

“The Glorious Orb

1859. 1859.

TRAVELER'S GUIDE

TO THE

New Gold Mines

IN

KANSAS

AND

NEBRASKA,

With a Description of the

Shortest and most Direct Route from

CHICAGO

TO

PIKE'S PEAK & CHERRY CREEK

GOLD MINES.

State Historical Society of Colorado, Denver

Matta collection

of Day Has Rose''

A Diary of the Smoky Hill Route to Pike's Peak, 1858

by Wilbur Fiske Parker
edited by Norman Lavers

During the year following the Panic of 1857, an economically depressed United States was more than ready to hear about gold strikes in the Pike's Peak region of Kansas Territory. Among those who dropped everything to try their luck in the goldfields was a small group of men from Pontiac, Michigan, including eighteen-year-old Wilbur Fiske Parker.¹ On October 24, 1858, the men set out overland from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. They left in drenching rain, later nearly died while lost in a snowstorm, and finally reached the goldfields about three months later.

Writing in pencil with a very clear hand, Parker kept a daily diary of his journey to the goldfields. This charmingly written diary contains the first mention of many features along the route that would be noted by those who followed. But its significance goes beyond that. To the best of my knowledge, it is the only existing diary of the Smoky Hill route for the 1858-1859 period, and it is evidently a record of the first party to use the route.

or "4 days to day our lives have been suspended on a single hair"—with no further word to explain what he meant.

Nowhere does Parker carry his reticence under stress further than in the brief entries beginning on December 27, when he set out for a "tramp" with Corb and Alverson, two other members of the party. By the next day, they had had a heavy snowfall, and Parker's ankles and toes were so sore that he could hardly walk. Parker's next entry is on January 1, when he was alone, lost, and down to the last meal in his pack. At 4:30, not long before dark, he found his camp. His next entry is on January 10, when we learn that he laid in camp for ten days. His son, Edward Wilber Parker, placed this note with the diary:

What immediately followed the Dec. 28 entry was, I believe, one of the most dramatic episodes in the life of W. F. Parker, about which he says nothing in this his diary. Such a silence was characteristic of him. It was his nature to keep silent concerning events that affected him deeply. . . . Many years later, however, when the edge had worn off his memory of the adventure, he told it to me.

Either Parker or his son could have embroidered the story a bit, but its main outline is consistent with the diary entries. According to Edward Parker, after the snowfall transformed the landscape, Parker, Corb, and Alverson lost their bearings; but remembering that they had followed a stream part of the distance, they concluded that they need only follow it back to their camp. Having camped on a divide, however, they became confused and followed a stream that went in the opposite direction. Carrying the limping Parker between them, Corb and Alverson traveled farther and farther from the camp. Parker kept saying they were going the wrong way, but they ignored him, thinking his mind was wandering. Finally, he became too great a burden; they left him, telling him that the camp was just ahead and they would send help. Parker told them they were going to their deaths.

As Parker waited, the last light of the setting sun picked out a curious feature that he recognized in the mountains behind him. He watched the spot until dark and then used the North Star to give himself a compass heading.

3. Herman S. Davis, ed., *Reminiscences of General William Larimer and of his Son William H. H. Larimer* (Lancaster, Pennsylvania: Press of the New Era, 1918), 142-143. See also Hafén, *Overland Routes to the Gold Fields*, 266.

Ignoring his half-frozen feet, hallucinating wildly, and followed by the sound of howling wolves, he began the three-day walk back to camp. He not only got back in time to save his own life, but in time for a rescue party to chase down Corb and Alverson.

After Parker and his companions arrived at Cherry Creek, they met General Larimer. Larimer's son, William H. H. Larimer, recorded their arrival:

About the last to arrive from the States during the winter was Mr Bacon and a party of five from Pontiac, Mich. Mr Bacon's party was the first to make the trip by the Smoky Hill route. They left Leavenworth on October 24th and arrived at Denver on the 15th of January. They followed the Smoky until they reached the head of that stream, then, by the aid of a compass they managed to strike Cherry Creek about twenty-three miles from Denver. The weather being favorable they came through without much suffering, though usually this was not a good route (as was learned afterwards) because water was very scarce.³

Parker stayed in General Larimer's cabin in Denver City. In a letter for the *Leavenworth Times*, dated February 2, 1859, Larimer gave a report of Parker's group and their journey to the goldfields:

A.W. Bacon, Parker, and three other men, from Pontiac, Michigan, came through by the Smoky Hill, the whole distance. They were delighted with the route. They made their own trail with one wagon; passed through a beautiful route the whole distance, and found no trouble crossing the streams. They left Leavenworth on the 24th of October, and were caught in your heavy rains. They took their time, often laying up a week at a place. Mr. Bacon speaks highly of that country the whole distance.⁴

4. *Leavenworth Times*, March 5, 1859. Reprinted in LeRoy R. Hafén, ed., *Colorado Gold Rush: Contemporary Letters and Reports, 1858-1859*, The Southwest Historical Series, vol. 10 (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Porcupine Press, 1974 [1941]), 223-224. Larimer's account does not quite tally with Parker's diary. Larimer mentions "A.W. Bacon, Parker, and three others"; Parker names George Alverson, Mr. Weeks, and Corb. This could be the Pontiac party; but perhaps they traveled with another party, because Parker distinctly refers to "waggons," and on December 7 he wrote that "part of our company have left us." There must have been at least one other wagon, which perhaps turned back. Larimer called Bacon "an old Californian," suggesting that Bacon had already had experience in the California goldfields. Davis, *Reminiscences*, 121.

Diary of Wilbur Fiske Parker,
October 24, 1858 to March 9, 1859⁶

Sunday Oct 24th 1858 Started from Leavenworth for Pikes Peak. the agua farely poured out of the heavens. travled all day; in the mud ankle deep; encamped at 8 Ock, when twas dark as Egyptian darkness, the water still poreing, not raining. Oh how I did curse the day that I left Pontiac

Oct 25th Encamped on the banks of Stranger River, water so high cant cross; will probaly have to stay 2 days about every half hour, a fine shower of rain, beautiful prospects, everything & everybody wet through, how I wish I was home

Oct 28th Crossed the Stranger yesterday noon. water quite high. We are now encamped on the banks of the Grasshoper River 18 mls fr Stranger waiting for it to fall so we can ford. But I do not think it will come down very soon as it has been raining all the while. It has been one continual rain ever since we started for the Peak. Still I could enjoy myself very well if I could have one good nights rest ones in a while. my bed is composed of corn Shovels and sundry other soft and downy articles, so that I should rest beautifully if I only had an Indian Ruber back

Oct 31st Have not yet crossed the grasshoper. It has been a very fine day yesterday and today, the first we have had since we have been on our journey, Twas so fine Mr Weeks & myself thought we would take a little walk to see the country, went about five miles, killed a price [prize] lot of Quails, and returned about dinner time with fine appetite

Nov 1st Crossed the Grasshoper to day, had to cary all of our things over in a small boat. I think I never saw it rain so hard, and it was so cold that I was num with the rain and cold we had a gloomy time, & slept in wet Blankets

Nov 2nd very cold & windy to day waded through mud & water, 4 inches deep, crossed the Rock River about noon encamped on the banks of the Muddy River, a cold rain set in about dark

Nov 3rd had good luck fording the River & good roads, had to stop at noon and wait for the Soldier River to go down We begin to have to keep an eye for Indians (Sunday Oct 24th we had got in a bad place, and Spanish, Balked, hit him to hard, and killed him, rained awfully)

6. The diary is a 2¼ by 4½ inch brown notebook with ruled pages. Parker occasionally skipped a few pages and then, as if not wanting those empty pages to go to waste, would use them to record later entries. For purposes of this article, I have rearranged the entries to appear in chronological order.

for a long tramp in the wilds of Kansas plains, perhaps never to see him again nor ever come back

Nov 14 To day we have been climbing hills & very hard going

Nov 15 still among the big hills going a W.W. by S course

Nov 16 begin to be alarmed at not finding the Smoky the hills seem to be growing larger and more of them

Nov 17 did not go over 2 miles this morning before we wer completely blocked in by hills turned about & went back to our old camp left *George Alverson* and myself to keep camp while all the rest went out in diferent directions to find the smoky, Corb and another man went directly south and found it in about two hours, we immediately took up camp and went within eight miles of it that afternoon and had nothing but buffalo chips for wood twas very cold

Nov 18 walked 8 miles this mng before brefast to wood

Nov 19 fowling [following] up the river. fine and cold wether

Nov 20 had a hard drive to day some very beautiful scenery

Nov 21 a fine day seen packs of white wolfs and heards of Buffalo

Nov 22 seen immense bluffs of lime Stone and beautiful mirage on the hills in the distance

Nov 23 found immense beds of Chalk of the finest quality

Nov 24 Killed a Buffalo this afternoon. I went on with the teams and encamped 3 miles from them on the Smoky The men did not get in untill about 8 Oclk all heavily loded with meat

Nov 25 encamped to day on buffalo chips to celebrate Thanksgiving had a variety of meats for dinner

Nov 26 have lost the cattel this morning and did not find them untill late in the afternoon, the heards of Buffalo wer immense

Nov 27 traveled all day without water saw immense piles of Rocks, just at night found some water in a buffalo hole & encamp there, we suffered a great deal from cold as we had no wood

Nov 28 Struck the river this morning at 9 Ock, and in 2 hours drive we found ourselfves among a nest of Indians the first wild ones we had met we wer somewhat alarmed and hurried

7. In a few passages in the diary, Parker experimented with a simple letter-substitution code. I have decoded those sections and used italics to indicate the words that he wrote in code. The original spelling and punctuation have been retained.

Dec 8 we went about 8 miles to day to better grass and encamped

Dec 9 went about 12 miles found fine grass and plenty of wood

Dec 10 some most beautiful seneries

Dec 11 came into an encampment of Arrapahoes the first we have seen they treated us very civil

Dec 12 passed through som Apachies did not like the looks of them,⁹ encamped to the last timber on the Smoky to night



Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka

Downes Station on the Smoky Hill Route, 1867

Dec 13 Traveled all day with out water had to melt snow to water our teams, had nothing but buffalo chips for wood

Dec 14 not very good feed for our teams had to melt snow again

Dec 15 great high bluffs and rocks, and a very great decent to the stream but we [no?] water in it, feed very poor, I think we must be very near the head of the stream

Thursday, Dec 16th 1858 headed the Smoky Hill Fork at 1 Oclk P.M. 4 days to day our lives have been suspended on a single hair

Dec 17 Sited the Peak Today at 8,45 Oclk A.M. not much enthusiasm manifested, Pikes Peak is seen about 10 miles direct west of the head of Smoky Hill Fork¹⁰

Dec 18 traveled all day over hills had no wood & had to melt snow

9. These may have been Kiowa Apaches, a small tribe originally from the northwestern plains country. This tribe had no actual connection with the Apaches who lived in the Southwest. See Frederick Webb Hodge, ed., *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico*, Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin no. 30, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1907), 701-702.

10. At this point, Parker's group is exactly 100 miles from Pike's Peak, which perhaps is the number Parker meant to write.

1859

Jan 1st Tis a most lovely morning but I am afraid it will not be a very Happy New Year to me, am on the Plains of Kansas, with only one meal in my Pack, and Lost, 2,P.M. have eaten my last meal, it looks gloomy. 3,P.M. have shot a Rabbit, 4½ P.M. sighted the camp.

10 Have laid in camp, until to day, traveled 15 miles in the Snow

11 It has been hard traveling to day in the snow, and awful hills, fine view of the mountains

12 11.A.M. a most splendid view of the mountains. We are encamped, for the first time that our vision is obstructed by timber tis a grand sight, hugh Pines as far as the eye can behold

13 We have crossed the last devide between the mountains and us. I never saw anything so beautiful as the mountains today. Pikes & Longs Peaks are the predominate points while the space is filled up with crags & Peaks and each seperate present a diferent view. 12.M. have come to a well broken Road and are as happy as mortals can be. 1.45 seen the first wht men, and found out that we are encamped on the Cherry Creck

14 Have drove into some Willow Brush, & encamped, about 80 rods from Cherry Creck

15 Walked 25 miles to day & found quite a settlement Slept in a Cabbin for the first time in 88 days, tis Gen Larimers House

16 Have been up the Platt River to day, to see the Miners dig, I was most hapily disceaved I watched 2 men Rock out 12 buckets of the surface not 2 feet down & when they paned out 80 cent.¹¹ 10 Oclk P.M. have been out in front of a Cabbin in Denver City and herd some miners sing nellie Gray I think it was the sweetest music I ever herd it almost made me homesick

17 have walked 30 miles in 8 hours to day, it has been very warm all day I carried a pack on my back that weighed 15 lbs

Feb

22 Encamped to night on Cherry all alone am imaginin what fine times the White folks are having to night Tis a queer Life, this; tis one of many ups & downs. Tis divided into many parts, Tis a Theater on a great, grand scale

March 9th 1859 bought Venison for Company paid \$2.00