

Traveling Trunk: *El Hombre*

by Dr. David Clapsaddle

It was 1870. I was twelve years old. Papa said that I could go with him on his next trip to Kit Carson. Kit Carson was a town in Colorado where Papa hauled wool, tons and tons wool. There also, he loaded his wagons with freight to be taken back to Fort Union and Santa Fe. Papa is Antonio Hernandez. People call him Don Antonio Hernandez out of respect. He is an important person with many wagons and oxen.

Mama did not want me to go. She said that I was too young, and that the men who worked for Papa were uneducated and used bad language. Papa said that I had to become a man sometime, and twelve was not too young to start. He warned me that just because I was his son, I would not be treated any differently than the men who drove his oxen. I would be expected to do my share of the work.

Early in March we began preparations for the trip. Mama and my sisters made hundreds of tortillas, and ground huge piles of coffee beans. The men who worked for Papa drank coffee by the bucketful. Many pounds of mutton and goat meat were dried, and onions, frijoles, black-eyed peas and chilies were packed in huge amounts. The men also took with them packs of corn husks their women had prepared for them. The husks, soaked and dried, were cut into pieces which would make cigarettes six inches long. Papa's men loaded the wool into the wagons. Some of them helped Papa examine the oxen hooves. Papa said that he did not want an ox to go lame because he had a loose shoe.

The day finally came for us to leave Santa Fe. I helped Oscar, one of the drivers, catch his oxen. I was too small to tie the yokes to the oxen's horns, but I was able to connect the chains from one yoke, five yokes in all. I walked with Oscar alongside the oxen. When he

wanted them to go faster, he popped his whip above their heads. It made a loud sound like a gunshot.

El Padre came to see us off. He blessed the oxen and prayed for a safe trip. Mama cried when she told me good-bye. She hung a gauge around my neck and placed the medal of *San Cristobal* in my hand. "He will keep you safe." She whispered. I don't think she noticed, but I cried some too. Late in the afternoon, we stopped and turned the oxen loose to graze. Papa sent me in search of buffalo chips to build a fire. They were everywhere. In no time at all, I had two sacks full. They did not smell like you might think, and they made a good fuel for our campfire. There were no bowls, and we dipped our tortillas into the pot, scooping up the stew as we sat around the fire.

In a few days, we came to Fort Union. Papa took me with him to the post trader's store. There, he talked some business with Mr. Barrow, the post trader. The store was full of wonderful things like the toys that officers bought for their children. Papa told me that the toys were meant for child's play. He said, "Julio, you are much too old for such foolishness."

Leaving Fort Union, we traveled north to the Raton Mountains. The only way to get across the mountains was through a low place called the Raton Pass. A man named Richard Wootton had built a road through the mountains, up and over the pass. People called him Uncle Dick, but Papa said that I must call him Mr. Wootton. He is an important man like Papa. He is married to a Mexican lady. Papa treated him with respect.

The road was a toll road and papa had to pay Mr. Wootton a certain amount for each of the wagons. At the top of the mountain, Mr. Wootton had a big two-story adobe house and a toll gate. There, Papa paid the toll. Papa said he hated to pay the toll, but he didn't have any other way to cross the mountains.

On the other side of the mountains was Colorado, and at the bottom of the pass was the town of Trinidad. It was a nice little town, and I wanted to stay a while. Some boys were playing in the street. When I turned my head to watch, Papa said, “We are not taking a pleasure trip.” Oscar smiled but he didn’t say anything.

North of Trinidad we came to the Arkansas River where Mr. Wootton had a toll bridge. Papa said he had to pay Mr. Wootton the toll for his road, but he refused to pay the toll for the bridge. He found a place where the water wasn’t deep and we could drive the wagons across. One of the wagons turned over. Such a mess you’ve never seen! The oxen, thrashing around in the water, were tangled in their chains. The wool was spilled into the river. Finally, the men got the wagon up onto its wheels and the wet wool reloaded.

A few miles east we reached Bent’s Fort, an old trading post the Bent brothers had built to trade with the Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians. Later, it was used as a stage station. When we were there, Mr. Landers ran a store at the old fort. Outside the adobe walls of the fort, we unloaded the wet wool from the wagon. The wool was much too heavy for me to lift. Papa had me spread it on the ground so it could dry. When I complained that I was tired, Papa frowned. I knew what that meant.

Papa bought me a knife at Mr. Landers’ store. Papa told me that it was no little boy’s toy. “It is a man’s knife,” he said.

When the wool was dry and reloaded, we drove northeast to Kit Carson. Kit Carson was a busy place where the Kansas Pacific Railroad had a depot. I have never seen so many people in one place! Wagons were coming and going all day and night. Men were constantly at work, loading and unloading the wagons. Hundreds of campfires surrounded the little town. At a distance, they looked like fireflies we sometimes see in the summer.

We set to work unloading the wagons. The wool was dry, so I could lift it. By the time the last wagon was empty, I was so tired that I went to bed without supper. In the morning, Papa said how proud he was of how hard I had worked.

The next day, we loaded the wagons with freight to be taken back to Mr. Barrow's store at Fort Union.

That night, when I opened my trunk, I found something wrapped in a piece of soft buckskin. It was Papa's watch and it had belonged to his papa before him. "For me?" I asked. Papa nodded yes. Oscar slapped me on my back and said, "*El hombre!*" Later that night, when Papa thought I was asleep, I heard him tell Oscar, "I left Santa Fe with a boy, but I'm going home with a man."