

Traveling Trunk: *A Long Way to Santa Fe*

by Dr. David Clapsaddle

I was ten years old. I was excited. I was going to Santa Fe with my father. Father was a merchant. He was called a proprietor, taking trade goods to New Mexico in big blue wagons with red wheels. The proprietor was an important person with many responsibilities, wagons to outfit, men to hire, oxen to purchase, merchandise to load. And that was only before the caravan left Westport. Once underway, Father had to keep the wagons moving at a steady pace. Sometimes an animal went lame or some of the drivers got into an argument. It was not unusual for an axle to break or a wagon tongue to crack. Then there were the storms, wild winds and blowing sheets of rain which turned the road into a river of mud. Father had to deal with all sorts of problems, too many to look after a little boy tagging along. That is until May 5, 1850, my tenth birthday.

Mother helped me pack the trunk Father had brought from Santa Fe. He said it had been made in Mexico. Mother made sure I had some extra trousers and shirts. "Never mind that your father's men never change clothes," she said. "You are the son of the proprietor and you must conduct yourself accordingly," she continued. She also insisted that I take my slate. "Robert Earl, you can't neglect your studies," she said in a stern voice, "especially arithmetic." I could tell she meant it when she called me Robert Earl, not Bobby.

The Day finally came. At dawn we left Westport, twenty-five wagons, loaded with trade goods pulled by oxen. Father called oxen cattle, sometimes steers. The oxen were yoked in pairs, four yokes to a wagon. Some of the proprietors preferred mules, but Father always used oxen. They cost less than mules and they did not require grain as mules did. They did quite well on the grass which was free for the taking. Another advantage the ox had over the mule was the

split hoof. The ox hoof would spread and grip when the animals were pulling wagons up a muddy creek bank. The ox, like the mule, had shoes. The farrier shod the oxen just before we left, two shoes for each foot, one on each side of the hoof. By the time we reached Santa Fe, Father said the shoes would be worn out. Sometimes an ox would lose a shoe along the way. I picked up the first one I found and put it in my trunk. After that, I saw several, but I didn't pick them up.

Father and I led the caravan out of Westport in our fine carriage pulled by two bay mules, seventeen hands tall. Father explained that a hand was four inches, equal to about the width of a man's hand. I got out my slate and Father helped me cipher how tall the mules were. Five feet – eight inches. The mules were even taller than Father. Some proprietors used horses to pull their carriages, but not Father. He claimed that mules had much more endurance than horses and were smarter, too. A horse sometimes eats too much and gets sick. This causes its hooves to grow long and turn up in a peculiar way. Father called this sickness foundering. He said mules would never be that stupid.

At noon we stopped for what is called the nooning. Sometimes as much as three hours were spent which allowed time for the oxen to graze and rest. Nooning was also a time for the men to rest and eat breakfast.

After nooning, we pushed on to spend our first night at Lone Elm where only one tree was left from a large grove. The other trees had been cut down over the years for firewood. Father said that the place used to be called Round Grove. Upon reaching our campsite, the men put the wagons in a circle to make a corral and turned the oxen loose to graze as they busied themselves building fires and cooking supper. After supper was over, the men drove the oxen back into the corral. Some of them stayed up to talk. One played a fiddle. But I went to sleep

in the little tent Father always used. The men slept under the wagons.

Early the next morning, Father walked through camp rousing the men from their sleep. I can still see them rubbing their eyes as they yoked up the oxen. In no time at all, we were underway, making a slow start on another day's journey. The wagons traveled at about a mile and a half an hour, and not counting the nooning, we traveled about ten hours a day.

Father said it was a long way to Santa Fe, 750 miles. He tried to help me figure in my head how long it would take us to get there. He was good with numbers, but I couldn't do it without my slate. I was finally able to cipher the answer. I wrote on my slate $1\frac{1}{2} \times 10$ and came up with 15 miles a day. I then divided 15 miles into 750. The answer was 50. Fifty days, that is if we had good luck and did not lose any time because of bad weather or Indian trouble.

As Father and I bounced along the road, I became restless, and Father suggested I get out of the carriage and walk awhile. He assigned me to William. William was an experienced driver. He had been to Santa Fe with Father several times. The driver always walked alongside of the oxen. They responded to his voice commands. "Gee" meant turn right. "Haw" meant turn left. "Whoa" meant stop. William was a gentle man and did not shout at his animals. He never used a whip like some drivers do. William and I soon became good friends.

Five days later, we came to Council Grove, a little town on the west side of the Neosho River. There was a store operated by a man named Hays. Father bought me a hat at the store. He said that if I did not wear a hat, the sun would bake my brains.

At Council Grove, two small caravans joined us as we continued on southwest. They had been waiting for several days to join up with a bigger caravan to gain protection in case of Indian trouble. Father said that they were welcome, but he did not expect any trouble. Along this part of the road, we traveled through tall grass called bluestem. The road stretched out before us over

long, low hills as far as my eyes could see.

Ten days later, we came to the big bend of the Arkansas River. Father said it was one of the major landmarks on the road. There, we began following the river to the southwest, a route we would follow for the next 125 miles. Just west of the big bend, we came to Walnut Creek. There, no tall bluestem grass grew, only buffalo grass. Short, thick and wavy, it looked like the matted hair of a buffalo. Buffaloes like to eat it. It was at Walnut Creek that we saw our first buffaloes.

Father had often talked about the buffaloes, how they covered the plains in great, huge herds, sometimes in the thousands, even in the millions. I don't mind saying that I was excited. The buffaloes were even bigger than I had thought. Some were taller than our mules. Father sent some of the men with his rifle to fetch us some meat. I begged to go along, and Father finally said, "Yes." Leading the mules, we walked close to them so that the buffaloes could not see us. When we reached a gully, we crouched low and crept around to a place within rifle shot. William took careful aim and "crack," the rifle exploded. Down went one of the buffaloes and the rest of the herd thundered away. There were so many of them and they ran so fast that they made the earth shake. I found that I was shaking too, as we approached the big beast. The men cut out the tongue and part of the hump on the animal's back. "Choice pieces," William said. That night we had buffalo for supper. It was good!

Two days later, we came to the Pawnee River. The banks were steep, and the oxen had a hard time pulling the wagons; so they were double teamed. That's what William called it. Sixteen oxen would be hitched to a wagon instead of just eight. Some of the men waded up to their waist in the water and turned the big, back wheels while others pulled on long ropes from the opposite bank. Such a commotion you have never seen with the oxen straining, the wagons

jerking, and the men yelling. I asked Father about some of the names the men were calling the oxen. He told me to never mind.

After crossing the Pawnee, we followed the Arkansas River a long way to a place William called the Arkansas crossing. There, we forded the river and began our long trip across the *jornada*, the Spanish word for the area where there was no water until we reached a little stream called Sand Creek. Sand Creek was dry, so we drove on to a place called Lower Spring. There we found plenty of water produced by a spring bubbling up out of the ground. Father explained that years before someone had buried a wagonbed in the ground near the spring to collect the water. The spring is sometimes called Wagonbed Spring. William called the water from the spring live water. He said from Wagonbed Spring to Santa Fe, we would have to depend upon live water.

Another stop was Cold Spring, where live water was available for our thirsty oxen. Nearby was a big cliff. It was covered with the names of travelers who passed this way going to and from Santa Fe. I found one name which had been carved only last year. It was Hamilton Norman, Liberty, Mo. June 18, 1849. Father said that he never knew Mr. Norman, but Liberty was not far from where we lived at Westport.

In a few days we traveled on to a landmark called Round Mound. It looked lonely in the middle of the plains and not very high. I wanted to climb to its top, but Father said no. "After all," he reminded me, "this is no pleasure trip," and indeed it wasn't. So we continued for many miles to a place where Mr. Waltrous had a store.

How nice it was – Mr. Waltrous' store! Its thick adobe walls blocked out the heat and its low ceiling made the rooms seem dark. The store was opened for business only last year. Father bought me some hoarhound candy at the store. It tasted good. I hadn't had anything sweet since

we left Westport.

Not too far from Mr. Waltrous' store, we came to a town called Las Vegas and then on to the little village of San Miguel. Leaving the village, we entered the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Father told me that meant the blood of Christ. In the late afternoon when the sun shines on the mountains, they turn red to look like blood.

Not far from San Miguel, we passed by some old Indian ruins called Pecos. There, father told me were kivas, little rooms dug deep in the ground where Indian men do their religious things. I wanted to go there, but Father said we didn't have time to stop. I could tell by the grumpy way he talked that he was in a hurry.

We reached Santa Fe the next day. Father quickly sold his merchandise to the merchants whose stores surrounded the plaza. We did not sleep in the tent that night, but stayed in a nice hotel.

Two days later we started back to Missouri. Father was in a good mood. I heard him tell William that he got a good price for his goods. He gave me a brand new Mexican coin, an eagle dollar he called it. He said that on our way home, we could stop at the Pecos Ruins and maybe even take time to climb Round Mound. I was glad to be going home. I didn't tell Father, but I had missed Mother.