

Edward E. Ayer [Huntington family]
[originally at Newburg City]

About the 20th of April, 1860, I was a night clerk in my Father's hotel in Harvard, McHenry County, Illinois, our home town, my father having purchased a large interest in a farm and laid out the town of Harvard in '56.

I went one morning after a cow that had strayed away, and returning with her about 10:00 o'clock in the morning, met some old neighbors of mine that I had always known, Horace Smith and his wife (formerly Maria Gardner) starting for California. I bid them "good-bye" and when I returned home, immediately went to Father and said that I wanted to go to California. My eighteenth birthday had been the 16th of November the year before. Father treated my request lightly at first, but within a couple of days had concluded to let me go.

I found out that there was a train, that is, several wagons, coming to Harvard from Kenosha, enroute to California, a few days afterwards and that other friends of mine, Horace Hartwell, wife and family were going to join the train there. It was arranged that I should go with the train.

Our family consisted of Father, Mother, five sisters and a brother, and we had all been together all our lives at this time, except my oldest sister, who had married in 1856 and was then living in Chicago. Of course, there was a general heart-ache at the parting. After bidding my friends and family a fond farewell, the last day of April, we started about 10:00 o'clock in the morning, one special friend I had had for several years, a gentleman by the name of Adolph Hutchinson, following alongside the train for about eight or ten miles on horseback,

gen. Edward L.

when he returned.

We stayed that night at Belvidere, Boone County, Illinois. That night we slept in the hotel; after that for the whole trip to California, our bed was the ground. I remember we went from Belvidere to Rockford; from there to Oregon, crossed the Mississippi River at Fulton, and from there on down to Iowa City, thence to Des Moines. Even eastern Iowa was sparsely settled, and it became much more so as we went westward. From Des Moines to Council Bluffs there was almost unsettled country, occasionally a stage station and a house or two. We were about thirty days going to Council Bluffs, and there was where we got the first mail which consisted of letters from all the family and many friends, including my best girl, Nancy Root. This was my first trip away from home, and of course, I was pretty lonely.

The first real lesson I got on the trip was about five or six days out. During the days in talking with the young men in the train, and others, I had referred to Father and Mother with occasional statements that "they didn't think so" or "didn't do things this way." About the end of that time, one of the boys ahead hollered back, "Ed, come on up here, I want to find out how your father or mother did this." The cure was instantaneous and permanent.

On receiving my mail at Council Bluffs, I dared not trust myself to open it before anybody so I took it and went off in the big sunflowers towards the Missouri river away from everybody, sat down alone and read the letters over, of course, crying most of the time.

We crossed the river in a day or two to Omaha, and then stayed there two or three days, securing our final outfit, purchasing ammunition, etc., when we finally pulled out for the "Great Unknown." There were sparse settlements west of Omaha, about fifty miles out a little town called Fremont, and about ninety miles out another one, Columbus, and once in a few miles there might be a house or two.

A day or so west of Columbus and after we had crossed the Loop Fork River and had arrived at the north edge of the Platte River, we went into camp at the usual time, with two or three of the horses picketed out. About 2:00 o'clock in the morning, a bunch of Pawnee Indians came along with a large quantity of buffalo meat packed on ponies, that they had secured from the west. They frightened all of our horses and they started on the back tract, except those that were picketed. A young man named John Sweeney, who became a tug captain in Chicago some ten or fifteen years afterward, and I started after them on two horses we had secured from the picketed ones, riding them bareback. We followed them something over twenty miles before we overtook them, and then had to return to camp, arriving about 4:00 o'clock in the afternoon, having ridden about forty-five or fifty miles bareback during the day. I have forgotten just how much skin there was left on my legs, but it was very little. The managers of the train had become worried about us after four or five hours, and started over the Loop Fork where the Indian village was, missing us, and were told the way the horses had gone by the Indians, arriving back about the time we did.

We followed on up the Platte River, without anything of importance happening, except several days after this, two or three of the small children were playing on the bank of the river. A little boy came running, yelling, "Doddie's in the river, Doddie's in the river." Doddie was a little boy of my friends, the Hartwell's. The only persons ^{men} there were there was a man from Kenosha called "Big Hank" and myself. The Platte River was running about fifteen per cent mud so that it was impossible to see anything in it. We both got into the river about three or four rods below where the child fell in, covering the current towards the bank. Just before he got to us the boy's little hand showed out of the water, which Hank seized and pulled him out. No harm done, but a tremendous fright to the mother.

We were on the upway until we got opposite Fort Kearney. The mail for the whole train was sent to Fort Kearney. It was on the south side of the river, and of course we were on the north. The subject came up as to how we were going to get our mail. The river was very high and full of islands and sandbars. I finally told the owners of our stock that if they would let me take my off-mare, I would go across and get it, which they consented to, and taking off my shoes and rolling up my trousers and putting my shoes on the back of the saddle, I was seen floundering through the water until I came to what I supposed was the opposite shore, but which was one of the islands in the stream. I had put my martingales back, and to my surprise came to the main part of the river. The road went off in the water, and when I had got about

ten feet from the shore down my horse went in a big hole. The water was running swiftly and heavy with sediment, and impulsively I pulled up on my rein, putting my horse's head partly under. I recognized instantly that this wouldn't do, and giving her a free rein, turned her down stream. She swam out a short distance below. It was really a miracle she wasn't turned over. I hitched her, and then cutting a pole with my knife, I waded in and found where it was less deep, and finally made my way across and got the mail, returning without any further adventure to our side.

We followed up the north shore of the Platte, passing Scott's Bluff, Chimney Rock, the junction of the South Platte and the North Platte, and on to Fort Laramie without any particular adventure except once or twice bands of Indians would squat in the road and ask for provisions, etc., but there were a number of us, and when anything of that kind showed up, every man would have a gun on his shoulder and a revolver in his belt, in fact where they were carried all the time.

Fort Laramie was about five hundred fifty miles west of Omaha, which we reached in due time. A short distance west of Laramie we made a detour to the right and crossed the Black Hills and came on to Sweetwater, my recollection is about one hundred miles, perhaps less, and the first important point that we reached after that was Independence Rock. There is a large valley there near the river, and in the valley there is an enormous rock, I should say about twenty acres, to my recollection, rising about one hundred feet at the highest point,

above the valley. We went into camp there, and I spent most of the next forenoon carving with a coal chisel my name on Independence Rock, "Ed. E. Ayer, Harvard, Ill."

A short distance above Independence Rock, the Sweetwater River cuts through a rock formation, I should say about ^{three} ~~one~~ hundred feet deep and a mile or so long, which is called "Devils Gate." We went a short distance above this and made a camp under a most wonderful mountain, for a week recruiting our horses, and after that we passed through the South Pass on to the Pacific Slope, with the great Wind River Range in sight on the north. I remember there was still ice and snow in certain places here, and flowers growing everywhere possible where there was no snow. We followed down Pacific Creek into Sandy Fork, crossing Green River a few miles above where the Union Pacific Railroad bridge now is.

The next morning we pulled out of Green River and had got about six miles when I found I had left the only coat I had left, on the bank of the river. Of course, I had to go back after it. There was a man in the train who had an old Indian pony which he let me take for the purpose. When I got back to Green River, I found my coat on an Indian, but by giving him a bandana handkerchief I had in my pocket he released the coat and I started back. On my way back to the River, I met a couple of wagons and a man hollered out, "Ed. Ayer, where the Old Harry are you going?" And much to my surprise and delight it was an old neighbor of ours who used to have a wagon and blacksmith shop at Ayers Corners on the State Line,