

# Traveling Trunk: *Charley's Trunk*

by Dr. David Clapsaddle

## *Preface*

*This is the story of Charles Parker, a twelve-year-old boy, the son of an army officer at Fort Riley, Kansas. When his father was transferred to Fort Larned shortly after the Hancock expedition as described in the companion story I Heard a Coyote Howl, Charles, his father and mother, and a driver named Mike drove to Fort Larned by way of Forts Harker and Zarah. Along the way, they stopped at several small towns and campsites where Charles acquired a number of keepsakes which he placed for safekeeping in his trunk, a present he received on his twelfth birthday.*

*The reader will find it interesting to contrast the lives of Box Elder in I heard a Coyote Howl and Charles Parker in *Charley's Trunk*, who both were the same age, lived at the same time, and whose lifestyles were in some ways similar ...but in other ways quite different.*

I was excited. It was my twelfth birthday. Father brought home my present from the shops. He had one of the carpenters build me a trunk, my own trunk, blue like father's, but much smaller. It was a stout little chest. Mother said she would paint my name on it. Father's name and rank were painted on his trunk. He is a captain.

I had another reason to be excited. We were moving to Fort Larned. I didn't know where Fort Larned was, but Father said it was 150 miles away, in the middle of Indian country. A couple of months ago, General Hancock had taken a big bunch of soldiers to Fort Larned in search of some Indians in the area. Father said they were Cheyenne and Sioux. West of Fort Larned, General Hancock destroyed their village on the Pawnee River.

I'll never forget that morning when some of Father's men came to help us move. As they loaded our stuff into the ambulance, I packed my trunk. Mother told me to take another pair of trousers and an extra shirt. "It will take several days to make the trip," she said, "and you will have to change your clothes before we get there. You must remember that your father is an officer in the United States Army and you can't run around like a ragamuffin." Mother spoke in a stern manner. She is a school teacher, you know. She insisted that I take something to read.

“You must not neglect your studies,” she reminded me. I put my favorite book into the trunk, *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*.

It was still early when we left Fort Riley. One of Father’s men, Private Williams, was the driver. I sat up front with him as the big black horses marched down the road, their tails switching back and forth like the pendulum on my grandmother’s clock back in Ohio. In a little while, we passed through Junction City. Private Williams was a big man, even bigger than my father. When I called him Private Williams, he smiled and said, “You can call me Mike.” I said, “My name is Charles, but you can call me Charley.” We soon became friends.

Later we stopped at a little stream Mike called Chapman’s Creek. He unhitched the horses so they could graze. Mother spread a quilt beneath a tree, and we ate the dinner she had packed back at Fort Riley. Mike built a fire so Father and he could have coffee. Mother and I drank water.

After we ate, I followed a path to the creek. Bending down to pick up a stone, I saw it -- an arrowhead! It was made of iron. Mike explained that Indians got iron arrowheads from white traders, “points” he called them. I put it into my trunk.

That evening, we came to a little town named Abilene. There was only one house, and it was in the middle of a prairie dog town. There were more prairie dogs than people. Mike and father put up the tent, and we all went to bed right after supper --Father, Mother, and I in the tent. Mike slept under the ambulance.

The next day, we drove a long way to another town named Salina. I tried to read some, but the ambulance bounced around so much that I couldn’t concentrate. I gave up and put the book back into my trunk. I think I saw Mike smile a little. Mother didn’t seem to notice. Salina

was a dirty place with muddy streets. Father rented a room for us in a hotel, but Mike stayed with the horses at the livery.

Leaving Salina, we drove to Elm Creek where a man named Hohneck had a store. Mike called it a ranch. Mother was happy. She didn't have to cook. We ate at the store. Mr. Hohneck was a good cook.

After dinner, we drove a long way to another ranch where the Farris family lived. They had a nice log home and kept a young elk as a pet. He would eat right out of your hand. Mother gave him a piece of apple. He liked it.

Mr. Farris had some Indian things. He gave me a little buckskin bag with long leather strings. He told me that Cheyenne warriors called these pouches "medicine bags". They kept things in the bags which they thought would bring them good luck. They wore the medicine bags around their necks at all times. I didn't want to wear mine, so I put it into the trunk.

The next morning we left early and drove to Fort Harker. It was perched on a hill overlooking the Smoky Hill River. There wasn't much there, just a few shanties. Father went to pay his respects, as he called it, to the commanding officer while Mike and I watered the horses. As we watched the horses drink, Mike reached into his pocket and took out a flint arrowhead. He told me that he found it when he was about my age and had carried it for many years as a good luck piece.

Leaving Fort Harker, we drove through the afternoon to Cow Creek where there was a stage station. We spent the night there, and the next morning, we started for Fort Zarah.

Fort Zarah was bigger than Fort Ellsworth. The soldiers lived in a barrack and there was a stone blockhouse nearby. East of the barracks was Rath's ranch. The officers were glad to see

Father, and they were extra polite to Mother. There was no place for us to stay, but they insisted that we have supper with them. Mike ate with the soldiers.

The next morning, Father took me to Rath's. Some men were loading a wagon with buffalo hides. One of them gave me a buffalo tail. He told me that Indians used buffalo tails to swat flies. I liked it, but it smelled funny. Mike said that I should let it dry out some before I put it into my trunk.

From Fort Zarah, we followed the Santa Fe Trail west. There were big wide ruts where freight wagons had gone. Finally, we came to a hill called Pawnee Rock. It was covered all over with names scratched in the soft sandstone. Some were in Spanish. There was no water for the horses, so Mike took them south to the Arkansas River. As Mother started supper, I decided to climb up the hill. On top, I could see for miles around. As I came down, I heard a strange noise, kind of a buzzing sound. Father yelled, "Watch out, that's a rattler." He came with a shovel he had been using to dig the fire pit and killed the snake, cut it in two. On the rattlesnake's tail were rattles, eleven pairs. Father said that meant he was eleven years old. He cut off the rattles and I put them into my trunk.

The next day, in the middle of the afternoon, we came to Fort Larned. It was on the south side of the Pawnee River and we had to cross a bridge near the post trader's store to reach the post. It was a busy place with hundreds of men, carpenters, stone masons, and such constructing the buildings.

"It will be some time before the officers' quarters are completed," Father said. So Mike and some other soldiers got a big tent from the quartermaster's and set it up south of the parade grounds. Mike and one of the men unloaded the ambulance and Mother got busy making the tent

for our new home. She put the carpet right on the ground. My bed was placed in one corner of the tent, and I put my trunk under it, safe and sound.

The next morning, Father told me the sad news. Mike had been transferred to another post, and he had already left for his new assignment. I was sad. Why hadn't he even said good-bye? I thought he was my friend. Mother said that Mike was not the kind of man to wear his heart on his sleeve. I asked Father what that meant. He said, "In time, you will know."

That afternoon, when I opened my trunk to get out *Grimm's*, I found the arrowhead Mike had showed me at Fort Harker. I guess that he wanted the arrowhead to bring me good luck just like it did for him for so many years.