all. I should like to write to each of you, separately, but I wish to write so many ways that my time is so occupied that I cannot write as much I want to. Since we have been here we have made our tent. It is made of bedticking, in a conical form, large enough for us all to sleep under - viz.: Mr. Spalding and wife, Dr. Whitman and wife, Mr. Gray, Richard Tak-ah-too-ah-tis, and John Altz; quite a little family - raised with a centerpole and fastened down with pegs, covering a large circle. Here we shall live, eat and sleep for the summer to come, at least - perhaps longer. Mary, you inquired concerning my beds and bedding. I will tell you. We five spread our India-rubber cloth on the ground, then our blankets, and encamp for the night. We take plenty of Mackinaw blankets, which answer for our bed and bedding, and when we journey place them over our saddles and ride on them. I wish you could see our outfit.

I had made for me, in Brother Augustus' shoe store, in Rushville, a pair of gentlemen's boots, and from him we supplied ourselves with what shoes we wanted. We have each of us a life-preserver, so that if we fall into the water we shall not drown. They are made of India-rubber cloth, air-tight, and when filled with air and placed under the arm will prevent one from sinking. Each of us take a plate, knife and fork and a tin cup. Mary, when we are under way I will describe the whole proceeding to you. When I see it before my eyes I can give a better description, for I shall have a better understanding of it. Husband has got me an excellent sidesaddle, and a very easy horse. He made me a present of a mule to ride, the other day, so I do not know which I shall like best - I have not tried the latter, Richard says "That's very bad mule - can't catch buffaloes." That is the test with him. An animal's speed makes him good, in his eye. I shall write you from Council Bluffs and at every opportunity, especially when Mr. Parker returns. We have lately received a letter from Mrs. Parker. O, what a spirit it breathed! When we were there she said if we could not get a minister to go with us we might keep Mr. Parker until one came, if we would only go on, and even now she has given permission for him to stay a year longer, and visit another tribe to the south. I wish I could show you her letter. You say Brother J.G. and his wife have been to Ithaca. Why did he not go when I was there? I had a good visit with Deacon and Mrs. Rolla, and a piece of a song, too, but not half enough. He sent me the "Missionary's Farewell," by Dr. Satterlee; music, by himself. Alas! my husband don't come to-night; the wind has blown so hard that I expect he has not been able to cross the river. Brother Gray is with him. I shall not feel so anxious about him on that account, so adieu for to-night. It is almost ten o'clock, and the family have all gone to rest.

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I should like to tell you how the western people talk, if I had room. Their language is so singular that I could scarcely understand them, yet it was very amusing. In speaking of quantity, they say "heap of man, heap of water, she is heap sick", etc. If you ask, "How does your wife today?" "O, she is smartly better, I reckon, but she is powerful weak; she has been mighty bad. What's the matter with your eye?"