

Recollections of the Plains

1 Thirty-seven years ago a party numbering forty wagons and two hundred persons ferried across the Missouri River and encamped for the night on the ground where the city of Omaha now stands.

Nothing save a trading post, a few Pawnee Indians and their ponies was visible to the emigrants bound as they all were for the Land of Gold.

The morning of May 13th, 1855 dawned bright and lovely. The camp was early astir--as the last preparation had been made for the long journey before us--and the work of harnessing fiery horses and yoking unbroken steers was among the amusing incidents of breaking the first encampment.

About 9 a. m. the wagons with their covers white as snow began falling into line of march, following the dim road which wound snake-like over the bluffs to the prairie which seemed an unbroken surface, until lost in the western horizon.

2 The first day of travel was one of excitement, refractory animals had to be subdued, horses reared and plunged in their harness, oxen shied and bellowed at the approach of strangers, requiring all the skill of their drivers to bring them into anything like order. Day closed and found us but a few miles on our way. The camp was made early and the work of organizing ourselves into an army for protection was soon arranged, for reports had already reached us that the Indians over whose domain we were to travel were likely to be troublesome. Every precaution was at once taken, guards were chosen and instructions as to duty made known to them. Supper being over the pickets assumed their posts and the remainder of the party retired for the night to dream of those left behind and to form plans for the future which awaited them in the land toward the setting sun.

The morrow opened sad and rainy; the untraveled road soon became a mire hole. So many animals driving their hoofs into the new black soil made it almost impossible for those in the rear to drag the heavily laden wagons through its miry depths. Streams full to their banks had to be forded, for no ferries or bridges were there by which we might pass over. But buoyant with anticipations and strong in purpose every obstacle was overcome and the writer, then a youth of fourteen summers, well remembers the loud exclamations and "whoa hawings" of the teamsters as they forced the unwilling animals into each stream that came in our way.

3 Gradually the excitement wore away and the end of the first week found all well disciplined, performing with exactness the several duties devolving upon each male member of the miniature army. Slowly we wended our way along the banks of muddy sloughs and over slippery hills until reaching Platte River whose low borders and turbulent waters meandering over quicksands reminded us we were fast passing beyond the abode of civilized man. Each day brought new scenes and landscapes beautiful to look upon; mountains rising in the distance defying our approach, buffaloes and antelope making their appearance by coming to the river in night time to quench their thirst but flying away like the wind when the first dawn of light revealed to their astonished gaze the ghost-like wagons scattered over their pasture ground.

Fort Kearney was passed by with nothing happening to mar our progress until reaching a small stream known as Snake River where the sadness of the scene witnessed there will never be effaced from my memory. Near its banks upon a slight mound we laid away to rest one of our companions, a little girl who had been ill since the commencement of our journey. As the company stood around the grave prepared with rude implements, for no sexton was there to perform the last sad duty, the coffin, a large trunk and in

it the idol of a fond mother soon to leave it on that desert spot until the morning of Eternity shall dawn; the wolves howling nearby; the desolation of the place; the anguish of the grief stricken parents, all combined to make it almost heart breaking.

4 I have passed through many sad trials since then, but when I compare them none has left a more vivid remembrance of sorrow than when we heaped the stones and earth upon that sepulchre by the roadside and turned away to resume our march.

Fort Laramie with its white washed walls soon appeared in the distance, but on the opposite side of the river we halted and made a tour of inspection, found a company of U. S. soldiers quartered there to protect travelers from the roving bands of Sioux who quite often indulged in robbing trains or stampeding horses of the careless emigrants.

Here we began a gradual ascent the funeral sides of the Black Hills rose in boldness before us and viewing these from afar, little did we think their lava slopes were to be crimsoned with the blood of our fellow pilgrims.

The scarcity of grass had some time before compelled us to disband. The train of forty wagons was divided into four trains of ten wagons each that the animals might be better provided with forage without going too far from the main road, as the Indians were burning the grass for miles on each side of us, compelling those in charge of the stock to go more than four miles into the mountains to obtain sufficient food for the horses and oxen.

5 The ascent of the Black Hills soon gave evidence our way over them would be no easy task, but we journeyed slowly on and finally reached the descending side and encamped again on Platte River, where we found grass in abundance concluding to remain a few days that the jaded animals might rest and regain strength for the route before us lay across alkali plains and sandy deserts.

Fires were kindled; supper prepared; the animals were allowed to stray farther than usual for no signs of Indians had been seen for several weeks and the company felt a sense of security which suddenly turned into a scene of disaster and bloodshed.

The sun had passed behind the high bluff to the west of us and the shadows of night were gathering around that quiet spot, men were reclining upon the grass smoking their pipes, the mothers preparing themselves and children for repose in their tents and wagons free from fear of the tragedy so soon to be enacted upon that camp ground.

6 It was time the horses were brought in and secured for the night. The father of the writer taking upon himself the task of driving the stock nearer by, set out on foot to where he might be able to catch a horse and return driving in the entire herd. He had not gone more than a quarter of a mile when he secured one of his own and mounting it, started the band toward camp. He had not proceeded far on his return before meeting a young lady of the train and a six year old sister of the writer in search of a cow which had strayed beyond the limit of regulation. By the time the cow was reached and in the act of milking, a sound as though the mountains were crashing from their base broke upon the ears of the bewildered girls.

My father had passed behind a point or rocks which made down from the bluff toward the river, hiding them from his view, but the piercing shriek of his child reached him, hurriedly riding back where he could look up the stream, beheld the frightened girls fleeing for their lives, and in close pursuit more than thirty Sioux warriors clad in hideous garb, warpaint on their faces, and with demonical yells, were urging their fleet of horses toward the defenceless girls. It was the work of but a moment. My father to save his child or die in the attempt, to reach them before the Indians could was the only hope of saving the girls. With fleet horses on either side each rushed

for victory, the Indians intent upon plunder and murder if need be, the other alone inspired with fearlessness to do and dare in the face of so many red devils, whose shouts of exaltation made the evening air resonant with crim. [sic]

The seconds were hours of agony to the distracted girls who cried in their despair, "Father, save us," but with firmness and deliveration of purpose he grasped my sister by the

7 arm and brought her safely on the horse in front of himself, and not a second to spare for at that instant a powerful redskin dealt him a blow across the head which nearly unseated him, but his horse dashed away from his pursuer before another thrust of his lance could reach its intended victim.

Maddened with defeat the Indian spurred his foaming horse until the blood streamed from his sides and on nearing camp, the hope of obtaining my sister gone, he again hurled his lance with deadly aim but the fleetness of the horse my father rode carried him almost beyond reach of the blow which entered his back near the right shoulder to the depth of half an inch.

The Indian turned away and sought his companions, who were endeavoring to separate the horses from the oxen, for in their fright all together had made a charge on the camp ground and it was with difficulty the Indians could separate them.

My father reached camp and gave his child into the arms of my mother. His wound although painful was not severe enough to require immediate attention and he at once accompanied by others retraced his steps to find the young lady left behind as the unmanageableness of his horse with no bridle prevented giving her any aid more than telling her to lie down in the tall grass. But a stalwart brave discovered her hiding place and attempted to carry her off but received in the face a blow from her milk pail which caused him to spear her seven

8 times in the back and shoulders and left her as he supposed dying. Still she had strength to stand up and feebly make her way toward camp where she was met soon as possible and conveyed to the train, her wounds examined which fortunately were not deep, and unless made with a poisoned spear not fatal, which a few hours would determine.

After the excitement was over we looked around for the result and found one half of our horses driven away with but one red devil sent to the happy hunting grounds. So sudden was the attack that scarcely a gun was in readiness or at hand. Many were sitting in their tents and did not realize the stampede until the frightened animals overturned the tents they occupied.

How most of the horses followed by thirty or more Indians passed among the wagons without doing much damage or killing someone has always seemed providential, for no one was injured, save by fear in their wild chase. It seems that some thirty or forty probably picked men, were to dash down upon us while in the distance a reserve force was kept should our numbers prove too strong for the advance host whose yells accompanied by the sound of many bells hung around their horses made the charge truly appalling.

Soon as the horses were in their power the Indians began a retreat driving their prizes away in defiance and with shouts of victory. After following for several miles but distance

9 only increased the number of Indians with no chance of recovery the men turned disheartened away and returned to camp.

Night closed in over a sad and despondent company. The wounded girl was cared for and my father's wounds he paid little or no attention to. But the morrow was to dawn upon us with no means of going forward or even retracing our way. Some who possessed the day before ten horses could on that gloomy morning count but one.

A council was called, a vote taken as to what should be done and resulted in going forward. Then began the destruction of everything which might fall into the hands of our foes.

All but the absolute necessities and provisions were destroyed, wagons and carriages left on the spot as monuments of our misfortune. Carts were constructed from the hind wheels of wagons, cows made to take the place of oxen and the following day with sad hearts, began again our toilsome way.

Our hope lay in reaching the bridge on Platte River some sixteen miles distant where we might possibly purchase teams and continue the journey. More than a week was consumed in going that distance. A few miles a day was all we could drag our sand clogged carts and wagons over but will and human strength finally conquered for on reaching the trading post found we could purchase oxen at reasonable rates as a train had just arrived from Salt Lake and were willing to  
 10 dispose of the entire outfit which was bought and we were again on the road day by day increasing the distance between ourselves and the homes of our childhood.

The teams we had purchased showed no signs of fatigue until reaching the desert but hay was provided for them by being cut on the Big Meadows for forty miles without grass or water was next in order and it was proposed to make the distance in night time so as to avoid the scorching sun which in day time was almost melting hot. But we crossed safely and encamped on the Carson River near Rag Town, a place known by that name being built entirely of tents and cloth houses.

There we found vegetables in abundance which were relished after so many months privation. We remained there a few days to rest and prepare for the climbing of the Sierra Nevadas which was successfully accomplished and the 7th day of September found us landed in Sacramento.

Since then very few comprising that number have ever met. The young lady wounded by the Indians recovered and I am informed lives in Northern California.

My father retained his animosity toward the Sioux to the latest moment of his life and my sister has ever afterward trembled in fear at the sight of a red man.

The iron horse has driven the bands of hostile Indians from the roadside and as I passed a few years since in a lightning express train over the very ground upon which  
 I had  
 11 tented in my early migration hither, I could but rejoice at the change for the slow ox teams had given way to trains whirling you along at thirty miles an hour in luxury and contentment.

Should this meet the eye of any who were my fellow travelers in that rather eventful trip it may renew in their memories the incidents connected therewith and rehearse in their minds the feelings of loneliness and desolation of that little company adrift with their loved ones in the midst of that desert land.