



John Franklin Oviatt and Mary Jane Whitlock Oviatt

Photos Courtesy Author

its banks intending to cross in the morning. During the night the rain came down in torrents, causing the river to rise and water to run under the wagons, washing away many of their supplies such as frying pans and buckets. The storm continued for many days and the thunder and lightning was terrible. At one time two men standing next to a stove were knocked down by lightning but survived.

As the days went by, the pioneers encountered many hardships. Shallow rivers, quicksand, and hostile Indians kept the pioneers on their toes. The days were very tiring on Mary Jane, because her baby was due in ten weeks. John was beginning to worry about her.

Indians would come to their camp begging for food. The white people had little to spare but always gave them a meal or two. Not a day went by without excitement. On one evening a small dog knocked over a tub of dishes causing the restless cattle to stampede. It was quite a job for the men to recover their stock. Many families had cows whose loss would be a big one. These cows furnished the only milk and butter available on the long trip. Cream would be carefully saved in a bottle and then the bottle would be fastened on the back of the wagon to jolt and churn all day. By night camp the family would be sure to have butter.

**A**T LAST the wagontrain was a half-day's travel from Fort Laramie. The Fort was situated on a sandy spit of land between the Platte and Laramie Rivers. The Fort was the busiest point on the trail because it was right in the heart of the Indian hunting grounds. Paths worn down by generations of Crows, Cheyennes and Arapahoes radiated over the plains and mountains.

In this same summer of 1851, Indians by the score began to put up their tipis in the area around Horse Creek, near Fort Laramie. From the Arkansas River all the way north to the Canadian border, the tribes sent their representatives, many of them coming from great distances with their wives and children in tow. Shoshone, Cheyenne, Arapahoe, Assiniboiné, Crow, Mandan, and Aricara tribes gathered to find out what the white men would say about the boundaries of their hunting grounds. This

peace treaty meeting was to begin on September 8, 1851.

As the train drew near Fort Laramie, a band of young braves, tired of being cooped up in their camp waiting for the meeting to take place, stampeded a herd of buffaloes near the wagontrain causing many of the oxen teams to bolt. An elderly lady known as Grandma Albridge was in one of the runaway wagons and as the team charged past the Oviatts, Mary Jane jumped from her wagon and threw her apron up in the faces of the oxen bringing them to a halt. She saved the old lady from a certain fall and possible death. But by the time the animals were under control and ready to continue, Mary Jane was in great pain.

Because of the great number of Indians in the area it was not safe to make camp, so the train had no other choice but to continue to the Fort. The danger to Mary Jane and their unborn child was too great if he stayed with the train, so John pulled their wagon out of line. He refused to have any of his family risk their lives too, so he and Mary Jane were soon alone. John knew their chances would be slim if any of the Indians discovered them.

Mary Jane was soon well advanced in labor, and as John was handing some tea into the wagon to her, a band of young braves rode into sight. John noticed that some were wearing war paint. The Indians seeing the wagon alone, rode up near and came to a stop.

When one brave grunted a question at John, "Squaw sick?" An inspiration came to him and he answered, "Yes, squaw heap sick, maybe so die, got smallpox!"

After the Indian translated John's answer to the others, they all wheeled their ponies around and hurriedly rode away. Many Indians had been dying of the dread white man's disease and all feared it in a terrible way.

As John turned back to his wagon with a sigh of relief, a baby's cry rent the air. His first child and my great grandmother had been born. John and Mary Jane and their new daughter, Francis, continued on their journey unmolested and joined their families two months later in the Salt Lake Valley in Utah.

## THE DAY THE STORK HAD SMALLPOX By Diane Ekins

**T**HIS STORY was related to me by my grandmother, Mary Jane Lyons. It is the story of her grandparents, John Franklin Oviatt and his wife, Mary Jane Whitlock Oviatt.

John had been living at Council Bluffs, Iowa, for five years. He had left the East at the age of fifteen with his parents and a band of Mormon pioneers. They were on their way to the Salt Lake Valley. John's father, Ira, was very proficient as a blacksmith and when they reached Council Bluffs, Brigham Young requested that John's father stay and outfit the wagons on their way west. They stayed until June 10, 1851, and then Ira and his family joined a company of over 100 wagons that were heading for Utah. They were being led by Captain Eli B. Kelsey.

John, aged twenty, and Mary Jane, his wife, were also accompanying the train. Mary Jane was expecting a baby at the time, but not until they reached Utah. Ten days after the train left they came to the Missouri River. They camped on