

DOCUMENTS
LETTERS OF A FORTY-NINER
Edited by Mildred Throne

On May 6, 1849, a wagon train left Iowa City for the gold fields of California. Among the members was Chauncey Swan, later to be honored as "The Father of Iowa City." On the journey, and during two years in California, Swan wrote several letters to his wife, Mrs. Mary Swan—letters which have been preserved in the State Historical Society of Iowa, and are here reproduced.

Chauncey Swan, a native of New York, emigrated to Dubuque about 1835. He served as a member of the first legislature of the newly-formed Territory of Iowa in 1838 and 1839. He gained the title, "Father of Iowa City," through his appointment on January 18, 1839, as one of the three commissioners to choose the site for the new capital of the Territory.¹ After the selection of the site of Iowa City, in May of 1839, Swan moved from Dubuque to the new capital as "Acting Commissioner" to superintend the laying-out of the town. He also chose the site for the Territorial Capitol building and superintended its planning and construction.²

For ten years, from 1839 to 1849, Swan was active in many of the affairs of the capital. He served as postmaster from November, 1839, to September, 1841;³ he operated "Swan's Hotel" which Theodore S. Parvin, in 1842, described as "the only good tavern ever established in Iowa";⁴ he was one of the five trustees of the First Presbyterian Church and gave

¹ "Certificate of the Election of C. Swan as commissioner to locate the Seat of Government [sic] of the Territory of Iowa for the (3rd) Judicial District." *Swan Papers*, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City; *Journal of the House of Representatives of the First Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Iowa, 1838-1842*, 248.

² Benjamin F. Shambaugh, *Iowa City, A Contribution to the Early History of Iowa* (Iowa City, 1893), 18-26, 62; Charles Negus, "The Early History of Iowa," *Annals of Iowa* (First Series), 8:109 (April, 1870). The document appointing Swan as "Superintendent of Public Buildings at Iowa City," dated January 20, 1841, and signed by Robert Lucas, Governor of the Territory of Iowa, is in the *Swan Papers*.

³ Clarence Ray Aurner, *Leading Events in Johnson County Iowa History* (Cedar Rapids, 1912), 28.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 654 note.

land for the church building;⁵ and, in 1843, he served as president of the Iowa City Manufacturing Company, an early cooperative venture for building a dam and grist mill on the Iowa River.⁶ His first wife, Dolly, died in February, 1847. In July of that year he married Mrs. Mary Walker, the widow of Elijah Walker for whose estate Swan had acted as administrator.⁷

Late in 1848 the news of the gold discovery at Sutter's Mill in California caused increasing excitement throughout the nation, and by the spring of 1849 groups were gathering in all parts of the East and Middle West for the long and hazardous journey to the gold fields. Those on the eastern seaboard could go by ship around Cape Horn, or to Panama, where they could cross the isthmus and continue by boat to San Francisco. To the Middle Westerner, the nearest and cheapest — although the longest — route was to go overland by the Oregon trail along the Platte River to Fort Bridger and Soda Springs, and thence along the Humboldt River, across the Sierra Nevadas, and into the Sacramento Valley.⁸ Some parties turned southwestward at Fort Bridger and went to the new Mormon settlement at Salt Lake City. This is the route followed by the "Sacramento Mining Company," of which Swan was a member.⁹

The Donner party disaster of 1846 was still fresh in the minds of the forty-niners; therefore, those who arrived at Fort Bridger or Salt Lake City late in the summer were reluctant to start on the last hazardous stage over the mountains. The party with which Swan traveled did not reach the Mormon city until the middle of August, 1849,¹⁰ too late to undertake

⁵ *History of Johnson County, Iowa* . . . (Iowa City, 1883), 660. Robert Hutchinson, mentioned by Swan in his letters, was also active in the founding of the Presbyterian Church.

⁶ Shambaugh, *Iowa City* . . ., 48-9. David Switzer, mentioned in Swan's letters, was also active in this company.

⁷ *Swan Papers*.

⁸ Accounts of these various routes to California can be found in Stewart Edward White, *The Forty-Niners* . . . (New Haven, 1918); Archer Butler Hulbert, *Forty-Niners* . . . (Boston, 1931); Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of California* (7 vols., San Francisco, 1890), 6:126-63.

⁹ "The Jacob Y. Stover Narrative," ed. by John Walton Caughey, *Pacific Historical Review*, 6:166-81 (June, 1937). "The names of the Company that started from Iowa City, as far as I recollect, were David Switzer, Lawrence Hudson, Henry Earhart, Dr. McCormick, John Adams, Chauncey Swan, Deacon Moore, Sam McFaddon, Abe Owen, Joseph Clement, Charles Pratt, Jacob Ressler, Charles Jones, Henry Walker, Columbus Cattet, John Craig, Dr. Downer, John Stutesman, Jacob Earhart, John Earhart, ——— McWilliams and wife and two sons, Mike and Bryan, Abe Earhart, and Jacob Y. Stover." *Ibid.*, 166.

¹⁰ See Swan's letter of September 2, 1849.

the Humboldt River route before snow would make mountain travel dangerous. These emigrants, anxious to reach the gold fields, were eager for any suggestions of an alternative route.

Jefferson Hunt, a Mormon, had explored a southern route from Salt Lake City to Los Angeles in the fall of 1847. He had traveled southwest from the Mormon city to what was called the "Old Spanish Trail," a route formerly followed by Spanish traders. This trail made "a bold curve from Santa Fe, north of the Grand Canyon, through the country of the Utes, across the Mojave Desert and Cajon Pass to Los Angeles."¹¹ Traveling south from Salt Lake City, Hunt had picked up the Spanish Trail on the Sevier River, and followed it southwest to the Rio Virgen, near what is now the southern boundary of Utah. From there the trail continued southwestward into southern California. It was over this route that Hunt proposed to pilot some 100 emigrant wagons. For his services as guide he asked a fee of ten dollars per wagon.¹²

The wagon train which started hopefully from Provo on Utah Lake, south of Salt Lake City, in early October of 1849 was to meet many disasters. Hunt's 1847 journey by pack train had taken 45 days; in 1849 he reached southern California with a remnant of the wagon train on December 22, after about 75 days of travel.¹³ The train had broken up somewhere near Mountain Meadows in southern Utah, where a "Captain Smith" with a small group of packers met them and persuaded the great majority to follow him directly west through Walker's Pass and into the Tulare Valley. Smith assured the travelers that he had come over this route with pack trains before and that he was sure wagons could go through "by digging and chopping a little."¹⁴ He showed them a map, "made by one Williams of Salt Lake" and this map was eagerly studied by the gold-seekers.¹⁵

Evidently this cut-off was already known to the travelers, since Swan

¹¹ John Walton Caughey, "Southwest from Salt Lake in 1849," *Pacific Historical Review*, 6:144 (June, 1937).

¹² *Ibid.*, 146; "Jacob Y. Stover Narrative," 170

¹³ Milton R. Hunter, "The Mormon Corridor," *Pacific Historical Review*, 8:185-6 (June, 1939); Caughey, "Southwest from Salt Lake in 1849," 150. Swan, in his letter of April 25, 1850, gives the date of arrival at Rancho del Chino as December 24.

¹⁴ "Jacob Y. Stover Narrative," 172.

¹⁵ William Lewis Manly, *Death Valley in '49* (San Jose, Calif., 1894), 109. Manly was a member of the group which followed Smith, and his book gives a graphic story of the disasters which befell him.

mentions the Walker Pass route in his letter of September 2, 1849, written from Salt Lake City. Hunt did his best to discourage those who were clamoring to follow Smith. He "expressed himself forcibly against the proposed cut-off, but the prospect of saving five hundred miles and of reaching the diggings in twenty days was too attractive."¹⁶ When his persuasions failed, he wished them good luck but warned that they were going "into the jaws of hell."¹⁷ It is from the disasters of those who followed this cut-off that the famous southern California desert received its name of Death Valley.¹⁸

Although it is not possible to tell definitely from Swan's letters whether he continued with Hunt or whether he turned off with Smith, the fact that he mentions reaching the Rancho del Chino on December 24, just two days after Hunt's party arrived there, would seem to imply that he was with, or that he followed closely, the Hunt group. Many of those who started on the cut-off grew disheartened and turned south until they picked up Hunt's trail.¹⁹ Another forty-niner relates that Hunt's party reached the Rancho del Chino on Christmas Eve.²⁰ Since those who escaped from Death Valley came into California farther north at about the same time, it seems logical to assume that Swan continued with the Hunt party.

The following letters, written over a period of several years to his wife, Mary Swan, give fragmentary pictures of a disillusioned forty-niner, on the trail and in California. Swan left for home by ship for New York in 1852, but died en route and was buried at sea.²¹

[Council Bluffs]²²

June 1st 1849

My dear Wife

My teams are all over and I have only time to say I am well & shall

¹⁶ Caughey, "Southwest from Salt Lake in 1849," 149.

¹⁷ "Jacob Y. Stover Narrative," 172.

¹⁸ "One group of emigrants, deserting the main trail near Mountain Meadow in order to reach the mines by what they thought to be a more direct route, soon lost their way and suffered indescribable hardships, a number perishing in the desert in southern California, which hereafter became known as Death Valley." Ralph P. Bieber, "The Southwestern Trails to California in 1849," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 12:369 (December, 1925).

¹⁹ Hunter, "The Mormon Corridor," 186.

²⁰ James S. Brown, *Life of a Pioneer*, quoted by Caughey, "Southwest from Salt Lake in 1849," 150.

²¹ Letter of A. B. Walker, Swan's stepson, *Iowa City Citizen*, September 8, 1915.

²² Although the letter does not indicate Swan's location at the time of writing, the

start for the Mountains tomorrow morning Mrs. Carpenter and Mrs. McDonal²³ are in our Company and I wish some times my wife my dear Mary was here but it is no place for a *Lady* — Doct McDonal says I am foolish to wish you here but his own wife should not have gone if she had any home behind we hope for the best your information with regard to sickness in this place was untrue no one sick here Doct McCormick²⁴ & Doct McDonald both send love tell Mrs Moor that her husband is well I wish you to [illegible] all I have to say to Charly & wife²⁵ Emly & all kiss her for me. also Alphonzo²⁶ I am in haste boat is waiting. So my love my much loved wife

farwell

C. Swan

Mrs. Mary Swan

Orrigan Pacific Springs²⁷

July 27th 1849

To My dear Wife

Mary — and all my family —

Greeting

Here I am in Mr Switzer²⁸ tent writing. 3 Miles west of the Great

phrase "My teams are all over" would indicate the crossing of the Missouri at Council Bluffs. Also, in the letter of July 27, Swan writes: "at the bluffs I wrote you a few lines." The wagon train had left Iowa City on May 6, 1849, "Jacob Y. Stover Narrative," 167.

²³ Stover does not include several names in his list of the company which are mentioned by Swan in these letters. Possibly Stover's memory played him false, since the "Narrative" was written many years after 1849. See footnote 9 for his list of members of the Iowa City company. Also, groups from other parts of Iowa no doubt joined the Iowa City train, since the gold fever was high and thousands were joining the "rush."

²⁴ Dr. William McCormick was a physician of Iowa City with close ties to Swan. He practiced medicine with Dr. Ezra Bliss, Mary Swan's brother, and with Dr. Silas Swan, Chauncey's oldest son. *Iowa City Iowa Standard*, June 17, 1846; *Iowa City Citizen*, September 8, 1915. McCormick remained in California, making his home at Grass Valley where he died in about 1899. *Proceedings of the Johnson County Old Settlers Association, 1866 to 1899* (n. p., n. d.), 48.

²⁵ Charles Swan, second son of Chauncey by his first marriage. He had married Angelina Moore, a niece of Mary Swan's. They later moved to California, *Proceedings of the Johnson County Old Settlers Association, 1866 to 1899*, 53. Swan had a third son, Lorenzo, who is not mentioned in these letters, and a daughter, Cordelia, who died in 1839, the first death in Iowa City. Sketch of Swan's life, by Sarah Paine Hoffman in *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, February 23, 1940.

²⁶ Alphonzo Walker, son of Mary Walker Swan by her first husband, and stepson of Chauncey.

south pass of the rocky Mountains 20 Miles south of Fremonts peak²⁹ which is covered with snow I have eat snow this day brought to me by Sam from Sweet Water river just above where I crossed said stream. I have just drank tea made from the waters that run west I am in Orrigan and within 25 Miles of California.³⁰ I expect to be at salt lake by the 15th of August I am well and hearty can walk from 20 to 25 Miles pr day sleep on a board and go without many comforts which I thought at home were indispicable to life My hopes are strong of being at Suters fort in California by the first day of October (a new rout having been opened by the Mormons which makes the distance 150 Miles less and brings the sandy desert in the bason down from 75 Miles to 17 where we will cross the western rim of the bason I have written all about my hopes I will now write of my journey thus far. In the first place I was flung from my horse but not hurt much I rode that day 40 Miles but was unable to get on to the horse in the Morning a Man rode him from Jackson Co 4 or 5 miles untill I got limber by walking (it being Sunday I supposed the teams would stop but they did not and I rode all day to overtake them I was used up for a day or two but then I drew on my long Boots and went into the Mud the country from Iowa City to fort desmoines is in the opinion of your humble servent a poor country after we pass Skunk river from Desmoines to council bluff is a barran waste and never can be improved. Rackoon forks is a fine place and if the commissione[r]s had been wise and [illegible — probably "located"] the seat of Government

²⁷ In present-day Wyoming, just west of the famous South Pass, in the west-central part of the state on the Continental Divide, one of the chief landmarks of the Oregon and California trails. Swan's party had traveled some 750 miles since leaving Council Bluffs, in a period of 57 days (June 1 to July 27), an average of 13 miles daily, which was about the usual rate of travel for wagon trains. For distances, see Andrew Child, *Overland Route to California* (Los Angeles, 1946), 29. This is a reprint of the original edition of 1852.

²⁸ David Switzer had come to Iowa with his brother in 1838 and had built and operated Switzer's Mill, one of the early grist-mills in Johnson County. After four years in the gold fields, he returned to Johnson County where he died in 1881. *Iowa City State Press*, July 20, 1881; Aurner, *Leading Events in Johnson County Iowa History*, 35-6.

²⁹ Swan was mistaken here. Fremont's Peak, in the Wind River Mountains, is too far to the north and west to be seen from South Pass.

³⁰ This area was still within the Territory of Oregon, created in 1848. "California" included all of the area south of the present southern boundary of the state of Oregon. Thus, Swan was near the southern border of the Territory of Oregon, and "within 25 Miles of California." See map, plate 112, James Truslow Adams (ed.), *Atlas of American History* (New York, 1943).

at that place Iowa City might bid good buy to her *Capitol*; ³¹ at the bluffs I wrote you a few lines we had no bad luck in starting I was taken sick after we had traveled a few days but nothing bad the *Colerea* was ahead of us (we judged by graves) from the Bluffs to fort Lorimer [Laramie] we counted some 80 nearly all marked with the cause of death after we left the fort the graves become less frequent untill now we have none McCormack has had it I had a taste Mr. More has been well all the journey and sends his love to all his wife and children in particular his hopes are strong and in fact our hopes all [are] strong of get[t]ing through and getting lots of the root of evill it is getting dark and I expect Mr. Babbit along with the Morman Mail ³² give my love to all kiss Emmy dear Mary it is dark I cannot se[e] my pen have no candle so good buy my dear farewell I shall come back again

Your faithfull Husband

Until we meet

C. Swan

Mrs

Mary Swan

Utah Lake 50 Miles south of the
Salt lake city California Sept 2n 1849.³³

To my dear

Wife Mary.

Again to take my pen to inform you where I am & my prospects &c is a pleasure & a task, you know I never write long letters, and any less will not satisfy me now, for I have much to write. The cattle I bought at the Bluffs I had to exchange at Salt lake city I made a trade with Amos Andrews (whom Charles will remember) and gave 20 dollars to make it.

³¹ Here Swan is prophetic; in 1857 the capital of the State of Iowa was moved to Des Moines, on the "Rackoon" forks.

³² Evidently the Mormons kept up a mail service between Salt Lake City and the Mormon colony still at Kaneshville (later Council Bluffs). On the back of this letter, over the address to "Mrs. Mary Swan, Iowa City, Iowa," is written, in a different hand, "Kane Iowa Sep 6," indicating that the letter reached that post office on that date.

³³ Utah Lake and the town of Provo are directly south of Salt Lake City. See plate 117, Adams (ed.), *Atlas of American History*. The wagon trains which were to follow Hunt on the southwestern trail assembled here. "Most of those who were going with Hunt moved down to Provo on Utah Lake to recruit their animals and to await the proper season for travel on the Spanish trail." Caughey, "Southwest from Salt Lake in 1849," 147; "Jacob Y. Stover Narrative," 170.

My Brother Moore sold his waggon and Sam (I mean Mr McFadden) took away 2 yoke of Oxen without saying by *you leave sir* but said to Doct Downer he would either have them or my life not wishing to die now I made no objection to his having them as this is in California³⁴ I am glad to be rid of his company. This all happened on account of trouble between Mr Moore & Sam, in fact no man could travel with Sam unless he would degrade himself to the level of a *Brute* I am glad it all has taken place as I can now go in with either Downer & McCormack and be used like a white man as they have both proved themselves Gentlemen on this route —

I shall go in with McCormack as he has more room in his waggon & better fitted for sleeping (so now I am with him you will be satisfied I know) he is well and as black as I am (almost) I am well & in high hopes. — The reason we are here & have been for 3 weeks is; it is impossible to go what is called the north route in the opinion of well informed men although thousand who were ahead of us have gone it and thousand more have started, we have not done so we now find that some have returned in time to save themselves from starvation in the desert or snow in the Mountains we hear of women & children having to pack on their backs their own food! the cattle have died of starvation as the grass was destroyed by the first few large trains that went through and what little they left the Indians burnt up. McDonal & wife have gone (or started) on that route! Alas! poor Mrs. [Mc]Donald I fear her delicate frame will not get over the mountain, we shall remain here untill the weather gets cold enough to go the south rout it is 400 miles over the rim of the Bason on this route, we then go from 2 to 3 hunderd miles in a South west direction up the waters of the Colderado untill we go through Walker's pass into the Tularry [Tulare] Vally the waters of which put into the Bay of San Francisco —³⁵

³⁴ Evidently Moore, McFadden, and Swan had joint ownership of a wagon and oxen. This type of partnership occurred often in the emigrant trains crossing the Plains. Moore and McFadden had had a falling out, which left Swan without a means of travel. The statement, "as this is California," refers to the fact that law enforcement was lax in the yet-unorganized territory of California, which embraced the present states of Utah, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, and California.

³⁵ This is not the route to be followed by Hunt, who led the party further south, across the Mohave Desert and through Cajon Pass into southern California at San Bernardino. The Walker Pass route was followed by those who left the Hunt party, south of Mountain Meadows. Although most of the accounts do not mention this cut-off until the train is well on the way south, when the emigrants met Smith and the pack train, Swan seems to have heard of it while at Salt Lake City.

Genl. Wilson³⁶ (better known a[s] black Jim) has arived in the Vally with 100 men I am informed he cannot go the north route and will go this south route on his way to the bay of San Francisco 1000 souls will go this route; we get to Wa[l]ker's pass in less than 700 miles we strike the waters of San Joaquin in 100 miles more. from Wa[l]kers pass to Suters fort is 400 miles and said to be gold nearly all the way which will be to our advantage as the weather is warm in the winter where we shall be in Jany Feby & March, after that if we do not succeed in the south we can go on North on the Sacramento in time to commence with the rest by the first of May we have no fears on the south route from snow or frost as we shall have neither but by staying here to have the weather get cold enough to travel, will put us back about one month, but we shall have 3 o[r] 4 Month to prospect in of which those who go the north route will be deprived as it will be in the cold rainy season on the Sacramento if they live to get there Mr. Moore is well fixed and lives in clover and has got a chance to go on with a Mr Houck. Tell Mrs Ely that I have got acquainted with a Mr Ely from NJ. who says he is a cousin of the family sends his respects he is on his way to California & is evry inch a Man Give my best respects to all who think it worth their notice as this Letter is for Charles as well as you, all can see it, as I have no secrets from any one in my family — Mr Moore wishes me to say to his wife that he has not forgot her give Mo's love to any pretty girl in Iowa City and Mine to Doct Woods and family. Say to Mrs Coleman that I recd her token of Love sent in your last letter & think I am much flattered, but would much rather return on her sweet lips than send it on paper but in the absence of such a chance you are at liberty to give her as much of My love as you think my own Mary can spare from her own heart. McCormack sends his respects to you and the Host & hostess of Swan's Hotell³⁷ requesting them to be very carfull of any new responsibilities which may fall into their lap about this season of the year. Stover³⁸ is with us and

³⁶ This is probably a reference to General John Wilson (not James or "Jim"), Indian agent at Salt Lake City in 1849. None of the other journals of this trip mention him as accompanying the emigrants. Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Utah* (San Francisco, 1890), 446; Chester L. Guthrie and Leo L. Gerald, "Upper Missouri Agency: An Account of Indian Administration on the Frontier," *Pacific Historical Review*, 10:53 (March, 1941).

³⁷ Charles Swan had taken over his father's hotel in Iowa City. A. B. Walker letter, *Iowa City Citizen*, September 8, 1915.

³⁸ This is a reference to Jacob Y. Stover, whose "Narrative" is an important source of information on this particular wagon train.

if you see his folks inform them he is well and as fat as a pig. Give my love to Emly next to my own dear Mary no one I wish to see more it is well for her and you that you are not here

So far as I have become acquainted with the Mormans at this place as well as Salt Lake I find them with some exceptions a hard working people the frost here has destroyed all the corn & buck wheat which was their main dependence this winter some of them must suffer for food before next spring they are a kind people and as much sinned against as sinning I would say to Charles that Amos Andrews wife is just like her Mother Mrs. Button Montgomery Button is here also and they are all Mormans poor human nature to what uses she will bring a man. — Say to Silas³⁹ to meet me without fail by the first of March at the Bay I shall be there before that time & if I have left to enquire of Genl Wilson at the Bay my whereabouts, &c, Give my love to Mrs Ely my respects to Sarah & my hate to Doct Murry's wife and disgust to Mrs. Berryhill, wife & children of Mrs. Holmes as well as himself will please accept my best regards as well a[s] friend Lathrop wife & their little god in shape of a big boy — Say to all the girls to set their caps for McCormack for he is a jewell some of them will be glad to wear when well gilded with Gold —

Now my dearly beloved wife I must draw to a close for the want to any thing to write which will interest you or Charles or any one of my family excepting that I hope you will not be alarmed from any reports you may hear from California with regard to murder Death & destruction and all that kind of news it no doubt will all be true but I shall take care of Mary Swan's husband for her sake as well as my own —

my hea[l]th is better than it has been in 3 years and you & I & Mine will soon meet to enjoy each others society. in that firm belief I envoke the balmy blessing of resignation on you & your's say to Alphonzo it is well for him he is not here it requires all my age experience perseverance and [illegible] stubbornness to get through myself — Emely kiss your Aunt for me and take one from Alphonzo in return love each other be kind be affectionate to my wife and may Heaven bless you all and keep you safe

³⁹ Swan's oldest son. This is the only reference to his possible presence in California. A. B. Walker's letter, written in 1915, states that Charles Swan went to California in 1849 and that Chauncey Swan followed "the next year," but Swan certainly left for California in 1849, and from his constant references to Charles in Iowa City at this time, probably Walker's memory was at fault.

from harm and now dear Mary once more I have the painfull task of saying farewell and the pleasant one of subscribing myself

Your Affectionate husband
Chauncey Swan

[Message written by Wm. McCormick on last page of letter of Chauncey Swan to his wife from Salt Lake City, Sept. 2, 1849.]

My Much Esteemed and highly respected

Friend

I could not see this blank page go, without saying a word or two at least for old acquaintance sake if nothing else, — but your "Dear Husband" has given you such a general outline of news, our whereabouts, intentions &c — That I have but little to add, That could possibly interest you. We are now comparatively taking a new rout from this point to California, called the southern rout, a glance at Freemonts map will shew it to you, the one he traveled I believe in /44.⁴⁰ We apprehend but little difficulty & no doubt shall reach the coast ere the year is ushered in. We all enjoy good health, and flatter ourselves that we will fare much better than those who have gone the northern rout. I fear much, suffering, misery, starvation, murder, Death, and all their attendant calamities on that rout, but of this you will probably hear before we do, — Mr. Swan looks better and enjoys better health than I have seen him do for a number of years — rest easy on his account he is now with me, and shall be well taken care of.

Give my res'pts to Emmy, Garret, the old man & in fact all who may enquire, not forgetting Mrs Ely, Sarah, & the Girls on the hill. We will gladly hail the first news from Iowa City. We long to hear from you all.

Respectfully your

Friend

To Mrs. M Swan

Wm McCormick

San Francisco

April 25th 1850

My Dear Wife,

I arrived at this place yesterday in a Goverment Ship from San Diago

⁴⁰ See John C. Fremont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843-'44* (Washington, 1845), 257ff for a description of this southwestern route, in reverse. Fremont traveled this route, from southern California, northeastward to Utah Lake, thence eastward.

— I found two Letters from you and it was a treat I promise you *I am well in body* I have hard times since I wrote you from *Utah Lake*. I started 1st Oct. on our long and da[n]gerous rout South (on Fremonts rout) after Sam took my team from me and Moore the waggon I went in with a Man by the name of Forbes from Chicago. I had to use all my meanes to furnish team and provisions as Moore & Sam cleaned me out of both. Mr Forbes had a horse for me to ride and I got along verry well for 200 miles I then had a fall from a pine tree from which I was getting dry limbs for wood and brock one of my ribs and was unable to ride a horse or in a waggon and had to walk the last 500 miles to Ranch del Chino (Col. William's)⁴¹ Before we arrived there we lost all our oxen and had to send to Col Williams for a team to draw our waggon into the Rancho. Many others did the same! — When I got there I was 800 Miles from this place. We arrived Dec. 24th. I had neither money cattle or waggon and no provision. Moore had gone Mc & Company went on and left me none staid with me but Bowan and he is yet remaining Col Williams is rich & a gentleman he gave me a job for which he paid me \$250. for 6 weeks time.⁴² I made 50 more on buying & selling a waggon & finily have arrived here with \$200.!!! As hard as my lot has been I have yet hopes to do something yet — I have no advic to give you or Charles but you must do the best you can — I cannot find a man here I know

⁴¹ Colonel Isaac Williams, one of the large landholders of southern California. A trader in the southwest, he had settled in Los Angeles in 1834. In about 1839 he had married the daughter of Antonio M. Lugo, owner of the Rancho Santa Ana del Chino, a large estate near San Bernardino and Los Angeles. On the death of his father-in-law, Williams became owner of the ranch. He is described as a typical southern California rancher, "enterprising, hospitable, and generally of good repute." Bancroft, *History of California*, 5:775. The migration into California in 1849 greatly increased the value and the business of these great ranches. "It is interesting to note that in 1848 Isaac Williams is reported to have offered the Mormons the 8-square league Rancho del Chino, 8,000 head of cattle, and a large number of horses, for 'five hundred dollars down' and the balance on the purchasers' own terms!" Two years later, in 1851, the Rancho del Chino was valued at \$35,000. Robert Glass Cleland, *The Cattle on a Thousand Hills: Southern California, 1850-1870* (San Marino, 1941), 158, 207 note. The Rancho del Chino became a stopping place for most of the emigrants traveling the southern route during 1849. Walter Van Dyke, "Overland to Los Angeles, By the Salt Lake Route in 1849," *Historical Society of Southern California, Annual Publication, 1894*, 80; "Jacob Y. Stover Narrative," 178; Caughey, "Southwest from Salt Lake In 1849," 150; Randolph B. Marcy, *The Prairie Traveler. A Hand-Book for Overland Expeditions* . . . (New York, 1859), 278.

⁴² Williams had been employing men since 1847 to build an adobe fence around his rancho, but the gold fever of 1848 and 1849 had taken all his workmen away. Bancroft, *History of California*, 5:775.

among 50,000 souls I would not remain here for *all the Bay* it is the worst place for gambling in the world —

When I think of what I have passed through to get here I am astonished Mary your Husband is an *old man* and if he had sufficient means he would be with you in 40 days but as it is I shall start to-morrow for the Mines and if I cannot do any thing in mining I shall work by the day to get money enough to get home to *die* in the bosom of my family fortunes are not as plenty here as some suppose. I may do well in a short time but do not expect it. there is twenty millions of Gold in this City and who you suppose have it? I am informed by the knowing ones that it is in the hands of (*Gamblers*)⁴³ alas for Callifornia It is no place for me in this City — the south part of this state is the garden of Eden grass all the year. I think that De Los Ge Angeas (City of Angeles) is the best place in the world. Rev Mr. Brier keep a Coffee house there⁴⁴ I cannot find Mr. Moore or any one else but perhaps shall in the mines — Now my dear Mary I must write no more at present I can hardly see the lines have a tear in my eye and a load off my mind if I knew you would get [this letter].

You say Charles named his girl after a lost sister and Angelina has added Mary two of the dearest names to me on Earth *Mary Cordelia* I love her now and in fancy press her to my heart — Give a Father's affection to Alphonzo and Emly.

I am most affectionately and Faithfully

Your own dear husband
Chauncey Swan

Sunday Morning July 27th 1851
(Swan's Barr Deer creek)

To My dear *Wife* Mary,

I wrote to you last Sunday from Grass Vally; but for fear you may not

⁴³ For descriptions of San Francisco at the peak of the gold rush, see Bayard Taylor, *Eldorado, or, Adventures in the Path of Empire* . . . (New York, 1855); Hubert Howe Bancroft, *California Inter Pocula* . . . (San Francisco, 1888); Bancroft, *History of California*, 6:164-220; White, *The Forty-Niners* . . ., 119-39.

⁴⁴ The Rev. J. W. Brier appears in several of the journals of this year. He was familiar to the Iowans, having preached at Iowa City and Pleasant Valley, according to Stover. He joined the Hunt party at Provo; when the party broke up at the cut-off, he was "the principal blower for the short-cut." Jacob Y. Stover Narrative," 171, 172 note. Manly has occasion to mention him a number of times, in not too flattering a manner. At one stage of the journey, when things were very black,

receive it I write again & shall write every week until I start for home in hopes that you may receive some token that the only woman on Earth I love is not neglected forsaken or forgotten —

My health is none of the best although I work evry day & *work hard*. Although my fortune has been hard since I have been in California, my *Ambition* and *Perseverence* will & shall bring me out. If ever I committed one fault worse than all it is in comeing to this place for if ever their was a Hell on Earth California is the place of its location! Yet among all the rubish some Good Men & Men of Tallent of the right kind are here, but for a General thing Men are not what they should be or what they would be in the States. They hang a Man by Linch Law for stealing an old Mule but half of the Murders go unpunished. A Man's best friend here is a good six shooting *Revolver* it is a bad state of things but will be no better untill the Goverment sell the Lands of California & it becomes the vested property of Men of Enterprise and those who intend to make Callifornia their home I have seen Doct McCormack Switzer B. Hutchinson and Downer lately all are in bad *Luck*. Downer is very unwell Lock is about 4 miles from me and is supposed to have \$10,000 but such cases are like Angels visits.

I made up my mind some time since to return home as soon as I could get funds enough to pay my passage but I now think I can start as soon as Dec. with my "*Pile*"!

. . . Where is that *verry* bad man that Moores family have worshiped and became enemies to me because I would not do the same? *I mean Hummer*.⁴⁵ I am sorry for his wife She is such a beautifull harmless

Manly came upon the camp of the Brier family, and found the "reverend gentleman very coolly delivering a lecture to his boys on education." At another time, Brier is described as sitting calmly by while his wife struggled to free their oxen from a swamp; other men in the party went to her aid, while "Brier himself never made a move nor said a word." In spite of hardships, the family reached Los Angeles, where Brier squatted on government land and opened a boarding house where Manly was employed for a time. Manly, *Death Valley in '49*, 137, 275, 342, 358.

⁴⁵ The story of the Rev. Michael Hummer and his bell is a classic of early Iowa City. Hummer was minister for Swan's church — the First Presbyterian — from 1841–1846. While in the East, collecting funds for the church building, he procured a bell for the church and, almost simultaneously, adopted Swedenborgian and spiritualist ideas. When he was rejected by his church at Iowa City he tried to steal the bell — the bell was in turn stolen from him, buried, and later transported to Salt Lake City. Evidently the whole Hummer incident had caused a rift between the Moore and Swan families. See Ruth A. Gallaher, "Hummer's Bell," *Palimpsest*, 3:155–64 (May, 1922); *History of Johnson County, Iowa* . . ., 433–4.

kind *Lady* it is almost a pity to have her abused even by her *Husband* but with all her faults she is an *Angell* compared with her *Husband* who is a Devil in sheep's clothing. I have not seen *Hughston Woods* but hear he is doing well on feather river I have heard *Newcomb* was with him also I have not seen *Sam* since I have been in *Callifornia!* If you should write to dear *Emma* Give her a *Father's Love* and say to her from me that she shall not be forgotten on my return — I saw *Sanders* the other day he says he got a kiss from you and *Emma* before he left it is what I have not had in *Callifornia* . . .

Give my best regards to *Ezra*⁴⁶ & wife my love to *Alphonzo* and if you should write to *Mrs. Ely* send her a kiss for me with my respects and now *Mary* as I am about to finish this Letter let me say to you that distance dose not lend the charm that we read no! No! One day at Home with My *Mary* in my arms would be worth all the Letters she can write although I am *very fond of them* but think more so of the writer She has faults the faults of her sex but with all her faults "*I love her still*" I hope to be able to send you some funds next letter although it is very unsafe to send by Mail you now know where to direct your letters and I hope to be able to have one to read every week as Postage is so low we can afford to write often —

And now may the God of all Grace have you in his holy keeping; keep you from temptation and the sin of doubting your *Husband's Love Friendship & Faithfullness*. When I forget thee *Mary* this Heart of mine will be cold in death.

I now say to you as you said in your last *Write Write "Write"* —

I remain most Respectfully and
Faithfully

Your loveing Husband

Chauncey Swan

To Mrs

Mary Swan

⁴⁶ Ezra Bliss, Mrs. Swan's brother. This letter is addressed "Mrs. Mary Swan, West Jefferson, Ohio. To the care of O. H. Bliss, Columbus — via New York," indicating that Mrs. Swan was visiting relatives in Ohio.