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The Mormons Were

THE ROAD TO VIRGINIA CITY: The Diary of James Knox Polk Miller. Edited by Andrew F. Rolle. Illustrated. 143 pp. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press. \$3.75.

By DAVID LAVENDER

IN the summer of 1864 a 19-year-old orphan named James K. P. Miller absconded with \$3,500 of his guardian's money and, under the alias of J. Sidney Osborn, went west to Salt Lake City. There he operated cigar and book stands. Finding this a losing venture and plagued by the hostility of Mormons toward all "Gentiles," he moved on northward to the gold camp of Virginia City, Mont. Two years of clerking, bookkeeping and mercantile speculation recouped his fortunes and in 1867 he headed by steamboat down the Missouri for a trip to Europe.

These three years on the frontier Miller recorded in a diary, writing almost daily under the discomfort but stimulation of pioneer travel, more intermittently when sedentary. Edited by Andrew F. Rolle, Associate Professor of History at Occidental College, the journal has now been published as part of the American Exploration and Travel Series issued by the University of Oklahoma Press.

Perhaps because any literate diary is like a peek into a new room, a fresh reality touches what, in summary, is just one more tale of dusty days and nights too cold for sleeping; of quarrels, bad water and mired wagons; of stomach upsets, inflamed eyes, swollen feet

Mr. Lavender, head of the English Department at the Thacher School, Ojai, Calif., wrote "Bent's Fort."

wrapped in a pillow. Against these miseries is set the verve of buffalo hunting, lightning storms and steamboat races on the Missouri, as well as the calmer pleasures of excursions to near-by peak tops, sleigh rides and service as an officer of Virginia City's Young Men's Literary Association.

Odd folk beliefs pop out: Miller would not let his dog, bitten by a rattlesnake, go swimming with him lest it poison the water. There are interesting sidelights on Bill Hickman, Brigham Young's so-called Destroying Angel, and a transcript of an amazingly incoherent sermon by Heber Kimball, early-day Mormon elder.

Such details are useful. Still,



From "The Road to Virginia City."
James Knox Polk Miller, c. 1866.

Hostile

the picture that grows in one's mind is of the writer rather than of the milieu. Miller, a tireless reader of then-current novels, was observant, ingenuous, candid. And yet he was strangely incurious, too; he seems to have been in the Montana goldfields two years before visiting a mine. Apparently his conscience bothered him about his embezzlement, for he several times insisted to himself, with relish, that he had not committed a dishonest act since coming West.

At times he grew homesick, once while lying in a blanket on a cabin floor listening to a traveling minstrel play a guitar. His rare soul-searchings are typically youthful: "Of all the young men of my acquaintances I know of none in so disconsolate a position as myself and yet they all think me light-hearted and convivial, & I am always welcomed wherever I go but all is Hollow-Hollow-Hollow. * * * How I long to hear from home, from my dear sister, my own darling. I wonder if it is possible for a person of my temperament to exist without loving someone. * * * How singularly I am constituted." Yet he possessed in good measure that wry sense of the incongruous from which so much frontier humor sprang.

The picture he thus reveals is given outline by several photographs preserved by his family. If he is not a particularly striking young man, he is at least real. The West was full of such, a fact we are not often allowed to remember in these days of airborne myth.