

The Other Oregon Trail: Crossing the Isthmus of Panama in the Early 1850s

*“Statement of Mary A. Gray McLench, concerning
her trip to Oregon in the Spring of 1851.”*

Written at the request of her daughter, Mrs. M. E. Watson, of Wallowa County, Oregon
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Mary A. Gray McLench was a young teacher in Grafton, Vermont, who came to the Oregon Territory in 1851 through the National Board of Popular Education. The Board matched teachers with schools throughout the southern and western United States. McLench and four other teachers traveled to the Oregon Territory with their chaperone, the Honorable Samuel R. Thurston, a Congressional Delegate who was returning home after Congress adjourned in early March, 1851.

My brother Oscar went with me to New York; where the next day we met Governor William Slade, Hon. Samuel R. Thurston and my sister teachers, Miss Lincoln, Miss Wands, Miss Smith and Miss Miller. After our arrival at New York City all our expenses were paid to Oregon City, except for the shopping we might do for ourselves; our fare was \$350 each; whether this included the Isthmus transit, I do not know.

New saddles were provided for each, which were to be kept for future use. These were taken from New York, also a box of claret [a red wine] for the company, as the water at the Isthmus was unhealthful. We sailed or perhaps I should say steamed away from New York harbor the afternoon of Thursday, March 13th, and arrived off the Isthmus at dusk Saturday, March 22d, where our vessel anchored, which fact was signified by the firing of rockets and responded to by the other side.

The next day [Sunday March 23, 1851] the passengers were landed in small boats, about twelve of thirteen at a time. After walking down steps on the side of the ship as the little boat and the big ship came together you were told to "jump – jump into that man's arms;" it had to be done promptly before the boats receded. It did not seem possible to do so but it was the only way. One lady going to San Francisco waited a little too long and took a plunge in the ocean.

Crossing the Isthmus of Panama

I cannot remember the name of the little town where our trunks went through the Custom House inspection. I know we stayed there one night [Sunday March 23, 1851] but I seem to think that it was a little distance up the Chagres River, but perhaps not. A broken-winded little steamer propelled two bateaux or flat boats with awnings as far as the river was large enough, after which the motive power was natives with poles which they thrust into the banks and mud.

We spent one night [Monday March 24, 1851] in our boat near some little town; we were in sight of the place which was perhaps a mile away. Just one month before the whole company had been killed here by the boatmen to obtain the gold with which they thought a carpenter's tool-chest must be filled. The night we were on the river the men of our company kept guard, two hours at a time. Mr. Thurston, who was nearly sick and very weary, got a hammock on shore.

Tuesday noon [March 25, 1851] we reached Gorgona, which if I remember right, was sixty miles from the mouth of the Chagres, perhaps the most crooked river in America. At Gatun, the "North American Hotel" had a ground or earth floor and a thatched roof. There were no chairs, cots or bedsteads. Beds were just made on the floor and there were just as many men and women as the room could contain, I presume twenty or over.

Wednesday morning [March 26, 1851] early as might be, preparations were going on for the day's trip on mule back over the mountains to Panama, twenty seven miles distant. The baggage also was transported in the same way, i.e., by pack mules. It was well for me that at the outset there was a few miles of comparatively level going or I never could have retained my seat on my mule, being totally unused to horseback riding; it seemed as if I should fall off every step. Many times the trail looked so dangerous I felt quite afraid, but what could I do but go on?

With no bridle but only a rope over his nose, I could not stop my mule, who did not seem vicious, only wanted to take the lead, and would do so if there was any chance to get ahead, which was the case several times. Miss Miller was thrown after the mountains were crossed; her mule then ran away, two men went in pursuit. My mule would not be left behind so I had to go too and kept up with the foremost.

Then for the first time I dismounted and out of sight of the rest of the party kept guard over three mules while the two men, one of whom was Mr. Thurston, took back the run-away to the scene of the accident. Miss Miller was but slightly hurt and soon we were on our way again and without further mishap arrived at Panama about sunset, just before the closing of the City Gates.

The streets of Panama were roughly paved with cobble stones, as were the roads for some distance back. We devoted the day after our arrival to getting rested, indeed I think we were incapacitated for any exertion or exercise. We found it very pleasant to walk about the place but on account of the heat could only do so early in the morning, or just before sunset. The drinking water was too warm to be good; each morning it was brought to the city in kegs on mule back from springs in the neighboring mountains, each animal carrying two. No fresher water could be obtained all the hot sweltering day.

The second of April [Wednesday April 2, 1851] found us again on our way on the old steamer, *California*, Captain Budd. The harbor of Panama contained many small boats, by stepping from one to another a dozen times or more we at last reached the one which was to convey us to our ship, anchored some miles away. For several days the heat was tropical and affected us more on account of the speedy transition from a cold climate. My warm traveling dress, which I had expected to wear the whole distance, had been discarded several days before for coolest, thinnest fabric.

The Final Voyage of Samuel R. Thurston

Mr. Thurston had complained of feeling ill at Panama and while there two or three times a day took minute doses of quinine (the first I ever saw, but from my knowledge of the drug since I should think the quantity was insufficient to have much effect in eradicating disease.) Mr. Thurston seemed to grow steadily worse and lost much of his cheerfulness, but we little realized what a dark cloud was so soon to overshadow us.

On Saturday night, [Saturday April 5, 1851] Mr. Thurston went to his stateroom sick, where some young men in his care watched over him. *Sunday morning* [Sunday April 6, 1851] he was assisted to the Captain's stateroom on deck, which he had kindly offered for the sick man's use; it was more commodious, larger and more airy. The disease (perhaps Isthmus fever) was making rapid progress, most of the time Mr. Thurston was conscious, except the last few hours. His death occurred early, not later than one o'clock, Wednesday morning, April 9th. [1851]

The steamer *California* anchored off Acapulco, Mexico next morning, Thursday April, 10, 1851, to bury Thurston. It sailed on to stops at San Blas, Mexico; San Francisco, California; and Astoria, Oregon Territory. Mary McLench continued her journey through the Oregon Territory to Fort Vancouver, Portland and finally arrived in Oregon City.