

Morton's History of Nebraska

Authentic—1400 to 1906—Complete

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CHAPTER III CONTINUED (7)

"This wonderful highway was in the broadest sense a national road, although not surveyed or built under the auspices of the government. It was the route of a national movement—the migration of a people seeking to avail itself of opportunities which have come but rarely in the history of the world, and which will never come again. It was a route, every mile of which has been the scene of hardship and suffering, yet of high purpose and stern determination. Only on the steppes of Siberia can so long a highway be found over which traffic has moved by a continuous journey from one end to the other. Even in Siberia there are occasional settlements along the route, but on the Oregon trail in 1843 the traveler saw no evidence of civilized habitation except four trading posts, between Independence and Ft. Vancouver.

"As a highway of travel the Oregon trail is the most remarkable known to history. Considering the fact that it originated with the spontaneous use of travelers; that no transit ever located a foot of it; that no level established its grades; that no engineer sought out the fords or built any bridges or surveyed the mountain passes; that there was no grading to speak of nor any attempt at metallizing the road-bed; and the general good quality of this two thousand miles of highway will seem most extraordinary. Father De Smet, who was born in Belgium, the home of good roads, pronounced the Oregon trail one of the highways in the world. At the proper season of the year this was undoubtedly true. Before the prairies became too dry, the natural turf formed the best roadway for horses to travel on that has probably ever been known. It was amply hard to sustain traffic, yet soft enough to be easier to the feet than even the most perfect asphalt pavement. Over such roads, winding ribbon-like through the verdant prairies, amid the profusion of spring flowers, with grass so plentiful that the animals reveled in its abundance, and game everywhere greeted the hunter's rifle, and finally, with pure water in the streams, the traveler sped his way with a feeling of joy and exhilaration. But not so when the prairies became dry and parched, the road filled with stifling dust, the stream beds mere dry ravines, or carrying only alkaline water which could not be used, the game all gone to more hospitable sections, and the summer sun pouring down its heat with torrid intensity. It was then that the trail became a highway of desolation, strewn with abandoned property, the skeletons of horses, mules, and oxen, and, alas! too often, with freshly made mounds and head boards that told the pitiful tale of sufferings too great to be endured. If the trail was the scene of romance, adventure, pleasure, and excitement, so it was marked in every mile of its course by human misery, tragedy, and death.

"The immense travel which in later years passed over the trail carved it into a deep furrow, often with several parallel tracks making a total width of a hundred feet or more. It was an astonishing spectacle even to white men when seen for the first time. "It may be easily imagined how great an impression the sight of this road must have made upon the minds of the Indians. Father De Smet has recorded some interesting observations upon this point.

"In 1851 he traveled in company with a large number of Indians from the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers to Ft. Laramie, where a great council was held in that year to form treaties with the several tribes. Most of these Indians had not been in that section before, and were quite unprepared for what they saw. "Our Indian companions," says Father De Smet, "who had never seen but the narrow hunting paths by which they transport themselves and their lodges, were filled with admiration on seeing this noble highway, which is as smooth as a barn floor swept by the winds, and not a blade of grass can shoot up on it on account of the continual passing. They conceived a high idea of the countless White Nation, as they express it. They fancied that all had gone over that road, and that an immense void must exist in the land of the rising sun. Their countenances testified evident incredulity when I told them that their exit was in nowise perceived in the land of the whites. They styled the route the Great Medicine Road of the Whites."

"Over much of its length the trail is now abandoned, but in many places it is not yet effaced from the soil, and may not be for centuries. There are few more impressive sights than portions of this old highway today. It still lies there upon the prairie, deserted by the traveler, an everlasting memorial of the human tide which once filled it to overflowing. Nature herself has helped to perpetuate this memorial, for the prairie winds, year by year, carve the furrow more deeply, and the wild sunflower blossoms along its course, as if in silent memory of those who sank beneath its burdens.

"Railroads practically follow the old line from Independence to Carpar, Wyo., some fifty miles east of Independence Rock; and from Bear river on the Utah-Wyoming line to the mouth of the Columbia. The time is not distant when the intermediate space will be occupied, and possibly

a continuous and unbroken movement of trains over the entire line may some day follow. In a future still more remote there may be realized a project which is even now being agitated, of building a magnificent national road along this line as a memorial highway which shall serve the future and commemorate the past."

There were other journeys of minor importance through Nebraska to the far Northwest, previous to Fremont's return from his first expedition, when the trans-Missouri region was no longer an unknown country. About 1832 a strong movement began for sending missionaries to the Indian tribes beyond the Rocky mountains. In 1834 the Methodists sent Jason and Daniel Lee; and in 1835 the Presbyterians sent Marcus Whitman and Rev. Samuel Parker, who started from Bellevue on the 22d of June with a caravan of the American Fur Company led by Lucien Fontenelle. The party first traveled to the Elkhorn river, which they followed ten miles, then followed Shell creek "a good distance." They crossed the Loup at the Pawnee villages near the junction of the forks, then went southwest to the Platte river, which they followed to the north fork.

In his journal Parker relates that his party crossed the Elkhorn on the 25th of June, 1835. "For conveyance over this river we constructed a boat of a wagon body so covered with undressed skins as to make it nearly water-tight. The method was very good." This appears to have been a favorite method of fording streams; for the first wagon train that crossed the plains of which we have any account—that of Captain Bonneville, in 1832—forded the Platte in the same way. The wagons, "dislodged from the wheels, were covered with buffalo hides and besmeared with a compound of tallow and ashes, thus forming rude boats." Mr. Parker tells us that,

"The manner of our encamping is to form a large hollow square, encompassing an area of about an acre having the river on one side; three wagons forming a part of another side, coming down to the river; and three more in the same manner on the opposite side; and the packages so arranged in parcels, about three rods apart, as to fill up the rear and the sides not occupied by the wagons. The horses and mules, near the middle of the day, are turned out under guard to feed for two hours, and the same again towards night, until after sunset, when they are taken up and brought within the hollow square, and fastened with ropes twelve feet long to pickets driven firmly in the ground. The men are divided into companies, stationed at the several parcels of goods and wagons, where they wrap themselves in their blankets and rest for the night; the whole, however, are formed into six divisions to keep guard, relieving each other every two hours. This is to prevent hostile Indians from falling upon us by surprise, or coming into the tent by stealth and taking away either horses or packages of goods."

The Pawnees were evidently the same troublesome, thieving creatures at the time of their first relations with white men as they proved to be down through territorial times. On the 2d of July Parker records that, "these Indians were going out upon their summer hunt by the same route we were pursuing, and were not willing we should go on before them lest we should frighten away the buffalo." And again, July 6: "We were prevented from making the progress we might have done if the Indians would have permitted us to go on and leave them. The men of the caravan began to complain of the delay, and had reason to do so, having nothing to eat but boiled corn and no way to obtain anything more before finding buffaloes." And then, July 9, we have a hint of that irrepressible spirit which was soon to force the Indians out and away from further opportunity for interference; for "Captain Fontenelle, by a large present, purchased of the Indians the privilege of going on tomorrow without them." But "our men could hardly have been kept in subordination if they had not consented." On the 14th of July "the announcement of buffalo spread cheerfulness and animation through the whole caravan, and to men whose very life depended on the circumstances it was no indifferent event. From the immense herd of these wild animals we were to derive our subsistence."

Francis Parkman, the noted historian, traveled over the Oregon trail, starting from Leavenworth in May, 1846. Like every other observant traveler, he makes note of the Pawnee trails leading from their villages on the Loup and the Platte to the southwestward hunting grounds. The universal notice of these trails, which appear to have extended as far as the Smoky Hill river, proves that they must have been well defined. Parkman expresses the difference in the impression made upon travelers by the plains and by the mountain country, by noting that the trip from Ft. Leavenworth to Grand Island was regarded as the more tedious, while that from Ft. Laramie west was the more arduous. By this time the principal points in the Oregon trail had come to be permanently fixed, and Parkman says, "We reached the south fork of the Platte at the usual fording place." The trail had also become

a busy highway by 1846, for Parkman tells us that the spring of that year was a busy season in the city of St. Louis. "Not only were emigrants from every part of the country preparing for the journey to Oregon and California but an unusual number of traders were making ready their wagons and outfits for Santa Fe. The hotels were crowded and the gunsmiths and saddlers were kept constantly at work preparing arms and equipments for the different parties of travelers. Steamboats were leaving the levee and passing up the Missouri, crowded with passengers on their way to the frontier." Parkman adds his testimony as to the illusory notion of the navigability of the Platte in an account of the misadventures of a fleet of eleven boats laden with furs which were attempting to make use of that treacherous stream as a highway: "Fifty times a day the boats had been aground; indeed, those who navigate the Platte invariably spend half their time on sand-bars. Two or three boats, the property of private traders, afterward separating from the rest, got hopelessly involved in the shallows, not very far from the Pawnee villages, and were soon surrounded by a swarm of the inhabitants. They carried off everything that they thought valuable, including most of the robes; and amused themselves by tying up the men left on guard and soundly whipping them with sticks."

Bryant testifies to the futility of successfully attempting to navigate the Platte even with the shallow Mackinaw boats. Below the forks he met two parties with these craft laden with buffalo skins and bales of furs. The men were obliged to jump into the stream very frequently to push the boats over the bars, and it would often require three or four hours to cover a single mile.

These incidents may be coupled in an interesting way with the serious attempts to navigate the Platte in the later territorial times.

Bayard Taylor, in his *Eldorado, or Adventures in the Path of Empire*, gives the following vividly realistic description of the part which Nebraska was playing in the great drama of California emigration:

"The great starting point for this route was Independence, Mo., where thousands were encamped during the month of April, waiting until the grass should be sufficiently high for their cattle, before they ventured on the broad ocean of the plains. From the first of May to the first of June company after company took its departure from the frontier of civilization till the emigrant trail from Ft. Leavenworth, on the Missouri, to Ft. Laramie at the foot of the Rocky mountains, was one long line of mule-trains and wagons. The rich meadows of the Nebraska or Platte were settled for the time, and a single traveler could have journeyed for the space of a thousand miles, as certain of his lodging and regular meals as if he were riding through the old agricultural districts of the Middle States. The wandering tribes of Indians on the plains—the Pawnees, Sioux, and Arapahoes—were alarmed and bewildered by this strange apparition. They believed they were about to be swept away forever from their hunting grounds and grass. As the season advanced and the great body of emigrants got under way they gradually withdrew from the vicinity of the trail, and betook themselves to grounds which the former did not reach. All conflicts with them were thus avoided, and the emigrants passed the Plains with perfect immunity from their hostile and thievish visitations.

"Another and more terrible scourge, however, was doomed to fall upon them. The cholera, ascending the Mississippi from New Orleans, reached St. Louis about the time of their departure from Independence, and overtook them before they were fairly embarked on the wilderness. The frequent rains of the early spring, added to the hardship and exposure of their travel, prepared the way for its ravages, and the first three or four hundred miles were marked by graves. It is estimated that about four thousand persons perished from this cause."

William Kelly observed Ft. Kearney with foreign contemptuousness, thus: "We reached Ft. Kearney early in the evening—if fort it can be called—where the States have stationed a garrison of soldiers, in a string of log huts, for the protection of the emigrants; and a most unsoldierly looking lot they were—unshaven, unshorn, with patched uniforms, and lousing gait. Both men and officers were ill off for some necessities, such as flour and sugar, the privates being most particular in their inquiries after whisky."

Stansbury, who reached Ft. Kearney on the 19th of June, gives this description of the fort: "The post at present consists of a number of long, low buildings, constructed principally of adobe, or sun-dried bricks, with nearly flat roofs; a large hospital tent; two or three workshops, enclosed by canvas walls; store houses constructed in the same manner; one or two long adobe stables, with roofs of brush; and tents for the accommodation of horses and men." He speaks of the road over the prairies as being "already broad and well beaten as any turnpike in our country." He says of the emigrant's wagon that "it is literally his home. In it he carries his all, and it serves him as a

tent, kitchen, parlor, and bedroom, and not infrequently as a boat to ferry him over an otherwise impassable stream. Many have no other shelter from the storm during the whole journey, and most of these vehicles are extremely tight, roomy, and comfortable." He complains of the breaking out of skin diseases on account of the lack of fresh meat and vegetables; and as to game, "Ashambault, our guide, told me that the last time he passed this spot (the valley of the Platte near the eastern end of Grand Island) the whole of the immense plain as far as the eye could reach, was black with herds of buffalo. Now not so much as one is to be seen; they have fled before the advancing tide of emigration." The emigrants were obliged to go four or five miles from the line of travel to find a Buffalo. Stansbury says that the Pawnee Indians were very troublesome between the Blue and Ft. Kearney, so that a force had been sent from the fort to drive them off. A great many of the travelers became discouraged before they had entirely crossed the Missouri plains, and Stansbury relates that "wagons could be bought from them for ten to fifteen dollars apiece and provisions for almost nothing at all." The party forded the south fork of the Platte one hundred and eighty miles west of Ft. Kearney in this way: "One of the wagons, as an experimental pioneer, was partially unloaded by removing all articles liable to injury from water, and then driven into the stream; but it stuck fast, and the ordinary team of six mules being found insufficient to haul it through the water, four more were quickly attached and the crossing was made with perfect safety and without wetting anything. In the same manner were all the remaining wagons crossed, one by one, by doubling the teams and employing the force of nearly the whole party wading alongside to incite and guide the mules. The water was perfectly opaque with thick yellow mud and it required all our care to avoid the quicksands with which the bottom is covered. . . . Both man and beast suffered more from this day's exertion than from any day's march we had yet made."

Published accounts of this California travel seem to be confined to the lower route—from Independence, St. Joseph, and Ft. Leavenworth. In the year 1849 one William D. Brown had a charter for operating the Lone Tree Ferry across the river from Council Bluff to accommodate this class of emigration. The upper routes, however, did not come into general use until the Pike's Peak discoveries of gold about ten years later.

The "Overland Mail" and the "Overland Stage" to California are justly famous as factors in the vast enterprise of opening up the western plains and of traversing them for communication with the Pacific coast. The simultaneous development of the California gold fields and the successful founding of the great Mormon settlement at Salt Lake City led to the establishment by the federal government of the "Overland Mail," and the first contract for carrying this mail was let in 1850 to Samuel H. Woodston of Independence, Mo. The service was monthly and the distance between the terminal points, Independence and Salt Lake City, was twelve hundred miles. Soon after this time this mail route was continued to Sacramento, Cal. The service was by stage-coach, and the route was substantially the same as the Oregon trail as far as the Rocky mountains, and thus passed through Nebraska, Ft. Kearney, Ft. Laramie, and Ft. Bridger were the three military posts on the route. When serious trouble with the Mormons was threatened in 1857, Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston was sent with five thousand soldiers into the Salt Lake valley, and the mail service was soon after increased to weekly trips. In 1859 this mail contract was transferred to Russell, Majors & Waddell who afterwards became the most extensive freighters in Nebraska from the Missouri river. The firm's original headquarters were at Leavenworth, but when it took the contract for carrying supplies to Johnston's army in 1858 Nebraska City was chosen as a second Missouri river initial station, and the business was conducted by Alexander Majors, who thus became a very prominent citizen of the territory. He states that over sixteen million pounds of supplies were carried from Nebraska City and Leavenworth to Utah in the year 1858, requiring over three thousand five hundred wagons and teams to transport them. This firm controlled the Leavenworth and Pike's Peak express, and after taking the mail contract in question the two stage lines were consolidated under the name of the Central Overland California and Pike's Peak Express. The new contractors abandoned St. Joseph as an initial point, and started only from Atchison and Leavenworth. After the subsidence of the Mormon trouble the mail service to Salt Lake City was reduced—in June, 1859. The first through mail line to the Pacific coast was opened by the postoffice department September 15, 1858, and it ran from St. Louis through Texas via Ft. Yuma to San Francisco. It was operated by the Butterfield Overland Mail Company, John Butterfield being the principal contractor. The main objection urged against the northern route was that on account of deep snow and severe weather the mail could not be

carried regularly and the trips were often abandoned during a considerable part of the winter season; but southern wish and political power were doubtless the real father to the thought of the change. The mail left St. Louis and San Francisco simultaneously on the 15th of September, 1858, to traverse for the first time a through route from the Missouri river to the Pacific ocean. The trips were made semi-weekly with Concord coaches drawn by four or six horses, and the schedule time was twenty-five days.

On account of the disturbance of the Civil war the southern route was abandoned in the spring of 1861, and a daily mail was established over the northern route, starting at first from St. Joseph, but a few months' afterward from Atchison, Kan. The consolidated stage line which carried it—the Central Overland California and Pike's Peak Express—was in operation for about five years, or until it was superseded in part by the partial completion of the transcontinental railway. The first through daily coaches on this line left the terminal points—St. Joseph, Mo., and Placerville, Cal.—on the 1st of July, 1861, the trip occupying a little more than seventeen days. This stage route followed the overland trail on the south side of the Platte river, while the Union Pacific railroad, which superseded it as far as Kearney in 1866, was built on the north side of the river. "For two hundred miles—from Ft. Kearney to a point opposite old Julesburg—the early stage road and railroad were in no place more than a few miles apart; and in a number of places a short distance on either side of the river and only the river itself separating them." As the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railway lines approached each other from the west and from the east, the stages adapted their starting points from time to time to the termini of the railroads. The Concord coaches used on this greatest stage line ever operated, and so-called because they were built in Concord, N. H., accommodated nine passengers inside and often one or two sat beside the driver. Sometimes an extra seat was built on the outside behind the driver, and not infrequently as many as fifteen passengers rode in and on a coach.

Until 1863 the passenger fare by this stage line was \$75 from Atchison to Denver, \$150 to Salt Lake, and \$225 to Placerville. The fare was increased soon after when the currency of the country became inflated. Ben Holladay, who was the transportation Morgan or Hill of those days, controlled this great line. In 1865 he obtained the contracts for carrying the mail from Nebraska City and Omaha to Kearney City. The Western Stage Company was another large transportation organization which operated stages in Iowa; and from the latter '50's until it was taken over by Holladay, quite after the fashion of present day combinations, it operated stage lines from Omaha and Nebraska City to Ft. Kearney. There was a good deal of friction between these two lines during the times of heavy travel, owing to the fact that the through passengers on the Overland route from Atchison filled the stages so that those coming from Omaha and Nebraska City on the Western Stage Company's lines were often obliged to wait at Ft. Kearney a tedious number of days.

The famous Pony Express, which was put in operation in 1860 between St. Joseph and Sacramento, was the forerunner of the present great fast mail system of the United States.

In 1854 Senator W. M. Gwin of California rode to Washington on horseback on the central route by way of Salt Lake City and South pass; and over part of the route B. F. Ficklin, superintendent of the firm of Russell, Majors & Waddell, was his companion. The idea of the famous Pony Express grew out of this trip. Senator Gwin introduced a bill into the Senate to establish a weekly mail on the pony express plan, but without avail, and then, through Gwin's influence, Russell organized the scheme as a private enterprise through the Central Overland California and Pike's Peak Express Company. No financial aid was extended to the company by the government. Ordinary letters were carried by the slower service and were barred by the high toll from this fast express. "The charges were originally five dollars for each letter of one-half ounce or less; but afterward this was reduced to two dollars and a half, this being in addition to the regular United States postage."