

Traveling Trunk: *No Pot of Gold*

by Dr. David Clapsaddle

Forward

Marion Sloan was seven years of age. Her little brother Will was four. They lived with their mother in Kansas City where they were waiting for Grandfather Sloan to come from California. He had been prospecting for gold and had promised he would come and take them all to California. When Grandfather did not come, Marion's mother moved the little family to Fort Leavenworth hoping to find a way to California. Marion's mother had no way of knowing that Grandfather would not be coming. He had died of cholera.

I was excited. I was going to California. Mother made arrangements for us to travel as far as Santa Fe with Francis Xavier Aubry's wagon train. The fare was \$250.00 for Mother and \$125.00 each for me and my little brother Will. Mother did not have much money, but an army doctor and two young officers agreed to pay the full \$500.00. In exchange, Mother was to cook for them all the way to Fort Union. Mother helped me pack my trunk. There was not enough room for all my clothes. What was I to take? Surely, my best dress, my drawers, and my petticoat. I also put my doll in the trunk along with Will's marbles. My, how he loved to play with marbles!

When it came time to leave Fort Leavenworth, Captain Aubry lifted Will and me into the wagon and helped Mother to the spring seat. He was not in the army, but people called him Captain out of respect. Mother sat next to the driver, Pierre. He was a Frenchman and spoke with a funny accent. He wore a blue shirt with tiny white stars and a big black hat with the brim turned up in front. He smelled of tobacco; but in time, we would come to like him, especially Will.

Pierre almost always walked, but sometimes he sat on the spring seat, his booted feet hanging over the dashboard close to the brown mules' swinging hips. Will was only four, three

years younger than I, but at times he walked alongside Pierre, his little feet kicking up the dust. Sometimes, I walked too, but most often I rode on our bedding behind the spring seat where Mother sat. She was constantly knitting. I played with my doll. Her name was Lucy. Her face was stained, but I loved her anyway.

About ten o'clock, the wagons stopped, and the mules were unhitched to graze. Pierre said that other wagon masters used oxen, but that Captain Aubry preferred mules. The mule is a strange animal. His daddy is a donkey, a jackass. His mother is a horse. A mule has long ears like his daddy. Jackrabbits also have long ears. Pierre said that they were named after jackasses. Will found a mule shoe along the road. The mule's hoof is much smaller than a horse hoof, but the mule is surefooted. Anyway, that's what Pierre said. Will asked me to keep his newfound treasure in my trunk.

Mother cooked breakfast while the men rested in the shade of the wagons or greased the wagon axles. The grease was a mixture of tallow and pine tar kept in a little wooden pail called a tar bucket. The grease was put on the axles with a wooden paddle. Will tried to help, but Pierre lost his patience and grabbed the paddle from his hand. Will didn't say anything, but I could tell his feelings were hurt. I felt sorry for him. He was only four, you know.

In the late afternoon we stopped, and the wagons were placed in a circle to make a corral. The mules were turned loose to graze. Mother began making supper, and Will and I were sent off to find firewood. In no time at all, Mother had the biscuits baking in the Dutch oven, and bacon was sizzling in the big black skillet. After supper, the men drove the mules into the corral, and we all went to bed. Pierre slept under the wagon. Mother, Will, and I slept in a tent.

One morning after a rain, there was a rainbow in the sky. Little Will spoke up, "There is a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow." I don't know where he heard such a thing. I asked

Mother if it was true. She smiled and said, “The end of the rainbow is always much farther away, and it seems we can only hope that it will lead to fame and fortune.” I thought our fame and fortune must be in California.

I remember crossing the Arkansas River. The water was not deep, but the current was swift. The miles struggled hard to get the wagons across. The men shouted and cursed. Some jumped into the water and pulled on the big back wheels. It took all day to get the wagons across. The men and the mules were exhausted. The next day, the mules were allowed to rest while the drivers filled barrels with water. Pierre said we were getting ready to cross the *jornada*, sixty miles without a single stream, no water. That night, we started our journey across the *jornada*, traveling in the cool of darkness to escape the heat of the blazing sun.

Finally, we reached a lower spring where clear, cool water bubbled up, right out of the ground. We had safely crossed the *jornada*, and Mother said that we had to celebrate. Will and I gathered some buffalo manure for the fire. Pierre called the manure “chips”. The chips did not smell. Mother said that they made a low, steady heat, just right for cooking. She baked a dried apple pie in the Dutch oven, and the officers invited Captain Aubry to supper. After we ate, one of the officers played his fiddle, and the doctor sang some old Irish songs. We all joined in to sing “Turkey in the Straw.” The grownups were still singing around the campfire when Will and I were sent off to bed.

The next morning, we were off early; and in a few days, we were in New Mexico, the Land of Enchantment, Captain Aubry called it. Pointing to the southwest, he said, “Look, there’s Rabbit Ears.” Sure enough, miles away two little mountain peaks pointed to the sky. They did look like rabbit ears. New Mexico was like a fairy tale with strange and wonderful things everywhere you looked. There were birds with long tails which did not fly but ran like a

whirlwind. They looked funny. Pierre called them roadrunners. There were horned toads which looked like little dragons and big black spiders called tarantulas. When I stomped my feet by the holes in the ground where they lived, they would run out on their long hairy legs. My, they were scary! Then there was the cactus which had fruit that looks like little pears. When I tried to pick one, I stuck my fingers on a hundred little needles. No wonder they are called prickly pears!

Before long we came to Fort Union. It was an Army post like Fort Leavenworth. There, Captain Aubry unloaded some of the wagons at the warehouse. Stacks and stacks of buffalo hides, Mexican blankets, and sheep pelts were scattered all over ready to be taken east on the next wagon train. Mother bought a sheep pelt. It was nice and soft. Mother used it as a cushion on the wagon seat.

There were some Indians gambling and playing mumblety-peg. Will wanted to play, and he bet his marbles. He lost them all. When Captain Aubry saw that Will was about ready to cry, he took us to the sutler's store and bought us some licorice. I still remember how good it tasted. We did not stay long at Fort Union but hurried on to Santa Fe. Santa Fe, in Spanish, means "holy faith". I don't know how old it was, but it sure was busy! Mules braying, oxen lowing, dogs barking, the city was alive with all sorts of sounds and all kinds of people, Mexican, Americans, Indians.

At Santa Fe, Mother found another wagon train to California, and we had to say goodbye to Captain Aubry. As we traveled west, Mother discovered that her money she kept in a little sewing basket was missing. Someone had stolen it! We did not have any money to go on to California. So at Albuquerque, we stopped where Mother sold some of her jewelry and got enough money to rent an old adobe house at the edge of town.

We all got busy sweeping, scrubbing, and cleaning. Mother began to take in boarders, and we had enough money to pay the rent and buy groceries. Albuquerque was not California, and there was no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. But Mother said, “We will just have to make do for a while,” and make do we did until we were able to move to Santa Fe where Mother opened another boarding house. We lived there four years before we returned to Missouri. I made many more trips to Santa Fe in later years, but the first trip in 1852 was my favorite. What a good time we had!

Afterward

Marion was to make four more trips on the Santa Fe Trail. On one trip, she met a young officer at Fort Union. They fell in love and were married. When she was ninety-one years old, Marion told the story of her life to Winnie Sloan, her daughter-in-law, who described her many journeys on the Santa Fe Trail in the book titled *Land of Enchantment; Memoirs of Marion Russell Along the Santa Fe Trail*. *No Pot of Gold* is the story of Marion’s first trip to Santa Fe taken from the book.