



HAL
open science

Letters 1-4

George McKinley Murrell, Juliette Bourdin

► **To cite this version:**

George McKinley Murrell, Juliette Bourdin. Letters 1-4. “There Is More in Luck than Work”: The Letters of a Young Kentuckian in the California Gold Rush (1849-1854), Editions Les Perséides, 2023, 9782371250673. hal-04530691

HAL Id: hal-04530691

<https://hal.science/hal-04530691v1>

Submitted on 3 Apr 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Copyright

(1) March 28-30, 1849, Ohio River near Owensboro and Louisville (Ky.) – to Samuel and Sally Murrell

[HM 36381]

Steamer Gen Worth,¹ Ohio river,
10 miles above Owensborough²
Wednesday night 10 o'clock [March 28, 1849]

Dear Father

Knowing that you all would like to hear how we are progressing with our trip I avail myself of this opportunity of writing, Although the boat jostles so that I can scarcely write. We are getting along at a swimming rate having just deposited the most of her fr[e]ight at Owensborough. We have quite a large number of passengers on board, every Cabin is full beside a goodly number who have to lodge on the floor.

Myself & Reubin³ are very comfortably quartered. When we left Bowling Green you know that we expected to go to Smithland.⁴ But after consultation we ascertained that we could go to St Louis by way of Louisville as cheaply, expeditiously, & more comfortably, than we could have gone, to have taken a boat at the mouth of Green [River] for Smithland. M^cgowen⁵ taking us to Louisville for \$4,00 and guarenteeing to us a passage on a good boat to St Louis for \$6,00. We expect to leave Louisville on the Gen Washington⁶ friday next at 10 o'clock in the morning. You will probably find our departure noticed in the Louisville journal.⁷ I have formed some acquaintance with several young men who are members of our company. They all seem to be gentlemen.

We amused ourselves coming down Green by shooting at wild Turkies, ducks, &c. *It was sport to us but not death to them* as in the fable of the frogs.⁸ The Ohio [River] is very full, and never in my life have I seen such a *congregation of waters* as met my admiring gaze at the mouth of Green.

For the present I will stop and resume my pen at Louisville where I will mail this.

Part One

Thursday night 9 oclock, 12 miles below Louisville
[March 29, 1849]

Nothing unusual has transpired since yesterday. We have at least 100 passengers aboard, every thing is going on pleasantly, And the California boys are in high spirits. We have met several boats bound downward with a goodly number of California boys aboard. They have their waggons aboard and some mules also. So I think that, after all, waggons & teams will not be so high as we anticipated. Rheubing se[e]ms to enjoy the trip very much. Mr Hill⁹ sends his best respects to you and says that he thinks we will rake in the gold dust.

Tell mother that I am as hearty as I have ever been, that I am in fine spirits, that I anticipate much privation as well as much pleasure, that I still think it is the most judicious step that I could have taken. Tell her not to give herself any uneasiness about me, for we are in the hands of a merciful Providence and we will be as wel[l] cared for by him in California as we would in Ky. "Imaginary evils are the worst kind."¹⁰ When you put up your petitions to the throne of a merciful God neglect not your son, who places not his trust in the wealth of this world but in heaven, Who seeks not gold to gratify an avaricious appetite but as a means of comfort in fut[ure].

Give my love to all of the family & my best respects to Mr Currin¹¹ & lady and also to Mr Colmery.¹² Tell the girls that they must write to me and address their letters to Independence.¹³ Write yourself. For the present I will close, But will write as often as I can conveniently.

To Samuel Murrell,

Your Son,
Geo M Murrell

Sister Sally¹⁴

I have but little more to say than I have said. I have had a splendid time of it thus far. The weather has been fine and I have spent the most of my time on deck enjoying a fine view of the river scenery. The Ohio is certainly one of the most beautiful rivers in the world. The scen[e]ry is nothing like as imposing as some I have seen. But then there is something at every turn & bend in the river to at[tra]ct the attention of the traveler, all sorts of craft are afloat

upon her waters from the rough canoe to the magnificent steamer. Even then are some houses built on boats moving about the owners pleasure. We have Misses Strange¹⁵ and her little daughter aboard.

I will have but little time to stay in Louisville tomorrow as we expect to leave for St Louis at ten oclock in the morning. You must write to me & give me all th[e] news. Give my love to Miss Jo¹⁶ when you see her. You must all make yourselves easy about me for no ordinary circumstances could induce me to relinquish the trip.

G M M

Friday morning, Louisville [March 30, 1849]

We got here last night, & will leave at eleven. I breakfasted at the Exchange,¹⁷ I will not have time to look around.¹⁸

1. Reverend Isaac Bard, who was not a Forty-Niner but a minister, mentioned in his diary his trip on the steamer *General Worth*, allowing for a more precise dating of Murrell's trip: "March, Tuesday, 27th, rode to Livingstone, [...] one mile of Owensboro. Wednesday, 28th, got on board General Worth Steam Boat. Went over the Falls of Ohio River while asleep and got to Louisville before light Friday morning. Much talk of cholera." Quoted in O. A. ROTHERT, *A History of Muhlenberg County*, Louisville, J. P. Morton, 1913, p. 199.

2. Present-day Owensboro, Kentucky, about 65 miles north-northwest of Bowling Green.

3. George Murrell's slave, Reuben, whose first name is spelled in many different ways in Murrell's letters (see Editorial Procedures).

4. Smithland is situated in western Kentucky, at the confluence of the Ohio and Cumberland Rivers, about 110 miles west of Bowling Green, as the crow flies.

5. McGowan was the captain of the steamer *General Worth*. See the *Courier-Journal* (Louisville, Ky.), April 27, 1849, p. 3.

6. About the steamboat *General Washington*, the *Indiana State Sentinel* (Indianapolis, Ind.) reported on March 31, 1849, a notice from Louisville dated March 26: "The Cholera has been very prevalent on steamboats arriving from New Orleans since Saturday. The steamer *Bride* had 14 deaths on board, and many more are still sick. The *George Wahington* had 15 deaths previous to her arrival in Memphis. The *Belle Key* had three deaths. The weather at New Orleans was hot and sultry, and much sickness prevailed, principally among emigrants."

7. Indeed, the company was mentioned in the *Louisville Daily Courier* (Louisville, Ky.), March 31, 1849, p. 2: "The *Gen. Washington* started for St. Louis yesterday morning with a full trip. The tide of emigration to California continues steadily to swell. The following persons from Bowling Green and vicinity came up on the *Gen. Worth*, and were transferred to the *Gen. Washington*. They gave three hearty cheers as they started: D. B. Campbell, S. M. Crosthwait, W. J. Ellis, G. A. M. Ellis, T. R.

Part One

Darnall, R. C. McKamey, Jas. O. Hill, C. W. Skiles, Geo. R. [sic] Murrell, Geo. W. Feland, M. H. Coleman, Wm. Bayly, F. A. Jones, J. W. Cole, Jones Hoy, J. H. Ingram, Levi Stern, John Davis, John K. Sale, Elijah Heard, Rube [sic] Murrell and Sam. Hill, of Cold Run.”

8. Reference to the fable “Boys and Frogs,” attributed to Æsop and rewritten by Roger L’Estrange: “A Company of Waggish Boys were Watching of *Frogs* at the side of a Pond, and still as any of ’em put up their Heads, they’d be Pelting them down again with Stones. Children, (says one of the Frogs,) you never Consider, that *though this may be Play to you, ’tis Death to us.*” R. L’ESTRANGE, *Fables of Æsop and Other Eminent Mythologists with Morals and Reflexions*, London, Printed for R. Sare, T. Sawbridge, B. Took, M. Gillyflower, A. & J. Churchil, and J. Hindmarsh, 5th ed., 1708, p. 425.

9. One James O. Hill, who died on May 9, 1849 (see item 9).

10. This quote does not exist as such. Murrell might have thought of a saying by Oliver Goldsmith (1728-1774): “Don’t let us make imaginary evils, when you know we have so many real ones to encounter.”

11. Probably Thomas D. Curry (1826-1879), who was Murrell’s age and who had married Lavinia Potter (1830-?) in November 1848.

12. Strangely, no Colmery household is listed in any of the censuses in Kentucky for that period.

13. Independence, Missouri, was the main “jumping-off” place for the overland trails to Oregon, California, and Santa Fe; i.e., the place where emigrants gathered and made their preparations before embarking on the months-long trip. The other important “jumping-off” places were St. Joseph and Weston in Missouri, and Council Bluffs, Iowa. W. BAGLEY, *So Rugged and Mountainous: Blazing the Trails to Oregon and California, 1812-1848*, Norman, The University of Oklahoma, 2010, p. 171-176.

14. Sallie Blaine Murrell was 18 years old.

15. There were too many people named Strange in Kentucky to be able to identify this woman and her daughter.

16. Probably Josephine Skiles (1829-1852), the daughter of William Hamilton “Ham” Skiles (1799-1881) and Lucy A. Underwood (1797-1884), who lived in Warren County. William “Ham” Skiles was listed as a slaveholder in the 1850 U.S. Slave Schedule, holding 14 slaves. Murrell married another of his daughters, Mary Malvina Skiles, after his return from California.

17. Reference to “Walker’s Exchange,” a historic restaurant founded in 1835 by William H. Walker, which “at once became one of the most notable ‘institutions’ of the city. It was not only well and favorably known in Louisville, but its fame and reputation spread over the whole country, and especially throughout the West and South.” M. JOBLIN & Co., *Louisville Past and Present: Its Industrial History*, Louisville, J. P. Morton, 1875, p. 153. The restaurant still exists nowadays. See also the Walker’s Exchange website, <<https://walkerslouisville.com/about-us/>>, retrieved May 20, 2022.

18. Another Forty-Niner, Henry Austin, a physician of Baltimore, did stroll around when he arrived in Louisville on April 19, 1849, saying he was “very much pleased with the town,” which he described in positive terms as “a fine handsome city possessing some very handsome public buildings, and some private dwellings of a magnificent style.” See H. AUSTIN, *Henry Austin Diary, 1849*, MSS C-F 157, Bancroft Library, p. 2 of transcript.

(2) April 5, 1849, Missouri River near Jefferson City (Mo.) - to Elizabeth R. Murrell

[HM 36348]

Steamer Boreas,¹ Missouri River,
30 miles above Jefferson city²
April 5th 1849³

Dear Mother

I take my pen this evening to inform you how I am getting along. I am well and have been ever since I left home except that I had the sick head ache the second day after I left Louisville. I am in fine spirits & look forward with bright hopes to the future, from all the information I can gain I think the trip will be a healthy one & also one of profit. I have conversed with many old mountaineers⁴ who have spent a number of years out there & they say that they never enjoyed better health in their lives than when wandering over the plains & camping out.

I got to St Louis on sunday night & left the next Tuesday evening.⁵ I would have written to you from there but was appo[i]nted by our company on a committee of arrangements to procure things necessary for our trip. So all my time was appropriated to the buisness of the company. I called about a half hour on Mrs Hall, & she encouraged me in the trip. She said if she was a young man she would go herself. Moreover she said she would write to you and set forth the peculiar advantages of the trip.

There is quite a stir out here about California & thousands will leave this state for the land of glittering gold. I have already met with persons from every section of the union bound for the "Eldorado." And so far as I have seen, the most of them seem to be gentlemen in their appearance & conversation.⁶ I am unable to say when we will get to Independence, but I expect about sunday morning. We have between 160 and 200 passengers aboard, the most of them California bound. Indeed, every boat going up the Missouri is loaded down with passengers & articles necessary for an outfit to California.

I will now devote a few lines to Rhewbin. He tells me to say for him that we are getting along pretty well, that he would like to see you all, and wants to hear from you. He says tell all the family

Part One

howdy for him. He says that in the midst of all things he wants you all to try & serve good. He says that he wants uncle Sam to consider part of this letter addressed to him. That he wants them all to carry on the meeting & prepare for a better & brighter world. He says that He would like to say more to them but his heart is too full to express it. That while he is writing these few lines he believes that Jesus is with him. Tell them to remember that when with them I tried to walk in the ways of wholiness & sing songs of praise to his excellent name.

I endeavored to put down what he said pretty much in his own language, for the purpose of grattifying him. Rhewbin is very good & kind to me & I will take good care of him. I think he is highly delighted with the trip, in fact the whole of our company seem to enjoy themselves exceedingly well.

I must close as we are drawing near a little town where I will have an opportunity of mailing this. You must write to me at Independence if this reaches you in time for a letter to get to me there. I expect to remain there untill the first of may⁷ & probably longer. Tell Pa that I left my letters of introduction in his hat, & that it would do as well for him to send them to me. If they will have time to reach me.

Give my love to all of the family, and my best respects to all of my friends, select some good clever girl for me, for a wife when I return. But then my fancy must be suited or she wont do. Be certain to write to me & tell my sisters they must write. Remember me at a throne of grace. Fare well.

Your Son,
Geo. M. Murrell

1. This steamer might be *Boreas No. 3*, which was among the 23 boats entirely consumed by fire during the night of May 17, 1849. See *Democratic Banner* (Bowling Green, Pike County, Mo.), 21 May 1849, p. 1.

2. Jefferson City, Missouri, is located about 120 miles west of St. Louis, as the crow flies.

3. Posted in Boonville, Missouri, April 6, 1849.

4. Murrell is alluding to the fur trappers, or Mountain Men, who extensively explored the Rocky Mountains to hunt for furs between the 1810s and 1830s. When resources became scarce, these often rugged and colorful characters became guides for the pioneer trains heading west in the 1840s. However, once the trails were blazed, emigrants no longer needed guides, and Mountain Men soon exhausted the pecuniary value of their vast knowledge of the West. Famous

From Kentucky to California

Mountain Men include Jedediah Smith, James Clyman, Jim Bridger, Kit Carson, Joseph R. Walker, and Thomas Fitzpatrick. See notably L. R. HAFEN, ed., *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West*, Glendale, The Arthur H. Clark Company, 10 volumes, 1965-72; R. M. UTLEY, *A Life Wild and Perilous: Mountain Men and the Paths to the Pacific*, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1997.

5. Sunday, April 1, 1849, and Tuesday, April 3, 1849.

6. On May 20, 1849, George Gibbs, a civilian artist and naturalist who accompanied the military expedition headed by Major Osborne Cross along the Oregon Trail, also noted in his diary: "It is [...] gratifying to observe that the emigrants are generally kind to one another, as well as that their conduct for the most part is exceedingly courteous and orderly. A few companies, we hear, have earned themselves bad names, but all that we have met have been as well behaved and well bred as [those] one would meet on a country road in the old states. Many are, in fact, led by men of high standing and composed of the most substantial class of the community. [It is a] pity that such should leave the comforts of civilized life to endure the sufferings that must await them before they reach the Utopia of the West." G. GIBBS, "The Diary of George Gibbs" [1849], in O. CROSS, *The March of the Mounted Riflemen*, ed. by R. W. SETTLE, Glendale, Arthur H. Clark Co., 1940, p. 286, 290. Some emigrants were much more negative in their appreciations of the Forty-Niners, such as Charles Hinman, who wrote: "A large majority of the Californians [i.e., California-bound emigrants] are desperate Fellows and they practice most all kinds of crime, and of course they will, in many instances, pay the Penalty before they get through." C. G. HINMAN, *"A Pretty Fair View of the Eliphent": Or, Ten Letters by Charles G. Hinman Written During His Trip Overland from Groveland, Illinois, to California in 1849 and His Adventures in the Gold Fields in 1849 and 1850*, ed. by C. STORM, Chicago, Printed for E. D. Graff by G. Martin, 1960, p. 11.

7. Indeed, Murrell's company remained in camp near Independence, Missouri, until the end of April. His first letter while "en route" to California is dated May 9, 1849.

(3) April 8, 1849, Independence (Mo.) - to Sally and Samuel Murrell

[HM 36373]

Independence, Mo
April the 8th 1849¹

Sister Sally

Having arrived thus far on my journey in safety & good health I take my pen to apprise you of it. We have had a very pleasant trip up to this time, Although in coming up the Missouri river our boat run aground a dozen times a day & sometimes oftener. But soon [we] got use to such things & we did not remain stuck long.

The Missouri land viewed from the river presents quite a sterile appearance. All of the Bottoms are covered with sand deposited there from the river when in a high stage. The deposit is from twelve inches to 20 feet in depth varying with the location of the land. But it is generally from 12 inches to 18 inches in depth.

The river water here is about one fourth sand and never clear, so when the river gets high there is a dead water² formed in bottoms & the sediment settles. The largest deposit of sand was in 1844, rendering valules & barren many rich & valuable farms. The timber on the Missouri differs very much from that in Kentucky. I have not as yet seen a single beech or poplar tree. The growth is principally cotton wood. You might think that where the sand is deposited so deeply around the trees that they would die. But that is not the case. They send out new roots near the surface and grow as luxuriantly as ever.

There is some very picturesque scenery on the Missouri. The Bluffs in many places rise in sublime grandure. And one that has a taste for the romantic can not but enjoy a trip up the Missouri. But I expect this precipices, [however?] sublime they are now, will be as mere pigmies and dwindle into insignificance when compared with the towering peakes of [the] Rocky mountains and the Siera Nevada. But I will give you a sketch when I get out there.

We landed here, as I have already said, on yesterday which was Saturday [April 6]. We raised our tents immediately & went into camp life although the evening was not very auspicious, for it rained all night. We kept dry & comfortable & [I] enjoyed myself finely. But

some of the boys looked a little long faced & could scarcely get on a smile. But I anticipated such things before I left Home and look for them again so I made the best of it.³ Fancy seeing some 40 or fifty men, each with a slice of Bacon on a stick Broiling & with pone of cold bread, seated around camp fires & you will see us. We did not take coffee the first night, and as for hot cakes & butter they would have been quite out of taste. And you know supper is not the time for des[s]ert anyhow I tell you we formed quite an "*interesting circle.*" We have not as yet much skill pa[s]tery and of cours it will be several days before we will be able to make good pies. But who would regard a pie when we are within 200 miles of the Buffalo grounds & 2200 of the gold "*diggings.*"

Independence is about three miles from the river. We are camping now on the Bank of the river but will move up near town in the morning. It is a very pretty place with a population of 2000.⁴ I am in town now. The land is very rich in this neighborhood, and I am better pleased with the country than I was at first. But California is the country yet.

From the best information I can gain there are about three thousand persons here & in this country bound for California. They are from every section of the union, And are arriving here daily. Many persons have gone to Weston & St Joseph⁵ which is above this point. You need not write to me here as I expect to leave this point before a letter could get here. We may not leave untill in may and probably sooner. If we leave sooner we will go out to the indian country some distance and feed our cattle untill we can travel on grass. The object of doing that will be to get an early start.⁶

You must take good care of yourself. And while I am seeking information & wealth by traveling in a distant land & delving in the mines of the sacramento, you must try to gather moral & intellectual wealth, By delving in books. Give my love to Father & mother & all of the children & all of the servants. Present my best respects to all of my friends. I must close.

I remain your Brother,
Geo. M. Murrell

Dear Father

I will write you a line to let you know how we are getting along with our arrangements. We bought the most of groceries in St

Part One

Louis, at a fair price. We bought 10 waggons at \$75- apice [a piece] with beds. I have not seen them yet. We left a gentleman in St Louis waiting untill the beds are finished. He will be up this week with them. Good oxen can be had at from forty to \$50- per yoke.⁷ We will take 10 or 11 waggons with 3 yoke & probably 4 to the wagon.⁸ I think that we are going to get along very pleasantly in the capacity of a company. Rheubin is well and in fine spirits. I will write again soon.

1. Posted in Independence, Missouri, on April [10?].
2. "Dead water": the mass of eddying water formed along a ship's sides in her progress through the water (*Webster's Dictionary*).
3. Murrell proved healthily pragmatic, as it was advisable to experience camp life as early as possible. The writer using the pen name "California" wrote from St. Joseph on April 2, 1849: "[The] young men, arriving in these points of rendezvous, instead of immediately forming a camp, and inuring themselves to the hardships of a duty with which they are unacquainted, go into boarding houses, determined to lead an easy life until the time for their departure arrives. By performing camp duty in a vicinity where the necessary accoutrements for such duty can readily be obtained, they ascertain more correctly what they may desire and are able to obtain, before they are beyond the bounds of civilization or the facilities for procuring such accessories as may be deemed important; and furthermore, they gradually become accustomed to the hardships of camp life, while in the vicinity of a comfortable respite from duty, should it be found too irksome. It is advisable for companies, as soon as possible after their arrival at these points, to go into camp." W. D. WYMAN, ed., *California Emigrant Letters: The Forty-Niners Write Home*, New York, Bookman Associates, 1952, p. 39.
4. There were no official statistics for population numbers in Independence, Missouri, in 1849 or 1850. However, during the Spring of 1849, this "jumping-off" place gathered tens of thousands of emigrants bound for California. See W. BAGLEY, *With Golden Visions Bright Before Them*, *op. cit.*, p. 53-54.
5. See note about "jumping-off" places in item 1.
6. The presence of sufficient grass for the draft animals was essential to undertake the trip successfully, especially with a mass emigration as in 1849. As the anonymous "California" wrote on April 2: "Some weeks will elapse before any company will be able to leave the settlements. At present, and for several weeks to come, the grass will be too young and insufficient to justify them in starting. To attempt to carry food sufficient for their stock to last them up to the time when there will be range and pasture enough, would only be unnecessary expense, but in the end not in the least facilitate them or expedite them in their journey. It is conceded, therefore, that the first of May is as early as any company should leave the settlements." W. D. WYMAN, ed., *California Emigrant Letters*, *op. cit.*, p. 39. Murrell, indeed, left in early May.
7. Fairly similar prices are given by the anonymous "California" in a letter dated April 5, 1849, from Independence: "The supply of oxen is fair, and the demand good,

From Kentucky to California

at from \$50 to \$65 the yoke, as in quality and conditions." *Ibidem*, p. 36. Likewise, Alonzo Delano wrote from St. Joseph in April 1849: "Cattle and mules, which had also been represented as being enormously high, can be had, the former at \$45 to \$55 per yoke and the latter from \$50 to \$70 each. Other supplies can be had on quite reasonable terms, and I should advise all who are coming *not to buy in St. Louis* but to complete their outfit here." See A. DELANO, *Alonzo Delano's California Correspondence*, ed. by I. MCKEE, Sacramento, Sacramento Book Collectors Club, 1952, p. 9.

8. Oxen were chosen by about 60% of emigrants on the overland trail. Alternate choices were mules or horses, representing 20% each. See M. J. MATTES, *The Great Platte River Road: The Covered Wagon Mainline via Fort Kearny to Fort Laramie*, Lincoln, Nebraska State Historical Society, 1969, p. 37.

(4) April 17, 1849, near Independence (Mo.) - to Mary Ann Murrell

[HM 36363]

Camp near Independence
April the 17th 1849

Sister Mary

It is with pleasure that I now devote a few moments to you although I have but little of interest to write about. Fearing that some reports may have reached you all, relative to the health of the California emigrants encamped in this county, I feel it to be my duty to correct them, least [lest] you should give yourselves unnecessary uneasiness about us. The reports in circulation I learn are these. It is reported in St Louis and at many other places that there are about 17,000 emigrants here,¹ & that one half have got the cholera & that there are many deaths occurring daily.²

The whole of the above is a monstrous exaggeration, gotten up by some individuals from sinister motives, to induce emigrants who are still in the rear of us, either not to come or go up the Missouri river to St Jo [St. Joseph] or Weston. In the first place, from the best information I can gain, the emigrants here do not exceed more than 3,000 and probably not more than 2,000. But they are arriv[ing] daily, some 400 haveing gotten here in the last 3 days. And as to cholra every boat that comes up the river has one or more cases aboard & once & while a death. And there have been several deaths in this vicinity. But the cholera here is not local or in the atmosphere. The most of the cases are mild & easily managed, when the usual remedies are applied in time. And then it is confined entirely to persons who have been either intemperate in their diet or drink, o[r] who have exposed themselves unnecessarily. So I think you need not give yourselves any alarm about me, for my health is fine. I have a good appetite, am not intemperate in anything. I am careful not to expose myself, And although the weather is cold, I sleep warm & comfortable in my tent, haveing provided myself with a sufficiency of excellent bed clothing. Yes of a truth without any [e]xageration I sleep as soundly & comfortably in my tent on buffalo rugs & blankets as ever I did under a roof and in a featherbed.

I remarked that the weather is cold. They dont c[a]ll it cold here, but we never have such weather as this in Ky at th[i]s season of the year. The wind has been blowing sharp & cold from the North West for the last 4 days and last saturday we had a considerable snowstorm, disagreeable weather I say for the 14th of April. But the snow soon melted off.

I have written the following letters since I left home: one to Pa, one to Ma, one to sal [Sallie], on[e] J. S. Grider,³ one to Henry Lucas and Jimmy Hays.⁴ And one to to to ----- none of your business.⁵

This is a sp[ell]endid country up here. The land is just as fine as it is anywhere, but a wretched climate, if what I have seen of it is a fa[i]r specimen. The masonic fraternity have a lodge here, also the sons of Temperance, & Odd Fellows.⁶ They gave a grand procession last Saturday [April 14], as bad as the day was. The streets were crowded. The procession was given for the purpose of bidding adieu to their friends who are on the eve of departing for California.⁷

I joined in with the procession. We marched to Cumberland Presbyterian church⁸ & heard delivered two addresses, one on temperance & the other on massonry, each of which were very appropriate & replete with good sense & excellent advice. On sunday last I went to the methodist church to heare a sermon preached to the California emigrants.

At night the same day I went to the new school Presbyterian church & heard a most excellent sermon. The first sabbath after I arrived I went to the catholic church, but haveing lost so much sleep on the boat I fell to sleep in less than 15 minutes, consequently I was not much [e]dified. The old school Presbyterians, The baptist & the Campbellites also [have] churches, so you might fancy this a church going community. But I never was in a place of the same size in which there was so much disipation as there is in this.

Give my love to all of my friends, especially to the family & grandma.⁹ I will write in a day or two & enclose this to you in his letter. I wi[l] write again when I get to the Sacramento.

Geo. M. Murrell

1. Emigrants of 1849 often tried to give estimates of the numbers ready to take the trail, such as Charles Hinman, on May 3: "As near as I can Judge from the information I can get there will be about 50,000 People attempt to cross the Plains this season." C. G. HINMAN, *"A Pretty Fair View of the Eliphent,"* *op. cit.*, p. 11.

Part One

2. The cholera epidemics was much deadlier than what Murrell anticipated, and his own company will lament the death of a young man, James O. Hill, on May 7 (see item 9). Indeed, in early May, the situation was already dire, as Osborne Cross testifies in his diary: "I arrived at St. Louis on the eighth of may, and finding the cholera prevailing to an alarming extent left on the tenth on board the steamer 'San Francisco,' after making a hasty outfit there. It will not be out of place to remark here that the cholera was not only in St. Louis, but had spread through every town on the Missouri river. In many instances [it] had raged with great violence on board several steamers, one of which, after losing nearly thirty passengers, was entirely abandoned and left tied to the shore." O. CROSS, *The March of the Mounted Riflemen*, *op. cit.*, p. 33-34. About cholera in the vicinity in 1849, see also H. W. BRANDS, *The Age of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the New American Dream*, New York, Doubleday, 2002, p. 136-139.

3. Reverend Jesse S. Grider (1828-1911), who was then a schoolteacher and would be ordained to preach in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church of Bowling Green in 1852. See his biographical sketch in M. SECRIST, *Warren County, Kentucky*, *op. cit.*, p. 106-107; see also the information about Jesse Smith Grider as Cumberland Presbyterian Minister of Bowling Green, Kentucky, <<https://www.cumberland.org/hfpcp/minister/GriderJS.htm>> retrieved June 15, 2022. Jesse S. Grider would be the witness of Murrell's marriage to Mary Skiles, celebrated on February 26, 1855.

4. These two men are most probably Nathaniel Henry Lucas (1818-1908) and James Samuel Hays (1822-1860), being listed as neighbors in the 1850 U.S. Census and as owners in the 1850 Slave Schedule for Warren County, each holding three slaves.

5. The ellipsis in the form of a long series of dashes is faithful to the original. Murrell surely alluded to a young woman for whom he had feelings, probably Mary Skiles. In item 11, for instance, he asks his sister Mary Ann ("Mollie") to give his best respects to all his friends, "Especially Miss Skiles" (see also item 19). Murrell would marry her in 1855. These few lines also indicate that Murrell wrote more letters than are gathered in this archive.

6. Freemason lodges were established in Missouri as early as 1807, and the Grand Lodge of California was set up in Sacramento in April 1850. See A. G. MACKAY, *An Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*, Philadelphia, L. H. Everts & Co, 1884, p. 144, 502. The Sons of Temperance were one of the numerous temperance organizations that existed throughout the country. This particular association started in 1842 in New York and then spread across the United States. See W. W. SPOONER, ed., *The Cyclopædia of Temperance and Prohibition*, New York, Funk and Wagnalls, 1891, p. 611-612. For the fraternity of Odd Fellows, see for instance T. A. ROSS, *The History and Manual of Odd Fellowship*, New York, M.W. Hazen Co, 1900.

7. Another procession took place on April 20, as emigrant Pritchett recorded in his diary: "Frost this morning. Took a cold bath and put on a calico shirt for the first time in my life, then went to town to an Odd Fellows celebration, rather a dry affair." See J. PRICHETT, Notes of a trip to California, 1849, typescript, March 21, 1849 – February 18, 1851, BANC MSS C-F 50 FILM, Bancroft Library.

8. The Cumberland Presbyterian church was organized in Independence in 1826, four miles south of town. See the Cumberland Website, <<http://www.cumberland.org/hfpcp/churches/IndependenceMO.htm>> retrieved June 15, 2022. Murrell's

From Kentucky to California

maternal grandparents, Thomas and Mary Sterrett belonged to the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. See KENTUCKY LIBRARY RESEARCH COLLECTIONS, "Longhunter, Southern Kentucky Genealogical Society Newsletter," vol. 14, no. 2 & 3, *Longhunter, Southern Kentucky Genealogical Society Newsletter*, Paper 53, 1991, p. 95.

9. Mary Ann Sterrett (1776-1851), Murrell's maternal grandmother.