

Morton's History of Nebraska

Authentic—1400 to 1906—Complete

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CHAPTER III CONTINUED (6)

"The distance from St. Joseph, Mo., to the Independence trail, striking it ten miles west of Blue river, is about 100 miles; from the forks of these roads to the Big Sandy, striking it near its junction with the Republican river, forty-two miles; from the Big Sandy to the Republican fork of Blue river, eighteen miles; up the Republican river, fifty-three miles; from the Republican to the Platte, twenty miles; up the Platte to the crossing of the south fork, 120 miles; from the lower to the upper crossing of the south fork, forty-five miles."

Mr. Palmer here observes that there is a road on each side of the river and but little choice in them. From the south to the north fork at Ash Hollow, twenty miles; thence to a point opposite Solitary Tower, on Little creek, forty-two miles; thence to a point opposite Chimney Rock, sixteen miles; thence to a point where the road crosses the river, fifteen miles; thence to Scotts Bluff, ten miles; thence to Horse creek, twenty miles; thence to Ft. Laramie, twenty-four miles.

Palmer followed the Little Blue, which he evidently miscalled the Republican fork of the Blue, and then went over to the Big Platte, the usual twenty miles, and thence to the crossing of the south fork, one hundred and twenty miles.

While all of these travelers followed substantially the same route through Nebraska, yet, either through their own carelessness or because the names of the streams, in the earlier part of the course especially, were not certain or fixed, they greatly confused them. The schedule distance between the Vermilion and the Big Blue was about fourteen miles, and yet Kelly traveled several days and crossed two other streams, each of which he felt certain was the important one in question, before he came to the fine river which he definitely decided was worthy of the name of Big Blue. The length of the route up the Little Blue valley for all was about seventy miles, though it left the stream where important bends or easier going required. If Bryant is accurate in his statement, he traveled twenty-seven miles from the Little Blue to the Platte river, which he reached about twelve miles below the head of Grand Island. Palmer, Kelly and Stansbury reached the Platte only a few miles below the head of the island; but Captain Bonneville reached it twenty-five miles below.

The old California crossing, which was substantially identical with the "upper ford," was twenty-seven miles east of the upper California crossing at Old Julesburg, opposite the mouth of Lodge Pole creek. In the year 1859 a Frenchman from St. Louis, called Beauvais, established a trading post at the old California crossing, which on that account came to be called Beauvais' ranch. There was very little travel by the upper California route until the daily mail was established in 1861, and which crossed at old Julesburg. After crossing the Platte, this route followed Lodge Pole creek as far as Thirty-mile Ridge which ran toward the north fork. It continued along this ridge by way of Mud Springs, reaching the North Platte near Court House Rock. The earlier and great crossing was on the main Oregon trail, and was commonly known as the Ash Hollow route. The Mormon trail, which was established by the Merriam exodus, followed the north side of the Platte all the way from Florence to the crossing beyond Ft. Laramie.

At least before Ft. Kearney was established, Ash Hollow was the most important and interesting point on the trail, this side of Ft. Laramie, after it struck the Platte river. Owing to Irving's vagueness we can not be sure that he was describing that delectable place in recording Captain Bonneville's progress: "They reached a small but beautiful grove from which issued the confused notes of singing birds, the first they had heard since crossing the boundary of Missouri;" but circumstances almost warrant that conclusion. Palmer relates that "the road then turns down Ash Hollow to the river; a quarter of a mile from the latter is a fine spring, and around it weed and grass in abundance."

Stansbury, seeing with the scientific eye and writing with the trained hand, has left us an invaluable description of the crossing between the two forks and of Ash Hollow itself:

"Today we crossed the ridge between the North and South forks of the Platte, a distance of eighteen and a half miles. As we expected to find no water for the whole of this distance, the India-rubber bags were filled with a small supply. The road struck directly up the bluff, rising quite rapidly at first, then very gradually for twelve miles, when we reached the summit, and a most magnificent view saluted the eye. Before and below us was the North Fork of the Nebraska, winding its way through broken hills and green meadows; behind us the undulating prairie sloping gently from the South Fork, over which we had just passed; on our right, the gradual convergence of the two valleys was distinctly perceptible; while immediately at our feet were the heads of Ash Creek, which fell off suddenly into deep precipitous chasms on either side, leaving only a high narrow ridge or back bone, which gradually descended, un-

til, toward its western termination, it fell off precipitately into the bottom of the creek. Here we were obliged, from the steepness of the road, to let the wagons down by ropes, but the labor of a dozen men for a few days would make the descent easy and safe. The bottom of Ash Creek is tolerably well wooded, principally with ash and some dwarf cedars. The bed of the stream was entirely dry, but toward the mouth several springs of delightfully cold and refreshing water were found, altogether the best that has been met with since leaving the Missouri. We encamped at the mouth of the valley, here called Ash Hollow. The traces of the great tide of emigration that had preceded us were plainly visible in remains of camp-fires, in blazed trees covered with innumerable names carved and written on them; but, more than all, in the total absence of all herbage.

On the slope towards the South Fork the valleys are wide and long, with gracefully curved lines, gentle slopes, and broad hollows. . . . Almost immediately after crossing the point of 'divide,' we strike upon the head-waters of Ash creek, whence the descent is abrupt and precipitous. Immediately at your feet is the principal ravine, with sides four or five hundred feet in depth, clothed with cedar. Into this numerous other ravines run, meeting it at different angles, and so completely cutting up the earth that scarcely a foot of level ground could be seen. The whole surface consisted of merely narrow ridges dividing the ravines from each other, and running up to so sharp a crest that it would be difficult for anything but a mountain-goat to traverse their summits with impunity. Never before had I seen the wonderful effects of the action of water on a grand scale more strikingly exemplified."

In his return itinerary this traveler observes that, "Ash Hollow has abundance of ash and poplar wood, a small stream in the bottom;" there were "cedars in the hills for camping purposes."

Kelly, who wrote with more literary spirit than any of the others of these travelers, was yet possessed of a degree of English surliness which, however, the charms of the Hollow overcame entirely for the nonce, and he dropped deep into poetry:

"Two more moderate descents brought us into a lovely wooded dell, so watered and sheltered that vegetation of every description appeared as if stimulated by a hot house compared with that on the open prairie. The modest wild rose, forgetting its coyness in the leafy arbors, opened out its velvet bosom, adding its fragrant bouquet to that of the various scented flowers and shrubs that formed the underwood of the majestic ash-trees, which confer a name upon the spot, producing a perfectly aromatic atmosphere. Cool streams, filtered through the adjoining hills, prattled about, until they merged their murmurs in a translucent pond, reposing in the center of a verdant meadow, a perfect parterre, the bespangled carpet of which looked the congenial area for the games and gambols for the light-tripping beings of fairyland."

But three years before Bryant saw only these prosy commonplaces: "We descended into the valley of the North fork of the Platte, through a pass known as 'Ash Hollow.' This name is derived from a few scattering ash-trees in the dry ravine, through which we wind our way to the river bottom. There is but one steep or difficult place for wagons in the pass. I saw wild currants and gooseberries near the mouth of Ash Hollow. There is here also a spring of pure cold water." Bryant found a small log cabin, near the mouth of the Hollow, which had been erected during the last winter by some trappers on their way to the East. This cabin had been turned by the emigrants into a sort of voluntary general postoffice. Many advertisements in manuscript were posted on the walls outside. These included descriptions of lost horses, cattle, etc.; and inside, in a recess, there were a large number of letters addressed to persons in every part of the world, with requests that those who passed would convey them to the nearest postoffice in the states. "The place had something of an air of a cross roads settlement, and we lingered around it some time, reading the advertisements and looking over the letters."

The reader will be inclined to credit Bryant's description with orthodoxy in the knowledge that the susceptible Englishman was also thrown into a fit of esthetic hysteria at the sight of a party of Sioux squaws whom he had seen a few days before:

"The women were extremely beautiful, with finely-chiselled features, dark lustrous eyes, raven locks and pearly teeth, which they disclosed in gracious smiles that lit up their lovely faces with a most bewitching radiance. They wore no head dress; their luxuriant tresses, divided with the most scrupulous accuracy flowing in unconfined freedom over their shoulders. Their attire consisted of a tanned buckskin bodice, not over tight, to which was appended a short full skirt of the same material which did not reach the knees. The legs were concealed by close leathern hose which revealed the most exquisite symmetry, embroidered on the sides with beads, meeting above the taper

ankles a laced moccasin, worked up the instep in the same manner; and over all was thrown with a most graceful negligence a blanket of snowy whiteness so arranged as to form a hood in an instant. They also wore large ear drops and had the fingers up to the joints covered with rings. . . . There was one dear girl amongst the group that I was fairly smitten with, to whom I presented a small looking-glass, taking leave to kiss the tips of her delicate fingers as she graciously accepted it, at which she smiled, as if understanding this silent but expressive mode of admiration; and taking off a ring, caught hold of my hand to put it on; an operation I playfully protracted by cramping my fingers, that I might prolong the pleasure of contact with so charming a creature."

The next notable landmark on the trail was Court House Rock, which Stansbury describes as "two bald elevations—to which the voyageurs, most of whom are originally from St. Louis, had given this name, from a fancied resemblance to a well known structure in their own city." It was some distance south of the road and the river.

When Samuel Parker, the missionary, passed Court House Rock in 1835, traveling on the opposite, or north side of the river, it was evidently without a name that was at all familiar, for he spoke of it as "a great natural curiosity, which, for the sake of a name, I shall call the old castle." Its situation was on a plain some miles distant from any elevated land, and by his estimate covered more than an acre of ground and was more than fifty feet high. It is tolerably certain from his description that this curiosity was what Bryant, in 1846, knew and described as Court House Rock. This traveler went a distance, which he estimated at seven miles from the trail, toward the rock without reaching it, and it appeared to him to be from three hundred to five hundred feet in height and about a mile in circumference.

Parker describes the remarkable formations in this neighborhood in general:

"We passed many uncommonly interesting bluffs composed of indurated clay; many of them very high, with perpendicular sides, and of almost every imaginable form. Some appeared like strong fortifications with high citadels, some like stately edifices with lofty towers. I had never before seen anything like them of clay formation. And what adds to their beauty is that the clay of which they are composed is nearly white. Such is the smoothness and whiteness of the perpendicular sides and offsets; and such the regularity of their straight and curved lines that one can hardly believe that they are not the work of art."

At the time of Palmer's trip in 1845, however, the rock was called Solitary Tower, and that traveler tells us that it was "a stupendous pile of sand and clay, so cemented as to resemble stone but which crumbles away at the slightest touch." According to this author it was situated about seven miles from the river, and was six hundred to eight hundred feet above the level of the stream. A stream of water ran along the northeast side some twenty rods from the rock.

Kelly, we may surmise, was still too much possessed with the charms of the Sioux squaws to have any eye for this inanimate object; and he dismisses the tradition that the rock was named "from its supposed resemblance to a large public building of that description," with the remark that "there was nothing about it of that striking character to seduce me from my path so far aside to visit it." Its location, according to this traveler, was six miles from the river.

Captain Bonneville describes the next wonder of this mountain region of Nebraska thus: "It is called the Chimney. The lower part is a conical mound, rising out of the naked plain; from the summit shoots up a shaft or column, about 120 feet in height, from which it derives its name. . . . It is a compound of indurated clay, with alternate layers of red and white sandstone, and may be seen at a distance of upwards of 30 miles." According to this authority the total height of this formation was then one hundred and seventy-five yards. Fremont records that, "It consists of marl and earthy limestone and the weather is rapidly diminishing its height, which is now not more than 200 feet above the river. Travelers who visited it some years since placed its height at upwards of five hundred feet." It looked to him from a distance of about thirty miles like the long chimney of a steam factory establishment or a shot tower in Baltimore.

Palmer describes it as "a sharp-pointed rock of much the same material of the solitary tower standing at the base of the bluff and four or five miles from the road." As Stansbury saw it, this Nebraska wonder "consists of a conical elevation of about 100 feet high, its sides forming an angle of about 45 degrees with the horizon; from the apex rises a nearly circular and perpendicular shaft of clay, now from thirty-five to forty feet in height." This author remarks here that young pines were taking the place of red cedars, the latter dying off. This is in accordance with the present tendency of the pine growth

to extend from that part of the state eastward, as observed by our botanists. Parker observes that, "It has been called the Chimney; but I should say it ought to be called Beacon Hill, from its resemblance to what was Beacon Hill in Boston." He found the base of the rock three miles from the river. "This Beacon Hill has a conical formed base of about half a mile in circumference, and one hundred and fifty feet in height and above this is a perpendicular column, twelve feet square, and eighty feet high, making the whole height about two hundred and thirty feet. We left our horses at the base, and ascended to the perpendicular. It is formed of indurated clay or marl, and in some parts is petrified. It is of a light chocolate or rufous color, in some parts white. Near the top were some handsome stalactites, at which my assistant shot, and broke off some pieces of which I have taken a small specimen."

Kelly is a sceptic in his view of Chimney Rock also:

"To my eye there is not a single lineament in its outline to warrant the christening. The Wellington testimonial in the Phoenix Park, elevated on a Danish fort, would give a much more correct idea of its configuration, though not of its proportions. It is, I should say, 500 feet high, composed of soft red sandstone, standing out from the adjoining cliffs, not so much the result of a violent spasm of nature, as if from the wearing and wasting effects of the watery storms that prevail in those forlorn regions. It appears to be fast chipping and crumbling away, and I have no doubt that ere half a century elapses Troja's fall will apply to the Chimney Rock."

Bryant places Chimney Rock three miles from the Platte river, and says that it is several hundred feet in height from base to apex and can be seen in a clear atmosphere at a distance of forty miles. "The column which represents the chimney will soon crumble away and disappear entirely. The scenery to the right of the rock as we face it from the river is singularly picturesque and interesting. There are four high elevations of architectural configuration, one of which would represent a distant view of the ruins of the Athenian Acropolis; another the crumbling remains of an Egyptian temple; a third a Mexican pyramid; the fourth the mausoleum of one of the Titans. In the background the bluffs are worn into such figures as to represent ranges of castles and palaces."

Captain Bonneville observed that Scotts Bluff was composed of indurated clay, with alternate layers of red and white sandstone, and might be seen at a distance of upwards of thirty miles; and Irving calls attention to "the high and beetling cliffs of indurated clay and sandstone bearing the semblance of towers, castles, churches and fortified cities."

Palmer found a good spring and abundance of wood and grass at Scotts Bluff. Parker describes these bluffs as "the termination of a high range of land running from south to north. They are very near the river, high and abrupt, and what is worthy of notice, there is a pass through the range a short distance back from the river, the width of a common road with perpendicular sides two or three hundred feet high. It appears as though a part of the bluffs had been cut off, and moved a few rods to the north."

Kelly relates that his party cried out, "Mount Ararat; Mount Ararat, at last!" at first sight of the bluff. "As we got on the elevated ground we could see that the bluffs took a curve like the tail of a shepherd's crook; a prominent eminence forming the curl at the end. This is called Scotts Bluff, from the body of an enterprising trapper of that name being found upon it."

Stansbury records that "these bluffs are about five miles south of the river. The road up the bluffs steep, but on good, hard, gravelly ground. A small spring at the top of the first hill."

One Robidoux had a trading post and blacksmith's shop there; and when the smith was not inclined to work he rented the shop at 75 cents an hour to emigrants who might do their own work. He pointed out to Stansbury a good wagon which he had bought from discouraged emigrants for 75 cents. He kept a considerable stock-in-trade of this sort, which he had acquired through the misfortunes and discouragements of travelers.

In his return itinerary Stansbury records that he found on Scotts Bluff a small rivulet, a row of old deserted houses, a spring at the foot of Sandstone Bluffs, where the road crosses the ridge, cedars on the bluffs and good grass on the plains.

Bryant describes this remarkable formation as follows:

"The bluff is a large and isolated pile of sand-cliffs and soft sandstone. It exhibits all the architectural shapes of arch, pillar, dome, spire, minaret, temple, gothic castle and modern fortification. These, of course, are upon a scale far surpassing the constructing efforts of human strength and energy. The tower of Babel, if its builders had been permitted to proceed in their ambitious undertaking, would be but a feeble imitation of these stupendous structures of nature. While surveying this scenery, which is continuous for twenty or thirty miles, the traveler involuntarily imagines him-

self in the midst of the desolate and deserted ruins of vast cities, to which Nineveh, Thebes and Babylon were pignies in grandeur and magnificence. The trail leaves the river as we approach 'Scotts Bluff' and runs over a smooth valley in the rear of the bluff seven or eight miles. From this level plain we ascended some distance, and found a faint spring of water near the summit of the ridge, as cold as melted ice."

From the extreme height of this ridge the travelers were able to see the peaks of the Rocky mountains; and Laramie's peak, one hundred and fifty miles distant, was distinctly visible. This author gives perhaps as nearly authentic a story of the tragedy which gave the name to the bluff as can now be told:

"A party of some five or six trappers, in the employment of the American Fur Company, were returning to the 'settlements,' under the command of a man—a noted mountaineer—named Scott. They attempted to perform the journey in boats, down the Platte. The current of the river became so shallow that they could not navigate it. Scott was seized with a disease which rendered him helpless. The men with him left him in the boat, and when they returned to their employers, reported that Scott had died on the journey, and that they had buried him on the banks of the Platte. The next year a party of hunters traversing this region discovered a human skeleton wrapped in blankets, which from the clothing and papers found upon it, was immediately recognized as being the remains of Scott. He had been deserted by his men, but afterwards recovering his strength sufficiently to leave the boat, he had wandered into the bluffs where he died, where his bones were found, and which now bears his name."

As Captain Bonneville learned the story in 1832, Scott traveled sixty miles eastward before he succumbed at the bluffs.

While those early travelers were keen and intelligent observers of the remarkable mountain region of Nebraska, it was left to the recent work of scientific men to furnish accurate information and specific data concerning it. Court House Rock is now about five miles from the river, its height above the sea level is 4,100 feet; and above the level of the river, 440 feet. Its upper part of about 160 feet is of sandstone and the rest of pink Bad Lands clay. Chimney Rock is somewhat less than two miles from the river; its height above sea level is 4,242 feet, and above the river, 349 feet. The chimney proper is about 50 feet in diameter at the base, 143 feet high, and is of sandy formation. A part of the upper forty feet of the chimney has been chipped off. The rest of the rock is of pink clay or marl, interbedded with volcanic ash. One of these beds is five feet in thickness. The varying colors of white and red attributed to these elevations by the early travelers were owing to the light to which they were exposed when they saw them. In the clear sunlight the color was white. Geologists suppose that the volcanic ash was blown across the plains from the far distant mountain regions of Arizona. Wind and rain tint the whole surface of these remarkable rocks with this whitish ash.

Scotts Bluff is about three-quarters of a mile from the river; 4,662 feet in height above sea level, and nearly 300 feet above the river. The upper 282 feet is of sandy and concretionary formation, below which are pink Bad Lands clay or marls, with two beds of white volcanic ash. This bluff is in Scotts Bluff county, and Court House Rock and Chimney Rock are in Cheyenne county. The highest peak in the range is Wild Cat mountain—5,884 feet—in Banner county. The highest elevation of these mountains, in Nebraska, is in the extreme northwest of Kimball county, where they reach the height of 5,300 feet.

It is said that the Oregon trail in Nebraska is entirely obliterated. In September, 1873, the writer of this history crossed it near Steele City, and it was then a gorgeous band of sunflowers, stretching on a direct line northward as far as the vision could reach—a most impressive scene. But the route may always be described generally by the principal rivers as follows: The Kansas, the Little Blue, the Platte, the Sweetwater, the Big Sandy, the Green, the Bear, the Snake, the Boise, the Grande Ronde, the Umatilla, the Columbia. The northern trail from old Council Bluff kept to the north of the Platte, crossing just beyond the mouth of the Laramie river. This northern route probably came to be considerably used about 1840. When Fremont crossed the Platte on his return, twenty-one miles below the junction of the north and south forks, he found on the north side "an excellent, plainly beaten road." Fremont crossed the Loup river below its forks, while the earlier Oregon trail crossed the forks above the junction. Subsequently there were branches from Florence, Omaha, Bellevue, Plattsmouth, Nebraska City, and Brownville, and from St. Joseph, and Ft. Leavenworth below the Nebraska line. They flourished most from the time of the gold discoveries in the Pike's Peak region until the Pacific roads were built.