

IN THE EARLY DAYS.

Along the Overland Trail in Nebraska in 1852—Written for the Nebraska State Historical Society.

On the 16th of March, 1852, I started with several others from Monroe, Mich., on the overland trail to California. Nothing of importance occurred during our travel through the states except the general bad roads, causing us to make poor progress. Crossing the Mississippi river at Warsaw, Ill., we kept along the northern tier of counties in Missouri which were heavily timbered and sparsely settled. Bearing southwest we arrived at St. Joseph, Mo., on the first day of May.

The town was a collection of one-story, cheap, wooden buildings located along the river and up Rattlesnake Hollow. The inhabitants appeared to be chiefly French and half breed Indians. The principal business was in selling outfits to the immigrants, trading in horses, mules and cattle. The level land below the town was the camp of the immigration. There was one steam ferry boat which had several days' crossing registered ahead. So the next day or two we started and drove up to the town of Savannah. After laying in some more supplies we drove to the Missouri river, at what was called "Savannah Landing." There we crossed over on a hand ferry, and for the first time we pressed the soil of the then unsettled plains of the Great West. Working our way through the heavily timbered bottom, we camped under the bluffs wet and weary.

Here we rested over Sunday, when we completed our company organization. The weather cleared up and Monday morning at sunrise we started on a trail that led up the hollow and on to the "great plains" of Kansas and Nebraska. The day was warm and the sun shone bright and clear. It was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen. Not a tree nor any obstacle could be seen before us, only this great rolling sea of the brightest green. This, then, was the land that we were told in later years, was the "Great American Desert." We have often heard it expressed from the rostrum and the pulpit inviting to look about what was half a century ago a "barren sandy desert," and they said it was so represented by early immigrants to California. True, one spoke of the deserts in Nebraska, but they are now in Nevada, for we stepped out of the territory of Nebraska into California on the summit of the Sierra Nevada mountains. Having lived here for twenty-one years, I know it was then as good as it has been any year since. The first Indians we saw were at Wolf Creek, where they had made a bridge of logs and brush and charged us fifty cents a wagon to pass over it. We paid it and drove on, coming now in the vicinity of the Big Blue river at a point near

where Barneston, Gage county, is now located.

Our company as organized consisted of twenty-four men and one woman, the wife of W. W. Wadsworth, our captain. We had eight wagons and forty-seven head of horses and mules. Four men were detailed each night to stand guard, two till one o'clock, when they were relieved by two others who came in at daylight.

As a couple of horsemen were riding in advance, we came suddenly to the Big Blue river, where on the opposite bank stood a party of thirty or forty Indians. We fell back and when the train came up a detail was made of eight men to drive the teams and the other sixteen were to wade the river, rifle in hand. Being one of the skirmish line, I remember how cold and blue the water was, and as to depth, it came into our vest pockets. We walked up to the Indians and said "How" and had some presents of copper cents and tobacco to offer them. We soon saw that they were merely looking on to see us ford the stream.

They were Pawnees, were gaily dressed and armed with bows and arrows. We passed several pipes among them and seeing they were quiet, the train was signalled and all came through the ford without any mishap excepting the water coming up four to six inches in the wagon bed, wetting their contents to that extent.

After the train was out in the open prairie again, we bade the Indians good bye and were all glad we got off so easily. At noon we moved off the trail, turned out the animals and all hands proceeded to dismount the wagons and spread their contents out on the grass to dry, as everything next to the bottom of the wagon beds was soaked with water. I forgot to say that in making preparations to ford the river, as a precaution of safety, the captain had placed his wife down in the bottom of their wagon bed and piled sacks of flour around her as a protection in case of a fight, and of course in passing the ford, she was necessarily drawn through the water in a very alarming and uncomfortable manner. But she was one of the bravest of women, and in this instance, as in many others, of danger and fatigue, before we reached our journey's end, she always displayed such courage and good temper as to win the admiration of all the company.

We now move on in the direction of Diller and Endicott, where we joined the main line of immigration coming through from St. Joe, and crossing the Big Blue where Maryville, Kansas, is located, we were soon coming up to the Little Blue, passing up on the east side and about one mile this side of Fairbury. Our trail now lay along the uplands through the day, where we could see the long line of covered wagons,

sometimes two or three abreast, drawing itself in its windings like a great white snake across this great sea of rolling green. This line could be seen many miles to the front and rear, so far that the major portion of it seemed to the observer to be motionless.

We now come to a stream called the Big Sandy (I believe it is in the southwest part of Fillmore county) about 9 o'clock a. m., when we were suddenly alarmed by the unearthly whoops and yells of 100 or more Indians (Pawnees) all mounted and riding up and down across the trail on the open upland opposite us, about a good rifle shot distance. Our company were the only people there. A courier was immediately sent back for reinforcements. We hastily put our camp in position of defense (as we had been drilled) by placing our wagons in a circle with our stock and ourselves on the inside. The Indians constantly kept up their noise and rode up and down, brandishing their arms at us, and we thought that every minute they would make a break for us.

We soon had recruits mounted and well armed coming up, when our captain assumed command and all were assigned to their positions. This was kept up until about 1 o'clock, when we decided that our numbers would warrant us in making a forward movement.

As a preliminary, skirmishers were ordered forward down towards the creek through some timber and thick underbrush, I being one of them. My partner and myself on coming to the creek first discovered an empty whiskey barrel, and going a little further in the brush we saw two tents. Coming carefully up to them we heard groans as of some one in great pain. Peeping through a hole in the tent we saw two white men, who on entering the tent we learned were badly wounded by knife and bullet. From them we learned the following facts which were the cause of all our fear and trouble that morning. They said the night before two large trains had camped there and as these men were keeping the "Post," they of course had whiskey to sell. These campers got on a drunk, quarreled and got into a general fight. As a result these men were wounded. On the trail over where the Indians were some immigrants were camped and a guard was placed at the roadside. While the shooting was going on down at the "Post" an Indian hearing the noise had come along the trail when he was halted by the guard, and not answering the guard fired and killed him on the spot. These people immediately hitched up and moved on. The Indians we confronted coming there found the dead Indian lying in the road, which roused their anger and kept us on the ragged edge for several hours.

The Indians all rode off as we began to approach them, and as the trail was