

MEMORIES OF EARLY WISCONSIN AND THE GOLD MINES

(N.P AND N.D)

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mill digging with spades, picks, shovels, knives, sticks---anything that could be found or improvised. His mechanics and laborers deserted him---whites, Kanakas, and Indians. The Fort was left tenantless, and houses, shops, mills, were abandoned. His domains were made common camping-ground. Gold-seekers seized his cultivated fields and squatted all over his available lands on the plea that they were a part of the unappropriated domain of the U. S. and hence common property. His horses and mules were driven off. His cattle, sheep, and hogs were butchered. One party of five men, during the floods of 1849-50, when the cattle were surrounded by water near the Sacramento River, killed and sold---as estimated---\$60,000 worth of these and then left for the states.

There was no law to prevent this stupendous robbery---at least none that could then be enforced. Captain Sutter's efforts to stem the tide of destruction that had swept in upon him, and to enforce recognition of his Mexican grant---a struggle involving him in continuous and expensive litigation which was not terminated until the decision of the Supreme Court of the U.S., in 1858-59, furnish a story of painful interest, (but which I cannot now stop to rehearse)

Starting from the mill, the mining field was rapidly extended. Fresh streams and gulches were discovered, rich in gold. The truth about these finds was enough to set men wild, but the truth was magnified a thousand fold, until some had come to think that the Sierras might only be a thin crust over mountains of gold. Mexico near by, Oregon on the North, the Sandwich Islands on the West, Peru and Chili on the South, poured in their eager diggers. Even China felt the thrill, and Austra-



lia sent her convicts. The Mexican war having just closed, thousands of young men were anxious to embark for the new El Dorado. Ships by the score, loaded with gold-seekers, rounded Cape Horn, <sup>and</sup> emigrant trains without number hurried across the continent, leaving the bones of men and beasts to bleach along their path. Forty-nine had its exodus, then fifty, fifty-one and fifty-two, before the rush reached its maximum.

It was in the last named year that as a schoolboy I was myself drawn into this seething current. Returning from College for my spring vacation, I found the excitement running high. In every neighborhood men were making ready for the plains. I found right at home a party of three already booked for the venture, and casting about for the fourth man to make out the complément. I was urged to take the place and after some hesitation on my part and more on my father's, consent was given and every thing made ready. Our little company was made up of an Irishman, an Alabamian, a Buckeye, and a Badger---a curious combination although but tamely illustrative of the motley hordes that were gathering across the mountains.

Our teams consisted of two light lumber wagons and eight yoke of oxen, or, to be a little more exact, of two wagons and two yoke of oxen and two of cows to each wagon. These animals ranged in age from three to six years, and most of them had just been "sent under the yoke"---the very teams, as you will see, afforded another illustration of the leveling tendencies of these expeditions---no distinction as to "age, sex, or "previous condition of servitude".

This yoking of cows into the service was something of an experiment at



that time. Besides being in greater demand at the mines, the theory was that cows, being lighter, would stand the trip better than oxen.

Our own experience, certainly, went to substantiate the theory. The alkali dust, gravelly mountain roads, and hot desert sands, were very trying on the feet. Our heavier oxen all had to be shod. The cows went through in good condition without shoeing. The youngest, too, seemed to stand the hardships of the journey best; just as striplings wore out full grown men in the trying marches and sieges of civil war.

The theory that prevailed in 1848-49 in regard to the weight and strength of wagons and teams that would enable them to stand the journey, had been completely reversed in the early '50s. At first, the heaviest wagons, log-chains, and teams were thought necessary, and with provisions to last a twelve-month. The result was the teams were worn out by the very weight they had to drag. A year or two later, the needed supplies were more definitely known, and every thing in the outfit was made as light as possible consistent with the strength necessary to stand the wear and tear of the journey.

Setting out on the 3rd day of May, crossing the Mississippi at Dubuque by steam ferry, and passing through central Iowa, we reached and crossed the Missouri on flat-boats a few miles above Council Bluff, on the first day of June. The Missouri at this latitude was then the extreme border of settlement and civilization. There were a few buildings at Council Bluff, but not one on the present site of Omaha. Not a permanent human habitation did we see from the crossing of the Missouri until we reached the Sacramento, a distance of about 2,000 miles.



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Our first camp-fire beyond the Missouri River was built at the Elkhorn, a small tributary of the Platte. Here we encountered a large camp of Pawnee Indians, as if to introduce us at the very start, to the denizens of the wild expanse upon which we were about to enter, and to warn us to be henceforth literally on our guard. The warning was heeded, for not a night passed, from that time on, that a guard was not detailed to keep ward and watch over the faithful animals that were to carry us through the mountains.

Our route was along the north side of the main Platte, and continued on the same side of the North Fork of the river to its great bend near the South Pass---thus following the Platte for a distance of 750 miles.

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Owing to the great over-land rush, in 1852, there was much difficulty in securing feed for teams. Over a great part of the route there were well-marked camping-places. Even at these places, however, it was often necessary to drive the stock back from camp, one, two, and even three or four miles, to find suitable grazing. Advance, under such circumstances, was necessarily slow, from ten to fifteen miles a day being a good average. (The chief inconvenience, up the Platte, however, was the scarcity of fuel. Green willows and an occasional piece of drift-wood were luxuries, and for a good part of the way the sole reliance was "Buffalo chips." Here was ascene for an artist---Camping ground reached---teams unyoked---and a delegation, self-appointed---five, ten, sometimes twenty men, each with a bag hurrying out over the little low sand knobs that fringe the upper Platte valley, picking his way among the bristling cactuses and gathering "buffalo chips" for the eve-



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ning camp-fires. The pioneer farmers along this same Platte valley, a few years later, were burning corn for fuel, while their neighbors over in Dakota were twisting hay for the same purpose; but how many of them have had experience with the sort of fuel that was made to do service in '49 and the early fifties? That was one of the luxuries, at least, in which modern campers and tourists are not permitted to indulge.

The region of the Upper Platte was the pasture ground and paradise of the buffalo at the time of which I am speaking; and yet in the brief space of 40 years---thanks to the criminal recklessness of sportsmen and the negligence of the government---there is scarcely one left upon our territory to tell the story of the treatment of his race.

Scientists tell us, I believe, that the word buffalo, as applied to this animal, is a misnomer; but by that name the American Bison has lived and died and will be handed down in story.

It was only an occasional straggler from the ranks that we chanced to see along the road up the Platte---and these at a distance. The main herds kept well back from the river. But a rare treat awaited us at the great bend in the Platte River where indeed we parted company with that stream. The mountains here hug close to the river, but within the bend or angle, is a rich little meadow where the herds come down at intervals to feed. We had halted here for nooning, and were in the midst of lunch when the shout of "buffalo" was raised. Looking across the river, a herd of more than a hundred full-grown fellows were seen coming slowly down the mountain toward the meadow. The Platte at this point has a swift current. But no matter; it must be crossed. A dozen



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men plunged into it, wading and swimming, as necessity demanded, with gun held over head. Several shots were secured, but no game bagged. The herd when fired into made for the river, or rather for the mountain beyond. The very earth seemed to tremble beneath their feet. Not the slightest halt was made at the steep river bank, but plunging down and crossing the stream, they made their way up the mountain and were soon out of sight.

We encamped that night a few miles out from the Platte on a sort of prairie-like undulating plateau. About daybreak next morning one of the night-guard came running into camp with the shout that buffalo were coming right up among our cattle and that there was danger of a "stampede." This at such a time and such a place was a very serious matter.

A re-inforcement was soon on the ground, but the buffalo in the mean time had retired in good order. I had a little experience of my own that morning which I will venture to relate. I had wandered off about a mile from camp, and was taking a little survey of the country and wondering whether civilization would ever reach out as far as this, when turning I saw coming around a knoll about 30 rods away, and making directly towards me, five full-grown mammoth-looking buffalo bulls. My first impulse was to make for camp. But second thought was wiser. This was a golden opportunity and must not be lost. Turning a little to the right and filing along one after another, these great bulls came up to within 75 paces, when they halted, giving me a broad-side exposure, but at the same time turning full upon me their long-whiskered, shaggy-browed, sand-matted faces. They were magnificent looking creatures, and in



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comparison with which, as they stood there, defiant, upon their native pastures, the wretched specimens exhibited in menageries and zoological gardens, look puny enough. Drawing a bead upon the leader, fortunately for me and unfortunately for the buffalo, my rifle "missed fire". That is, it didn't "go off" and neither did the buffalo. Picking the flint, or rather, putting on another percussion cap, the buffalo ague was given time to subside, and the next time I was more successful and brought down my game. He was a monster, estimated by good judges to weigh 2,000 lbs. Another was killed the same morning, and selecting the choicest parts, you may rest assured there was feasting upon "jerked" buffalo meat from that time on. Just as we were breaking camp that morning, there came in sight about a mile away, a herd of at least 500 buffalo---little, big, old and young, and their bleating and bellowing could be distinctly heard at that distance. What an opportunity would this have afforded sportsmen, a few years later. The temptation to tarry even at that time was very great, but as the summer was creeping by, and the trying part of our journey was still before us, we were admonished to move on, if we hoped to clear the Sierras before snow-fall. Following up the valley of the Sweetwater, a small tributary of the Platte we passed over the backbone of the continent at the South Pass in the Rocky Mountains. This is one of the easiest passes in the whole chain of these mountains. The ascent at the pass is so gradual that one hardly realizes that he is scaling a mountain at all. We had been climbing and climbing for weeks, and for no little part of that time, had been scaling smaller chains and spurs until, even at this low divide, we



were nearly 8,000 feet above sea level. Here one is literally at the "parting of the waters" and through the clear atmosphere, for the distance of a hundred miles east or west, one can trace the outlines of the streams as they make their way on the one side toward the valley of the Mississippi, and on the other to the Columbia and the Colorado. The journey to the South Pass was not difficult, but from that on, it was very trying to man and beast. It will be noticed that the emigrant roads for three or four hundred miles now, do not follow the streams as heretofore, but lie across them. This means the climbing of one mountain after another, with water scarce and feed scarcer.

Crossing Green River---the chief tributary of the Colorado---then bending around Bear River, which makes a sharp angle at this point, and leaving Great Salt Lake and the Mormon city to the south, then passing through Thousand Spring Valley, we finally reached the head waters of the Humboldt, (at this point upon the map.)

The Indians thus far had given us a wide berth. In fact we had seen very few since we left the Pawnee camp at the Missouri. Occasionally, one more curious than his fellows, would come dashing from the hills on his pony, decked out in feathers and war paint, (that is the Indian, not the pony) as if curious to know when that long procession was going to end. The Indians along the Humboldt were known to be very treacherous.

Accounts of their attacks upon emigrants in other years were fresh in our minds. Hence it was customary for trains to double up a little here in self-defense. The Humboldt is a small stream in mid-summer, but is bordered along most of its course with a thick growth of willows which

~~one 1000 of ...~~ ~~page ...~~ newly arrived immigrants were



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afford excellent hiding places for the Indians.

About 12 o'clock one day, as our train of a dozen teams was making its way slowly down this stream, two or three gun-shots were heard in quick succession just around a bend in the road. Suspecting trouble ahead and hurrying on as rapidly as possible, we soon came in sight of two teams that had halted for their nooning, and a little way from them and making off with a wounded companion, were 8 or 10 Indians. There were but four persons with these two teams---two men and their wives---but they were genuine backwoodsmen, women and all, and were armed with trusty rifles which they all knew how to use. It was this that made them a little reckless in their way of traveling. The Indians had crept up close to them as they sat at their lunch and had fired upon them with a shower of arrows. They had been quickly answered with rifle shots with the result already mentioned. Suspecting that the Indians had re-inforcements close by, our teams were quickly corralled and every thing made ready for defense. There were about 30 men in our company ---all well armed---and perhaps one third that number of women and children. In a short time about 75 Indians on ponies came in sight and rode up within a quarter of a mile of us, circling around, first in one direction and then in the other, as if carefully taking measure of our strength. This they kept up for more than an hour, and then slowly retreated to the mountains. This was the closest call to an attack by the Indians that we had upon the route. They succeeded afterwards, however, in spiriting away some of our cattle---once upon the Humboldt River and again at the foot of the Sierra Nevadas.



Leaving the Humboldt about 75 miles above where it sinks into the sand, we followed the old Lassen Trail across the Black Rock Desert, striking the Sierras at the head of Honey Lake valley. Honey Lake is one of several little sheets of water that nestle close to the foot of the Sierra Nevadas on the Eastern side, and which are greeted by the thirsty, foot sore emigrants like oases in the midst of the desert. The Nevadas by this route are not difficult to pass, and they compensate in some measure for the weary waste behind, by their wealth and majesty of forest, and by their buttes and lakelets and their thousand unique forms of nature.

We finally reached and crossed the Sacramento on the 11th of October, having been more than five months making the distance now traversed in Pullman Sleepers with Dining-Car and Observation attachments, and with all the conveniences and luxuries that modern ingenuity has devised---in less than five days. To make such a journey with ox teams was trying on soul and body, but it was at that time the accepted way and was deemed by far the most certain and safe.

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ing practically a penniless "pilgrim" (all newly-arrived immigrants were