

AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF
ISAAC JONES WISTAR

1827-1905

HALF A CENTURY IN WAR AND PEACE



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Isaac Mott
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taining to the spectators, caused little other sensation. It was perhaps as well for us who were much inclined to see—if not to emulate—these novelties, that the breaking and working of our wild mules gave us plenty of employment elsewhere. Sublette, Hudspeth, 'Peg-leg' Smith, and other famous 'mountain men' were then at Independence and never wanted an admiring and inquisitive crowd about them. These were the first of the celebrated trappers or 'mountain men' whom I had seen, the type of others with whom it was later my lot to associate during long periods, far from men and civilization.⁵

On both sides of the British border-line their race has long since disappeared with the fur trade, though while it continued to exist, they were no ignoble types of the men developed by the perils and exigencies of the mountains and the wilderness. Carrying their lives in their hands, rarely encumbered with baggage or provisions but trusting to a thorough understanding of all the resources of nature, alone or in pairs they penetrated every known and unknown corner of the continent, trading, trapping, fighting or concealing themselves even from the keen-eyed Indian, as occasion required, and there remains today no country or condition in the world to develop or breed

⁵ At this time occurred a famous fight which may perhaps still be remembered in the stirring annals of Independence. The celebrated mountain man, 'Peg-leg' Smith, possessed a wooden leg as a substitute for the original—which he had himself amputated with his hunting knife, taking up the arteries with a bullet mould—when it had been irremediably smashed by an Indian bullet, at some solitary spot in the mountains. Now 'Peg-leg' was as timidly modest and retiring as a young girl, when he was sober but not being proof against the festive attractions of Independence, he had on this occasion become pretty drunk and all the bar-rooms were locked against him till he should resume his usual peaceful disposition. He therefore blew off the lock of one of them with his rifle and entered upon four border-desparadoes, deep in the fascination of 'poker,' who instantly opened fire. 'Peg-leg's' gun being empty, he promptly jerked off his hickory leg and at one blow extinguished all the candles on the table and began feeling for the enemy. The general net result of the engagement was—two men killed by the wooden leg, another hors de combat, and the fourth, shot with a captured weapon as he was making his way out. Having been variously wounded in the encounter, 'Peg-leg's' blood was now up, and he was for remaining to fight the town, but his friends applied the 'similia similibus curantur' and with the aid of more whiskey, managed to get him away among the Kaw Indians across the boundary and no one in Independence hankered for the job of capturing this famous character on the open prairie.

to say, where the subject, while in the main yielding to force and necessity, maintains a noble and gallant spirit of subdued revolt, always watchful and ready to seize every opportunity for liberty, if possible—if not, for vengeance. We supplied our wagons with spare poles and axles, double covers, water casks and other necessities, and with all such preparations complete, struck tents and made a start on April 25th. But the first essay proved a continuous mule fight, aggravated by slippery hills, countless mud holes, and a steady industrious rain which defied all reasonable prognostications by coming down almost as soon as we had started. After making but five miles we encamped, covered with mud, wet, disgusted and worn-out. The first night of such expeditions—as I have often since had occasion to know—is always discouraging. The men have not found out each other's real qualities, the teams are 'soft,' and soon become exhausted or devilish, or both, the things most wanted cannot be found, and on this initial occasion we found ourselves in anything but a joyous mood. To find water and wood, take care of the animals and harness, set a guard and prepare supper, all that is never very attractive occupation, after dark and in the rain, but for our brand-new and inexperienced party—of whom the oldest was but twenty-two—tired, wet, hungry, and discouraged, it was particularly disagreeable. However, it was done, and when we waked in the morning with a glorious sun gilding and glorifying everything with his warm and joyous beams, our spirits promptly came back to par. Even the fervent desire to kill his favorite mule which had pervaded every breast the day before, yielded to more genial feelings, though soon to be revived with redoubled ardor.

★ From the diary which I kept after leaving the State Line, I find that we started sixteen in all, with thirty-five mules and a few Indian ponies belonging to individuals of hunting proclivities, for riding purposes. Dr. Gambel had joined himself to five Virginians who with their one wagon and eight mules traveled with us. For provisions we had at first flour, hard-tack, bacon, beans, coffee, sugar and salt, and for other lading two wall tents, some extra harness, mule shoes and nails,

at the time, considerably abbreviated, but otherwise nearly in the language then used.

May 3rd. The first day out from the State Line, dawned with a steady, soaking, business-like rain. I tried to sleep under the wagon last night—for which places there was a lively competition as the tents were not pitched—but soon crawled out from a puddle collected in the depression made by my body in the mud, and sat on my rolled-up blanket under the wagon, but as the howling wind blew the rain everywhere, I took little benefit from the shelter. Notwithstanding the condition of the weather, the roads and ourselves, all hands agreed that it was no wetter moving along than sitting in the mud, while the former offered a chance of finding some other place to camp with more shelter and some fuel, so we harnessed up after a breakfast of wet hardtack and raw bacon, and pulled out. The country in any decent weather would be beautiful, being rolling and well-timbered in the hollows with fine hickory, oak, and walnut, and as far as the Line, shows a few settlements, fences and houses. West of the Line the country belongs to the Indian Territory, and is uninhabited except by wandering Indians. In this vicinity, these are Pottawatomies, who with remnants of other removed tribes, all friendly but thievish, extend for a hundred miles or more, which distance will bring us to the Pawnees, who are counted intractable and hostile. Grass, though as yet little grown, is abundant, and all the hollows at this time of the year contain water. No doubt the country must some day become the seat of a dense and wealthy population. With a little more comfort and less work to do, one might even now enjoy its lovely grassy hills, and richly-timbered creek-bottoms full of deer and turkeys.

May 4th. Rain, with intermissions, constantly emphasized by plenty of thunder and lightning. This morning it was hard to get ourselves limber enough to water and repicket the mules, who notwithstanding the bitter hatred they justly inspire, must be preserved. After carrying some scarce and green wood over a mile, it took the whole water-soaked party two hours to coax it into a fire, after which we took our coffee, hardtack and bacon standing round the fire, well soaked by the falling rain. After a

series of desperate and gallant mule fights we 'caught up' in the afternoon and 'rolled on.' After sticking in numerous mud holes, digging, prying and in some cases doubling teams, we were at last brought to a stand by an impassable slough, not much over a mile from our last camp.

May 5th. Raining most of the night and morning with the same hearty, honest steadiness as ever. But the place was too comfortless to stop at, and by filling the slough with brush and putting three teams to a wagon, we at last got across, and tugging over slippery hills and sticking in countless mud holes, covered about five miles, and are encamped on a high roll of the prairie, which sinks away behind us a short distance to the Big Blue, a fine stream skirted with good timber. The sky has cleared, and the moon lights up a far-stretching series of round grassy hilltops in front. There is plenty of wood, and around some generous fires all the wet clothes and blankets are sending up clouds of steam while every one is cheerful with the prospect of a better time tomorrow. The river is high and may give trouble, but notwithstanding the good rule, to camp always on the far side of a stream, we were too much used up to try it tonight.

May 6th, Sunday. We had hardly suspended our execrations of the weather, when the rain began again this morning, with increased vigor, as if under conscientious obligation to make up for the valuable time lost. But now we have the tents set and plenty of wood and are comfortable ourselves, while as for the mules, we hope they are suffering as much as is compatible with their duties tomorrow. The road may now be called impassable for loaded wagons. The mules cannot maintain a footing on the slippery hills, while each intermediate little valley is a bottomless morass in which the wagons plump to the axles. But the mules are perceptibly tamer, and it is now possible to go within stone's-throw of them without open war; and they even seem to be taking in the notion that it is easier to give a good pull altogether, than to jump over each other's backs and kick and bite at everything within reach. Two of our men have had fun enough, and have concluded to go back, but the rest, including the Virginians,

CHAPTER III

DIARY OF JOURNEY ACROSS PRAIRIE

May 8th. Waiting in camp on J.'s illness. If it should be smallpox we will be in a bad way, as we could neither carry him on, nor expect Lipscombe to keep him in his one-roomed log-cabin. To empty a wagon and haul him back to Independence would cause delay that might have serious results, in case we should arrive at the Sierra too late to cross this year, about which our fellows are already nervous.

May 9th. Rode back last night and left two spare mules at Lipscombe's for J. and G. to overtake us with, in case the former should recover. They can easily do it for several days yet, as the wagons move slowly. This morning we rolled out early and in good spirits—except for J.—the blue sky and bright sun reflected in every face, and looking as if they had come to stay. The prairie is covered with lovely flowers brought out by the sun, making some of the little sheltered valleys sheets of beautiful colors. Hitherto we have followed the old well-beaten Santa Fé trail, but now bend off to the north, being encamped tonight at its junction with the Oregon emigrant trail, with wood scarce, but good grass and water not far off. The country is beautiful, being a succession of high, round, grassy ridges with running water in the hollows, and distant points of timber nearly always in sight. We made seventeen miles and passed numerous fresh graves, besides many dead cattle and mules. At noon we passed the 'lone elm,' standing by a chain of water pools, a famous landmark for east-bound Santa Fé trains. How it came to grow here alone, and why no other tree or even bush has joined it in its isolation, none of our scientists can explain.

May 10th. Leaving camp at an early hour, we plodded on over very much the same kind of country as yesterday, but

are staunch and will stick, come what may. When the mules get tame and can be managed by two men to a wagon, it is thought we have men enough for labor and guard detail, but at present, affairs go hardly, because although the Indians give no trouble, the mules must nevertheless be well guarded to prevent their running back to the settlements, a direction they much prefer. There is a large camp below us on the Blue, badly afflicted with cholera, of which five have died, two of them last night.

May 7th. The train rolled out at daylight leaving S. J., myself and A. as rearguard to gather up the loose mules. In returning separately from that job, I passed the deserted camp which the crows and buzzards were beginning to examine, and seeing a buffalo-robe, as I supposed, forgotten, I tried to pick it up but my Texas pony would not approach it. After discussing the matter with him warmly but fruitlessly, I dismounted, rolled it up compactly and secured it to my riata, the other end of which was fast to the saddle. Then remounting, I dragged it to me, but when it came under the horse's nose he voted decisively against the scheme, every time. Finally, after considerable circus-riding, he fell over backward, giving me just time to slip from under, but as I was bruised and confused, he got away and ran off careering over the prairie with the obnoxious object dragging behind. After a while it got detached, and he fell to grazing, but was always prompt to start again as soon as I approached, and as by this time the train was out of sight, I began to fear seriously that I might have to leave him. But after long and wily manoeuvring I at last got hold of the riata, and my temper by this time not being in its sweetest condition, I determined to break or kill him, and after some more fighting, succeeded in the former, and putting him to a gallop, forded the river and came up to the train just as it came to camp some miles beyond. Here on indignantly throwing down the innocent cause of the commotion I had the satisfaction of learning that, having belonged to the negro Milton, it had been purposely abandoned as probably infected with smallpox! Though I had hugged it closely during a gallop of several miles while in a profuse perspiration, I was never troubled with the disease, though cholera or fatal diarrhoea is prevalent among the emigrant

encountered two or three mud holes with nearly vertical banks, which even after considerable pick and shovel work, stalled all the teams. The worst was at the crossing of an insignificant stream about ten miles from the Santa Fé fork, where the bottom was so miry, and the banks so steep and high, that the crossing of our five wagons detained us more than two hours. At 4 p.m. we struck the Wakarusa, a fine running creek of about twenty yards' width, in a timbered bottom half a mile wide, the shade and whispering verdure of which was a delightful thing to our eyes, already somewhat tired of the bare monotony of the illimitable grassy prairie. The bluff on the west side, though no more than thirty or forty feet high, was so steep that it required doubled teams and all hands at the wheels to pull out. Fortunately it was neither muddy nor slippery. In fact, we like the Wakarusa, which besides its lovely marginal forest, is a beautiful swift-flowing stream with a bold ledge of exposed limestone on our side—carved into fantastic shapes by water and ice action, and a steep wooded bluff on the other. Though now running full, from the frequent rains, it looks favorable for fish, but in two hours honest trial I only got one weak nibble, and returned to my bacon.

May 11th. On the road by 7 a.m. today, having turned out before daylight for an early start. Two hours brought us to a singularly shaped hill. It is plainly of natural limestone formation, but from its shape, presenting bold projecting salients all around, and a succession of terraces, due to the more rapid weathering of the upper and more exposed strata, it looks like a great fortification with successive walls, gradually retiring as they rise one above the other. The wagon trail breasts it boldly and leads directly over the top. From the summit there is a superb view of rolling prairie, stretching interminably in every direction from its base to the far edge of the saucer-like horizon. Looking back over the thin, faint line of road we have just passed, Bryant's train of 170 pack mules was just coming into view, straggling along far, far beneath us, like an army of mice. Shouts and whoops came faintly up to us, and so cheeringly dry was the prairie, that

the dust from their 700 hoofs hung over them like a moving canopy. Far southward appears another bend of the timber lining the Wakarusa, which stream after a long detour to the right of the trail, here sweeps away again to the southwest, bound for the Kaw river, we suppose. The march today has been, as usual, over a perpetual series of gently undulating hills, one rising beyond another on all sides, through and among which we are perpetually winding to avoid steep ascents. We seem confined in a deep, vast, green bowl, whose encircling sides we are constantly striving in vain to surmount. The horizon presents the illusion of rising higher than ourselves on all sides, and even when we gain a hilltop, it only discloses an illimitable succession of others, without distinctive landmarks, and with views, vistas, landscape and scenery, so precisely alike, that except for the sun and compass and our tired muscles, it would be hard to realize any movement.

B. produced a few curlew and cowbirds tonight, the product of his shot-gun, unfortunately the only one in the party, and these varied pleasantly the usual hungry rush to slapjacks and bacon. Notwithstanding, the rain has followed us and commenced drizzling again after the unusually liberal allowance of two days' sunshine.

May 12th. J. and G. overtook us last night, the former much worse for his ride, though considered nearly recovered when they left Lipscombe's. After a hard march we camped tonight on a small tributary of the Kaw, or Kansas, and within a few miles of that river, which must be crossed tomorrow. The camp has been made near a dead ox, which doesn't enhance its attractions, but the rain has ceased and we are all agog to put the Kansas behind us tomorrow. A large train is camped nearby, waiting for the same purpose, which has lost several men from cholera and still has some bad cases in the wagons. Two heavy ox-trains came up in the rear, passed, and camped ahead of us.

May 13th, Sunday. Rolled out early to reach the crossing, if possible, in advance of the large trains near us. As we passed these, some were burying a man just dead of cholera, while the others were catching up their teams. The five or six miles of road leading to the crossing was bad, and we

Independence and its vicinity was a strange and peculiar place to eastern eyes. It had been for many years the favorite seat and outfitting place for the great packmule and wagon trains engaged in the Santa Fé trade, by which Chihuahua, Durango and the northern and least-known parts of Mexico, were then and until the later days of railroads, supplied with manufactured commodities. This once-famous trade had made the place rich and populous, and though within twenty miles of the Indian frontier, beyond which not a house or a settler was allowed by the general government, and within a few days' ride of actively hostile Indians, it had become a large and wealthy place. Nevertheless, as every man in it, of any standing, was or had been a New Mexican trader, Indian fighter or some other kind of adventurer, its whole population from the successful and wealthy traders down to the people who herded their animals and drove their teams, bore a rather tough reputation. Even its peculiar appearance indicated the unique character, interests and occupation of its inhabitants. Some of the wealthiest citizens, millionaires even, then when fortunes were so much smaller than at present, were considered the most dangerous and lawless, and if they did not take a pride in such reputations, were not in the least averse to them, and never slow to earn and maintain them. In winter when they came in from their various errands on and beyond the far-reaching plains, there was gathered a population amounting to several thousand, with plenty of leisure and taste for pleasure, as there understood.

But during the temperate portion of the year, its adventurous people were scattered about over thousands of miles of territory, some on long and dangerous journeys occupying years of time, and the place was comparatively deserted. In some low-lying ground and meadows adjacent, at least fifty or more acres of old and worn-out Santa Fé wagons were falling to decay, and in and around it were at that time encamped several thousand strangers, comprising emigrants, hunters, trappers, Indian and fur traders, besides stock dealers, gamblers, teamsters and all sorts of loafers and desperados, including many of wide frontier renown. Fights and homicides were of frequent occurrence and though always enter-

cooking utensils, carpenter's, digging and pioneer's tools, as well as some simple medicines and other necessaries. For private property each had blankets, arms, ammunition and tobacco, and Seaborn Jones also possessed an excellent young negro who had acquired some useful experience during the late Mexican war, as servant to his elder brother, a voltigeur officer in General Scott's campaign. The experience of the first day's march admonished us that some additional preparation might not be wasted, so we remained a few days longer at our first camp, and it was not till May 2nd that we at last crossed the State Line into the Indian country, and—as the sailors say—'took our departure.'

A country beautifully undulating, and bursting everywhere with the buds of early spring, nevertheless furnished us with a hilly, uneven and sometimes slippery road, with deep, muddy sloughs in every intermediate hollow; and with our raw drivers, untamed mules, overloaded wagons, and continual April showers, our tribulations and difficulties were at first quite disheartening to many. As if to cap the disagreeables, S. J., (Jones) who had remained behind to look after his negro Milton, who was ill, now overtook us with the alarming intelligence that the disease had been identified as smallpox, which was not particularly encouraging to the rest of us, who had been living in such close association with him. Jones had been obliged to leave Milton in charge of an old negro woman belonging to Colonel Ralston, who promised to look after him and ship him home to Georgia, in case of his recovery. It was not till several years afterward that I learned that the negro did recover, and was shipped by express with a label sewed to his breast, from Independence to Paulding county, Georgia, and arrived there safely! In these days of railroads and continental express companies, that may not seem so very remarkable, but at that time there were few or no railroads west of the Alleghenies, and the whole distance, which must have been at least 1200 miles, could only be traversed by stagecoach and steamboat, or on foot.

For the purpose of conveying a fresh or contemporaneous idea of the long and weary, but interesting journey now fairly commenced, I cannot do better than copy here my diary written