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ACROSS THE PLAINS IN '57

The story of the family of
Peter Campbell and a train of immigrants
as told by Nancy Campbell Lowell,
a member of the party.

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On April 1, 1857 another party of pioneers started West from Carroll County, Arkansas, and, more exactly, from Carlton, the county seat of that county which was on the main trail leading west. This caravan consisted of about 125 wagons one of which belonged to Peter Campbell and his family which included his wife, a baby son two years old, a daughter three years old, and his eldest daughter, Nancy, four years old. It is from little Nancy (Mrs. Lowell) that we have the following story:

From Arkansas the wagon train proceeded slowly to Cherokee Nation. Here it lay in wait one month until joined by an additional fifty wagons or so from Missouri. The combined party composed one of the largest trains ever to cross the continent. Slowly they moved along, frequently stopping for one or another of several reasons. Possible delay was caused for the fording of a river. Such an event would occupy a week or so. Before it was possible to cross, it was necessary to cut down many trees of required length and size. These were laid two across the ends until what was called a pen of sufficient height was built. These timbers were then fastened securely by chains. Next the bed was removed from a wagon, the pen was placed on the bolsters, the bed back on top of the pen. Oxen were then hitched to the wagon, and that wagon was ready to cross the stream. Usually, three men on horseback in addition to the driver accompanied each wagon—one to goad on the leaders, one to spur on those in the swing, and a third to prod the wheelers. Of course the horses and oxen had to swim, the wheels of the wagon would be on river bottom, but the bed, owing to being perched on top of its pen, would safely convey family and cargo above water level. Sufficient oxen were hitched to one wagon so that when the leaders were swimming, the wheelers were still on land, and by the time the last oxen had reached deep water, the leaders would have their footing on the opposite shore. To so cross a stream usually occupied a week for the train.

Possibly a clear shallow stream that was no trouble to cross was nevertheless reason for more delay. This happened when the stream and a much needed wash day arrived at the same time. This, too, meant a stop of a week or ten days.

A third and perhaps most interesting cause of delay was frequently occasioned by Buffalo. Herds would come in such numbers that it was impossible to drive through them. It was often necessary to wait several days for them to pass by so that travel was again possible.

Storms occasioned other delays, and three times progress was arrested by the stampeding of the cattle, twice from unknown reasons and once deliberately stampeded by Indians. From two to ten days were necessary each of these times for the collecting of the cattle again.

Further relations with the Indians forms another interesting part of the story of this particular party. One incident concerns the family of Peter Campbell only. It was one of the rules that the man driving the leading wagon in the train, should be responsible to aid in choosing the camp site for the night. The following day that wagon would become the last in line, and the one behind it would be first. It in turn would be the last wagon the following day and so on—each wagon thus having a day in each position in line. It so happened that the Campbell wagon one day was holding the very last place in the line. It so happened that the Campbell wagon one day was holding the very last place in the line. The slow oxen, plodding along, even more slowly than those before them, became a quarter of a mile or so behind the nearest wagon ahead. The day was hot and sultry, and the mother had tied up the side canvas.

Three little children were sitting along the open side when, without warning, three feather-decorated Indians dashed up on horses and made an apparent reach for the children. The mother grabbed the clothing of all three and pulled them to her at the same time releasing the canvas. The Indians rode away just as quickly as they had come. The oxen were prodded into a trot to overtake the others and no such distance was allowed to intervene again. Whether the Indians accidentally missed the children, or whether it was their idea of a joke was never known.

A second Indian incident closed just as fortunately. There appeared one evening an Indian chief who requested permission to stay for the night. Giving due consideration to the problem, the captain of the train, who was also Mr. Campbell's cousin, decided it was best to grant the request. He ordered a tent put up and the bed spread. When night fell, the chief wished to sleep without, but was made to understand that he was welcome to stay but must sleep within the tent. Being alone, he was unable to insist on other arrangements. The captain made his own bed within the same tent for the night and placed four men on guard without in addition to the regular shift. Every night by turn, some men would guard until midnight and others the rest of the dark hours. Throughout this particular night Indian fires were plainly visible in all directions on the hillsides, which in itself was not unusual, as the country was not only well inhabited by Indians, but this year all tribes were warring on one another and such a nightly sight was common. The visiting chief arose the next morning, was presented with some sugar, and his buffalo hides made bucket-like were filled with milk. He departed and nothing was again seen or heard of him or his friends. If he had planned some sort of signaling, his plans were thwarted.

So the people travelled day by day and week by week. At last a place near Mountain Meadows, a short way from Salt Lake, became the camping grounds for the night. Mr. Campbell's wagon, being first of the train, Mr. Campbell with his cousin attempted to choose the camp site. A disagreement arose between the two men with the result that Mr. Campbell left the train. He with only two other wagons now started on alone. The others moved on into Mountain Meadows. This so-called place, as its name implies, was meadows surrounded by mountains with but one means of entry. This entry was a most unfortunate one, for being so hemmed in, their exit was impossible against enemies that took up a position on guard at the one passage way. Every one of these brave, courageous people, after their months of privation, work, worry, and all that such a trip entails, was here massacred with the exception of twelve children, five days after their separation from the other wagons. This deed was at the time blamed to Indians, but one of these surviving children later told a story that seemed to give evidence that it was a party of Mormons. The reason is explained in the fact that the group of immigrants from Missouri that originally joined this train were relatively well-to-do. They had horses in place of oxen and better equipment in other respects. It is believed that the ruthless murderers knew this and killed the party for their possessions. This, however, has never been proven.

The little train of three wagons, so narrowly escaping death, made their way to Carson Valley, Nevada. Here again the party divided, two wagons

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Desiring to go over the mountains, via Truckee, through Dutch Flat and on to Trinity County, the Campbell family alone taking a trail which lead through Placerville.

The direct purpose of this family's trip was not for gold. Mr. Campbell had been a teacher and for the times was a man of good education. He had a brother living in Marysville interested in keeping a store. Mr. Campbell's trip was in response to his brother's suggestion that he come west to assist him in this business and in keeping books, etc., while the brother managed the store in its other connections. Such arrangements had been made between the two brothers by mail carried by pony express mail.

Brighton was at last reached (by this little family traveling alone) on the first day of October after six months of travel. Here they stayed one month. Then, the remainder of the trip from Brighton to Marysville was accomplished, but only a great disappointment was awaiting them. The brother, having heard that all members of the train were massacred at Mountain Meadows, had decided to go back to Arkansas. He left Marysville three days before the arrival of the Peter Campbell family. The brothers never saw each other alive again. His plans upset, Mr. Campbell attempted to make a living by working on farms when and where he could. The mother aided by doing housework necessarily having to take her little children with her at all times. Just one story will give an idea of here life and of Marysville at this time.

It was not an unusual experience on her way to work in the morning to meet a drove of wild cattle. More than once on such an occasion she would run for the nearest tree and lift her three babies into it until it was safe for her to proceed on her way.

After one year in Marysville the family again set forth in their wagon still drawn by oxen and came to Sacramento, settling temporarily east of the city across the American River. From here they moved on to a farm of their own near Folsom, where they lived permanently, Mr. Campbell passing on at the age of sixty-eight, the mother in 1885. The children attended school in the present Sylvan school district.

Concerning all these adventures, Mrs. Lowell, the little Nancy of the wagon train, though only four years old at that time, remembers many incidents very distinctly. The experience of the three Indians grabbing at her made an impression very clear. She remembers that one man refused to build up his wagon to ford the Green River with the result that the wagon bed containing his family floated boat-like off its wheels and down the river until rescued. The picture of the floating wagon bed and the screaming people in the wagon both is still very clear to her. Quite distinctly she recalls the day when the little two year old brother wanted to stay and play when the wagons were ready to depart, and the father said, "All right, Richard, I'll leave you here with the Indians." Her concern for the little brother was too real to be easily forgotten. After arriving in California, one day she found a fifty-cent piece. She knew it was money and she knew she had heard much of people who had come to California for gold. Naturally, the memory of her first and sudden wealth is still remembered.

One reference to Sacramento during these early days closed her story. Mrs. Lowell's description of the present capital city in her words was, "Sacramento was just a little town of shanties. During the flood of '61, my father cut and peddled wood to the people by row boat. It wasn't much of a town in those days."

* On the original pamphlet this has been changed in ink to read:
in the year of 1865.