

Primary Source Readings

Benjamin Butler Harris, *The Gila Trail*, pages 77-78

“Next day, soon after starting down the river valley for San Xavier, forty miles distant, on a bench [mesa] to the left, I thought I had found a desert treasure in the shape of a pillar standing amid ruins. Approaching, I could not but admire its tall, columnar, beautifully tapering shaft, with two graceful arms pulling out opposite to each other.

Nearer, I noticed it was elaborately fluted and carved with long shiny spines protruding ‘like quills of fretful porcupine.’ When presto!, it was found to be a subject of the vegetable kingdom, it came upon my mind as a natural wonder, an astonishing ‘what-is-it?’”

William W. Hunter, “Diary-Journal, 1849,” page 107

“Two of our men killed and presented to me a singular looking animal of the lizard genus. Its color on the back is a rusty black, variegated with irregular lines and figures of pale yellow. Its belly of the same colors the white or pale yellow predominating and tinged with a shade of pink. Its tail, short and thick, is marked with patches and irregular rings. The lips are jet-black, as well as the throat and lower extremities of the legs. These have each five toes armed with talons. The mouth is enormously large armed with transparent teeth formed like fangs, through which I thought I could distinguish a line of light, denoting them to be tubes, and a thick tongue forked at the point. Its eyes were black. The skin is thick and looks as though it were beaded, the beads touching and raised to half their height.”

William W. Hunter, “Diary-Journal, 1849,” pages 116-117

“We saw a bird called by the natives, ‘gayta’ whose form resembles our blue jay with a head and neck as large as (that) of a turkey. The plumage like that of the Western Pheasant, with two circular bare patches on the back of the head of a vermilion color, lying parallel with the eyes – beak black, 3 inches long, and terminating in a hooked point. Wings very short and disproportionate to the size of the body. Their color black with a shade of invisible green, and striped with three rows of oblong white spots, extending across the fore part of the feather. Tail twice the length of the body, color invisible green tipped with white, and near its insertion overlaid by a coat of short feathers of a plum color, fringed around their edges with white. Body, the size of a duck, mouse colored on the back, breast and under part fawn colored. Legs very long and of great muscular power.”

William Tallack, *First Overland Mail*, page 143-144

“It has no leaves, in the ordinary sense of the word, but consists of a lofty, straight, spiny, grooved, and dull green shaft from twenty to fifty feet in height and from one to two feet in diameter. From half way up this shaft, two opposite branches diverge at right angles and, taking another bend, also at right angles, grow parallel to the main trunk, which they resemble in nature and thickness. Though the general appearance somewhat resembles a huge branched candelabra-stand, there is great diversity of size and form; some being like a pump, others assuming the aspect of a tall man stretching out his arms in making a public address; whilst others are simple, unbranched fluted columns, . . .”

John Lewis Robards, “Journal of a Journey to California,” page 63

“We passed a large cactus, which was a must [*most*] imposing and magnificent [*sic*] mass of vegetable matter. It was forty feet [*feet*] high and three feet in diameter, handsomely fluted, in a solid column without foliage and of a beautiful green colour [*sic*] from its main stock grew out ten other large columns starting about five feet from the bottom and curving upwards until they projected some four or five ft. from the main body and then running up parallel with and nearly to the height of it. It was full of small sharp thorns and would weigh several tons . . .”

Extension to Science -William W. Hunter, “Diary-Journal, 1849,” continued from pages 107 -108.

“I conjectured from its appearance that it might be amphibious. It cannot support itself on its legs, but crawls somewhat nimbly along, its body gliding on the ground. Its food, insects and smaller reptiles. Its internal structure was very curious. Its capacious throat terminated in a very small canal, which again distended and formed its stomach, this again contracting formed another small canal to its exit. Its digestive apparatus was uncommonly large, its lungs lay on each side the back bone apparently disconnected and about 4 inches in length. And, at the lower part of the abdomen were two elongated masses of bluish looking flesh filled with blood vessels and supplied through the right lobe of the lower by a large artery which branched and entered at their upper extremity, their offices I could not discover. Its ribs, 44 in number, extended more than two thirds the length of the body.”

Background Information on the Travelers

Benjamin Butler Harris traveled by mule from Eastern Texas to the California goldfields in 1849. He traveled through El Paso and joined the Gila Trail near where it enters modern-day Arizona from Mexico. This is a published reminiscence of his trip to California.

William W. Hunter left Montgomery County, Missouri, on April 23, 1849, and headed for the California goldfields through Santa Fe and the Gila Trail. This is his unpublished journal/diary.

William Tallack (in book by Walter Lang, First Overland Mail,) writes of the first stagecoach trip across southern Arizona in the summer of 1860. He was a newspaperman who wrote a description of his trip for publication. The stage route closely followed the route of the Gila Trail through Arizona. This was published in a newspaper in 1860.

It is not clear who wrote the *Journal of a Journey to California*. John Robards or possibly Benjamin Stevens, of Hannibal, Missouri, might have written it. This is an unpublished journal in the *John Lewis Robards Papers*. The author traveled in a wagon train on the Gila Trail in the fall of 1849. He was a gold seeker who left from Missouri and traveled the Santa Fe Trail to the Gila Trail.