

A
PIONEER MOTHER
OF CALIFORNIA

By ELISHA BROOKS

*Written for his grandchildren to show them how
the emigrants crossed the Plains, and also
what manner of person was their
Great Grandmother*

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THE STORY OF A PIONEER



RECENTLY I took a trip by rail from California back to my boyhood home in Michigan, which trip revived scenes of a journey made over the same section of country more than half a century before. Comfortably seated in a luxurious car, I gazed out of the window trying to locate ancient land marks, while across my memory trekked an old ox team carrying all the wealth of my mother and her little children on a long, lone journey to the West. As we sped over the land, the picture films of half a hundred years ago and more, though dim and faded, unrolled as in a dream. On that spot I saw this little family asleep under the stars, the stealthy savage creeping upon them. Fifteen minutes later last night's camp ground, with the little group gathered around the fire of buffalo chips, eating their frugal supper, the music for the banquet furnished by the "wolf's long howl," had flitted by. Every fifteen minutes, that tireless iron horse whisked its train over a day's journey of the gaunt, plodding ox team. Here we were surrounded with ease and safety and plenty, while out there toil and danger and hunger "followed fast and followed faster." Then

across, our bridge of brush had sunk beneath the ooze, and the people crossed on slender poles, or jumped across aided by the carcasses of two horses that had conveniently perished in the mire. Our mother, in attempting to walk a pole with her youngest child in her arms, fell in and was fished out in such a state that her children did not know her. We never before saw mother look like that.

We pitched our camp on the bank, and soon after dark one of those dreaded prairie storms came up and showed us how sloughs were made. The tempest lasted through the night; the slough overflowed its banks, covering our camp by morning with water several inches deep. One of my brothers and I had made our bed on the ox yokes in the tent while the rest were curled up in the wagon. Ox yokes are not very good mattresses—there is not enough spring in them. At least I thought so then. At about midnight we were awakened to find our tent blown down upon us, and our bed floating, while we, almost suffocated, were taking a bath somewhere in the interior. We climbed, dripping, into the wagon, which we found by feeling through the darkness, and stood up in wet misery until morning, then plodded on our joyful way.

We crossed the Mississippi River on a little ferry boat, just large enough to hold one wagon and team, propelled by two horses, one on each side of the boat, in a treadmill. We had to sail up a western branch of the river about seven

miles to find a landing that offered ground firm enough to bear our wagons.

A picture lingers in my memory of us children all lying in a row on the ground in our tent, somewhere in Iowa, stricken with the measles, while six inches of snow covered all the ground and the trees were brilliant with icicles. A delay of a week to enjoy the measles put us on our feet again, and we drove on.

As we drew near Council Bluffs on the Missouri River, the cry of "Indians, Indians," turned me into stone. Just ahead, a band of blanketed, feathered, beaded, fringed, wild looking objects barred our way and halted us. I thought our days were numbered, and that the days of my life were eleven years and five months. I felt sad to have to die so young. But remembering then that there were just two classes of people in the world, the quick and the dead, I said to myself, "Come, now, I must be quick or I'll be dead." So, forgetting my pistol, with which I was going to slay whole tribes of Indians—an old Allen's revolver more dangerous to the shooter than to the shootee—forgetting that pepper-box as we called it, I slunk under the wagon in abject terror, peering through the wheels to watch the proceedings and take my last look at the landscape. I had just commenced to say "Now I lay me down to sleep," for I thought it was time to pray, when to my unutterable joy they held out peaceable hands to beg. They were a band of friendly Pawnees and I was anxious to give them all we had.

The next day we drove into Council Bluffs, the last outpost of civilization—the fitting-out place for the long journey through the wilderness. What the wilderness meant in those days you can hardly comprehend now. You recline in a palace car and in less than three days are whisked from the Missouri to the Pacific, past smiling farms and flourishing cities, while the dining car supplies all your wants; and as you doze in comfort on an easy couch, visions of long ago may troop across the field. An old emigrant trail winds among the hills, through the sage covered plains, over the mountains, across alkali deserts; canvas covered wagons drawn by gaunt and hungry oxen creep by; dirty, ragged specimens of humanity, big and little, drag themselves wearily on, crying for water, crying for bread. Indians, skulking on their trail, swoop down on any unprotected party with a yell which, once heard, will echo and re-echo in your ears as long as life lasts.

You can but dimly realize that from the Missouri to the Sacramento one may encounter not a solitary face of the white man except, now and then, an Indian trader or a trapper as wild as the Aborigines, an Army Post at Fort Laramie, and a Mormon settlement at Salt Lake more hostile than the Indians. It was the home of wild animals in their primeval fierceness, and the hunting grounds of the Ishmaelites of the plains.

The air was thick at Council Bluffs with tales of Indian massacres, starvation and pestilence. Here we met many people returning with har-

rowing stories of blood-curdling horrors; the one refrain was that the plains were alive with Indians on the war path. In fact, the storm was brewing that burst about nine years later and resulted in the great Indian massacres of the frontier settlers along the Missouri in 1861.

It required stout hearts to stem this gloomy, regurgitating tide. Our company quailed before it and went to pieces, some settling there and some returning home. Our teamster, as faint-hearted as the rest, deserted us in spite of Mother's earnest pleadings; and there we were, stranded on the swollen Missouri. Having nothing to look backward to, as all our hopes in life were in the West, and all our wealth in that wagon, our Mother, remembering Lot's wife, kept her eyes toward the sunset. After a week's delay making final preparation for the journey, and in waiting for the flood to subside, she crossed the river and pushed out into the mysterious West, into the teeth of the unknown terrors—alone with her six little children.

Our first camp was made near a Pawnee campody where Omaha now stands; and here in sight of these wild men of the plains, realizing her loneliness and utter helplessness, even our mother's resolution wavered, and she seemed to be catching at straws for support. For a moment she appeared to lean on her little children. She asked us if we wanted to go on, and if we thought we could drive the team, and if we were afraid of the Indians. Of course we could drive the team, and we had just lost our fear of In-

dians; besides, were we not almost there? Then in the loneliness of that night, we saw her—her form revealed by fitful flashes of our fire—kneeling beside a log, pleading earnestly for a vision of the guiding hand to point her destined way; and the spirit, if not the language, of her petition was:

“Lead, Kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom,
Lead Thou me on,
The night is dark and I am far from home,
Lead Thou me on.”

With the coming of the morning, the astral glow in her eyes told us we were going on, so, casting a farewell glance at Council Bluffs and the Missouri River, we cut loose from the effete civilization of the East and threw ourselves on the tender mercies of the Red Men, the deserts and the pestilence; and we found them all, though stern at times, no worse on the whole than some of the degenerate sons of Japheth.

In a week or so we fell in with another company who loaned us a man to drive our team; for, as the difficulties grew apace, our strength proved unequal to the demands. This company proved to be mostly a band of roughs, and our new teamster a cowardly reprobate; we found our trials much increased by his help. One of his fiendish deeds, burned into my memory, was the killing of our chickens and banqueting his boon companions on them. How I did ache to empty my Allen's pepper-box into him, for those were the only chickens in the world. I know it is wrong, but I have not lost that feeling yet, and

I tremble to think of the tragedy that would happen if I should ever meet him with my seven-chambered artillery that shoots backward. Still we endured him as long as human nature could endure for the sake of the protection his company afforded.

The cholera had been raging along the Platte a few weeks ahead of us, and, in one day's drive of fourteen miles, we counted thirty-two new made graves with the inscription on the head-board announcing the death by cholera. As the Sierras were waiting at the latter end of the journey with a winding sheet of snow for all belated travelers, the trains dared not wait for the recovery of the stricken ones, but often left them by the roadside with a couple of watchers to bury them when the end came; the stories ran that if the patient lingered too long he was sometimes buried before life was extinct.

It was a time that tried men's souls. By a long delay the watchers might be left so far in the rear that they would never overtake their train, but would be gathered in by the Indians.

We had heard many tales of buffaloes—of trains being run over and people trampled to death by a wild stampede of these shaggy monsters; and we had not long to wait for an unwelcome introduction to them. One morning a large herd was seen on the other side of the Platte River in full sweep toward our camp, which was pitched on the bank. Into the river they plunged, forced on by the mass in the rear, churning the water into foam and heading straight for us as

the only landing place in the vicinity. We all turned out and by shouting, gesticulating and firing into the herd we succeeded in sheering them off a little to one side and escaped with only the destruction of a tent or two and some shattered nerves. We had jerked buffalo meat dangling from our wagon bows from this time until we left their haunts, in the Rocky Mountains. On the Laramie Plains we would sometimes hear a low continuous rumble like distant thunder, and a long black line would appear on the horizon, growing longer and larger until the rumble swelled into a roar, and an immense herd of buffaloes swept by in mad career. These herds were often followed by a band of whooping savages, and their wake would be lined by dead buffaloes with arrows protruding from their sides. These were grand and stirring sights which this earth will never witness again. The buffaloes are gone—slain by the vandal hand of civilized man, merely for his amusement or for their hides.

As the streams and springs where we expected to find water were often dried up, every wagon carried a cask of water for emergencies, and detours off the road were frequently made in search of water and pasture.

In one of these detour camps, a little three year old boy, the only child of his doting parents, was missed at supper time, and we all turned out exploring the country far and near through the dense sage brush that covered all the ground, without finding a trace of him. Soon after dark a terrific storm arose, lasting through the night

and destroying all hopes of finding the child alive. However, the search was renewed at dawn, but, by nine o'clock, it was decided that he had probably been devoured by the wolves that we had heard in the lulls of the storm, and the company, all but our family, hitched up and drove on—our teamster with them—leaving the stricken parents alone in their despair.

In about an hour, a man rode up on horseback inquiring whether we had lost a little boy, as one had been found that morning about two miles away, moaning under a sage bush, nearly dead. It was our missing boy, and the delirious parents took him and turned their team towards home, while we overtook our train in camp that night and rejoined our precious teamster.

At the north fork of the Platte, our trail crossed to the south side, but the ferry had been washed away by a flood, and the river was too deep and treacherous to be forded. Some of the men swam to an island in the middle of the stream and attempted to haul a wagon over with ropes, but the wagon with all its freight disappeared in the flood, carrying one of the men under it to a watery grave. Another was swept down by the swift current until rescued some distance below by a man on horseback, who swam out and brought him to shore clinging to the horse's tail. We spent two days attempting various schemes for crossing, but the treacherous current and dangerous quicksands baffled all our efforts. When the prospect had begun to look too gloomy for words, two Mormons arrived

with timber for a boat, and we all lent a hand in its construction. In a week it was launched and we prepared to cross, when the ferrymen, ignoring our labor on the boat, demanded a price for ferriage which would almost confiscate our outfit. We compromised the matter by posting a guard of our roughs over them with cocked rifles, while we ferried ourselves across as an offset to our work on the boat; then treating those profane ferrymen to a bath in the Platte to cool them off, we drove on.

From this time on the trail was marked with ruin. Broken down wagons, harness, trunks, camp-utensils, mining machinery, dead animals in all stages of decay lined the road, and the track of the Indian was over it all. Almost every day we met parties returning home with pitiful and heartrending tales of massacre and starvation.

It was well that we were not alone in these regions, for the Autochthons of the soil were watching us. Now and then a roving band of Sioux warriors would swoop past us on their horses or hang on our flanks for days looking for a favorable opportunity to gather us in. Our picket guard had no inclination to sleep at night, and the serenade of the wolves was a cheering sound because it told us that the Indians were not there.

We parked our wagons in a circle at night, stretching chains across the openings, and drove our stock inside, while the sentinels, with horses hobbled or picketed near at hand, were posted

at a little distance from camp with weapons ready for instant action. We made our beds in and under the wagons or in tents, and, as we children laid our tired bodies on the ground to sleep, we repeated as faithfully as we could:

“If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

And too often, what with prowling beasts and prowling Indians on our track, the chances seemed largely against our ever waking again.

As we reached the crest of a ridge one day on the Laramie Plains, we saw just ahead of us a band of a hundred or more Sioux lining both sides of the road. A halt was called for a council of war, in which it was decided to drive boldly on carrying our guns ready for action. Our cowardly teamster was taken suddenly sick at this decision and crawled into the wagon out of sight so that I was compelled to drive our team through that living lane; it was an arrangement that I did not fully appreciate, for I wanted to climb into the wagon myself, only I did not want to be found dead with that teamster.

While making this drive quaking with fear I saw several Indians amusing themselves at my expense. One of them took my whip and brought it down with all his force on the back of my favorite ox, Old Brock, who jumped and struggled so violently as to alarm us. I sprang with a scream and snatched the whip out of the Indian's hands before he could strike another

blow, for we never whipped Old Brock. Why, he was mine! I had raised him and his mate, Old Nig, from calfhood and yoked them up with a primitive homemade yoke when they were only six months old, and they had dragged me wildly over the fields on a home-made sled and dumped me into snow banks and scattered me around as though it was proper. But I had trained them up until now they were big, strong four year old wheelers dragging us to California, and here was a wild Indian lashing them in savage glee just to see them jump. I went mad, and the Whites and the Reds began to swarm, but those disturbers of the peace saved the day by springing around us, shoving the offender to one side and saying things to us in words that I could not spell.

Thus convinced that they were not hostile we camped within a mile of their wigwams, and they swarmed about us all the evening trading and begging. Some of the squaws sat down and made us children each a pair of moccasins from buffalo hide, receiving in payment seven pins per pair. On comparing their pins they found that one had eight, so the rest all came back for another pin, which they got.

They were anxious to buy white children, offering a pony for a boy and two for a girl; but no mother wished to sell her children at that price, though our teamster tried to dispose of me in this way, claiming that was more than I was worth. I had just been expressing my opinion of his style of bravery. Our mother

bought a fine pony for a blanket and a pint of sugar, and I mounted him bare backed with a hackamore bridle, in Indian fashion, to try him out. I never had been on a horse before, and he, discovering that it certainly was no Indian astride of him, ran away with me and tried me out, and found me wanting—to get off and walk. Nevertheless I clung to him for dear life as he hustled over the plain, and in a few minutes I was in the camp of the aborigines. These “Noble Red Men” were very hilarious over my feat of bare back riding, but I was paralyzed at the thought that I was to be an Indian the rest of my life. However, after performing what I took to be my ghost dance around me, and feasting me on buffalo meat or wolf, or some such abomination, several red boys mounted their ponies and escorted me back, and we concluded that Indians were not so bad as they were painted. This proved to be a very friendly tribe.

After this our teamster became more worthless and abusive than ever, and on the Fourth of July our roughs celebrated their “personal liberty” with a drunken brawl and a free fight. As a consequence our mother decided once more to forsake civilization and to take her chances with the wild men and wild animals rather than longer endure the teamster and his associates. In order to get rid of him peaceably she yielded to his demand for a pair of blankets and some provisions from our fast dwindling stores, and we pitched our tent by the willows of a little stream while the train drove on. We watched

their white-topped wagons as they disappeared "out into the West, out into the West as the Sun went down," and we were again alone in the midst of a vast solitude somewhere near the Rocky Mountains—six babes of the wild with our mother. A very lonely feeling overshadowed us as we lay in our tent that night and listened to the ominous growl of the wolves at our very door, a harbinger of the famine wolf hard on our track, and visions of our humble home in Michigan shone bright in the dark setting of that gloom.

From this day forth our faithful team obeyed only our piping treble until they dropped by the wayside one by one, and the staggering remnant dragged us to the Pacific Shore.

Our many delays had thrown us to the rear of the emigration so that the pastures were almost all fed bare and our cattle were getting gaunt and weak. Once in a while, a belated train would overtake us, and we would whip up to travel in their company, until our weary team would totter so far in the rear that their wagons would fade away toward the sunset, and like the Ancient Mariner we could cry, "Alone, alone, all, all alone, alone on a wide, wide sea"—of sand and alkali and prickly pears.

On the Sweetwater River, we came across a band of friendly Crow Indians moving camp in search of better hunting grounds. They traveled with us a week or more, marching by day in our front and on our flanks and erecting their wigwams near us at night. We presented a

strange and weird scene in camp, and a motley and picturesque procession en route: red men in rich robes of bear and panther skins decked out with fringe and feathers; red men without robes or feathers, and unwashed; favorite and actually handsome squaws in elegant mantles of bird skins, tattooed and adorned with beads; unlovely squaws in scanty rags and no beads, and unwashed; papooses rolled in highly ornamented cradles grinning from the backs of their ancestors; toddling papooses without a rag, and unwashed; ponies hidden under monumental burdens; packs of dogs creeping under wonderful loads; and, bringing up the rear, an old ox team with six wild, ragged children and a woman once called white, and sometimes unwashed, for we could not always get water enough to drink. We were a Wild West Show.

Every tree and every rock, and even the elk horns, quite plentiful in some regions, were covered with the names of the pilgrims; and it was like meeting a friend in a "weary land" to discover a familiar name. Independence Rock, a famous landmark on the Sweetwater River, was a veritable pilgrim history, an enormous Rosetta Stone, where people had carved their names a hundred feet up its perpendicular sides, letting themselves down with ropes to find blank pages in this great stone book. Can you imagine our joy on finding our father's name among the rest, placed there two years before? Our names are now there with his if "Time's effacing finger" has not rubbed them out.

In this region grasshoppers were so thick as to dim the light of the sun and make us shield our faces at times with handkerchiefs or veils. Every green thing was devoured, and before we escaped from this plague of locusts, two of our oxen starved to death, and we yoked up our two cows to take their places.

With a lean and worn out team at the tail end of the procession we entered the alkali tracts, only to find the pasturage eaten up, dried up and burned up, and the August sun beating fiercely down on the brackish alkali pools from which we must often drink or die of thirst. Our cows soon lay down and yielded up the bovine ghost; then the death rattle was heard in the throats of two more of our faithful beasts; and we dragged ourselves on with four lean skeletons that actually rattled as with slow and dragging step they wobbled about. It was with mingled feelings of pity for them and alarm for ourselves that we saw these dumb creatures, our only friends, roll up their eyeballs and stretch out their limbs in death after faithfully drawing us so far on our way; and with heavy hearts we looked back on their poor old skeletons as we drove on and left them alone. It seemed a heartless, wicked thing to leave them a prey to the wolves.

We cast aside everything but the most absolute necessities; we exchanged our wagon for a lighter one that we found abandoned—and we had our choice of many—and wondered when the end would come and what that end would be.

How dreary and lonely seemed the solitude of those boundless plains, boundless as a shoreless sea to our vision; and as we crept like a snail, a dozen or fourteen miles a day, week after week, without sight of hill or tree, it seemed as though our camp each night was on the spot of the night before, and we were only marking time on the desert sands. Although pity was rare in those wilds, and the fiend in man's nature came out in strong colors, I saw a few tears trickling over the bronzed, hard faces of some strangers that found us camped one night in a grassless, treeless, cactus waste, with our water cask entirely empty. They gave us a cup of water apiece from their scanty store and helped us on for a few days, to greener fields; and we added to our childish prayer:

“God bless these good people.”

We made Herculean efforts to keep pace with these good Samaritans, but they soon went beyond the western horizon as “other friends had done before.”

In the Bear River country, roving bands of Blackfeet warriors were often discovered watching us from the surrounding hills, while signal smokes appeared on prominent peaks; and woe to any unprotected party that ventured on their domain.

You will never know the sensation we felt on seeing clear cut against the sky on some frowning or overhanging ridge, a troop of red demons in battle attire, looking down on us as we crept