

Succumbing to a strange fever

"The past winter there has been a strange fever raging here," Kitturah Penton Belknap wrote in the spring of 1847 in Van Buren County, Iowa. "It seems to be contagious and it is raging terribly, nothing seems to stop it but to tear up and take a six months trip across the plains with ox teams to the Pacific Ocean."

Kitturah's family eventually succumbed to the fever, as you'll read later in this issue. So did Albert Paschal from Louisa County, and James Cowden from Keosauqua. So did 17-year-old Eliza Ann McAuley from Mount Pleasant.

According to historians' estimates, so did another quarter to a half million people. Iowans were certainly among thousands and thousands of "fever-struck" Americans who migrated west between the 1840s and the 1870s. The migration is an American epic. The image of covered wagons crossing the Great Plains is carved into our national memory as surely as are the wheel ruts that still scar the land.

But there is a tragic simplification in seeing American westward expansion as a stream of wagons winding across open, empty land, as a flood of emigrants marking distance on a vacant landscape. The real story is one of complex interconnections and shifting dynamics involving diverse peoples.

Iowa's newest historic site—the Western Historic Trails Center—reveals this complex story through intriguing combinations

of interactive exhibits, films, and historic images. In this issue of *Iowa Heritage Illustrated*, we'll tour the new Trails Center in Council Bluffs. And through excerpts from diaries, we'll experience the trails ourselves. We'll pack a wagon with Kitturah Belknap, ford icy streams with Albert Paschal, cross alkali swamps with Eliza Ann McAuley, and encounter a host of other people on the trail.

After all, the story of western expansion is a story of people—people who left home and people who were left behind; people who entered the West and people who already lived in the West; people who protected others and people who profited from others.

And it is a story of people interacting with the land. Land that taunted travelers, starving their animals, busting their wheels. Land that awed them and humbled them. Land that promised gold.

Travelers had their own impact on the land, leaving behind deep ruts, livestock carcasses, shallow graves, carved initials, cast-off belongings. And as the dynamics shifted between diverse peoples, the land itself was redefined. Sacred Land. Great American Desert. Garden of Eden. Reservations. Homesteader's Paradise. Wild West.

The story of America's western trails started long before the 1840s—with the Lewis and Clark Trail in 1804–1806. And it did not end when the iron trail, the transcontinental railroad, knit the East



and the West together in the 1870s. Eventually, ever more sophisticated trails—graded roads and paved highways—would weave together the mountains and plains and deserts. Automobile tourists clutching maps of scenic landmarks would become America's 20th-century emigrants.

As with all far-reaching events in history—wars, depressions, epidemics—the westward



expansion comprises countless individuals and experiences. Selecting material for this issue could be likened to the challenge faced by emigrants packing covered wagons: How much will fit? What must be left out? Painful choices!

Reading 19th-century trail diaries is a compelling way to encounter the past. Toward that end, this issue presents portions of five diaries, each rich with experiences

on the western trails. Listen to these five travelers, and then multiply their experiences by the quarter or half million emigrants who went west. You will begin to sense the magnitude and meanings of westward expansion for this continent and its people.

—The Editor

The Joseph Henry Byington family was one of thousands of families emigrating west in the mid 19th century. Here, the family rests near Calls Fort, Utah, circa 1870.

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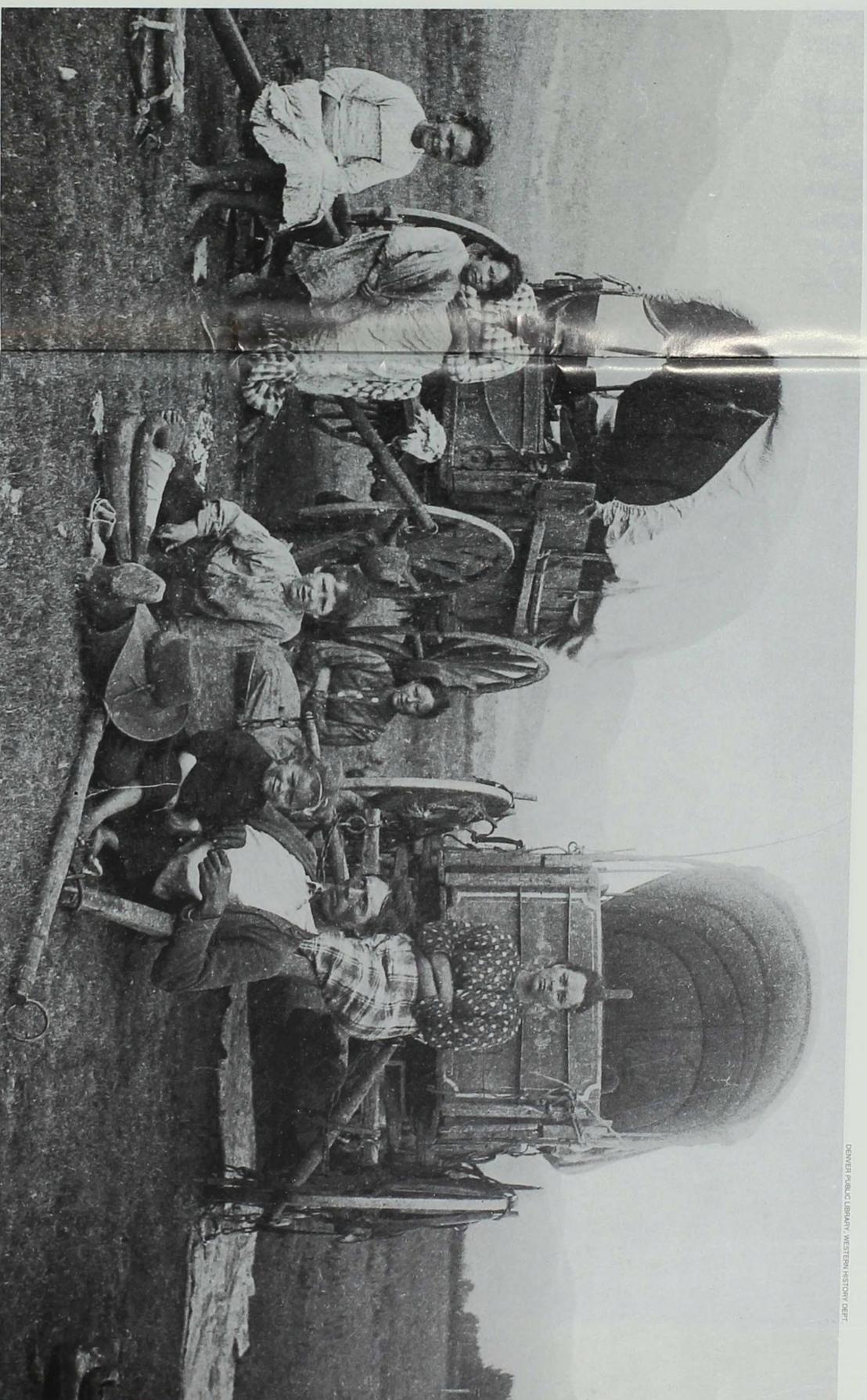
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