

Morton's History of Nebraska

Authentic—1400 to 1906—Complete

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CHAPTER II CONTINUED (5)

On the 15th of April, 1847, the oldest daughter, Virginia, married Frederick Berthold, who died in St. Louis in 1868. She was married a second time to Armand Peugeot. Mrs. Peugeot is still living (1904) in St. Louis. John B. Sarpy's only son, John R. Sarpy, who was born December 27, 1838, died while yet a young man. John B. Sarpy died April 1, 1857, in his sixtieth year. Thomas L. Sarpy, another brother, was a clerk in the service of the American Fur Company when he met a violent death, January 19, 1832, in an explosion at the post of the Ogallala Indians. About 1823 Peter A. Sarpy came to Nebraska as a clerk for the American Fur Company under John P. Cabanne, and in 1824 succeeded him as manager of the post at Bellevue. Shortly after, he established a post on the Iowa side of the Missouri river which he called Traders' Point; this was used for the accommodation of the whites, while Bellevue catered chiefly to the Indian trade. On account of the encroachments of the river, Traders Point was abandoned in 1853 and a new location established at St. Mary, four miles down the river. In 1853 Colonel Sarpy established flat-boat ferries across the Elkhorn river near where Elkhorn City was afterwards located, and on the Loup Fork near the present site of Columbus. He was a man of peculiar temperament, kind at heart, but in the pursuit of his business enterprises he spared no one. He was small and wiry in build, possessing great physical endurance. He loved the freedom of the West and was intimately associated with the Indians, being honored with the title of "white chief" by the Omahas. He married, according to Indian custom, Ni-co-mi, a woman of the Iowas, to whom he was greatly attached, and whom he as greatly feared. Ni-co-mi had been the wife of Dr. John Gale, who had deserted her and their child. In 1854 Mr. Sarpy was a member of the Old Town company which laid out the town of Bellevue, and in company with Stephen Decatur and others he laid out the town of Decatur, where he had maintained a trading post. In 1862 he moved to Plattsmouth, where he died January 4, 1865. Sarpy county was named in his honor.

Mr. Allis gives the following sketch of Mr. Sarpy's characteristics:

"He possessed some excellent qualities and traits of character; although sometimes rough and uncouth, was a high-toned gentleman who exerted a great influence among the whites as well as the Indians. He was particularly generous to white men of distinction and wealth, also to the Indians when it paid well, but exacted every penny of his hired men and others who earned their living by labor. Still he was generous to the needy. He was active and persevering in the transaction of the various kinds of business, employed considerable capital in Indian and other trade, but was often wronged by his clerks, which vexed him, as he was very excitable. For a business man with a large capital he was rather a poor financier. Toward the latter part of his life he became addicted to intemperance, a habit of seven-tenths of the Indian traders. During my acquaintance of thirty years with him he was always kind to me and would accommodate me in every way he could. He was all that could be wished for a man of the world, except the habit of intemperance. He was extremely fond of fast horses and always kept a plenty. He was also fond of good dogs and always had a number. During the last few years of his life he suffered much; had several severe attacks, and at last died in Plattsmouth, Nebraska. His relatives lived in St. Louis, and his remains were taken there for final interment. It was said that he left a property of \$75,000, most of which was in St. Louis. He had one brother, John B., who died before him, and who was a member of the American Fur Company."

Mr. S. D. Bangs further sketches Sarpy as follows:

"In April, 1855, Col. Peter A. Sarpy was keeping a store at St. Mary, Iowa, then a station on the stage route from St. Joe to Council Bluffs. As my destination was Bellevue, Nebraska, I stopped here and alighted from the stage with Colonel Gilmore, a friend of Sarpy, who received us with a cordial and affectionate greeting. We were invited to the store, where refreshments were served, and I had a good opportunity to observe the eccentricities of our worthy host. He was about fifty-five years of age, rather below the medium height, black hair, dark complexion, well knit and compact frame, and a heavy beard that had scorned a razor's touch for many a year. His manner was commanding, his address fluent, and in the presence of the opposite sex, polished and refined."

The St. Louis relatives of Colonel Sarpy deny that he left any considerable estate. He provided, however, for the payment of an annuity of \$200 to Ni-co-mi, his Indian wife, which amount was paid regularly until her death.

CHAPTER III.

Early Travel and Transportation—River Navigation—Overland Stage—Pony Express—First Railroad and Telegraph.

Travel and transportation, whose impetus is the desire for the exchange of ideas, personal impressions, and material goods, have always been the prime factors of civilization; and where travel and trade have been freest, civilization has there reached its highest plane. There is as yet but scant knowledge of Indian or prehistoric routes of travel in Nebraska, and the subject is in the main a future field for students. One class of investigators insist that, on their longer journeys, Indians traveled by a sort of instinct and irregularly, and not by fixed or definite routes. Mr. Edward A. Killian in a discussion of the subject quotes T. S. Huffaker, of Council Grove, Kansas, "who came to the frontier in 1846, as a missionary and teacher," as follows:

"When I first came among the Indians, now more than half a century ago, there were at that time no well-defined trails between the locations of the different tribes, but between the several bands of the same tribe, there were plain, beaten trails. Each band had a village of its own, and they continually visited each other. The different tribes would change their location perpetually, and never remain in one location long enough to mark any well-defined trails, in going from tribe to tribe."

Mr. Killian argues that the conclusions to be drawn from the above statements are:

"That there were no permanent trails over the plains in prehistoric times, as shown by the facts and conditions set forth herein, and there is neither evidence nor tradition for such an assumption. There probably were prehistoric routes, sometimes several miles in width, but no trails, roads, or paths as understood by the use of these words at the present day. In a timbered or mountainous country, the case was different, and prehistoric trails existed."

In a discussion of this subject in the same journal Mr. A. T. Richardson quotes Gen. G. M. Dodge, who became very familiar with the plains country during the construction of the Union Pacific railroad:

"All over our continent there were permanent Indian trails; especially was this the case west of the Missouri river. There were regular trails from village to village, to well-known crossings of streams, up the valleys of great streams, over the lowest and most practicable divides, passing through the country where water could be obtained, and in the mountains the Indian trails were always well-defined through all the practicable passes. I traveled a great deal with the Indians myself at one time, and when they started for any given point they always took a well-established trail, unless they divided off for hunting, fishing, or something of that kind; and in my own reconnaissances in the West, and in my engineering parties, when we found Indian trails that led in the right direction for our surveys, we always followed them up and examined them, and always found that they took us to the best fords of streams, to the most practical crossings of divides, to the lowest passes in the mountains; and they were of great benefit to us, especially where we had no maps of the country, because we could lay them down and work from them as well-defined features of the country."

Mr. Richardson also quotes the observation of Parkman, the historian, Rufus Sage, and John C. Fremont as to the existence of distinct Pawnee trails on the Nebraska plains. The notations of the first surveyors of Nebraska show fragmentary Indian trails and roads of pioneer white men, because some of them marked their routes with regularity, while others did not. It will require the laborious work of special students to trace these Indian routes of travel, which undoubtedly existed well-defined and of various lengths, from the local trails radiating from the more or less permanent villages to those of an extent of several hundred miles, such as the well-known Pawnee routes from the habitat of that tribe along and north of the Platte valley to the hunting grounds of the Republican river country and even to the rivers farther south. When Major Long arrived at the Pawnee villages on the Loup river he noted that the trace on which he had traveled from the Missouri had the appearance of being more frequented as he approached the Pawnee towns, and here, instead of a single pathway, it consisted of more than twenty parallel paths, of similar size and appearance. Again he observes that the path leading to the Pawnee villages runs in a direction a little south of west from the Cantonment (Long's winter quarters), and leads across a tract of high and barren prairie for the first ten miles. At this distance it crosses the Papillion, or Butte creek.

Charles Augustus Murray, in his account of his residence with the Pawnee Indians in 1835, describes the Indian mode of travel in masses:

"They move in three parallel bodies; the left wing consisting of part of the Grand Pawnees and the Papagees; the center of the remaining

Grand Pawnees; and the right of the Republicans. All these bodies move in Indian file, though of course, in the mingled mass of men, women, children, and pack-horses it was not very regularly observed; nevertheless, on arriving at the halting-place, the party to which I belonged invariably camped at the eastern extremity of the village, the great chief in the center and the Republicans (Tapages), on the western side; and this arrangement was kept so well that after I had been a few days with them I could generally find our lodge in a new encampment with very little trouble, although the village consisted of about 600 of them, all nearly similar in appearance."

Murray recounts a remarkable feat of traveling by an individual Indian. His party started from Ft. Leavenworth to the Pawnee villages with a party of Pawnees who had gone on ahead:

"A runner had been sent forward to request the chiefs to make a short halt in order to give our party time to come up. This Indian had walked at the head of the party as guide during the whole day's journey, which occupied nearly 24 hours. When we halted, Sa-ni-tsa-rish went up to him and spoke a few words, upon which, without rest or food, he tightened the belt around his middle and set off at a run, which he must have maintained upwards of 20 miles. He had to traverse the same ground coming back, and thus he must have gone over 100 miles of ground without food or rest in 24 hours. We found the Indian regulations for traveling very fatiguing, namely, starting at 4 a.m., with nothing to eat, and traveling till one, when we halted for breakfast and dinner at one time, and on the 20th (July, 1835) we traveled from half past three in the morning till half past eight in the evening."

A war party leaves only the trail of the horses, or, of course, if it be a foot party, the still lighter tracks of their own feet; but when they are on their summer hunt or migrating from one region to another, they take their squaws and children with them, and this trail can always be distinguished from the former by two parallel tracks about three and a half feet apart not unlike those of a light pair of wheels; these are made by the points of the long curved poles on which their lodges are stretched, the thickest or butt ends of which are fastened to each side of the pack-saddle, while the points trail behind the horse; in crossing rough or boggy places this is often found the most inconvenient part of an Indian camp equipage."

Mr. Murray makes an interesting observation as to the quantity of game on the prairies of northeastern Kansas over which he was traveling:

"No game had been seen or killed (since starting from Ft. Leavenworth) and every hour's experience tended to convince me of the exaggerated statements with which many western travelers have misled the civilized world in regard to the game of these prairies. I had now been traveling five days through them, and with the exception of a few grouse and the fawn I shot, had not seen anything eatable, either bird or quadruped."

Whether or not the famous Santa Fe trail was established or used by Indians in the general sense indicated by the name, before it was surveyed under authority of the federal government, not long after 1820, is a mooted question. The first wagon train over this trail started from Westport, Mo., its initial point, in 1828. This road was established for communication between the Missouri river and the settlements of New Mexico.

The Oregon trail was the most notable route of its kind in the country. It may be called fairly a social institution, for like other social institutions it was not made but grew, and its growth was simply the result of human movement along lines of least resistance. By 1843 it had become a well-defined route for trade and other traffic between a great base. St. Louis, and a great objective point, the mouth of the Columbia river. The general line of this trail had been used by the Indians, though in a piecemeal fashion, from time immemorial. It was left to the true emigrants and travelers, the whites, to develop it into a continuous route. While St. Louis was the real southern terminus of the route, the overland trail began at Franklin, Mo., two hundred and five miles above the mouth of the Missouri river. In the course of ten years Independence, situated near the mouth of the Kansas, had superseded Franklin as the initial point of the land route, and in a few years the river had carried away the Independence landing, so that Westport, now within the boundary of Kansas City, became the starting point. It is true that the first traffic by way of Franklin and Independence, which began about 1820, was with Santa Fe, and it is not possible to say when travel over the eastern end of the Oregon trail began. In July, 1819, Long's party noted that Franklin, "at present increasing more rapidly than any other town on the Missouri, had been commenced but two years and a half before the time of our journey." This indicates a considerable trade with Santa Fe and Missouri posts, and also its recent growth. Long's journalist uttered a prophecy as to the fate of Franklin which was to be verified in a very realistic manner, for the town was swept away not many years after.

The chronicler said: "The bed of the river near the shore has been heretofore obstructed by sandbars which prevented large boats from approaching the town; whether this evil will increase or diminish it is not possible to determine, such is the want of stability in everything belonging to the channel of the Missouri. It is even doubtful whether the site of Franklin will not at some future day be occupied by the river which at this time, seems to be encroaching on its banks."

Hunt's Astorian expedition (1811), as we have seen, did not follow the eastern line of the trail, but ascended the Missouri river to the Arikara villages. But it did follow the trail from the junction of Port Neuf river with the Snake. There appears to be no authentic account of the passage of this route by white men before Hunt, and to his party belongs the credit of having discovered and established it. Certain writers incline to belittle Hunt's ability and achievement, but he should have the credit of reaching the Columbia from the point where he struck the Wind River or Bighorn mountains, near the present Jackson's Hole, by original investigation and experimental exploration of a very difficult character. There was absolutely no pathway to the Columbia river, and the Indians at the head-waters of the Snake river were ignorant of any way to reach it. On their return Stuart and Crooks followed the general course of the Oregon trail to Grand Island, Nebraska, with the exception of a detour in southeastern Idaho. Bonneville certainly, and Wyeth probably, passed over the cut-off from Independence to Grand Island in 1832, and, as far as is known, Bonneville's was the first wagon train over this end of the trail. These appear to be the first authenticated journeys by the cut-off. A fairly accurate itinerary of the trail has been made from notes of Fremont and other travelers as follows: From Independence for the distance of 41 miles it is identical with the Santa Fe trail; to the Kansas river, 81 miles; to the Big Blue river, 174 miles; to the Little Blue, 242 miles; head of the Little Blue, 296 miles; Platte river, 316 miles; lower ford of South Platte river, 433 miles; upper ford of South Platte, 493 miles; Chimney Rock, 571 miles; Scotts Bluff, 616 miles. Adding the distance from the northwest boundary of Nebraska to Fort Vancouver, the terminus, yields a total of 2,020 miles. The trail crossed the present Nebraska line at or very near the point of the intersection of the 97th meridian and about four miles west of the southeast corner of Jefferson county. It left the Little Blue at a bend beyond this point, but reached it again just beyond Hebron. It left the stream finally at a point near Leroy, and reached the Platte river about twenty miles below the western or upper end of Grand Island. Proceeding along the south bank of the Platte, it crossed the south fork about sixty miles from the junction, and touched the north fork at Ash creek, twenty miles beyond the south fork crossing.

In 1820 Maj. S. H. Long crossed the Platte from the north side. There was evidently no fixed or well-known ford at that time, for this noted explorer informs us that he was led to the fording place of the north fork through animal instinct:

"We had halted here, (at the confluence of the forks) and were making preparations to examine the north fork with a view of crossing it, when we saw two elk plunge into the river a little above us on the same side. Perceiving it was their design to cross the river we watched them until they arrived on the other side which they did without swimming. We accordingly chose the same place they had taken, and putting a part of our baggage in a skin canoe, waded across, leading our horses, and arrived safely on the other side."

Major Long crossed the neck between the two forks diagonally and forded the south fork at or near the place of the subsequent lower ford.

Travel by emigrants across the plains by the great trail to California and Oregon, chiefly to the latter, set in appreciably in 1844.

Francis Parkman, who left St. Louis in the spring of 1846, on a tour of curiosity and amusement to the Rocky mountains, found "the old legitimate trail of the Oregon emigrants" at the junction of the St. Joseph trail, and in that year both Parkman and Bryant found a heavy travel of emigrants to Oregon and California over the trail. The latter reports that his party met five men between the lower and upper ford of the Platte, going eastward, who had counted 470 west-bound emigrant wagons in coming from Ft. Laramie; and they were "about equally divided between California and Oregon."

Before the high tide of traffic to the California gold fields set in, in 1849, there were two principal places where the large general travel to Oregon and California crossed the Platte, known as the lower ford and the upper ford. Irving, in his *Adventures of Captain Bonneville*, pays more attention to literary form than to exact narrative and statement of facts, much to the present historian's regret. We learn from him only that Bonneville traveled two days from the junction to his crossing of the south fork, and nine miles from that crossing to the north fork. No mention is made of a lower ford, and his crossing-place was probably some distance

east of the later common upper ford. We are told that when he arrived at the forks, "finding it impossible from quicksands and other dangerous impediments to cross the river in this neighborhood, he kept up along the south fork for two days merely seeking a safe fording place."

Fremont on his outward trip, in 1842, made this record: "I halted about forty miles from the junction. . . . Our encampment was within a few miles of the place where the road crossed to the north fork."

Joel Palmer of Indiana, who started with a party from Independence, Mo., May 6, 1845, returning in 1846, makes the following explicit statement:

"The lower crossing of the Platte river is five or six miles above the forks and where the high ground commences between the two streams. There is a trail which turns over the bluff to the left; we, however, took the right and crossed the river. The south fork is at this place about one-fourth mile wide and from one to three feet deep, with a sandy bottom, which made the fording so heavy that we were compelled to double teams."

Nineteen miles from the forks, "the road between the two forks strikes across the ridge toward the north fork. Directly across, the distance does not exceed four miles; but the road runs obliquely and reaches the north fork nine miles from our last camp"—the place of leaving the south fork. "At Ash Hollow the trail which follows the east side of the south fork of the Platte from where we crossed it connects with this trail." Palmer's itinerary has this record: "From lower to upper crossing of south fork, forty-five miles."

Edwin Bryant, who traveled by the Oregon trail from Independence to the Pacific coast in 1846, crossed the south fork thirty-five miles west of the junction, according to his measurement, but he states that "the distance from the south to the north fork of the Platte by the emigrant trail is about twenty-two miles, without water," which would place the upper ford approximately where Palmer and Stansbury found it.

Howard Stansbury, a captain of U. S. topographical engineers, was ordered, April 11, 1849, to lead an expedition to Great Salt Lake for the purpose of surveying the lake and exploring the valley. His description and measurements of the route are made with a clearness and precision characteristic of the trained engineer. He started from Ft. Leavenworth on the 31st of May. He notes that a "Boston company's train," which traveled in advance of his party, crossed the South Platte twenty miles above the forks; but he "preferred to follow still further the main road," crossing sixty-six miles above the lower ford or seventy-two miles above the forks. He says specifically: "This is the upper ford, and easily crossed in low stages of the river, width, 700 yards." By his measurement it was eighteen and a half miles from the crossing to the north fork at Ash Hollow. On his return trip in October, 1850, he notes that at Ash Hollow "the road leaves for the south fork, and the ridge is crossed by several tracks; one leads to the junction of the two forks, ours to the upper crossing of the south fork." He finds the distance the same as in the outgoing trip, so that this part of the trail seems to have been well-defined and permanent at that time.

William Kelly, an English traveler, who passed up the trail in 1849, crossed the Platte at the upper ford. He describes the route between the two forks of the river as follows:

"About half way between the forks we got upon the summit of the hills that divide, where driving became rather a nerve-testing operation; the only practicable path being along a ridge with a declivity amounting to a precipice on each side, and so narrow that it did not admit of a man's walking alongside to lay hold of the leaders in case of need; but this very circumstance, I believe, contributed to our safety, as the sagacity of the mule convinced him that there was no alternative but to go on cautiously. Not a voice was heard for a couple of miles, every mind being occupied with a sensation of impending danger, for in some places the trail was so edge-like that even some of the horsemen all, under the influence of giddiness."

The descent into Ash Hollow was precipitous. In undertaking it all but the wheel-spans of mules were taken off, the wheels were locked, and the men undertook to steady the progress of the wagon by holding it back with a rope. The rope broke, and the wagon slid or fell upon the mules, killing one and injuring the other.

Stansbury found the distance from Ft. Leavenworth to the meeting of the St. Joseph and Independence road about forty-six miles. He seems to have left the Little Blue at the usual point, near the present Leroy, Adams county, where the trail cut across to Thirty-two Mile creek, seven and a half miles; thence to the Platte river, twelve miles; and to Ft. Kearney, seventeen miles. He tells us that he struck the Platte in a broad valley and that, "this road has since (June 18, 1849) been abandoned for one on the left, more direct to Ft. Kearney."

Joel Palmer in his itinerary gives the following distances on the Oregon trail: