THE WEST exerted a mighty pull on Iowans in the mid-19th century, attracting them with tales of adventure and promises of new beginnings, enticing them from their homes.

Home to siblings Sarah, John, and James Stageman, from their various points on the western trails, was a distant log cabin in Pottawattamie County, Iowa. There lived Christopher and Mary Stageman, their parents, the center of their affections and the recipients of their heartfelt letters for one long decade.

Home had not always been this cabin along Mosquito Creek; the Stagemans, like so many Americans on the move in the 19th century, were not yet rooted to one place. Christopher and Mary and their five children—Sarah, Harriet, John, James, and Mary Ann—arrived in America in 1840 from England, where Christopher had worked in livery and as a farrier on an estate near Carlisle. For eleven years the family farmed in the close-knit community of Fair Hill, Maryland.

In 1851, the Stageman family joined the westward movement of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, though only the eldest child, 23-year-old Sarah, had been baptized Mormon. Perhaps Christopher intended to build a mill in the new Mormon territory; a decade earlier he had brought with him from England the detailed diagrams of a gristmill. Sons John, now 20, and James, 17, were no doubt feeling the pull of the West, and perhaps daughters Mary Ann and Harriet were as well.
Letters from the Western Trails

Home to Iowa
Traveling with a group of Mormon families, the Stagemans came by steamboat up the Missouri River to Wray’s Landing at Kanesville, the center of the Mormon settlements along the western edge of Iowa. Kanesville (soon to be renamed Council Bluffs) served as the last major staging area for Mormons headed to their Zion, the Great Salt Lake Valley, and as an outfitting point for gold rushers headed to California and other emigrants headed to Oregon.

These vast movements of people were pouring through Kanesville, buying food and supplies for the long westward trek. By June of 1851, some 4,500 wagons and 22,000 head of horses, mules, oxen, and cows had passed through town already that year. This level of migration would continue for another two years.

Disillusioned with Mormon practices, Christopher and Mary Stageman chose to remain in Iowa, purchasing 160 acres three miles east of Kanesville. The Iowa soil promised abundant crops, and the Missouri valley was rich in wildlife. The seven Stagemans settled in.

Within the year, 22-year-old Harriet married Francis Stine and moved to Pleasant Valley, a Mormon settlement just south of Kanesville. By the next summer, Sarah had joined one of the last wagon trains for the Salt Lake Valley. Sarah’s commitment to the Mormon faith had not faltered, and by going on ahead, she hoped to lead the way for the rest of her family.

Having Sarah leave Iowa, knowing they might never see her again, must have been heartbreaking for Christopher and Mary, especially in light of their disenchantment with Mormon practices and their realization of the rugged journey facing their daughter.

Heartbreak again washed over them in the fall of
1852. While Christopher was back east settling the sale of his Maryland farm, daughter Harriet died unexpectedly. "The shock that I felt I cannot describe," he wrote to wife Mary, "and what I felt at the time I cannot explain. — The very story the people in Philadelphia kept from me, I was told [in Fair Hill]. — They meant to have broken it out to me by degrees, when I returned, and then I should have been prepared."

Christopher and Mary Stageman were not done saying goodbye to their children. In the fall of 1853, John headed west. He would make good, he surely told his parents. He would visit Sarah. He would write home.

Thus began another great migratory movement—this time, of letters, tucked into envelopes and sent back east to the Stageman home on Mosquito Creek. Over the next several years, Christopher and Mary would receive numerous letters from their children out west, carefully unfolding the thin pages, studying them in the dim light of winter or the glare of summer, then refolding them, putting them in a safe place.

The habit continued for a century and a half. Five generations of Stagemans preserved the treasured letters in a weathered wooden box. The letters bring to light the affections and obligations of family, the push and pull of human relationships, the struggles between a child's definition of success and a parent's of duty.

The forces that pulled the Stagemans over the Missouri and into the West worked on multitudes of Americans. Those who went west often sent letters to those they left behind, but not all of them were as emotionally honest as those written by the Stageman children to their parents in western Iowa.

When John Stageman writes to his parents in March 1854, he is visiting his sister Sarah, but he does not reveal in the letter that she has become the third wife in a polygamous marriage. Instead, other news fills the letter—his plans to head farther west, the high costs of food, and, for his younger brother, James, descriptions of an Indian raid (the Native Americans in Utah Territory were suffering from the encroachment of the Mormons onto their traditional hunting and food-gathering areas). John also suggests his parents talk with local storekeeper and former Council Bluffs mayor Cornelius Voorhis regarding their new son-in-law, Charles Bassett.

[Great Salt Lake Valley] March the 14 1854
My dear parents

It is with pleasure that I take up my pen to inform you that I received your letter and I was rejoiced to hear from you . . . Sarah received one from you and one from Maryan when I received this I thought you had forgot me but I think different now for you sent me a good letter. I had got very home sick to here from you . . . I am in the valley of the grate salt lake and I have been in this valley over seven months and have not made one cent. I wold come back this spring if I could for I know that I could do best their but I expect to leave this valley on the 20 day of april for California trusting in god for protection praying that god will keep me from all harm. I wold have gone be fore but Sarah was not married and I did not like to leave her but now she is married to charls basset and she [h]as got a good home and she is well satisfied. He is well off[.] and he is a nice man if you want to know about him ask vories in Kanesville.

I shal not stay over a year if I can get away and I would like it first rate if father would buy me a little place close by his. I think I shall be able to pay for it again I come back.

James I must now tell you something about my self I live about 20 miles from the city. I have spent a grate deal of money in this valley every thing is dear since but a man as to work for 1 dollar per day flour is 6 dollars per hudred wheat is 2 dollars a bushel potatoes is 1 dollar per bushell coffee is 40 cents a pound sugar the same tobacco one dollar a plug leather is 75 a pound for a pair of shose that you could buy for 80 cents we have to pay 4 dollars but if a man as a start and go to farming he can do very well for he can raise from 40 to 50 bushels of wheat per acre and every thing els acodingly but he [h]as to pay . . . [a] tenth of all he possess and all he rases . . . James you told [me] to tell you something about the Indians. There [They] are very bad about to weaks a go they Stole a bout 1 hudred and fifty head of cattle and about 40 men put after them [and] they will slay them all and that will raise [h]ell among the indeans the mormens are all forted up it will keep them all the time gading [guarding] the indeans if I was to stay in the valley thed [they'd] send me off to preach to the nations of the earth they would give me any thing if I would stay but I have other things to find.

James I send a few lines to lisbel garner tell her that I was glad to here from [her] I got the bracelet she sent to me and I was glad of it. I intend to keep it to remember her by and tell her that I will not get married till I come back and if she is not married it will be her and me for it there is plenty of girls in this valley and they would be glad to marry me but they cannot comit. James I have pade to dear for my w[h]irl I would give every hair on my head if I could.
see father and mother and James and Maryann and
frank and lenard but it [is] all to no use but I must do
the best I can . . . James all I have to say to you and
every young man if you know when you ar well of[f]
stay where you are . . . I bid you good by for I am going
[on] a long jorney . you need not answer this letter
Here I go good by good by
my heart is ful I have to cry
John Stageman

April the 18 1854
G S L [Great Salt Lake]
My dear parents I take my pen at this time to inform
you that Sarah received a letter from James and Sarah
red it to me and I was glad to [h]eare from you . . .
I thought as my brother in law [Charles Bassett]
was going to cainesville I would send a few lines to
you to tell you that I start for california monday next
and you need not answer this letter James you said

The Great Salt Lake Valley became Sarah Stageman
Bassett's new home, but the Mormom refuge was only a
stopover for her brother John in 1854.

you was going to sea but you take a brothers advice
and stay at home for traveling is not wat it is cut up to
be If I was home again I would never leave for it is a
dogs life to live . . .

John Stageman

Now Sarah writes her parents, trying to explain
her feelings, still hoping they will come west.
Her longing will be a frequent theme.

Great Salt Lake City Sunday May 7th 54
My dear Mother
I sit down this day to write a few lines to you it
gives me the greatest of pleasure I can assure you
Ah! But a far greater pleasure were you only here that I could converse to you the same. Oh! My dear Mother never before since I left you have I shed tears to see you until now. Last fall when John came in I was quite unwell & could have given anything to have seen you & many times besides ... I can truly realize there is no care like a mother's. No my dear Mother I was aware of that before I left home I counted the loss most assuredly — but I was truly convinced this was the work of the Most High God — & truly it is — & you were disposed not to believe it — & I thought I must be up & a doing — opening the way for you — though thorny be my path ... 

O if I could only think for one moment you were coming this fall to spend the winter happy should I be. I could wait patiently for you, until then. Ah! I know too well it is not the case — I am writing thus to you — but perhaps you have turned your back upon me on account of my situation ...

If my husband was at home I should not feel as I do — but I should have that same desire to see you. But he is not here — & you are not here ... I know it is all Mormonism — & the greater the trial the greater the crown.

The spring is rather backward here we have had quite a severe winter. We have had quite a covering of snow this morning — it is quite cold at present. The gardens though look quite nice. I was at a ball in april when we had asparagus, lettuce, radishes, green cucumbers etc etc.

I pray my Heavenly Father & My God to bless you continually & direct & control all your doings by his unseen hand at all times, for your best good.

Sarah Bassett
Father what a pleasure you would afford me would you write me a few lines if they were but a few

Having arrived in California, John writes from Gold Springs and Columbia, in the southern mining region. Vast amounts of gold had been discovered there the previous year—though John still wonders if he could make more as a plasterer. Mail from California to Iowa now takes about five weeks; John will write often.
February 16th, 1855

My Dear Brother,

I received your letter January 30th, 1855 and was glad to hear from you but I was sorry to hear that my dear mother was sick. I pray to God that mother may be restored to you both a good. I hope that these few lines may find you as they love me. I am out of a claim at this present time you want to know whether I was saving any money or not. Some if it is not worth for any man to save money at this present time for the wages is about seven out I am not saving much I could save a little if I would work at my trade but I did not come to California to work at it. I am to mind to make my hole or nothing but it.

John enclosed in this letter two “small specimets of gold which I dug up with my one hands one for you and the other for Mary Ann” and then added: “the large peace for James.” To his mother and father he promised a present when he came home.
I feel glad to here that you are getting a long so fast with your farming. James I want you to send me how times is in iowa and if I was to com home wether 1 could get work at my trade or not California is a hard place. Their is more shooting and robbing and hanging than any other place i ever saw...

James you wanted to know wether there is any pretty gals here or not i will till that there is not. Their is plenty pretty wimen in this contry from all contrys but they are bad ones...

I send my cind [kind] respects to you all praying that the god of heaven may bless and prosper you all is the prayer of your obedient son and brother

John Stageman...

Great Salt Lake City March 55
My dear brother [James]

... I was very glad to hear that you were all well & doing well. You say something about a blue eyed daughter. You never told me whose it was, but I judged it must be Mary Anns by the name I was truly glad to learn she was doing well. I hope it does not give her the trouble mine does for my boy has cried day & night ever since it was born, for more than four months now, that I am almost worn out & I am trying to teach school, & have been ever since my babe was three weeks old.

My husband has gone on a mission & I have got to do something if it is but a little. faith & hope sustains me, it is all Mormonism. You say John wonders why I have not written to him, but I say he need not. It is only two months ago since he wrote to me for the first time, & I answered his letter the same or the next day I got his. I wondered whether he was dead or alive, & so you may judge the opportunity I have to write, but I suppose if I did not write to you you would never to me. But did you only know how much good it does me to hear from you all you would write every mail. I received a letter from James two mails ago & it was very welcome. I was glad to hear you were all well & doing well. But how happy should I feel to have you all here. Oh! Come now when you can, the time is very fast approaching when you will want to come & cannot. This is the only place of savety. This is a very dry summer. I do not believe that we have had any rain since the first of April. Pleas tell me when Mary Ann's babe was born, tell her to write & James also. I am expecting charles home every day now & I shall be glad when he comes, truly so... My dear little [son] is just beginning to grow, he has always been very puny & sickly. Oh how he would love to see you, will he ever come, come, do come & see him. It will be worth your trip. He is a very great comfort to me...

Sarah S. Bassett

[Great Salt Lake City] July 30th 1855
My dear parents, James & Mary Ann

I sit down to write you, a line or two. Excuse me for not writing the two last mails. I have been so very unwell this summer, & my babe sometimes is very fretful, & I have to teach school to get along & so you may judge the opportunity I have to write, but I suppose if I did not write to you you would never to me. But did you only know how much good it does me to hear from you all you would write every mail. I received a letter from James two mails ago & it was very welcome. I was glad to hear you were all well & doing well. But how happy should I feel to have you all here. Oh! Come now when you can, the time is very fast approaching when you will want to come & cannot. This is the only place of savety. This is a very dry summer. I do not believe that we have had any rain since the first of April. Pleas tell me when Mary Ann's babe was born, tell her to write & James also. I am expecting charles home every day now & I shall be glad when he comes, truly so... My dear little [son] is just beginning to grow, he has always been very puny & sickly. Oh how he would love to see you, will he ever come, come, do come & see him. It will be worth your trip. He is a very great comfort to me...

Sarah S. Bassett

[Columbia, California] February the 12 1856
My dear brother [James]

... last July I went to Snake gulch to mine that is a cros the river me and four more found som good digins and we cant under a tree I worked nearly 2 month and I took sick and was not able to work and I went to Columbia and their I stayed that a docktor to see me every day and that run away with my money for they will not look at a man for les than five dollars I had no loving mother to bring me a cup of tea nor no brother and sister to talk with but [was] all a lone I was sick nere 5 months and then my money run out and then my friends was whole gone and I was obliged to go to the hosspittle and their I am at this present tim[e]. I am very well tended to and thank god I am getting better and I hope with the blessings
of god will be able to go to work in too or three weeks
James I have give up all hope of making a pile I
have made up my mind if I get well agane to save
money a nuff to come to the States for it is no use of
me to try to save money. I can make money anewhere
but can not save it something turns up that it must go.
James, California is a poor place for a man in
good helth let alone sick there is thousands that is
worken for their board . . .
John Stageman

To soothe his restlessness, James, the second youngest
Stageman, travels by steamboat and rail to the
family’s old home back east. From there, he writes of
visiting old friends and justifies the trip’s costs. In his
wanderlust, he even mentions going to Italy.

Fair hill [Maryland] April 30th 56
My Dear parents
... I do not grudge a cent I have spent in this trip
I say to every young man go out & se the world &
then you will [know] somthing about it you may
stay to home till the day of judgment & not [know]
any thing at last . . . [Stayed] in our old home & it
brings back to my memory the days of my childhood . .
James Stageman . . .

Fair hill [Maryland] may 4th 1856
My Dear Sister [Mary Ann]
... [I am] among the kindest of frends . . . I make
my home at mr phillips I expect to go to work to
morow if I am well for him if nothing hapens i shall
work till I get a leter from home then I think I shall go
to ilety to se the wonders their mary ann be not
trubled about me for the same god that portect you can
pertect the lone wandres on the sea I am poor but I
trust not for saken by him who luls the universe the
intructions of my dear parents are not lost on me & I will
try to prove myself worthy . . . remember [me] kindley
to all my aquaintence tel them I have to rome if I
could be placed at home just as I was before I left &
five hundred dolers to boot I would not exchange for
what I have lerned I say to all go out & se the world
& lern somthing I am not home sick but I would like
to se you all again once more of corse that is natral . . .
James Stageman

Great Salt Lake June 29th 56
My dear parents
... I embrace the present opportunity of writing a
few lines to you, to inform you I am still among the
living, & my dear boy also, & he is well. I am far from
being so. I should have written to you last mail, but I
was just moving to a new residence. I am living alone
with my boy. This is a world of ups and downs
please excuse my writing much. My ink is so miser­
able I cannot write with it . . . I hope [Mary Ann] is
better. Please send me word the day of the month she
was married, & when her first child was born & when
this one I presume from what James says she has got
another by this time, & is beating me. It is a year ago
last Christmas since I heard from John . . .
May the Lord bless you all
From your affectionate daughter
Sarah S. Bassett

Columbia [California] July the 1 1856
My dear father
... My dear father I feel thankful that I enjoy this oppor­
tunity of embracing you with a few lines to let you
know that I am in the land of the living and in pretty
good helth thank god . . . you say you would like me
to come home but I cannot possibly before next spring
. . . i should have come home when I herd that james had
left you if it had not been for that spell of sickness . . .
James talked of coming to California but I told him to
stay where he is or else go home, for times is very hard
here there is thousands working hard for their grub
we have had a very dry winter and water is very
scare and every thing has been very high but they
are not so high now as they have ben . . . please father
rite soon and let me know how you all are . . . please
send me all the news you can . . .
John Stageman

Fair Hill [Maryland] Aug 9th 1856
My Dear parents . . . I am sory to think I have ca[u]sed
you so much wory but if you will keep up your curige
a few weeks I shall soon be home if god spair my life
and then I shall not lieve you til death parts us & I
hope I shall be improved by my journey anuf to repay
you for your sorow I loved [you] at first but I love
you fore times as much now father I have lerned
more in this trip than I could in 7 years at home I
was in hope you could get along with out me . . . .
James Stageman

Fair Hill [Maryland] Aug 27th 1856
Dear Brother [in-law Leonard]
... [This is] wat I am going to do I will tel you
but I dont want you to talk it over So that every body
gets to heir it I was thinking of [buying] a french
[cavalry] stalion the pretyest horse you ever saw & if
Though John writes candidly of his failures on the goldfields and discourages James from leaving the safety of home, his letter to his younger brother on June 22, 1855, is on writing paper bearing illustrations of western scenery, travel, and adventure.
I can buy im will fetch him out & [stable] him for [mares] this next spring . . .

James Stageman

Fair Hill [Maryland] Aug 29th 1856
My Dear parents
... you must not expect any more letters from me from this place for I have the poorest luck at getting answers over here in my life . . . you must excuse this for I have rote so much letters that I am tired . . .

James Stageman

Iowa October 6 1856
My Dear Son [James]
It is with pleasue I write to you . . . I am glad you are all well as it leaves us the same . I have sent you the enclosed which I hope you will recive to bring you home to us again, I have put it under the Care of Mr Phillips . . .
I Remain Your Affectionate
Mother & Father
Christopher Stageman

The $50 from James's father reaches Maryland on November 4, but James had already left for Iowa a month earlier. After seven months in the East, he is again farming the home place with his parents. In 1856/57, Council Bluffs experiences the most severe winter yet recorded, followed in the next fall by economic panic and depression. Council Bluffs suffers along with the rest of the country, with banks collapsing.

Meanwhile, in California, fire has leveled Columbia. John has just recovered from jaundice, perhaps from hepatitis, and bilious fever, which affected his digestive tract. Now 28, John is feeling his years.

[Columbia, California] February the 14 1858
My dear brother [James]
... I told you that i was going to work for the new water company but i could not stand it so I did not work long. we have had a grate fire in Columbia since I rote to you . it burned the city all down slick and clean . it burned dogs rosted hogs and burned 9 men and scorched several others . So i went to work at my trade and made some money and then i went off a prospecten and I took the yellow jander and i let them run on me for some time and the boys told me if i did not do something for them they would kill me so i went to town and doctored for them and got well and . . . worked 5 days and then i took the bilious fever and it was very bad . I lay for 4 weeks and I got well agane and I feel first rate

i [am] working in a [quartz] mill at present . i am getting small pay but it is more than a grate many is getting . wages is very low and every thing else is very high so it is bad for the laborer . i get 50 dollars pr month . the quarts mill is a mill to grind rock . . . it is called the mother of gold because there is more or less in the rock for hundred of feet deep.

James you say if i do not come home next spring you will come out here but take my advice . . . california is a bad place . i will come as soon as i can . i think you ought to get married and settle for life for i never expect to get married for i am getting old and loosening my teeth . . . give my cind love to all inquerey friends . . .

John Stageman

Columbia [California] July th 1 1858
My dear brother [James]
It is with pleasure that [I] embrace this opertunity of answering your letter . . . i was very sorry to here that mother was lame and not abel to walk without crutches . James I thought your letter was verry cool you said I did not tell you to answer the other letter that I rote to you. I had forgot it but I will not forget this. Please answer this letter and send me all the news that you can. I was verry glad to receive them papers wich you sent me. The last time I rote to you I was in the [quartz] mill but I left it . I am mining for my self . . . James California is nerely deserted and I think I will desert it to . I have a strong notion to travel about 15 hundred miles up north for me to come home is imposible . I have not much money and to come home without money I will not do it for I have bean out here most 5 years and spent my best days and I must make a rase before I come home if god will . . . [If] I had known 5 years ago what I know now I would not have come to California . . .

John Stageman

Four years after his brother's departure for Utah and California, James finally achieves his dream of going west—though not very far west. Driving his small herd of cattle, he joins his friend, Chester Risley, on his ranch in Cedar County in the northeast corner of Nebraska Territory. Earlier in a letter to James, Risley had boasted of fast-growing corn, fine-looking beans, and potatoes “as Large as my Fist.” Risley also instructed James to bring “carpenter tools to fix the dore and window a straw tick some Blankets to lye under some flour and such things.” Clearly excited to be out west, James takes up his pen and writes home.
Columbia, California, in 1856. With a county population of 30,000, the city had dozens of stores and businesses. The greatest profits lay not in mining for gold, but in storekeeping and other services that catered to California’s miners and their needs.

Johnson’s army to Utah to quell concerns about Mormon activity. At the order of Brigham Young, Salt Lake City residents evacuate to the south around Utah Lake.

For Sarah and the other Latter-day Saints, the year 1859 is an eventful one in the Salt Lake Valley. President James Buchanan sends Col. Albert Sidney
Here is plenty of stir here since the soldiers came, everything is bringing a good price & money has been very plentiful. Clothing is very high indeed. My husband has gone to California after merchandise I expect him back in April he started the first of last month. I am living in Lake City 30 miles south of Salt Lake City.

I have written to John several times. I cannot think why he does not write to me. how long has James been gone how lonesome father and mother must be. I do wish they were here. Tell them Charles Henry says he would like to see them. He sends his love to you all, he is now learning to write & he is writing on a piece of paper to send to you, it is only about three months or a little over since he commenced to learn his letters & he can now read first rate, it would astonish you to hear him. By the time he is five years old I think he will be able to write to you a letter if he keeps his health he is a smart boy, but he is small, & delicate at present . . .

Sarah Bassett

Columbia [California] May the 1 1859
Dear father and mother as I have not herd from James for so long I think he must have left you and gone to the gold mines and I think it my duty to rite to you and inform you that I am alive and well at present . . . if James has not gone to the mines tell him to rite to me an send me all the particlers. it is very dull in california . . . the mines are worked out father and mother were failing fast so I had made up my mind to cum home let the sacrifice be what it would my promice to mother must be kept if god spairs thairs and my life a few weeks longer I hope that you will see that they suffer for neither help nor the comforts of life til I cum and I will make it all right . . .

I shall be obliged to leave my ranch with chet for I cannot sel it for aney thing. I have had som of my catle stole and it cums pretty near breaking me up tel father & mother keep up their curige a little while longer an I wil be with them . . . James Stageman . . .

Running Creek [near Pike's Peak, Colorado] April 1st 1861
Dear parents . . . I have not herd a word from you for seven months so I have cum to the conclusion that you have entirely forgotten me. It is different with me you are my first and last thoughts . . . I am still living on running creek. I expect to farm this summer we ar building a new house to live in, it is 26 ft by 17 to be to storys high times ar very hard heir at present but I hope they will get beter soon we have had a very fine winter heir I have been out in the montains nearly all winter hunting with out any shelter whatever the depes snow is fifteen inches our catel do first rate with out hay.

I hope you are getting along as well with out me in your farming arrangements as you did when I wis to home if I had the money you should never do another days [work] as long as you lived with out at your plesure I have tryed my best time and again to send you the money that I owed you but I could not get it but I will send to you as soon as I can . . .

I feel anxious about you scarcely anight pases lest I dream of you and home you may think I am home sick but it is not so. If you wer well and young I should not want to cum home for years yet But lenard wrote you wer a lone with no one to help you . . .

I must bring my letet to close hoping god will protect and spair your lives til I see you again is the prayer of your afectnect son.

James Stageman . . .

Running Creek [Colorado] June the 10th 1861
Dear brother[ -in-law Leonard]
It is so long since I have herd from you that I think you ar all ded or have forgotten me for I have not herd a word from you since erly last fall . . .

I have not much time to write please give my love to father and mother mary an and the children and all enquiring frends.

James Stageman . . .

An unexplained gap of two years exists in the collection of Stageman letters. Now aged 69 and 72, Christopher and Mary are in poor health. James, ranching and mining in Colorado Territory, anguishes over how to assist them and writes to his brother-in-law Leonard Buckminster.

Denver City Jan 30th 1861
Dear brother . . . I was glad to heir from you but sorey to heir that father and mother were in such bad circumstances Bill Smith told me that father and mother were failing fast so I had made up my mind to cum home let the sacrifice be what it would my promice to mother . . .
By the fall of 1861, John has abandoned mining to work for a regular wage in the building trades. Commenting on Sarah’s divorce (in 1859), he seems resigned to his own lot.

Sacramento [California] November the 16 1861
Dear brother-in-law Leonard

I take my pen in hand to inform you that I am in the land of the living . . . I have been traveling all summer . . . and have not made a sent and I have come to the conclusion that traveling will not pay and I am in the city of Sacramento now and shall remain as long as I am in the state please god I am makeing 18 Dollars per week I am working at painting and roofing I cold make a grate deal more if I would carry on business for my self but I have not quite confidence enough in my self lenard if I were married and settled down I could make money in this city but I shall never mary till I see coulcel [Council] bluffs city but you cannot expect me to come till I get money enough to bring me there I suppose times is very dull their at present

you tell me that James is settled down in pikespeek I think he has settled in a poor country but if he likes it that is all that he requires . . .

I was glad to here from Sarah but was sorry to here that she was living alone and that she has left her husband may god bless her I thought wen she got married to baset she would not live long with him it is cuereou [curious] how we are scattered around this world but it is gods will.

. . . Tell father that I long to see them again I suppose they thot I am single and nothing to kep me here but fortune has went against me or I would have ben home long ago in ’55 I lost a good deel of money, more than they have any idea of and I have been trying to make it again but it is no use. Fortune goes against me and I am contented to be poor . . .

I am keeping batchelors hall cooking my own grub but it is my intentions to come home as soon as I can sell the rifle I should like to see them again if it is god will I shoald like to se the old stomping grond again . . .

John Stageman

James leaves Colorado Territory in 1862, returning home to Iowa out of concern for his parents’ health. Meanwhile, John continues to lament his struggle to save sufficient money to return home, a plight common to thousands of gold rushers in California.

Sacramento Cali June the 30, 1862
Der brother [James]

. . . i am still in Sacramento city working at painting I make my 21 dollars every week and still i canot save any thing money will not prosper with me i never get a dollar without working hard for it I do not know ware it goes. i do not drink any
Once miners exhausted streambed and placer deposits of gold, they set aside their individual tools and turned to costlier technologies—hydraulic mining (above) and quartz mining. Both required tremendous amounts of water, so water companies were organized, investors were found, and systems of dams, reservoirs, canals, and flumes were built. Aiming high pressured water hoses at a hillside loosened tons of gravel each hour, which fell into sluices where it was washed. Quartz mining required drilling into a vein of quartz, bringing the rock to the surface, breaking the rock in stamp mills, and then washing it for the gold. Large companies operated the quartz mines, selling shares to investors and hiring wage labor.

thing stronger than water. James I am coming home this fall or in the spring if god is willing i hate to come home in the fall for this climate is so differant from yours that i am a feared that i will get the runaticks [rheumatism] but I never was contented in this country and I shall endeve to leave it if posible.

i send you my likeness and you can see wether i have altered or no. i have went through as much [as] any man in the country and have s[tr]ood it as well as any . . . i hope you have done better a great deal than I have i can make money ware any other man can but I canot save it that is the grate point i [c]ame very nere being rich in this country once but luck was against me an I lost it I do not want to be rich but I shold like now to prosper a little better . . . i rote to father about 6 weeks ago but I supose father did not get it yet I told him about the grate flood that we had in the country this winter it like to sweep every thing before it it knoct our little city into a cock hat that [is why] my painting is so floureshing this summer . . . James what is your opinion about this war they must have have som very hot times in the States . . . I wish it was ended times would be ten times better in the States than they are here . . .

John Stageman

In 1863, James again heads west. He visits Sarah in Salt Lake City before settling in Carson City, Nevada, to mine with Council Bluffs friends John and Tommy Ritter. In early 1864, James and John reunite for the first time in ten years and discuss returning home together that fall—though James is unwilling to borrow funds, as he did in Maryland, to return to Iowa.
Carson City [Nevada] Feber 15th 1864

Dear Parents

... I have not herd a word from home since I left ... me the poor wanderer. It can’t be that out of sight out of mind. No I will never think that.

I have received three letters from John since I came here. He isCOMING over to see me in the spring. He wants to go to Reas River [in central Nevada] ... I would give more for a letter from home than you could imagine.

If you want any money, just say so. I can send you sum any time you wish. I shall never want while I have a doler. If I knew it, I would send you a check in this letter, but I don’t [know] whether you are alive or not.

Dear mother, I want you to keep a girl all the time. Get Lissey if you can, and if you can’t get her get sum one else. Keep a girl if you don’t, you must never expect to see me again. For I shall be very angry and father I would be very glad if you would keep a man to help you farm your place and keep it from going to weeds so much and when you answer this letter I will send you a hundred dollars to commence with.

I am doing pretty at present. Chopping wood and mining together any thing that turns up I can make from $75 to a hundred dollars per month. Chopping wood three dollars 50 cents per day. Mining and tuniling george and Tom Riter are doing well. They have not had a letter from home since I came here. Since I came here they want to [know] if they ar forgotten to ...

James Stageman

Carson city [Nevada] April 24th 1864

My dear parents

... I had the pleasure last Sunday of meeting with long absent brother [John]. I knew him on sight but he did not know me. He is well and sends his kind love to you both. He is going to work in Virginia city this summer so we can see each other frequently. He longs to see you both again before he dies.

I got a few lines from Orsen Stoker the other day. He said father was sick. I was sorry to hear that but I hope he is well again. I wrote you a letter some time ago and told you to write me and I would send you some money to get along with so you need not work so hard but it seems that you have all forgotten me. I did not come out here with the intention of making a fortune and enjoying it my self, but to share it with you and try to make you happy and comfortable the balance of your days. I live hard and work hard for that purpose and nothing else. You are all the world to me. If you die before I get back Iowa will never [know] me again. John wants me to come home with him in the fall but I told him I went home once dependent and it shall be the last time. I would go through fire and water to serve you but to have it said I came for your property is too much for my heart to bear when God knows it is not so ...

I have been out here almost a year and have not herd a word from home yet ...

So goodby for the present. Father and mother, get some one to write for you.

... your affectionate son

James Stageman

THE FINAL letter in this saga is from James, now 31. He has received sad news and writes openly of his feelings. Considering possible routes back to Iowa, he wants to see Sarah before returning home.

Carson City [Nevada] July 17th 64

Dear Brother [in-law Leonard]

I received your kind letter on the 15th and was glad to hear from you. I thought you had forgotten me. I did not get your letuer containing father’s death. I herd it through Sarah. She saw it in the papers. It made me feel sorry to think how he lived and died when he might have lived so happy if he had been more conformable to the ways of the country. I should have [been] so glad to have taken care of him in his old days but he always thought I wanted to cheat him. I did not want to cheat any body much les him.

It dun me good to hear that mother was so well. I hope God will spare our lives to see each other yet once more ...

I think I shall start [home] about the first of October. I would float around by New York if it was not for the sake of seeing Sarah. She would be so disappointed. John could not stand it in this country. He had to go back to California. I shall pay him a visit before I come home. I want to fetch him along if I can.

You must please excuse this for my hands are so hard and sore I cant do beter. I have chopped about 400 cords of wood since new years besides mining. I never loose a day without I am obliged to and it is using me up mighty fast. I feel very old. May god bless you all is the prayer of your Brother

James Stageman ...

THE CONFLICT of old ways and new ideas was never resolved between James and his father. James was willing to take risks; Christopher probably urged caution. Already nearly 60 when he first came to Iowa, perhaps...
Christopher no longer wanted change of any magnitude.

James’s route home probably took him first to San Francisco, then by steamship to Nicaragua. According to family lore, he stitched his money into a vest for safekeeping and never took it off, despite the steamy heat of crossing Lake Managua. Whether he took a steamer to New Orleans and then upriver to Iowa, or the sea route to New York and train to Iowa, is uncertain.

John returned to Iowa about the same time, and it is likely that the two brothers traveled home together. Now confident in his trade, John became a house builder in Council Bluffs. He married Eliza Sutherland and with her raised five children.

Sarah resided in Salt Lake City the remainder of her long life, her place of death only a few blocks from Temple Square. She is buried in the Salt Lake Cemetery on a hillside overlooking the Great Salt Lake Valley she loved so dearly.

James married Mary Williams and they shared their home that first year with James’s mother until her death in 1865. James realized his dream of owning beautiful horses by raising and selling Percherons. The young couple settled into farming, reaping profits from the black gold of Iowa, its deep and fertile soil. They planted an orchard and a vineyard on the family farm and sold fruits and vegetables at the Omaha farmers market. About 1884, James and Mary constructed a large home for their family of nine children, with bricks made and fired on the farm. The house stands on a hill above Mosquito Creek and the site of the log cabin that the seven Stagemans first knew as their Iowa home.

Kathryn Webb Wikert teaches talented and gifted children in the Southeast Polk Community School District and is the great-great-granddaughter of Christopher and Mary Stageman.

NOTE ON SOURCES


On the Mormons in Salt Lake City, see: Norma B. Ricketts, Melissa’s Journey with the Mormon Battalion: The Western Odyssey of Melissa Burton Corry, 1846-1848 (Salt Lake City: International Society Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1994); and Scott R. Christensen, Sawitch: Shoshone Chief, Mormon Elder, 1822-1887 (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1999). County and town histories for Pottawattamie County and Council Bluffs were useful, for establishing the local context specifically: Charles H. Babcock, Early Days at Council Bluffs (Washington, D.C.: Byron S. Adams, 1916); O. L. Baskin and Company, History of Pottawattamie County, Iowa, 1882 (Chicago: O. L. Baskin, 1883); Homer H. Field, History of Pottawattamie County, vol. I (Chicago: S. J. Clarke, 1907); William J. Harsha, Story of Iowa (Omaha: Central West Co., 1890). For an Iowa context, see Leland L. Sage, A History of Iowa (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1974); and Susan Easton Black, Iowa Mormon Trails: A Self-guiding Tour of the Iowa Mormon Trail Across Iowa (Brigham Young University and Iowa Mormon Trails Assn., 1995). Annotations to the original manuscript are held in the Iowa Heritage Illustrated production files. SHSI (Iowa Gty).