

INCIDENTS OF WESTERN HISTORY.

III

An Early Venture Across Nebraska.

The narrative from which we offer extracts below can be considered history or fiction, according to the taste of the reader. The incidents described did not happen to the persons named at the times and places mentioned, but they might have done so had they been there. They are typical of plains travel in the early day. The enthusiastic appreciation of the beauties of interior Nebraska, as depicted to the narrator by some veteran of the plains (very likely Williams himself) is pleasing to the inhabitants of a hundred years later.

Our quotations are made from a book called "The Lost Trappers," written in 1844-45 by David H. Coyner, a Virginian then living in western Missouri, and published in Cincinnati in 1847. Some recent writers treat it as a reliable work, while others are quite severe with the author. He, however, disarms criticism in a manner, stating plainly in his introduction that the book is his own work, his authorities being his Missouri neighbors and certain "musty, mutilated, badly written and very defective" documents. He claims to have had access to a journal kept by Captain Williams, who is the hero of his largely fictitious tale.

Ezekiel Williams, an early settler in Cooper county, Missouri (the county in which Boonville is located, about half way across the state) is a historical character and a very respectable figure of the pioneer period. He went up the river in the employ of one of the fur companies in 1809; came down two years later and went out the Arkansas with a party of fur trappers, where they had trouble with the Arapahos; and the last mention the writer has seen of him tells of another mountain journey in 1814.

Coyner in his book represents "Captain" Williams as having been employed by the government to escort Lewis and Clark's famous Mandan chief back to his people. These captains did bring a chief of the Mandans down with them in 1806, and the authorities did have trouble in getting him back through the country of the Sioux. But this was not accomplished until 1809, and then it was Pierre Chouteau who, with 125 men, took him up, for a consideration of \$7,000. A facsimile of part of the contract is given in Captain Chittenden's late work on the fur trade.

Now for the story. Bearing the above facts in mind, one can still enjoy it as probably an account of a very early journey over the later Oregon Trail, from the Topeka ford of the Kansas to the Platte above Grand Island. It indicates what is generally supposed to be the case, that the Indians pointed out this route to the first white adventurers who traveled it.

"It was in the spring of 1807, that this

expedition set out from St. Louis. The party consisted of twenty men, under the direction of Captain Ezekiel Williams, a man of great perseverance, patience, and much unflinching determination of character. His men, being citizens of Missouri, which was, at that early day, an almost unbroken wilderness, were all accustomed to the privations and hardships of a frontier life, and like most frontier men, fond of adventures and daring enterprises; well skilled in the use of the rifle, and entertaining a strong partiality for those hazards and exploits that are peculiar to a frontier and savage life.

"The outfit of each man was a rifle, together with as much powder and lead as it was supposed would last for two years. Each one took six traps, which were packed upon an extra horse with which each man was furnished. Pistols, awls, axes, knives, camp kettles, blankets, and various other essential little articles, also made a part of the equipment. Captain Williams provided himself with an assortment of light portable little notions, intended as presents for the Indians. To the expedition belonged also four dogs, (great favorites of their masters,) one of which was a very superior gray-hound, that was taken along by his owner to catch deer on the plains.

"On the 25th of April the party were on their way, exhibiting all the glee, and excitement, and laughter, of men enjoying the wild freedom of frontier life, and expecting to pass through scenes of adventure and danger that would fully test their patience and courage, and perhaps be marked by the effusion of blood. At that season of the year, there was a sufficiency of grass for their horses, and as for themselves, it was their purpose to depend on their rifles for provisions. As it was the purpose of Captain Williams to reach Fort Mandan as early in the trapping season as practicable, the party abandoned the meanderings of the Missouri, and launched forth into those seas of prairie on the south side of said river, with no other guide than that very imperfect knowledge which was then had of the country. The expedition of Lewis and Clark was confined to the Missouri, as they went up and came down. The party headed by Captain Williams was the first overland expedition ever undertaken to and across the Rocky Mountains, from the United States. Some of the party had been up the Missouri river some distance, trading with the Indians for furs, but none of the company had any knowledge of the country through which they had to pass, from personal observation. The difficulties, therefore, which they had to encounter, were very numerous and trying. But they found the Mandan chief, Big White, to be of great value to them, as an observance of his timely suggestions and counsel very often pre-

vented the party from being entirely cut off. He always urged upon Captain Williams the great importance of constant vigilance day and night, the strictest attention to the position of their encampments, and the situation of their horses. The captain learned from him that the Indian, although generally inclined to surprise, assault, and kill, was not given to rash and careless adventure; and that he would never attack a party that were prepared and on the alert.

"About twenty-five miles was the distance they traveled each day. When night approached, they selected a position to camp where wood, water and grass were convenient. Large fires for the first eight or ten nights were kindled up, around which they gathered and roasted their fat venison, and ate, and laughed, and talked, and passed their rough jokes, until they sunk into the embraces of sleep. This unguarded and careless way of encamping, however, was abandoned when they entered the region of country infested with savage and hostile bands of Indians, against whose assaults they found it necessary to guard at all times. For the first two hundred miles, game was not very abundant, although they killed enough to supply them with provisions. About the twelfth day, the prairies seemed to enlarge and approach nearer the river. Timber was not so abundant. The face of the country improved and was much more interesting, and the soil was evidently richer as they traveled westward.

"On the evening of the twelfth day, the party were encamped in the edge of a beautiful prairie about two hundred and forty miles from St. Louis, having crossed the Gasconade, the Osage, and several affluents to the Missouri. Two very fine deer were killed by some of the company near the encampment, the blood and entrails of which attracted a band of hungry, saucy wolves near the company. There were not less than twenty, of different sizes and color; and some of the smaller kind, that were crowded out of the feast, kept up a plaintive whine and howl. The dogs belonging to the company began to bark very fiercely, and rushed out after them and pursued them around a point of timber; but as soon as they were out of sight of the company, the wolves turned upon their pursuers and chased them back within a short distance of the camp. One of the dogs, the most resolute of the pack, in a bold attempt to stand his ground, was seized by as many as could get at him, and was torn to pieces almost instantly. That evening, one of the men set one of his traps, which he baited by a piece of venison, hung on a bush immediately above the trap. In the morning, not only the venison, but the trap was gone, much to the surprise and mortification of the inexperienced trapper, who, knowing but