# Introduction
# By Thomas D. Clark

Few American authors have been so successful in the timing of their books as Edwin Bryant. Before *What I Saw in California* reached the public in 1848, gold was discovered on the American River. By the time this discovery was publicized worldwide, the book was being reviewed in the press. Suddenly, the former Kentucky newspaperman was recognized as an authority on how to survive the grueling passage from Independence, Missouri, to San Francisco, a passage he had made two years earlier.

To be sure, Bryant's was by no means the only journal of overland travel available to the Forty-niners. Francis Parkman had traveled almost half of the same route in 1846 and written about it in *The Oregon Trail* (1849). Lansford Hastings had published *The Emigrant's Guide to Oregon and California* in 1845 (it would be used the following year by the Donner party), and by 1849 there existed numerous other journals and guides, including two or three books on life in California.

It was Edwin Bryant, though, who set the pattern for most travelers who were to describe their experiences along the California Trail in the great rush of 1849. He made specific recordings of time, place, and weather. *What I Saw in California* may lack the flowing literary qualities of Parkman's *Oregon Trail,* but it is more penetrating and helpful as a contemporary source of information. It was widely emulated by the diarists among the Forty-niners. They realized, as Bryant did, that their accounts would reflect forms and conditions of life that would quickly disappear, and that what they wrote would mirror the image of an irrecoverable moment in American history.

When Bryant resigned his position as coeditor of the *Louis-*

them of hostile intentions and ordered them away. They however managed to secure some powder and balls, and availing themselves of a moment when Mr. N., being worn out with watching, had fallen asleep outside of his tent, they shot three balls into him. He sprang into the tent to secure his rifle, but was seized by one of his assailants, who with an axe nearly severed one of his legs. He died of his wounds the next day. Mrs. N. escaped. The Indians robbed the tent of all its portable contents.

The number of wagons which took the new route from Fort Bridger via the south end of the Great Salt Lake, intersecting with the old wagon-trail on Mary's river 250 miles above the Sink, was about eighty. The advance company of these was Mr. Harlan's. The pioneers, and those following their trail, succeeded by energetic exertions in opening a road through the difficult mountain passes near the Salt Lake, and reached the settlements of California in good season. The rear party, known as Messrs. Reed and Donner's company, did not follow the trail of those who had preceded them, but explored for a portion of the distance, another route, and opened a new road through the Desert Basin. In making these explorations and from other causes, they lost a month's time, the consequence of which was, that they did not reach the Pass of the Sierra Nevada until the 31st of October, when they should have been there by the 1st of October.

The snow commenced falling on the Sierra, two or three weeks earlier in 1846 than is usual, and when this party arrived at the foot of the Pass they found it impossible to proceed from its depth. The people of the town of San Francisco, as soon as they received intelligence of the dangerous situation of these emigrants, held a public meeting, and with a liberality that reflects the highest credit upon them, subscribed fifteen hundred dollars for the organization of a party that would penetrate the mountains for their relief. This party started, and soon afterwards other parties under the direction of the naval commandant at the Port of San Francisco, were organized for the same object. Capt. J. A. Sutter, a philanthropist in its most ex-