

Traveling Trunk: *Letters from Sarah*

by Dr. David Clapsaddle

My name is Sarah Williams. I am nine years old. I live with my father, mother, and my little brother James in Leavenworth City, Kansas. Father's name is Henry. Mother is named Ethel Elizabeth. Father calls her Liz. Father is a teamster. He works for a big company which hauls freight from Fort Leavenworth to army posts all the way to Fort Union in New Mexico. Our town is right next to the fort. He drives a wagon pulled by eight big oxen, "cattle" Father calls them. Father's favorite ox is coal black named Midnight.

I begged to go with Father on his next trip to Fort Union. Mother laughed but not Father. When he saw me crying, he held me on his lap and explained that men could sleep on the ground and eat biscuits and bacon every day, but not little girls. Father said that even though I could not go with him, I could write him letters. He said that there were post offices all along the Santa Fe Trail where you could receive letters, send letters, and buy stamps. He said that I could send a letter anywhere with a five cent stamp.

Father said that many of the post offices were at army posts. The soldiers who lived at the posts provided protection for the stage coaches which carried the mail.

Father went into the bedroom and brought out the document box. It was covered with brown leather and decorated with brass tacks. The inside was covered with newspaper. One was dated 1831. The box was old. It had belonged to my grandfather. Father kept all his important papers in the box. He showed me the wedding certificate the preacher had signed when he and mother were married. Father kept paper, pencils, quills, and ink in the box.

My first letter to Father was sent to the post office at Council Grove, Kansas. Council Grove was 120 miles from Leavenworth. Father's wagon train could reach there in eight days.

But the stagecoach which carried the mail could travel there in only two days. Mother said that my letter would be waiting for Father when he got to Council Grove. This is my first letter to Father.

Dear Father,

I asked Mother what I should write about. She said to tell you about our cat, Sally. She has a new litter of kittens. One of them is black. She said we should name him Midnight like your favorite black ox. What do you think? I'll be glad when you get back and we'll name all the kittens.

With Love,

Your daughter Sarah

This is the letter Father wrote from Council Grove.

Dear Sarah,

I am happy to get your letter. Council Grove is a lively little place with a river running through the woods which surround the town. There are several stores here. Send the next letter to the

Pawnee Fork Post Office at Fort Larned. Give your mother and James a hug for me.

Love you,

Your father Henry Williams

I asked Mother where Fort Larned was. She said that she didn't know exactly where it was, but that it was miles away in Kansas. Father had told her that it was in the middle of buffalo country. Where you find buffaloes, he often said, there you find Indians.

Dear Father,

Mother says that Indians live near Fort Larned. Have you seen any? James found a picture of Indians in a book. Their clothes were decorated with little beads. Do you think that you could get me some Indian thing with beads? I could take it to school to show my friends.

With love,

Your daughter Sarah

This is the letter Father wrote from the Pawnee Fork Post Office.

Dear Sarah,

The post office here is at the mail station where mules are kept. Nearby is Fort Larned. It is a little place. The soldiers live in dugouts and adobe buildings. There is a store at the post called the Sutler's Store where Indians come to trade. Maybe I can find some beaded things there. Send your next letter to the post office at Fort Lyon, Colorado Territory.

Love you,

Your father Henry Williams

This letter was sent to the post office at Fort Lyon.

Dear Father,

Colorado Territory seems so far away. I don't think I would like to be that far from home. Is it scary? Tell me about Fort Lyon. I have never heard of it before.

With love,

Your daughter Sarah

Dear Sarah,

Yes, Fort Lyon is a long way from Kansas City, but it is not scary, just lonely. The fort was built two years ago and named for the governor of Virginia, Thomas Wise. But when Virginia became a confederate state, the name was changed to Fort Lyon. Send your next letter to Bent's Fort in Colorado Territory.

Love you,

Your father Henry Williams

This is my letter to Father at Bent's Fort.

Dear Father,

The other posts where you stopped were named Fort Larned and Fort Lyon. Why wasn't Bent's Fort named Fort Bent? The kittens are getting big. Mother says that they are growing like weeds. Midnight is bigger than the other kittens.

With love,

Your daughter Sarah

This is the letter Father sent from Bent's Fort.

Dear Sarah,

Bent's Fort is not an army post. It was built by the Bent brothers to trade with Indians for furs and buffalo hides. There is a store here owned by a Mr. Landers. I will try to find you a present there. Your next letter should be sent to the post office at Fort Union, New Mexico Territory.

With love,

Your father Henry Williams

This is the letter to Father at Fort Union.

Dear Father,

When are you coming home? You have been gone for such a long time. I miss you, so does Mother and James. If I didn't know better, I might think that even the kittens miss you. I can't wait for you to see Midnight. He's so big now.

With Love,

Your daughter Sarah

This is Father's letter from Fort Union.

Dear Sarah,

Yes, I've been a long time gone. Let me tell you about Fort Union. This is where army supplies are sent. From here, they are taken to all the other army posts in New Mexico and Arizona. I will be returning soon to Leavenworth. The wagons will be empty so we can travel faster. I will not write again.

With love,

Your father Henry Williams

Father finally came back in September. Mother, James and I all went to the wagon yard to welcome him home. He gave James and me a big hug. He kissed Mother right on her mouth. He gave James a harmonica he had purchased at the Fort Larned Sutler Store. He gave me a pair of beaded baby moccasins he had found at Bent's Fort. They're pretty. I can't wait to name the other kittens with Father's help.

**After he got home, Father went right to bed. He was tired, "worn out" Mother said. She made James go outside to play his harmonica. Father called it a mouth organ. The next morning after breakfast, we named the kittens: Midnight, of course, Larned, Lyon, and Bent.*