

LIFE ON THE PLAINS

Extracts of a letter from Waters Curtis, a former resident of Sangamon county.

Indian Territory,)
May 27, 1849)

We are now in the land of the buffalo, well and hearty, on the South Fork, near the crossing, 450 miles from Independence.

The Platte is one of the most splendid rivers I ever saw to look at; it is from one to three miles wide; with a valley from five to fifteen miles wide; winding its course through entire prairie. The river contains a great many islands, with a few cotton wood trees and willows upon them, but there is no timber on either shore. Irving well says that "it is the most beautiful and useless river in the world."

There are at present 26 wagons and 30 men in our train. We are getting along well, although the grass is short. The season appears to be very backward, and so cold that I have worn an overcoat for the last four days.

To-day, for the first time, we saw buffalo. They seem to have left the road on account of the emigration. Old signs are very plenty. The plains look like an old pasture field. The grass is cut off short and the ground almost covered with manure by the buffaloes. The soil seems to be good here, and would produce well; but the timber is lacking.

The Springfield and Petersburg folks are all behind. I heard from them last night, and they were all well. We have passed a great many mule teams on the road.

June 1, 1849.

We are now 100 miles further on than when I commenced this letter. We crossed the south branch about 50 miles from the mouth, and then struck over to the north branch. The south fork or branch is about three-fourths of a mile wide, is very shallow, the water being more than eighteen inches deep. We passed through it without any difficulty. But in crossing over from the north to the south fork, we had to encamp about midway between the two streams, on the high prairie, and there we had a real stampede.

Soon after supper we saw that a storm was coming up. We had a 'corral' formed with our wagons, connected with chains, so as to hold our cattle, which we drove into the enclosure, and had a guard placed around them. By this time the storm came on with great fury, sweeping down most of the tents. It soon became dark; the storm continued; the rain fell in torrents; and it was very cold. About mid-night the cattle made a rush with the course of the wind, mashed down three wagons, and the most of them got away. In the morning we found that about 120 of our cattle were missing. The rain and wind still continued, but we started out to hunt for our cattle, and we returned in the afternoon with most of them, cold, wet and hungry,

and we had no wood, not even enough to make coffee. The rain and snow continued all day and most of the night. This night we tied up all our oxes with ropes.

The next morning we continued on our way for the north fork, where is a little wood as well as water, with what teams we had. One yoke of my cattle was missing. Fifteen men continued the hunt for the missing cattle, found all of them over on the south fork, and returned with them, overtaking us when we were near the Platte river, in Ash Hollow. One of my partners did not return with the rest, and did not overtake us till to-night, which left him two days behind, but he brought with him some stray oxen,--so that our team has increased, instead of having been diminished. To-day the weather has been pleasant and quite warm.

Out of the three wagons that were broken at the stampede, we made two, and took the load of the third in the other wagons.

One of my partners, Mr. Hawley, killed a buffalo the other day, the first killed by any of our train.

The country has changed in appearance since we crossed the south fork. Instead of a rich soil and sloping bluffs, we have a sandy soil and high rocky cliffs. We are now on a stretch of 150 miles without wood, and the rains have injured the qualities of buffalo chips for fuel.

Fort Laramie, June 7, '49

We have, at length, reached Fort Laramie, all well and hearty. We arrived about dark to-night and moved beyond the road about a mile and a half, where we encamped. The lights about the fort made it look like home. We are getting along finely. Within the last six days, we have traveled one hundred and forty miles. The road is good and grass plenty,--better than we shall have hereafter. We now leave the Platte valley and cross over the hills. The Platte is now quite narrow and deep, and the bluffs close in on both sides and assume quite a mountainous appearance. We have been in sight of Laramie's peak for the last two days. It is one of the highest peaks of the Rocky Mountains.

We met some mormons yesterday from the Salt Lake, and they tell us as fine tales as ever of the gold diggings. They had some gold dust with them. We shall reach the South Pass in sixteen days, if we have reasonable luck. Watson, Biddle and Co., are still behind. We out-travel many of the mule teams. They are too heavily loaded and their wagons are too heavy. A great many are leaving their wagons and packing thro'. First rate wagons can be bought at fort Laramie at from fifteen to twenty dollars. Laramie river is about 40 yards wide, and so deep when we crossed it that we had to raise our wagon beds, to prevent the water from running into them.

June 8, '49

We stop to-day and rest and sun our loads, as it is a fine day. The nights are now very cold and the days are hot. We have a good deal of thunder and wind, but not much rain.

The country is getting quite barren and sandy. No grass is to be found except on the river and creek bottoms. Some scrubby pines and cedars are seen on the bluffs and some cotton wood in the bottoms. We saw no buffalo within seventy miles of the fort.

The chimney rock is quite a curiosity. It is situated about seventy-five miles below the Fort.--It stands out from the point of a bluff on a mound. Its whole height is about three hundred feet. It can be seen twenty-five miles. The mound is formed of a kind of soap stone, which is fast wasting away. It looks in the distance like the chimney of a large mill or factory. The castle rock and court house, and many other rocks, are great curiosities. Adieu, till you hear from me again.