

Overland in Forty-Nine

28 This part of our journey took us through a fine interesting country and I promised myself if I ever returned to the States, and was able, I should come back and spend a summer hunting buffalo. It did not occur to me that by that time the buffalo would be gone, and if anyone had suggested such an idea, who would have believed it possible that creatures roaming the country by thousands could be so ruthlessly slaughtered that in such a short time their species would have become almost extinct.

Not only was the country around here wild and beautiful, but the atmosphere was remarkably clear. For two days before we came up to it, we could easily see Chimney Rock, a landmark in what is now Nebraska. We were at that time on the North Fork of the Platte River.

Our camp life offered very little variety. When we halted at night we were usually too tired for games or
 29 sport of any kind. We smoked our pipes, talked when we felt like it, and did some guessing before we examined the odometer about the number of miles made during the day. In true American fashion--if we had anything to bet, and there was sometimes a little extra tobacco--we would back our opinions regarding the speed of the train with a wager. This was about the extent of our gaiety.

Almost every Sunday we laid by to rest the animals and repair damages. We usually had preaching by one of ^{the} three ministers of the company. A fairly good pulpit was made by setting a mess-chest on end, from which the Dominie delivered his sermon, and, looking upon the motley congregation, saw gathered closed about him a few cutting hair and performing the offices of barbers for each other, several doing their mending, others washing out a few shirts, and the cooks taking the opportunity to bake soda biscuit and bread, and boil beans. He also saw that no disrespect was intended and that, though they were not all in devotional attitudes, they were seldom inattentive and always joined lustily in the singing of the hymns.

To procure fuel was often very difficult now. Through a long stretch of this buffalo country it was impossible to find any wood whatever and here we learned that buffalo chips served very well--if it did not rain. The cooks carried flour sacks and picked up the dried chips during the day's march. When fuel was scarcest a competition among
 30 the cooks for a supply of chips sometimes occurred and in their haste to secure the necessary amount some chips, not as dry as they looked were occasionally encountered, with not altogether pleasant results. Once, in the captain's mess, when they supposed they were dining on fried buffalo steak, cut in small pieces, the captain--putting his fork into what he took to be a piece of steak--broke it in two, than asked the cook "What in the devil is this?" The latter examining it, found it was a chip instead of a steak. He made no apologies, but simply remarked, "I wondered what had soaked up all my bacon fat," as he tossed it away. They continued their meal in silence. Indeed we soon learned to eat under almost any circumstances. Before starting on the journey I had been greatly troubled with indigestion. After a week on the road I could eat my rations--pancakes and fried bacon--with relish, and usually wished I had more.

One Sunday, while camping, we were looking at the opposite bank of the river. It had the appearance of being covered with dark bushes, interspersed with green spots. One of the men declared the green changed its location. A glass was brought to bear on the hills and it was soon seen that they were covered with buffaloes. The wildest excitement prevailed in the camp. Several of those who had horses took their rifles and mounting, forded the river in search of sport. The river bed was quicksand and they

31 had much difficulty in reaching the opposite shore. They succeeded in killing one or two of the animals, but could only bring a small portion back to camp. They reported that there were thousands in this herd, which had probably come down to the river for water.

As some of us went to the stream to bathe one evening we saw a good wagon on the opposite shore. The canvas curtains, flapping idly in the breeze, seemed to invite investigation. Two of the men went over to see if anyone was around and if not, why the wagon was left there. They stumbled first upon a new made grave, then going to the wagon and looking in, saw the body of a poor young fellow who, apparently, had died of cholera, alone, without a soul to do him a kind service or say a soothing word. He had evidently buried his wife, unaided, and must have realized that he, too, was doomed, for he had turned his cattle loose. This was only one of the many tragic terminations to journeys begun in high hopes of success.

A short time afterwards on our march, near Scotts' Bluff (in what is now Idaho) word was passed along the train that there were buffaloes ahead. Every man saw that his rifle was in good order. I was in the rear of the train, but soon heard the firing. It proved to be a band of seven old bull buffaloes. When old they either desert the large herds or are driven out by the younger animals and rove by themselves. The men on horseback at the head of the train

32 divided this small band—some going to the right and others to the left. The former went in the direction of the precipice called Scott's Bluff, which is, perhaps, one hundred and fifty feet high. It is composed of soft sandstone and is full of seams and deep gullies formed by the action of the water. Some parts are very abrupt and rugged and about half way down is a shelf on which were lodged several straggling dead cedar trees that had been washed down from above.

The men on horses had several shots at the buffaloes. Mr. Ladd was on a fine animal, one of the best buffalo hunters in the company. It would give its rider a chance to make a good shot by taking him near to the game, and was very quick about dodging and avoiding attacks. After shooting at and making one successful retreat from an old fellow that was nearing the edge of the precipice, Mr. Ladd became anxious to disable him before he went over. In his excitement he confused his horse by pulling him the wrong way. The old bull, seeing his chance for revenge, turned on the horse, took him between the hind legs and pitched him heels over head, injuring him quite badly, but not permanently. Mr. Ladd was thrown several feet in advance. The buffalo then went over the precipice, striking the small shelf among the cedar trees, and scraped his way to the bottom. The fall broke one of his forelegs, the bone penetrating the skin, in spite of which he got up and started.

33 away, when one of Ladd's companions dismounted and, firing from the edge of the rock, stopped his further progress.

The endurance of these old fellows was wonderful and as long as a spark of life remained in them they would show fight if attacked.

The men on foot all had a chance at the three buffaloes which had been driven to the left of the train. One which had been shot seventeen times, with rifles and revolvers, finally laid down. The men expecting him to give up, formed a circle around him. He glared wickedly at us and we concluded to dispatch him at once. Our lieutenant, Mr. Cannon, moved up to give him a finishing shot, when he made a dangerous lurch at his tormentor. A timely shot from a revolver, taking effect in his eye, laid him out without injury to anyone. In a short time we had removed his hide and loaded his carcass into a wagon, which had been held back for that purpose. One of his companions which had received but two shots, traveled a short distance, then laid down and died.

34 The spot where we camped that Saturday was three or four miles away from this place. After dinner some of the cooks proposed going back on horseback and getting a few choice pieces from the animal that had gone over the bluff. We started late in the afternoon expecting to return before dark. On reaching the scene of the previous day's excitement, we looked over the rock and saw the buffalo lying at the bottom. Leaving one man to guard the horses--which we tied to a fallen tree--we started on foot to make the descent, following the waterways which were worn in the sandstone. We found it a very difficult matter to get down, there being a great many perpendicular "drops" that necessitated caution and sometimes compelled us to turn back. After making a considerable circuit and doing a good deal of sliding we finally reached the animal. Darkness had already begun to settled down upon us. We whipped out our knives and quickly selected the portions we thought most desirable--one choosing the loin, another the hump, and so on. I cut a good piece from one hind leg, making a slit in it, through which I slipped my hand, in order to carry it easily, and--with one of the party--hurried away from the others, anxious to get back to the horses, for that part of the country was inhabited by Sioux and Pawnee Indians, who might easily have seen us and in such a case would have found it a very simple matter to take advantage of our absence and run away with all our horses. It grew very dark and soon the prairie wolves began to howl dismally. After wandering among the hills and ravines for some time we realized that we had lost our way. We halloed and hooted long and loud, hoping to hear a response from some of our companions that would guide us. I was inclined to drop my buffalo meat, thinking that,

35 if we were obliged to sleep out all night, it would be better to have nothing that would attract the wolves, but my comrade urged me to hold on a little longer, saying, "Perhaps we will hear them pretty soon." At last we heard a faint reply and continuing to call, followed the sound of the answers until we reached our friends. Much relieved and very thankful we mounted our horses and returned to camp. The next day being Sunday we had plenty of time to feast on our fresh meat. That morning some of the men returned to the bluff for more buffalo. The wolves, however, had been there ahead of them and except his bones, horns and some hair there was nothing left of the big creature we had killed.

36 One day in this locality and shortly afterward, we made an early camp on the bank of a stream. The head cook of our mess thought he would try his luck at fishing. He was gone so long (this being contrary to the rules of camp) that I took my rifle and started up the stream to look for him.

The country hereabouts had a great many clusters of chaparel and greasewood bushes, large enough to hide a man, and along the river bank were here and there groups of willow trees.

As I made my way along I noticed an Indian dodging from one bush to another. He was so intently watching something that he did not see me, and I took pains to keep out of his sight. His expression was that of a tiger about to spring at its prey. He carried a bow, half drawn, in which was flint barbed arrow. I watched his movements and soon saw where his game was located. I followed--

37 unobserved by him--both of us dodging from one bush to the next, until I was about twenty feet from him, then stepping out in front I cocked my rifle. His countenance changed instantly. The fierce look gave way to one of fear. He saluted me with "Whoa, haw, God damn," and a cheerful smile. His English had evidently been learned from the drivers of ox teams. After delivering that rather unusual greeting he quickly disappeared among the bushes. I found our cook fishing quietly on the bank among some willows. He wore a bright red shirt which was undoubtedly the prize coveted by the Indian, who would likely have been well pleased to shoot him for the trophy and thus win, perhaps, the title of "Great Chief Red-Shirt-on-the-River."

Onemorning word came flying along the train that a band of hostile Indians was about to swoop down upon us. With this news came the order to close in with the wagons,

36 mass our forces in front of them and load our rifles. We made haste to do so, for we could ~~hard~~ already see the reckless riders drawing near. We were quickly in position to resist an attack. On they came towards the train at full speed. They were a band of twelve in war paint, feathers, fringes and all manner of toggery. The chief was the most fantastic creature we had ever seen. Even his pony was decorated in an unusual way--its ears being trimmed close to its head in little points, (like a bulldog's), and its tail notched up at the bottom like the end of an arrow, or the handle of a quill pen. The Indians made known, by motions to us, that they were searching for a party from another tribe that had been encroaching upon their buffalo land. The different tribes were constantly warring with each other and anything served as an excuse for an encounter. Their war paint, costumes and pantomime were very interesting to us. When we found they were not looking for us and after assuring them that we had not seen the ones they were hunting for, they dashed away and we were once more rolling along.

39 From time to time we came across queer looking objects in the trees. On investigation these proved to be the bodies of Indians wrapped, with all their trinkets and belongings, in large buffalo robes and suspended in the branches above the reach of wolves. The Indians so disposed of their dead, not (as some believe) to enable the good spirits to take their souls more easily to the "Happy Hunting Grounds," but to keep the bodies from being molested by wolves. I do not know if such precaution would have availed in the case of white men, but it is certain that if the bodies of those unfortunates, who perished of cholera or exposure going over, were not disturbed by wolves, the Indians opened the graves--no matter how deep they were--to get the clothing. In this way cholera was contracted, causing great fear among them and adding much to their distrust for us--they believing that we had poisoned them. They had no knowledge of the disease and were ignorant of remedies for it. A great many deaths occurred among them.

Though we saw a great deal of the "big game," we killed but few buffaloes, owing to the fact that we were kept moving very steadily, not wishing to lose any time, lest we should be overtaken by the snow and kept prisoners in the mountains. From start to finish ours was a forced march of over two thousand five hundred miles, the goal being to get over the Sierra Nevadas before we should be snowed under.

Our train was too large to move very rapidly. The smaller companies made much better time.

40 Two or three of our men were allowed to leave the train to hunt when we were in regions where antelope and deer were plenty, but they were seldom able to pack more than the hind-quarters of the game owing to the great distances they were obliged to travel to overtake the train or reach the camp, and this was so little to distribute among the sixty-two men that it was usually given to the sick. It would have been very unsafe for the men to stay so far from the train had it not been that the Indians were armed only with bows and arrows. Although very expert with these and using flint arrow-heads, they were hardly equal to rifles in case of an encounter. The Indians were often allowed to come into our camps, but we were obliged to keep pretty close watch of them, as they would steal anything from an ox-yoke to a tin cup. They placed very little value on the lives of their old squaws and often before venturing among us themselves, sent their old women to find out if we were friendly, reasoning that if these poor creatures, whose lives would not last much longer anyway, were not shot down, it would be perfectly safe for them to venture to visit us. Many of them had never before seen a wagon and our outfits were full of mysteries to them. Our revolvers were objects of especial wonder and interest--they thought they would continue shooting as long as we kept pulling the triggers!

Late one afternoon while we were in this vicinity, John Root missed one of his horses and turned back to look for it. Darkness fell before he found it, and as he began

to retrace his steps he came upon a camp of emigrants where an ox had just been killed. He ate supper with them, then bought a pice of the meat and stowing it in his canvas saddle bag resumed his journey. Finding it too dark to see the trail and feeling rather tired he decided to picket his ponies and sleep where he was. He made himself comfortable by putting his saddle on the ground for a head-rest, and rolling himself up in his blanket was soon asleep. He was disturbed in a short time by feeling his pillow pulled from under his head. Before he had time to wonder about it, the snarls and growls of wolves fighting over

41 the canvas bag told him what had aroused him and he blazed away in the direction of the three pairs of fiery eyes that now confronted him. He emptied both bafrels of his gun and howls of pain told of his success. He secured his saddle-bag and found one dead wolf lying beside it. Being sure that the others were gone he again laid down to rest. When morning came he looked over the ground of the evening's excitement and found another dead wolf in some bushes near by. He overtook us that morning.

Indians crept up to our corral one stormy night, not long afterwards, and undoing some of the chains from the wagon wheels, turned our cattle loose and stampeded them. The noise aroused us and mounting as many men as we had horses for, we immediately gave chase. The thieves had run them into a canyon where we soon overtook them and recaptured out stock. The night guard had a severe lecture read to them were accused of having been asleep in the wagons. This experience taught them a good lesson and made us all more watchful.

42 On the third day of July we were within two miles of Fort Laramie. A large majority of the company were anxious to have a Fourth of July celebration, so we concluded to remain camped and have a grand "blow out." All the mess chests were removed from the wagons and converted into tables, and the finest dinner we could get up, by drawing liberally on the commissary department, was prepared. Speeches were made, songs, sung, games played and general hilarity prevailed. Two good days were thus lost, which only Captain Potts and myself seemed to realize might be very valuable before our journey's end was reached.

The captain and I cut wood and grass and made charcoal, for repairing any breaks in the iron, or setting tires which often--in this dry country--became loose and required resetting. Indeed we were prepared for almost any emergency. In our company were a blacksmith, several carpenters, wagon-makers, millwrights, mechanics of all kinds and men of all professions.

We had a blacksmith's wagon containing a complete supply of necessary tools and under each wagon were slung extra tongues, axle-trees, ox-bows and other articles useful in cases of breakage.

43 On the fifth of July we arrived at Fort Laramie, at the foot of the Rocky Mountains, or Black Hills, four thousand four hundred and seventy feet above the level of the sea. There were stationed at the fort about fifty men--officers and soldiers. There were several camps of mountaineers, trappers and Indians just outside the fort. The latter were on friendly terms with all the neighboring white men. In fact many of the mountaineers had made their homes with the Indians for years.

These people all thought we were rather late in our journey and advised us to keep moving as rapidly as possible. When we reached this altitude the cholera left us, but we were never without some drawback. From good roads, plenty of feed for our stock and drinkable water we were now to experience the trials, discomforts and, finally, the horrors of journeying through a country lacking all three.

44 The steep, rough roads and constant climbing soon began to tell upon the feet of our unshod cattle. The heavier ones quickly showed signs of tender feet and be-

coming hopelessly lame were, one by one, abandoned. Though our wagons were all comparatively light, and were none of them overloaded, (weighing about seven hundred pounds each of provisions when we started, and having been daily reduced by the serving of rations), it was more than our young stock could stand to pull them along. We were obliged to double the teams on a wagon for the ascent of the steep hills and returning bring up the other wagons. This consumed a great deal of time. The young cattle, too, required much more rest and feed than mature animals--(this is true of both man and beast)--and altogether our advance was much slower than we had expected.

If my memory serves me right the most of this road, nearly three hundred miles, from the fort to near the South Pass, was not only rough and dreary, but campless.

After passing Independence Rock, on which many of the men painted their names with axle-grease, we approached the Sweet-water River, where for a short time we had a good camping ground and found considerable game--mostly deer.

In this vicinity we encountered the most sudden and terrific hail storm I ever experienced. We had made a noon halt. The day was bright, clear and pleasant. Most of the

25 cattle were lying in the road resting, not having been unhitched from the wagons. Some of the messes had made coffee during the half-hour stop and everything seemed peaceful and quiet. As the order to start was given we noticed that it began to grow a little dark. A soft rain commenced to fall soon after and before we were quite ready to start, the roaring sound of a storm coming from the direction of Wind River Mountain, had excited the cattle so, that it needed but a few blows from the hail, which now began to pelt them violently, to precipitate a stampede. It was now nearly as dark as night. The booming noise made by the big hail stones as they fell with great force on the ground and bounded up, or rattled and crashed against the camping outfits and wagons, combined with the rushing of the wind and bellowing of the frightened cattle made a terrible confusion and racket. Seeing that a stampede was inevitable some of the drivers had forethought enough to loose the wheel-oxen from the wagon tongues so that a few of the wagons remained in the road. In their maddened flight most of the teams took wagons and everything that came in their way, overturning their loads, breaking the tongues and generally demoralizing things.

46 When I saw them rush away, it seemed to me that the expedition had come to an end and that we would all have to make our way home as best we could. It seem an utter impossibility that the scattered train could ever be gather together again. With this thought in my mind I resolved to keep my horse to ride back, at any cost. When the storm overtook us Frary and I were about to mount our horses and I was attempting to put on a rubber coat. He sought shelter under a wagon, holding his pony by the reins. I warned him that he could not hold it that way, and after a few wild plunges it went with the rest of the animals. I held my horse by grasping both reins under the jaw with my left hand, and pressing the right hand against her withers. She would spring into the air and jump from side to side, taking me with her. By planting my feet firmly on the ground I managed to get her to do a little waltzing by herself, taking care to work her towards a wagon near by. She finally saw it and came up under its lee, pressing me so hard against it that I thought every bone in my body would be broken. When the hailstones struck her head she would back away from me and when struck in the rear she would dash forward. I put my knees against her and by a desperate lurch freed myself so that I dropped under the wagon. By this time the storm was over and my horse was the only animal in sight.

47 The storm lasted but ten or twelve minutes. After it had passed we began to look up the injured. A great deal of sympathy was expressed for me by the men. I assured them I was all right. They said I might be, but my face was covered with blood. I said, "Oh, no, that is only perspiration," but on putting up my hands I found them red with blood and remembered being stunned for a moment

while struggling in the storm with my horse. A big hailstone had cut through my felt hat and made quite a deep gash just above my forehead. I also had a bad bruise on my right thumb where one had struck me on the nail. Several of the men were so badly hurt in the hands and arms that they were obliged to carry them in slings for a number of days.

After the danger was over we recalled many very ridiculous occurrences. Among the most laughable being the performances of a lame old Irishman, Laferty, whom we had picked up on the road (he having been discharged by a party who had engaged him to work his way as herdsman to California). He had attempted to protect himself by putting a large sheet-iron camp kettle on his head and becoming bewildered in the storm had stumped and danced round and round, wringing his hands and howling to the "Holy Virgin, the Blessed Virgin Mary" to save him. Mr. Lord had fortified himself in a like manner with a saddle. As the stones smote his unprotected hands, he would exclaim, "Oh, Lord, oh, Lord"--evidently not wishing to go outside his own family for help. Kettles were very popular head-gear, during those ten or fifteen minutes, among the men who were caught before they could get shelter, but the way they would drop them and yell as the hailstones pelted their hands was a caution. In a few moments the sun came out radiant and beautiful. Some of the men took shovels and filled the camp kettles with hailstones and we were treated to drinks of ice water.

The captain borrowed my horse and, accompanied by several of the men, went in search of the cattle. Those who remained behind busied themselves righting the wagons, replacing loads and making general repairs. Many of the wagon covers were badly riddled and torn by the hailstones.

The cattle and most of the horses were found about five miles away from the road, quietly grazing. The men reported finding hailstones here that were five inches in circumference. The task of securing the animals, restoring the loads, repairing damages and getting into line once more--though it looked like an endless, if not an impossible, one--was accomplished in twenty-four hours, and we again resumed our journey.