

## SOME NOTES ON TRAILS.

Mr. E. A. Kilian's article in THE CONSERVATIVE of August 8th suggests a good many different lines of speculation; it would hardly seem as if anything save speculation were in place, as to the trails which may have been used by the Indians of the plains before the white men came. What would be a pre-historic trail? The history of Nebraska does not yet extend over an entire century; if it were known that the Pawnees had a fixed route across the state in 1800, would that be therefore considered pre-historic? Or must one, to be warranted in using that term, go back of the Spanish conquest?

In the latter case, the quest for a pre-historic trail would seem hopeless indeed; for it is held, is it not, that the Indians did very little traveling before the Spaniards brought them horses? I believe that the ancestors of the plains tribes are held to have been stationary, or practically so, so long as they were obliged to perform their journeys on foot; living in earthen villages along the streams, principally in the East; developing slowly in the direction of the pueblos of the more highly civilized tribes of the Southwest; leaving, when the exigencies of peace or war forced them to migrate, the so-called "mounds" after a long stay in one place, and such remains as Mr. Blackman has been unearthing in Eastern Nebraska, after a shorter sojourn.

If this is the correct theory, there would be no trails going back of the Spanish invasion, because there was no traveling prior to that epoch. None, that is, in the plains country; but I should imagine that the Mexican tribes might have had highways, and that one of them might very probably have crossed the Rio Grande at El Paso. And as fast as the more remote tribes became possessed of horses, and were thereby enabled to make raids on distant enemies, excursions to outlying regions in search of buffalo, and periodical changes of residence, to suit the seasons or their vagrant fancy, one would expect them to fall into certain habitual lines of travel, and to form thereby in time distinct roads or trails.

There is no room for doubt that, at least in Eastern Nebraska, they did in fact make such trails. There are too many men living who have seen them. There are in Nebraska City two of the early surveyors of the territorial boundary and sub-divisional lines, in the course of which labor they saw more primitive, undisturbed country than could possibly have been seen by men engaged in any other pursuit; these are Charles W. Pierce, whom the town calls Uncle Charley, and Judge M. S. Campbell; both of whom have lived in Nebraska uninterruptedly for well-nigh half a century. They have both been consulted afresh as to their recollection

of Indian trails as they first found them, whether they had any appearance of antiquity or not; and both are emphatic in their reply, agreeing moreover to a nicety in their accounts. They say that there were many trails, hard-beaten paths worn in the prairie sod; they lay always along the ridges, because an Indian in traveling cared only for keeping on a level; a saving in distance was no object to him; and they invariably led to the best ford over the nearest stream, so that in new country, when in search of water, the surveying parties learned to follow an Indian trail with implicit confidence.

Now as to the age of these trails, both these old gentlemen speak, as of something so remarkable as to have impressed them at the time, of the fact that they were frequently found worn deep into the soil; Mr. Pierce says he has seen them as much as *two or three feet* below the surface. He says in explanation that the Indians would use a trail until it became so deep as to be impracticable, when they would strike into a new path alongside. Now, how long a time must be assigned for the wearing of a trail knee-deep in the prairie, with no more travel than the semi-annual buffalo hunt which we know to have been practiced by the Indians of the Platte; even allowing for a good deal of assistance from the rains?

A very definite statement on this subject has also been received from General Grenville M. Dodge, who has responded most obligingly to a request for his opinion. He writes: "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 reconnoissances 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 practicable 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."

So they all say. Mrs. Carrington speaks, in 1866, of the hill-sides being

"seamed and scarred by countless trails, where the Indian ponies have dragged lodge poles in their periodical or other changes of habitation and hunting." General Custer describes buffalo trails (which must have been identical with Indian trails in many instances) in 1874 as "so regular in their construction and course as to well excite curiosity. They vary little from eight to ten inches in width, and are usually from two to four inches in depth; their course is almost as unvarying as that of the needle, running north and south." Even old Lewis and Clark testify. They noticed in one place "appearances of old buffalo paths," and say that "as the animals evince wonderful sagacity in their choice of their routes, the coincidence of a buffalo with an Indian track affords the strongest evidence that it is the best."

Let me also quote some mention by the Fathers of one particular trail, that of the Pawnees, crossing central and western Nebraska.

Nathaniel Wyeth, on May 16, 1834, traveled "12 miles to the Pawnee trail to the head of the Arkansas."

October 11, 1841, Rufus Sage "crossed the regular Pawnee trails, leading to and from their hunting grounds, which bore the appearance of being much frequented."

June 9, 1842, Medorem Crawford "crossed the Pawnee Trail at 8 o'clock."

Seventeen days later, John C. Fremont "crossed several Pawnee roads to the Arkansas."

Parkman, the historian, crossing Nebraska in 1846, "in the midst of a gloomy and barren prairie, came suddenly upon the great Pawnee trail, lead from their villages on the Platte to their war and hunting grounds to the southwest."

Do not these indicate that there was a distinct track of some kind?

What this trail may have been, which was thus conspicuous somewhere between Hastings and Kearney, I do not exactly know. Possibly it was traveled by the Pawnees to certain hunting fields near the mountains, perhaps it was their highway to the country of the Kiowas and Arapahos, or used for that commerce with the Mexicans, in horses and blankets, mentioned by Pike in 1806.

There is another source of information in regard to these aboriginal avenues, which might yield some interesting knowledge if it were carefully followed out. This is the maps of the territorial survey of 1854 and subsequent years, on which all such land-marks as Indian trails ought, as General Dodge intimated above, to be exactly noted down. An inspection of these maps in the Land Office at Lincoln, however, shows that the trails are platted on them in only an irregular and fragmentary way. For this there are three reasons: