On March 8, 1865, his birthday, Isaac Owen wrote out for future generations a brief history of his life. Owen’s diary entry for that day reads:

Today is my birthday, I am fifty-six years old today. I was born in the Town of Milton in the State of Vermont on the 8th day of March in 1809. Was removed by Parents to the State of Indiana in 1811 was left a Fatherless boy in 1824 was converted and joined the Church in 1827. Was appointed Class leader in 1828, was licensed to exhorte in 1830, was married to Elizabeth S. Harbin and Licensed to preach in 1832, joined the travelling connection in 1834, was made Agent of the Indiana Asbury University in 1843, was appointed missionary to California in 1848 And reached this country in 1849, was appointed college agent for the University of the Pacific in 1854. First elected to General Conference in 1855 was chosen President of the California Con. in 1861, was elected the sec[ond] time to the Gen. Conference in 1863.¹

Eleven months later, February 9, 1866, this remarkable Methodist was dead. The cause of death was assessed as erisypelas, but a more likely cause was blood poisoning. Owen had been nailing up red-wood boards at his farm near Santa Clara. A large sliver entered his thumb, and the wound became badly infected. Even though his sickness increased, Owen traveled to San Francisco where he died while attending to his appointments.

Owen’s short autobiography does not do justice to his extraordinary career. He neglected to point out that he had raised $63,000 during his tenure as agent for Indiana Asbury University. He totally ignored his service as Presiding Elder in the California Conference and the original Oregon and California Mission Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Martin Clock Briggs, one of Owen’s more famous contemporaries, remembered him as “that short, square-shouldered, dark-eyed, ever-smiling man with retreating forehead and repeating Greek . . . a marvel of labor and success.”² Indeed, it can be said Isaac Owen was the Father of Methodism in California. His contribution to California Methodism

¹ Diary of Isaac Owen, March 8, 1865, Owen Papers, California-Nevada Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church, Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, California. There is some discrepancy concerning Owen’s date of birth. His tombstone shows March 9, 1809. His diary, however, clearly states March 8, 1809 was the date.

remains unequaled.

The career of Isaac Owen has been chronicled in such works as Charles Volney Anthony’s *Fifty Years of Methodism: A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church within the Bounds of the California Annual Conference from 1847 to 1897*; and in Leon L. Loofbourow’s *In Search of God’s Gold* and his two volume *Cross in the Sunset*.

Owen produced a large collection of records, journals, and diaries. These dated from the moment of his arrival in California to the time of his death. Such meticulous attention to the recording of his daily routine leads one to assume that he also kept an overland diary. The lack of knowledge as to the location of this diary, if it exists, has left Owen’s overland journey a blank in his overall biography.

Recently, while researching a dissertation on Methodism and the California Gold Rush, this writer discovered materials which help to shed light on Owen’s trip west. The most important of these materials consist of Owen’s letters to the *Western Christian Advocate* and the Diary of Sallie Hester, the young daughter of Owen’s wagon-master.

In April or May of 1848, Owen wrote to Edward R. Ames expressing a desire to go to California. In his reply, Ames indicated it would be better to await the final decision of the Church concerning California before making plans. But Ames stated Owen would be his choice for the California missionary work. 3

Owen next wrote to Bishop Beverly Waugh (June 14th) about his interest in California. Bishop Waugh replied that he had heard nothing further about the General Conference decision to organize an Oregon and California Mission Conference. 4 But, in a letter dated October 16, 1848, from Baltimore, Bishop Waugh informed Owen that he had “come to the conclusion to appoint you to the California Mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church.” 5

Owen immediately began making plans for his journey to the Pacific. He already had the backing of his Indiana Conference. That body had passed resolutions October 13th, giving their consent for his transfer; authorizing him to collect funds and buy books for the mission; and wishing him the best in his chosen undertaking. 6 On November 1st, he tendered his resignation “To the

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3 Edward Raymond Ames to Isaac Owen, June 8, 1848, Owen Papers, Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, California.
4 The mission was approved and established by the General Conference of 1848.
5 Beverly Waugh to Isaac Owen, October 16, 1848, Owen Papers, Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, California.
6 Resolution approving the appointment of Isaac Owen to California, October 13, 1848, Owen Papers, Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, California.
joint Board, and visitors of the Indiana Asbury University." 7 And on November 7th, Owen formally acknowledged his appointment in a letter to Bishop Waugh. The next few weeks were spent in gathering funds for the mission and in arranging the personal affairs of his family.

In January, 1849, the Estimating Committee of the Missionary Society began the consideration of expenses for Owen. On the 17th, it was decided to allow $300 for outfitting the party; and $900 per annum as a salary for Owen. The salary was to begin March 1, 1849. Table expenses would be paid upon arrival in California. 8

The committee, being unable to determine with accuracy the cost of Owen’s transfer, resolved “that the necessary expenses . . . be paid, on the presentation of proper vouchers to the Board, and in view of Bro. Owen’s taking the Overland route that an advance of $500 be made for his transportation before leaving, with the understanding that if his necessary expenses be more the Balance be paid by the Board, if less, the excess of the amo. appropriated be applied to his salary.” 9

All was ready. A letter from Owen to the Western Christian Advocate announced the impending departure of the wagon-train.

The Bloomington, Ia., company, bound for California, will leave Bloomington, Ia., on the 20th of February, 1849, spend Sabbath, the 25th of February, at Terrehaute, Ia., and rendezvous at St. Joseph, Mo., on the 23rd of April, at which time and place all persons wishing to join the company will please report themselves to the undersigned, with the necessary outfit. The outfit will consist of one good strong two-horse wagon, and three yoke of oxen, or an equal team of mules, to four persons, suitable camp utensils, a suitable supply of provisions, medicines, clothing, etc. Each adult male must have one good rifle gun, and a good supply of ammunition. After starting from St. Joseph, Mo., mutual aid will be given to each other. Godd- [sic] moral character will be required of all wishing to join the company, with satisfactory assurances that the Sabbath will be observed when practicable. 10

The presence of missionaries, and the religious and moral regulations adopted, earned for the company the sobriquet Missionary Train.

A letter published in the Western Christian Advocate, April 25, 1849, and written from Chariton County, Missouri, one hundred

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7 Resignation of Isaac Owen as agent of Indiana Asbury University, November 1, 1848, Owen Papers, Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, California.
8 Minutes of the Estimating Committee, Methodist Missionary Society, January 17, 1849, Microfilm #122 at the University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.
9 Ibid., January 19, 1849.
10 Western Christian Advocate, XVI, #6, February 7, 1849.
miles east of St. Joseph, described the uneventful happenings of the trip from Bloomington.

While the Owen family and friends were en route to St. Joseph, the family of Sallie Hester was also heading for the same destination; but by a different route. Sallie and her family left Bloomington March 20, 1849; having sent their wagons on ahead with the Owen party a month in advance. They went first to New Albany, Indiana, where Sallie remarked, "This is my first experience of a big city and my first glimpse of a river and steamboats." 11

On the 26th of March, the family boarded the steamboat Meteor bound for St. Joseph. The journey down the Ohio was uneventful, but when the Meteor commenced its ascension of the Missouri River it encountered numerous delays. Sallie thought the Missouri the worst river in the world, since most of the time the Meteor and its passengers were ensnared on the river's sand bars.

Finally, the river bested the Meteor, catching it fast on a bar ten miles below St. Joseph, April 14, 1849.12 Here passengers and cargo were forced to disembark. The Hesters were fortunate in having a friend who lived in the area, and who took them in until they could be reunited with the Owen Train and their wagons.

The Owen party reached the rendezvous on schedule. On April 23, 1849, as the announcement had advised, the company organized. By-laws were adopted which prohibited Sabbath-breaking, card-playing, gambling, swearing, and drunkenness. Among the party were five preachers, four Methodist and one Cumberland Presbyterian. The party consisted of 134 male members and an unspecified number of women and children.13

Although now officially organized, the company did not function as a unit until it crossed the Missouri River. Sallie Hester indicated that her family crossed the river May 1st, and camped six miles from town.14 They remained several days in that location. The Missionary Train, or at least that part of it now grouped around Isaac Owen, did not cross the Missouri until the 8th of May, and

11 Sallie Hester, "The Diary of a Pioneer Girl," The Argonaut, September 12, 1925, p. 3. New Albany in 1850 had 8,000 inhabitants and was considered the most important urban center in Indiana. See: Emma Lou Thornbrough, The History of Indiana, Vol III: Indiana in the Civil War Era, 1850-1880 (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau and Indiana Historical Society, 1965), pp. 555-556.

12 Sallie Hester, op. cit., p. 3.

13 Western Christian Advocate, XVI, #23, June 6, 1849. (We know the names of only three of the preachers. They are Isaac Owen, James Corwin, and William McMillen, all Methodists. Other members of the party were Wm. M'Pheterage, L. Smith, John Shryer, W. Batterson, J. Stone, C. H. Stone, J. Fox, J. A. Dale, Edward B. Maxwell, Alexander Hess, James B. Hess, E. Anderson, a Mr. Hutsonpiller, and two Messrs. Henderson of Indianapolis. In addition, of course, were Owen's wife, five children, his father-in-law Wm. Harbin, and the five members of the Hester family.)

14 Hester, op. cit., p. 3.
the last wagons did not obtain the west bank until the 9th.

The long journey westward began May 11th. The next day provided the company with its first view of Indian huts. In the evening they camped near a Presbyterian Indian Mission, located in the vicinity of present Highland, Kansas. Owen observed that the inhabitants of this region—the Iowas, the Sioux, and the Fox—were all poor and filthy.\(^{15}\)

The next day being Sunday the 13th, the train remained in camp. Sallie reports that the Missionary Train, obviously under the influence of its leaders, always made it a point to rest on Sunday. They had a sermon in the morning and again Sunday evening. She also pointed out that she used this weekly stop-over to “jot down our wanderings during the week.”\(^{10}\) On this particular Sunday James Corwin preached at 3:00 p.m.\(^{17}\) Corwin was a young local preacher from Owen’s Indiana Conference.

Tuesday morning the Missionary Train continued across the Plains toward the Big Blue River. Rain the day before had prevented a Monday departure. The company probably reached, and crossed, the Big Blue on Saturday, May 19th. Here Sallie is inconsistent in saying that they camped on the banks of the Big Blue, Sunday, May 21st. In 1849, the 20th of May fell on a Sunday, not the 21st. She was again mistaken in concluding the party was now 215 miles from St. Joseph.\(^{18}\) At the crossing of the Big Blue they were scarcely 120 miles from their starting point.

Assuming the Missionary Train followed the standard route to the Platte River, the company would have left the Big Blue and proceeded to the Little Blue River a few miles west in the vicinity of present-day Hanover, Kansas. Once in the valley of the Little Blue they would follow that stream northwest to Fort Kearney on the Platte River. The distance from the Big Blue to Fort Kearney was approximately 150 miles. This entailed about eight days travel.

The last communication from Isaac Owen to the *Western Christian Advocate*, written while on the trail, was posted from some point on the Platte, most likely Fort Kearney. The letter was dated May 29, 1849. Owen wrote that to that date the company had suffered five cases of cholera, which resulted in two deaths. Owen also mentioned that a religious association had been formed, and he expected half the company would become members. Finally, he

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\(^{15}\) *Western Christian Advocate*, XVI, #23, June 6, 1849. (In naming the Sioux Owen was mistaken. He had instead met Sac Indians. Owen was at that time crossing lands reserved for the Iowa, and Sac and Fox Nations.)

\(^{16}\) Hester, op. cit., p. 3.

\(^{17}\) *Western Christian Advocate*, XVI, #23, June 6, 1849.

\(^{18}\) Hester, op. cit., p. 3.
announced that Mr. Hester, Sallie's father, was now in charge of the company.\textsuperscript{19}

From this point, we have no record of Owen's journey written by himself. But the affairs of the company as a whole, fortunately, continued to be recorded by Sallie in her diary—even though for the most part sketchily. Upon these sparse entries, we are dependent for further information concerning the party in which the Reverend Mr. Owen and his family traveled.

On June 3rd, another Sunday camp was made further up the Platte River. This was possibly Cottonwood Springs, although the name was applied much later. The company were still sticking to their original agreement to rest on the Lord's Day. Sallie implies cholera was raging among other companies. But she reports their company were all in good health.\textsuperscript{20}

Two weeks later, June 17th, Sallie made her customary Sunday entries. She mentioned that several trains were encamped within her sight. Also she wrote of the "Italian skies" they were experiencing. Then almost casually she added that the company had passed, during the week, Court House Rock and Chimney Rock, the latter being "230 feet in height." Two of the most distinctive sights along the trail to that point and they were barely mentioned! Scott's Bluff did not even rate a mention!

Fort Laramie was better served. Here, on June 19th, Sallie noted her impressions and, like an early tourist, "stayed here some time looking at everything that was to be seen. . . ." \textsuperscript{21} The Missionary Train remained at Fort Laramie for two days to "wash and lighten up." Then on June 21st, the company commenced their journey over the Black Hills.\textsuperscript{22} It took them seven days, not counting a Sunday stop, to reach Independence Rock. "This rock is covered with names," wrote Sallie on July 2nd. "With great difficulty I found a place to cut mine." \textsuperscript{23}

The entries for July 2nd and July 4th are somewhat misleading. Both entries were probably written on Sunday, July 8th. This may explain Sallie's fuzzy memory and the way in which she intermixed the events of the two dates. Suffice it to say that the Missionary Train, in the course of that time, passed Independence Rock; Devils Gate, an imposing precipice climbed by Sallie, her brother John, her sister Lottie, and their friend John Owen, "a son of the minister"; Ice Springs, South Pass, and Pacific Springs.

\textsuperscript{19} Western Christian Advocate, XVI, #26, June 27, 1849.
\textsuperscript{20} Hester, op. cit., p. 3.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} The reader should not confuse the Black Hills west of Fort Laramie, Wyoming with their more famous counterparts in South Dakota.
\textsuperscript{23} Hester, op. cit., p. 3.
During the days that followed, the company ventured onto Sublette's Cut-Off, spent two days resting at the Green River, and then pressed on to Soda and Steamboat Springs (Idaho). Sallie made few comments about any of these locations.

By August 3rd, the company had completed the Hudspeth's Cut-Off (mistakenly called Sublette's by Sallie), struck the Raft River, and passed the City of Rocks. August 18th found them on a branch of the Humboldt River. Sallie indicated that some of the young men had left their company that week, as they were in a hurry and dissatisfied with the policy of Sunday stops. The entries for August 20th, 25th, and September 2nd, still show the company heading down the Humboldt.

September 4th through 6th was spent in crossing the desert between the Sink of the Humboldt and the Truckee River. Listen to Sallie's impression of that desert journey.

... The mooing of the cattle for water, their exhausted condition, with the cry of 'Another ox down,' the stopping of the train to unyoke the poor dying brute, to let him follow at will or stop by the wayside and die, and the weary, weary tramp of men and beasts, worn out with heat and famished for water, will never be erased from my memory.

After such an ordeal it is understandable that the Missionary Train would choose to rest Thursday and Friday on the banks of the Truckee. Saturday the 8th, they began their journey along the Truckee and their ascent of the Sierra Nevada. That day they crossed the river twelve times in fourteen miles. The next day they again rested. In the two succeeding days of travel they crossed the river ten times more. September 14th, the Missionary Train came upon the site of the 1846 Donner Tragedy. Sallie noted "all that was left to tell the tale of that ill-fated party": two log cabins, trees cut off at the snow line, and bones.

Sunday, the 16th, found the Missionary Train encamped on the headwaters of the South Fork Yuba River. The location of this spot is in the vicinity of Summit Valley, west of Donner Pass. This encampment marked the first Sunday the Owen party spent in California.

The histories of the Methodist Episcopal Church in California have generally related that Isaac Owen preached his first California sermon at Grass Valley, September 23, 1849. The origin of this

24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
belief is to be found in Anthony's *Fifty Years of Methodism*, previously mentioned. Most historians of California Methodism since Anthony have accepted his date as correct. That date also gave foundation to the Church tradition that Owen and his co-worker in California, William Taylor, both preached their “arrival” sermon in California on the same day, even though one had come by land and the other by sea. But, if the information in the Hester Diary is correct, a conflict is apparent.

Since it had been the practice throughout the journey overland to stop on Sunday, and to have preaching morning and night on that day, it is fair to assume the practice was not abandoned upon reaching the Sierra Nevada. One might also assume that Isaac Owen, being the senior preacher in charge, would preach at least one of the Sunday meetings. It is probable, then, that Owen preached his first California sermon on Sunday, September 16, 1849, in the Donner Pass area, on the headwaters of the South Fork Yuba River.

On the 17th, the company moved down the valley and then stopped again for two days. During this time they had “preaching out under the pines at night. The men built a fire and we all gathered around it in camp-meeting style.” This would have been Monday and Tuesday night. Again Owen probably did not pass up such an inviting opportunity to preach.

Wednesday, the 19th of September, the party covered twenty-five miles. They camped through the 20th near Emigrant Gap, California. On Friday morning, the 21st, they commenced letting their wagons down “a tremendous hill” with ropes. The Missionary Train was now in Bear Valley. Here the party rested through Sunday the 23rd, this being the train’s second Sunday in California and the day designated as that on which Owen preached in Grass Valley.

Although Sallie does not mention the day travel resumed, it most likely was Monday the 24th. Almost immediately the company were faced, for the second time, with winching their wagons downhill. This occurred at Steep Hollow, which Sallie refers to as Sleepy Hollow. The descent was completed by mid-day and the wagons continued on to Grass Valley—arriving there no earlier than Tuesday, September 25, 1849. Here they rested four or five days. It was at Grass Valley that Owen preached his California “arrival” sermon, substituting for a pulpit his cane topped by his hat. The whole meeting was conducted in the open under a pine tree.

From Grass Valley the Missionary Train made for the Sacramento Valley by way of Johnson’s Ranch. Members of the company whose primary interest had been gold dropped out of the train

28 Ibid.
in the mining regions. By the time Sallie made her diary entry at Vernon, California, on the Sacramento River, there were remaining in the company only thirteen of the original fifty wagons.\(^29\) The date was October 6, 1849. Taking May 11th as the start of the trip from St. Joseph, the Missionary Train had been on the trail 149 days.

At Vernon the company parted. The Hester family eventually settled in San Jose where they became prominent citizens. Isaac Owen headed for San Francisco. He soon discovered the Superintendent of the Oregon and California Mission, William Roberts, had left instructions for him to reside in Sacramento. William Taylor, later to be Bishop Taylor, was assigned to begin the work in San Francisco.

Thinking he would not further burden his family and livestock by returning overland to Sacramento, Owen arranged for passage on a river schooner. The family that had braved the overland trail for 149 days without hazard to themselves, other than fatigue, stoically watched as the vessel capsized in the river with all their baggage.

Isaac Owen's California trials had begun.

\(^{29}\) Ibid.