

CROSSING THE PLAINS IN 1852

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This drawing of the Bear and the Walrus appeared at the "mast-head" of the Argonaut in its early years. It is restored to head this column of reminiscences and stories of Old California.)

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Reminiscences of a California Pioneer.

(The writer of these reminiscences was ten years old when she crossed the plains. She now is 83 years old. Her recollections of her experiences, written for her descendants, are published for the first time in the Argonaut.)

My parents were both natives of Kentucky. They were married there and had four children. Father was a farmer and lived near Bardstown, Kentucky. They had the misfortune to lose their eldest daughter and eldest son. They then emigrated to Missouri and settled on a farm on the Walkendaw river in Clark County, Missouri, where I was born in January, 1842. Our postoffice address was Winchester, Clark County, Missouri.

Father was an enterprising man and when he settled in Missouri he selected a beautiful site for his residence in a little slope of meadow land just at the edge of a forest of black walnut, hickory, wild plum, hazel bush and slippery elm trees. He cleared out a place near a hill and the public road passed between the site selected for the house and the meadow and when fenced, formed a lane to the bridge which spanned the Walkendaw River. Many wild plum, slippery elm and black walnut trees were left standing around the home site. Near the foot of the hill father dug out the clay and burned the brick of which the house was built—the first brick house in our neighborhood. The entire woodwork of the house was of black walnut.

One incident which is vivid in my memory was going to school one cold morning in January. I was just six years old. I started home in the afternoon in a big snowstorm and in going down a steep hill I fell in a snowdrift. My eldest sister helped me out and at the foot of the hill we stopped in a neighbor's house, who informed us we had a baby brother, which was a great surprise.

The winters were cold. Icicles hung from the eaves of the houses and often snow and ice covered the farm. Father was a typical Kentuckian all the days of his life—very hospitable and sociable. We always had guests in our home and the winters were quite gay with dancing, quilting, apple paring and sleigh riding parties. I remember two big barns were filled with tobacco hanging up to dry. One barn was full of hay and corn for the stock. A colored woman in the kitchen, molded candle-made sausage meat, mincemeat and other good eatables. Negro George was hired by the year to work on the farm and when he was in the kitchen he loved to sing and dance and always seemed happy. Father did not own slaves in Missouri, but always had them hired by the year from their masters.

The spring was a busy season with ploughing, sowing and planting and the home was beautiful with blooming orchards. The weather was warm in summer and ripened the grain, which was harvested by men with cradles cutting down the grain and men walked behind them binding it up in sheaves, and when the cradles were sharpened with a whetstone they made a peculiar noise or sound which would be like music to my ears to hear again. A great field of growing tobacco was good to see, but I detested the green worms that infested them. I enjoyed the fireflies at night and I loved to hear the whippoorwills and to gather the beautiful lady slippers which grew wild on the place. The neighborhood always had a barbecue on the Fourth of July, when oxen were roasted whole in the ground, and we had a real feast, and there was dancing, speech making and a merry time. After the slaves had served their masters at dinner they adjourned under a shady grove, where they danced and sang and enjoyed themselves to their hearts' content.

The autumns were spent in gathering nuts which grew wild and in abundance, and the farmers were busy laying up provisions for the winter.

I must not forget the log school house in the shaded dell by the running brook where the young children went to school in the summer time and the grown-up children in the winter.

We had frequent thunderstorms in summer. Our dog Sancho never came in the house except when it thundered and lightninged and then he would run into the house frightened almost to death, crawl under the loom and stay there until the storm was over. We had a well with a long sweep and an old oaken bucket which hung in the well. Our mother wove on a loom wool blankets, jeans and linen tablecloths. She was a religious woman, gentle, refined and devoted to her family. Our parents were both Catholics and we had family prayer every night before retiring, the memory of which is still very vivid and beautiful to me.

In 1848 gold was discovered in California. Early in 1849 there was a great excitement in our neighborhood. Several made up their minds to go to California and make their fortunes, father among the rest. A few days before it was time to start on their journey, mother fell ill and her life was in danger, so father gave up the trip. Two years after, in 1851, several returned and gave glowing accounts of California, the mild climate, gold mines and grizzly bear hunting. Brother John, six years old, stood spellbound as he heard the marvelous stories of bear hunts. Early in 1852 father again took the California fever and decided to take his family with him as many in the neighborhood intended to go and take their families and they planned to travel together.

All was excitement getting ready to start across the plains in the spring. The first thing father did was to go to Keokuk and order two strong wagons which were made with long wagon beds and then corded with ropes the length of a mattress. In those days bed springs were not used; all bedsteads were corded. Tall bows were placed over the wagon bed with two covers of heavy canvas made to fasten tight in front and back to keep out rain. A large tight box was made behind the wagon bed with a lid on hinges to let down which could be used as a table. In the box we carried cooked food for lunch at noon. It also carried a can of fresh milk. A tent was ordered with poles that could be folded up and tied to the side of the wagon.

Clothing was packed in canvas sacks and placed in the bottom of the wagon under the corded bed.

The front of the wagon was tall enough to allow one to stand up straight in it. This was the family wagon. In the other wagon our provisions were stored to last through the journey. The four men who came with us occupied that wagon. Our provisions consisted of ham, bacon, flour, corn meal, beans, rice, dried fruit, salt, tea, coffee and vinegar—everything was packed carefully in heavy canvas bags. On the 25th of March the great auction sale took place. All the furniture of the home and farming utensils were put up to the highest bidder. The farm was not for sale but was rented for three years as we intended to return. No one in those days expected to make California his permanent home.

On April 22, 1852, we were ready to start on our long journey. We had two yokes of oxen for each wagon. Four men came out with us, each one paying a certain sum of money or something equivalent. Tom Shuman gave a yoke of young oxen and the others money. The other men were Ben Baker, Alex Simon and Doc Clay. I do not know whether he was related to Henry Clay or not, but I hardly believe he was as he was the laziest man in camp. Besides the four yokes of oxen we had several other oxen, a horse and also a cow which gave us milk all the way across the plains. I was so gay and happy when I bid good-bye to the old home. I found mother crying and said to her: "Why, mother, do you feel so sad?" She replied: "Child, you will wish yourself back many a time." (And I have.)

On leaving the farm we had to cross the bridge over the Walkendaw River. The cow that was raised on the farm would not cross the bridge, so a rope was tied around her horns and a man on horseback swam the river, drawing the cow after him. We were delayed until noon in consequence. We traveled two days and then reached a colony of relatives who lived on farms in Scotland County, Missouri, where we made a short visit. The morning we left they had congregated at Grandmother's house and it was a sad gathering. The house was full of people, many in tears. Grandmother was prostrated. I went to her room to bid her good-bye and she said, "Child, I will see you no more," and they all said "we will never meet again." (Which was true, for we never met again.) We traveled along until we arrived at Council Bluffs. There was such a large emigration ahead of us that father had to register and wait his turn to be ferried over the Missouri River. We camped there three weeks before our time came and were ferried over and camped on the other side which was a city of tents, now the city of Omaha. When we set foot on the right bank of the Missouri River we were outside the pale of civil law. We were within the Indian country, where no organized civil government existed. In Utah territory we joined our neighbors from Clark County, Missouri, and formed a train of about twenty wagons.

It was necessary to travel together in large trains for protection from the Indians and to be heavily armed. Every train had a captain who governed and settled all disputes and selected the camping grounds. Our captain was Mr. Handshaw, a great big, handsome man. The first few weeks of our journey were very pleasant. The young people danced in the evening by the moonlight and the little children, too, had merry times. Four men took turns standing guard every night to protect the camp and prevent the stock from being stampeded. We traveled about twelve miles a day and when we stopped for the night all the wagons were drawn up in a line and the tents were pitched behind them, forming a street. Then preparations began for supper. We had a little sheet iron stove at the beginning of the trip but it proved to be a nuisance and was discarded. The cook, one of the men of our party, used to dig a trench about a foot deep and three feet long, build a fire in it and then hang the crane over the trench with the coffee pot and camp kettle. As soon as he had coals in the trench he baked bread in a dutch oven, fried the meat, made coffee and tea and when supper was ready a coarse cloth was spread on the ground to protect us from dust and the prickly pears. Then the tin dishes were taken from the box behind the wagon and placed around our table on the ground for eleven people. The milk can was brought out with a lump of butter on top churned by the motion of the wagon. After supper was over preparations were made for bed. Our tent was pitched behind the family wagon and a ditch dug around it to keep it from being flooded, for we had some terrible rainstorms on the Platte River. A heavy canvas was spread on the ground in the tent and two feather beds were placed on it where part of our family slept, the rest sleeping very comfortably in the corded wagon bed which took the place of a spring mattress. Our family numbered seven. Father and mother, who were young people, sister Annie, seventeen years old; sister Margaret, twelve; I was ten, brother John seven and brother Jim, the baby, four. The country we traveled over was beautiful. Although emigration was large we found plenty of grass for the stock.

Whatever is in a person will come out on the plains, whether it is good or bad, mean or selfish. Two men in our train were traveling together. They had a span of horses and a light spring wagon. I will designate them by calling them John Doe and Richard Roe. They were afraid their horses would give out before they reached the end of the journey so they persuaded one of our men to join them with the yoke of oxen he had contributed to pay for his trip across the plains. Just before we were ready to start one morning father espied the yoke of oxen hitched in front of the horses belonging to these men. He went forward to take them and John Doe hit him over the head with a whip, which staggered him. Recovering himself, he again went for his oxen and then Richard Roe went for him. They clunched and commenced to fight. Bystanders promptly separated them. Mother said, "Sammy, don't have any trouble; give them the cattle." Sister Annie said, "Father, fight for your rights." Margaret jumped up and down in a bed of cactus. Father shouted, "The cattle are mine; I will never give them up." Someone called the captain. He came forward and asked the cause of the disturbance, and upon being informed he looked at father and asked him if he had a written agreement with the young man. "I have," father replied. Annie ran to the wagon and brought forth the document, handing it to the captain, who read it aloud, and when he had finished he said: "The cattle are yours; go and take them." That settled the controversy. We soon proceeded on our way as if nothing had happened. Before many weeks had transpired the young man asked to be taken back to our family. His request was granted and he was a peaceable young man the rest of the trip.

On the Platte River we saw herds of buffaloes. The young men in our camp frequently went hunting after supper. The captain had lanterns hung on a high pole so they could find their way back to camp and we greatly relished fresh meat once more.

While we were traveling along the Platte River in June cholera broke out among the emigrants. Mother was among the first victims. We camped alone the first day she was taken

(Continued in Next Week's Argonaut.)



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(Continued from last week's Argonaut.)

Our train went on. We heard there was a physician not far behind us, a Dr. Mason, and we waited for his train to overtake us in the middle of the afternoon. He stopped and treated mother, stating the case was very serious, and advised us to join his train the following day as they intended to camp part of the day. We started the next morning, overtaking his train at noon, and camped on the Platte River under cottonwood trees in a beautiful spot where wild roses grew in great profusion. On June 24 at two o'clock in the afternoon mother died. Although I remember every detail of her death and burial I will draw a veil. It is too sad and sacred. I cannot write about it. Sixty-nine years have passed since then, but whenever I see a wild rose the whole scene comes vividly before me. When Dr. Mason asked us to join his train we did not know then that mother had cholera. During the epidemic of cholera we passed a dozen new made graves a day. Dr. Mason was captain of this train. He had a wife and several children.

We traveled on and four days after mother's death my two brothers were playing in the wagon on the bed. The curtains were rolled up and the front wheels went down in a rut which jarred the wagon, throwing brother John out. A hind wheel ran over him, breaking one of his legs. Had it not been for deep sand in the road he would have been killed. His leg was set at once by Dr. Mason and he got along well, but was confined to the wagon for the rest of the long journey.

We passed mounds or villages where prairie dogs, owls, snakes and badgers lived, but how they lived I had no way of finding out. We passed Fort Laramie, Pike's Peak, Independence Rock, Chimney Rock, Devil's Gate and many beautiful colored rocks and boiling springs, both hot and cold water.

We were traveling in a deep canyon and camped one night under a thick grove of trees. In the morning when the train was ready to start father found that one of his oxen was missing. He said he would stop to find it and would soon overtake the train. He mounted his horse, carrying his gun with him, and commenced to search for the missing ox. Noon came and our father had not overtaken us. We traveled on and camped just before sunset. I never felt so miserable in my life. I sat on the ground with my face buried in my hands speechless. I knew well that if a train did not overtake father that the treacherous Indians would kill him. What would become of us children? I heard men talking in low tones and I gathered from what I heard that the captain intended to send out a posse as soon as they had supper to search for father. Then I heard cheer after cheer. I looked up and there was big, handsome father riding in front of a pack train of twelve men on mules and with more mules packed with their supplies following behind. The twelve men were our guests at supper and in the evening after the chores of the camp were finished others joined the group around the campfire. They had breakfast with us in the morning and started for their day's journey before our train was ready. As they were leaving us father grasped each one by the hand and said, "Good-bye, brother."

I did not hear any of their names, much to my regret. This is father's story. When he found the ox it was high noon and not a person in sight. In a few minutes he saw Indians on the hill beckoning to Indians on the hill across the canyon. They soon met and came down the canyon towards him and he could see they carried guns. He knew his danger and prepared with his trusty gun to fight for his life. The Indians were approaching fast and in five minutes all would be over. He thought of his motherless children and his hair began to rise on his head. Then as if by a miracle a pack train of a dozen men on mules came in view. He said, "Gentlemen, you have saved my life." "Join us, brother," they said, which he gratefully did, thanking God for sparing his life.

We traveled along many rivers, such as the Platte River, Sweetwater, Humboldt, Carson and many small streams. We had to cross Green River, which was very swift. A man was stationed there with a ferry boat, but his charges were so exorbitant for ferrying wagons over that one man said he would not pay it and started to ford the river in a wagon with two of his children. The wagon body floated off and went a mile down stream before it was rescued. One daughter, who was twelve years old, saved herself and the life of her little sister, two years old, by catching hold of the wagon bows and holding her little sister's head above the water. In crossing streams we often had the wagon beds propped up on rocks to keep the water from running in.

An incident which is vivid in my memory happened just before we reached Salt Lake City. We were on a mountain overlooking the valley, about four o'clock in the afternoon. The valley looked lovely to our tired eyes and seemed so near. Someone said, "Shall we camp here or in the valley?" The captain was sent for as he always selected our camping places. The captain said, "In the valley by all means." He, too, was deceived as well as the rest of us, for the valley was farther off than we imagined. We soon started down the mountain which was heavily timbered. It was soon pitch dark and the road was so rough and dangerous that we were afraid to ride in the wagon. An old man with a lantern walked ahead and the women and children followed behind and there were some mothers with young children in their arms carrying lanterns. Brother John with his broken leg was carried on a litter.

Very few words were spoken as we had to look where we were stepping. Eight o'clock and nine o'clock passed and we were all exhausted, but we had to go on for there was no place to camp. Every able bodied man was needed with the teams and wagons. Several men had to walk on each side of the wagons to keep them from turning over. At last at ten o'clock at night we found a place where we could turn out of the road,

but with not room enough to pitch a tent. Most of the travelers went to bed supperless, being too tired and sleepy to think of anything to eat.

We reached the valley about noon next day and camped for a week near Salt Lake City. It was a beautiful city even at that time. Every block had a little stream of clear sparkling water running around it. We purchased fresh vegetables there and we said they were the best we had ever tasted. On the 24th of July the Mormons celebrated. There was a grand parade through the streets and Brigham Young and his many wives were in the procession. I was left in camp and did not see the procession, but I heard others who were present speak of it as a very interesting affair. They were commemorating a great event, but I do not remember what it was. I saw Brigham Young's home—several buildings joined together. Each wife had a separate home where she lived with her children. We saw Salt Lake at a distance, and when the sun shone on it it looked like a lake of gold. We traveled on where the dust was unbearable and we often encountered whirlwinds. We could see them coming at a distance, formed like a funnel. We would close the wagon cover, lay our faces down on anything handy and hold our breath until the whirlwind passed. In many places there was nothing but sage brush, sand and rocks.

I could not endure the odor of sage brush. There were some young people in the train. Sister Annie, who was seventeen years old, scarcely ever left the family wagon, as she took care of her invalid brother John. The young men often walked beside the wagon holding on to the bows so that they could talk to sister. One young man had weak eyes and as he found the light unbearable Sister Annie made him a sunbonnet and put splints in it and he wore it on the rest of the journey. Toward the end of the trip we were so worn out that we were not particular how we were dressed and presented a mixture of fashions, and with our faces burned brown by the sun and covered with dust we must have been a ludicrous sight to behold. We usually camped a half day each week to rest the stock and to do the family washing.

When we came to Humboldt Lake we camped there a day. It was a beautiful place, the grass was plentiful and the stock had a feast. We were to cross the great desert and thought it advisable to cross it at night, so we took as much grass and water along as space would permit, to give to the cattle on the desert. We started to cross at sunset. All who were able walked. I did not walk but went to sleep, awoke at daylight next morning, dressed, and got out of the wagon. The desert was white, with little round mounds of earth here and there. The road was sandy.

Man and beast were exhausted, but managed to crawl along. On each side of the road were skeletons of horses and cattle that died while crossing. I saw tires of wagons, pieces of wagon beds and all kinds of utensils which had been thrown away to lighten the loads. They told a heart rending tale. Just after sunrise we came in sight of Carson River and before we reached it the drivers had a difficult time to keep the teams from jumping down the embankment into the river, as they were almost famished for water.

When we forded the river it was a pleasure to see them drink. Our experiences were different from those of many others. We only brought with us what was absolutely necessary, so were not heavily loaded. We had careful drivers and our teams were not hurried, but jogged along slowly but surely. I heard of many emigrants whose cattle lay down and died so that their wagons had to be abandoned with their provisions and supplies and they had to accept charity for the remainder of the trip. Some used little judgment and did not know how to take care of their teams. Our provisions lasted all the way, such as they were, and we only lost one ox, and that one was wounded by Indians who shot into our camp one night. A good captain in a train who has good judgment is worth a fortune.

One night we camped in a beautiful spot. Some of the women said they would like to settle there. There was a little stream full of rocks at the foot of the hill with bushes skirting the banks. There was a trading post near by and we felt so safe. Sister Margaret and I crossed the stream on the rocks and gathered berries that grew on the other side. We had to cross the stream twice next day in our travels as the Indians had burned the bridges over them a few days before we arrived there. It was necessary to get an early start next morning to be ahead of all trains. It was the captain's orders that we must be ready to start on our day's journey at daybreak. Long before daylight the camp was astir. The captain and father were sitting by the campfire when the cook was preparing breakfast. They heard something flying over their heads and remarked:

"How strange for birds to be flying in the darkness; what could have disturbed them?" and they heard it again and again. Day was breaking and we were ready to start, and to our surprise and horror we found arrows all over the camp. Some had gone through the covers of two wagons, but no one was injured. Several cattle were killed and father had an ox wounded. The men at the trading post bought the killed and wounded cattle. The supposed birds captain and father heard were arrows shot by the Indians on the hillside. That was the only time we had trouble with the Indians during the whole trip. We were glad to leave the beautiful camping place, and when we reached the first crossing of the stream all stood aghast. It seemed impossible that any wagon could cross over the rocks, but what could we do? We just had to cross over, so the men mustered up courage and made the attempt. I watched one wagon cross. As many men as could get hold of the wagon went into the stream and literally carried the wagon over the rocks, and the poor oxen fell down time and again before they reached the other side. Each wagon went through the same trial until all had crossed. All the women and children crossed on the rocks and brother John was carried over safely on a litter. We were walking ahead of the train so I did not see how they managed the last crossing. It took us the whole day to go four miles, where we camped for the night. Every man almost died from such a strenuous day's work.

We took the Carson route, as it was considered the safest. Had the Donner party kept to the old emigrant trail they would have escaped the terrible tragedy which befell them. They took a cut-off and the road was almost impassable, which delayed them until it was too late to cross the Sierra Nevada mountains. We could not go around the mountains as the trains do now; but we had to go over the top.

This is the way it was managed: A dozen yokes of oxen were hitched to one wagon and with hard pulling they reached the top. After all the wagons were over, we took lunch on the top of the mountains and then prepared to go down, which was more dangerous than going up, for in places the mountain was very steep. One yoke of oxen were hitched to a wagon and one at a time went down. Heavy chains were fastened on behind the wagon and as many men as could catch hold of the chains did so and when the wagon started they held back to keep the wagon from running down the mountain and killing the oxen. We were an exhausted community when we camped that night—