

## The Letter of John Riley Woods from California

*Glen Woods, a grandson of John Riley Woods, found this letter among family documents. He transcribed the letter and on January 25, 1942 had it certified as "a true and correct copy" of the original.*

*The text below is copied from the certified copy with spellings as they appear in that copy. In addition it includes explanatory footnotes and in some cases additions or corrections in square brackets.*

Nichalaus [Nicolaus], California<sup>1</sup>  
September 27<sup>th</sup>, 1852

Dear Margaret,<sup>2</sup>

I once more have the privilege of addressing you another letter.<sup>3</sup> First, we have all arrived in Calafornia in good health. We had a long and almost endless journey, but patience and perseverance brought us through. We landed in the Sacramento Vally on the 22<sup>nd</sup> Inst. [September 22, 1852], five months to a day on the Plains.<sup>4</sup> I rec'd a letter from your father [Samuel P. Woods] on first inquiry at the office and contents peruse with pleasure. It made me feel for a moment like I was at home. I have enjoyed good health since I left home, never had better. I have not been sick in the least since I left home. Though I have been one of the fortunate. While I have come in good health, thousands have falen to the sand. I got both of my horses here. Twig is in good plite considering. Since we got in I have been offered for him \$300. Noah is tolerable thin. I did not ride him for 700 miles on the latter part of the journey. I have been 5 months a stradle a horse or mule and I feel like a forked log. Henderson and Calvin<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Located midway between Sacramento and Yuba City on the Feather River, **Nicolaus** was established in 1850 and named for Nicolaus Altgeier, a German who operated a ferry for several years. In 1852 the town was the county seat of Sutter County and had a population of 1,207, nearly half of which were domesticated Indians. Nicolaus had a population of 211 in 2010.

<sup>2</sup> **Margaret Ann Woods**, daughter and eldest child of Samuel Purviance Woods and Elizabeth Greaves (Dickson) Woods, was born in 1832 in Tennessee. She married John Riley Woods, the writer of the letter, in 1849. By 1852 they had two children: Alice, born on August 2, 1850; and Samuel D., born on December 12, 1851. John Riley Woods was born in Carroll County, Tennessee, in 1828, the oldest son of Dysart and Sarah (Holmes) Woods. John R. Woods came to Arkansas in 1837, his parents settling in Osage Township in Benton County, which was formed in 1836. In 1850 the county had a population of 3,710, though it more than doubled in the next decade.

<sup>3</sup> The implication is that he had written other letters to her, perhaps posted along the route from Bent's Fort, Pueblo, or Fort Hall.

<sup>4</sup> According to a leading historian of overland migration before the Civil War, 1852, 1853, and 1854 were the peak years of overland livestock (including sheep as well as cattle) drives to California and Oregon. John D. Unruh, Jr., *The Plains Across*, p. 333.

<sup>5</sup> **Henderson** Phineas Holmes (1821-1893) and **Calvin** Hall Holmes (1825-1898), were sons of Phineas Holmes and younger brothers of John Riley Woods's mother. The two appear to have been the leaders of the California cattle drive. One or both of them may have already been a part of an earlier drive. Calvin would lead another drive in

made a lucky trip. I think they only lost about 25 head of stock on the plains. Our company come in as good condition as ever any could. Ferrier<sup>6</sup> is still behind. He left us at the head of the Humbolt [Humboldt]. He thought we travailed too fast for his teams and he held back. He was getting along as well as could be expected. The dreaded Humbolt has been a celebrated place for grass this year, which was greatly in favor of the migration. The Origion company and ours kept pretty much together to the forks of the road 180 miles north of Salt Lake City.<sup>7</sup> Your cousin Thomas<sup>8</sup> and all the ballance of that company were well, though at that place they buried Mrs. Sloven, sister to the Ingrams.<sup>9</sup> She had been sick all the way from Arkansas. George Wallace<sup>10</sup> and family are all well and had a very pleasant journey considering the disposition of John and Buck. The waggon run over John and skined his head a little which helpt him a good deal. Henry Mises got in good health without any difficulty, tho Sarah's under lip would some times get limber.<sup>11</sup> I got Bush and Bob<sup>12</sup> both here fat and saucy. Upon the whole the trip to California is nothing if a person will go at it like grubing. There was never any scene of lamentable distress happened under our own observation accept one time which was a young Jerman that shot himself accidentally. He sat down to bathe his feet in a hot spring. He laid his gun down at his side and when done he drewed his gun to him to start when she fired. The ball passed through his breast and lodged against his shoulder blade. Poor fellow fell, rolled and hollowed. Bled like a hog. He lived but a few hours. We crossed the desert in about 20 hours. We started in the desert in the morning at the usual time of starting and drove to the hot springs about twenty three mile. There we cooled water for our stock and gave them fead of hay which we laid in and drove out before day next morning. The desert on that rout (The

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1854. Both men were residents of Osage Township in 1850 and remained in California, residing at Santa Rosa, Sonoma County.

<sup>6</sup> Ferrier was Silas Farrier, whose family lived in Osage Township in 1850.

<sup>7</sup> From the outset, the overland travelers had two separate destinations: California and Oregon. They would have parted company to the west of Fort Hall in present-day Idaho, the Oregon company continuing to follow the Snake River, while the California company angled southwesterly towards the Humboldt River.

<sup>8</sup> **Thomas** Newton Blair (1833-1906), was the son of Mary (Holmes) Blair (1808/10-1883), a widow and a sister of John Riley Woods's mother. While we do not know where Thomas was living in 1850, his mother and one daughter were a part of the household of George P. Wallace, whose wife, Cynthia, was her sister. Although the context suggests that he was a part of the Oregon company, at the time of the 1860 census he was a neighbor of George Pomeroy Wallace in Santa Rosa, California.

<sup>9</sup> **Mrs. Sloven** may have been Mary Ann Slocum, a thirty-nine-year-old widow with five children and a resident of Osage Township in 1850. Her oldest sons were in their early twenties in 1852. From the context, we can assume that she was a part of the Oregon company. The **Ingrams** were no doubt William R. Ingram (1812-1875) and Sarah (Winn) Ingram (1818-1881), both born Tennessee, in their thirties, and also residents of Osage Township in 1850. The Ingrams were no doubt members of the Oregon company as they settled in Washington County, Oregon.

<sup>10</sup> **George Pomeroy Wallace** (1814-1894) traveled to California with his wife, Cynthia (Holmes) Wallace (1815-1884) and his children, including a son, **John M. Wallace** (1845-1862). **Buck** may have been his infant son, Clarence Holmes Wallace (1851-1926). George's father, who stood nearly seven feet tall, was the first judge in Benton County. Cynthia was the daughter of Phineas Holmes.

<sup>11</sup> Henry Mises was Henry Clay Mizer (1827-1877) who had married his wife, Sarah (Forsyth) Mizer (1831-1928), in 1851 in Benton County. They remained in California, settling in Santa Rosa, Sonoma County.

<sup>12</sup> While we know that Twig and Noah were horses, Bush and Bob may have been mules.

Trucky Rout) [Truckee Route] is 45 miles.<sup>13</sup> We came out without the loss of any. We did not see any suffering people on the desert at all and only two or three dead cattle, and one that had better been. There was a great many teams behind us yet will be apt to have hard time yet I am afraid.

Well, Margaret, you will not expect me to give you a history of Calafornia yet. As far as I have seen there is quite a difference in the movement of things here and in Arkansas. People are doing business here in a hurry as if they got paid for it. Horses of good size is worth from 1 to \$300. Cattle are better than the dust it self. We are now stopped on Feather River 18 miles below Marysville and 25 above Sacramento. We are doing some tall wresting and eating fresh fixings. I do not know where we will settle. Calvin and George Wallace are going to start tomorrow to Russian River to look at that country. It runs out of the Coast range into the Pacific north of Sanfrancisco. It is said to be a good farming and stock raising country and just beginning to be settled. So we do not know where we will stop untill they return. Tell your Father I thank him for his kind letter and will return the compliment in a few days. I have been expecting for five months that when I would get here I would get a letter from under your own fingers but not one did I get!!! Why is it so? Never did I undertake a more pleasing task than to write you a letter. I will excuse you if you will promise to do better. I will stop with the promise that you shall never want for information from me on my part. Do write to me often and tell your father and mate to write too. Write to me and tell me how big my boy is and how black Alice is. Tell Alice John will come back and bring her a pretty something. Give my love to all my friends and particularly to Aunt Ann. Tell her I don't sleep half so sound as I used to.

Remains Yours Truly,

Jno. Rily.

Farewell

A.B. Direct your letters to Sacramento City untill we know where we will stop. No more.

J.R. Woods

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<sup>13</sup> A historical source refers to this desert as "Forty Mile Desert," described as "a barren stretch of waterless alkali wasteland. It is the most dreaded section of the California emigrant trail. If possible, it was traveled by night because of the great heat." Boiling Springs were scores of hot springs midway across the desert. "Most travelers stopped here just long enough to cool some water for their livestock and then pressed on." National Park Service, National Historic Trails Auto Tour Route Interpretive Guide across Nevada (2012), p. 38. [https://www.nps.gov/poex/planyourvisit/upload/NevadaATR-IG-041612\\_web.pdf](https://www.nps.gov/poex/planyourvisit/upload/NevadaATR-IG-041612_web.pdf)

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age in 1852</b>	<b>Born</b>	<b>1850 Census Location</b>	<b>1860 Census Location</b>
Holmes, Henderson Phineas	28	TN	AR-Benton-Osage	CA-Sonoma
Holmes, Calvin Hall	26	TN	AR-Benton-Osage	CA-Sonoma
Woods, John Riley	23	TN	AR-Benton-Osage	AR-Benton-Osage
Wallace, George Pomeroy	40	TN	AR-Benton-Osage	CA-Sonoma
Wallace, Cynthia (Holmes)	37	TN	AR-Benton-Osage	CA-Sonoma
Wallace, John M	7	AR	AR-Benton-Osage	CA-Sonoma
Wallace, Sarah P.	6	AR	AR-Benton-Osage	CA-Sonoma
Wallace, Ann E.	6	AR	AR-Benton-Osage	CA-Sonoma
Wallace, Clarence Holmes	1	AR	Not yet born	CA-Sonoma
Mizer, Henry	25	TN	AR-Benton-Osage	CA-Sonoma
Mizer, Sarah (Forsyth)	21	TN	AR-Benton-Osage	CA-Sonoma
Farrier, Silas A.	42	TN	AR-Benton-Osage	CA-Humboldt
Farrier, Clarissa (Dean)	32	TN	AR-Benton-Osage	CA-Humboldt
Farrier, William	6	AR	AR-Benton-Osage	CA-Humboldt
Farrier, Jane	3	AR	AR-Benton-Osage	CA-Humboldt
Farrier, Mahala	2	AR	AR-Benton-Osage	CA-Humboldt
Farrier, Nancy	0	AR	Not yet born	CA-Humboldt
Blair, Thomas Newton	18	AR	?	CA-Sonoma

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