

CROSSING the PLAINS

in 1862

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My father, John F. Walker, was much interested in California, its climate and gold mines, and in 1849 fitted out some young men who were desirous of going there to search for gold. If they were successful he was to share in their success. I do not remember the result of the venture.

During the Pikes Peak gold excitement in 1859, my father left his home in Vernon Springs, Howard County, Iowa, to go to Pikes Peak. On the way he met his brother Elijah who was returning from there and his brother advised him to return home, telling him, "The prospects for finding gold are not good." Not wishing to give up his trip, he came to California and stayed for a year in Quincy, Plumas County. Then he went back to bring his family. His business detained him in Iowa until 1862 when we started on our journey.

At Omaha a group of people intending to come to California organized themselves into a train, electing my father captain. It was very important for us to have good camps where there was plenty of feed for the stock and good pure water for all. It was of the utmost importance to have a man of experience and good judgment in charge of such a journey as that, when the lives of all the party were in danger for weeks and months at a time. The knowledge of the country and camps that our captain had obtained when going over the country the first time was of great value to us.

Our train of forty wagons traveled twenty miles after leaving Omaha and camped on the Elkhorn River. At the river there was a ferry boat that had been built by an emigrant, who

after he had taken his train across the river, sold the boat to the next train for two dollars and fifty cents, expecting each train to do the same. The man who had charge of the boat when we came there wanted to sell it for thirty dollars, but our people took the boat, paying him two dollars and fifty cents for it, and after our train had come over we sold it to the next train for the same price.

I was interested in the Indians we saw there. One Indian had been to Washington and some one had given him a soldier's uniform which he was wearing with a white dress shirt that was clean but neither starched nor ironed. It was worn as an outside garment and gave him a very odd appearance. He had flattened and polished some silver coins, joined them together and fastened them to his hair so that they hung down from the crown of his head nearly to the ground. He looked fine and seemed to know it. I was much pleased to see a couple of dresses some showed us. They were made of very fine deer skin. One was trimmed with the teeth of some animal, bear I think. The teeth had been polished and looked beautiful. There were three rows of these teeth around the skirt and a row around the neck and sleeves and on the girdle. The moccasins also were trimmed with them. It was very artistic. The other dress was trimmed with beads. There was a broad band of beads six inches wide around the skirt and running thru it was a beautiful design of wild roses. To be worn with this dress was a small shoulder cape completely covered with bead embroidery and the girdle and moccasins were also of solid embroidery to match the dress. To add still more to their beauty both dresses were trimmed with deep fringe made

of deer skin. This description does not do them justice for they were very beautiful and I wanted one or both of them. I read in a paper recently that a dress had been purchased from an Indian woman the description of which was exactly like one of these, but the price astonished me; it was fifteen hundred dollars. The Indians were living on wigwags made of skins.

The latte river is a very dangerous river with its bed of quicksand. My father's best friend was drowned in it when he was on his first trip across the plains. He saw his friend in the river leaning against a sand bar and called to him saying, "Hold on, I am coming". Just then he was swept away. The latte was eighty rods wide in this place.

My memory takes me back to a time when I saw a tall, noble looking man standing on the lower fork of the latte river. A noble mind and determined purpose are written in every feature, and as he stands there looking out over the water, I can but wonder if his thoughts are of that old friend whom he saw swept away by the treacherous stream while he stood in that place two years before. This man is our captain, the one who is to lead us across the plains, the one upon whose shoulders rests the responsibility of guiding us thru dangers we little dreamed. We were fortunate to be under his leadership.

We had the most terrible thunder storms while traveling along the latte. I remember how the wind swept and howled around our camp. "I think, Captain," said one of the men, "we had better fasten the wagons to the ground or they will be swept into the river tonight." The night grows dark and we seek the shelter of the tent. Now the storm has burst in all

its fury. Flash upon flash of lightning, peal upon peal of thunder, till all the world is ablaze of light and our ears are deafened by the roar. How frail is that little cloth tent that stands between us and the dreadful storm.

I have very vivid recollections of the Castle Rocks. I have often wished to see them again just as I saw them then. I saw one large white rock that looked exactly like a house with chimney, window and green blind all complete. It was a nice grassy country where the Castle Rocks were and it looked as if each castle was surrounded by its own lawns.

On our way we passed acres and acres of country covered by mounds made by prairie dogs and we could often see little dogs and owls near the mounds. At one place we came to a great bank of snow probably fifteen feet high. As we started the middle of May this was a great surprise to us. Farther on we passed a place where, by digging down a few inches, we found ice. In a newspaper of September 4, 1925, we read, "Sioux Falls, South Dakota. In the Northwestern section of the Black Hills country workmen have dug up an 'ice mine'. The vein of ice is fifteen feet wide and ten feet thick and is on a hillside facing west where the sun has beaten all summer. The vein is ten feet under ground." This is probably similar to the one we saw. We saw long lines of government wagons drawn by fifteen yoke of oxen. We traded a yoke of large fat oxen that were footsore for a yoke of sinewy long horned oxen that were better able to stand the hardships of the trip.

When we reached Green River the water in the river was very high and the river appeared to be about a mile wide. We

took two wagon boxes and after caulking the cracks and covering them with tar, fastened them together end to end. Two of these boats were made for our train. The first wagon box carried only the rowers, but the one behind was piled high with the rest of the wagon, wheels, tongues, etc. and with the camp equipage and provisions. No freight was carried when passengers went, but the boat was piled high when loaded with freight. One woman packed her dishes and provisions in a tub and just as the boat was starting the tub slipped off the top of the pile and floated down stream. Her husband ran down stream, swam out and brought it back. The cattle were driven into the water and swam over. It was a great undertaking to move a train across a large swift river that way and many trips were made before all were over. I think the government made a mistake by not building bridges over these large rivers and also by not sending soldiers to guard the emigrants. This country would have been settled much sooner if this had been done. At Fort Bridger the army officer promised to send an army escort to guard us but failed to do so.

We passed several places where there had been massacres. We could always tell when we were coming to such a place for the ground would be covered with feathers. The Indians would empty the beads to get the ticks in which to carry the loot from the trains they had successfully attacked.

Before reaching American Falls on the Snake River in Idaho the Indians had stolen about twenty head of stock from us and some of our people wanted to go after them, but father said he could not have the train separated, that it was better to take care of what we had. Then we ferried across the river