

WENT TO KANSAS;
BEING
A THRILLING ACCOUNT
OF AN
ILL-FATED EXPEDITION

TO
That Fairy Land, and its Sad Results;

TOGETHER WITH A SKETCH OF THE LIFE OF THE AUTHOR,
AND HOW THE WORLD GOES WITH HER.

BY
MRS. MIRIAM DAVIS COLT.

“There’s a Divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough hew them as we will.”

WATERTOWN:
PRINTED BY L. INGALLS & CO.
1862.

Foreword

Many of those who went West in search of opportunity were satisfied in their quest. But others, despite every effort, eventually abandoned their newly acquired lands and acknowledged failure by returning to the East. *Went to Kansas*, published in 1862, traces the growing disappointment and the final defeat which one family suffered in the West. In describing her experiences as wife and mother in Kansas, the author, Mrs. Miriam Davis Colt, provides an unusually moving story of courage and heartbreak on the frontier.

For a time Mrs. Colt and her husband had taught school. Then, when Mr. Colt tired of a teaching career, the family moved to a farm near Potsdam, New York. In 1856 Colt determined to sell the farm and to go with his wife and two small children to the territory of Kansas. His goal was a settlement organized by the Vegetarian Settlement Company on the Neosho River in Kansas near Fort Scott. As a practicing vegetarian, Colt was attracted by the idea of living with others who believed as he did. He was excited as well by the fine-sounding economic prospects advertised by the Company.

Mrs. Colt has included in the appendix of her book

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the prospectus circulated by the Company, from which it is easy to imagine how attractive the settlement must have appeared. The Company invited people from all parts of the country to purchase shares, in return for which the Company promised to erect mills and other necessary facilities and to provide a common building in which families might take shelter until their own houses were built. The Company announced grandly that "a Hydropathic Establishment, an Agricultural College, a Scientific Institute, a Museum of Curiosities and Mechanic Arts, and Common Schools, will be among the first Institutions of the new settlement." Success seemed certain.

On April 16, 1856, the Colts bade their neighbors goodbye and headed West with all their belongings. But after they had crossed the Little Osage River, Mrs. Colt was beset with disturbing premonitions. When she saw a woman, barefoot, with a sack of corn meal thrown across her shoulder, enter a primitive cabin along their route, she asked herself, "Is that what I have got to come to?" Nor was her morale improved by arrival at the settlement. No buildings had been constructed; everyone was living in tents; and those who had already arrived "tell us they are sorry to see us come to this place."

The most backbreaking work could not overcome the hopelessness of their economic situation. And to this there were threats of Indian attack to be endured, intrusions of poisonous snakes, and the debilitating effects of illness. Unable to hold out any

longer, the Colts decided in early September to leave. But greater tragedy awaited. When they reached Booneville, Missouri, on the way back, the Colts' three-year-old son died from an illness contracted in Kansas. Hardly was he buried than Mrs. Colt's husband followed him to the grave. Sustained by sympathetic townspeople, Mrs. Colt kept up her courage and several months later resumed the sad journey East with her daughter.

Mrs. Colt was induced to publish this account of her experiences (based on a diary she had kept) in the hope of adding to the small sum of money she had received from her husband's life insurance. J. Christian Bay furnishes more information about Mrs. Colt in *A Heroine of the Frontier—Miriam Davis Colt in Kansas, 1856* (Cedar Rapids, 1941), pp. 5-9.

To My Daughter,

MIRIAM LOUISA COLT, WHO HAS STOOD BY MY SIDE WHILE
THE DARK WATERS OF SORROW AND ADVERSITY
HAVE SURGED AROUND ME; AND WHO HAS
BEEN, AND IS A WORLD OF COM-
FORT TO ME,

This Volume is Affectionately Dedicated.

John W. Gorse & Co., Binders.

PREFACE.

It is with extreme modesty that I present the following pages to be read by other eyes than mine. I do not hand them out expecting that they possess merit enough to interest the million, in these exciting war times; but it is of my friends (those that know me,) and their friends, that I ask patronage, and expect audience.

While in Kansas, I carried a little note-book in my pocket, in which I noted the dates, and the transpirations of each day; so that in writing my sad history, I have carried out the same form, describing the scenes just as they transpired.

What I have written, my friends may rely upon as being the Truth. If it fails of being truth, it is not plus truth but minus truth, on account of my lack of language to describe up to truth.

I have not written, expecting to plate myself over with the purest and most shining of metals, *gold*; neither have I written expecting or wishing to gain "the naphtha lamp of deathless fame;" but *I have written* that I may thereby procure the means to buy my "bread to eat, and wood to warm," and peradventure, redeem my *little home*, which I feel was purchased by the life-blood of my beloved husband!

When common necessities are not supplied, (save by charity,) we cannot wish for riches, or court fame; so that my prayer must be, "Give me this day my daily bread."

My friends will not expect my book to come, bearing the marks of extensive lore; for I have never gathered from the rich halls of science, or reaped from the broad fields of general knowledge; but as I have walked along over earth's uneven highway, now gathering flowers by some silver stream, then clambering over hills and the mountain's rocky cliff, or taking shelter under a spreading leafy tree, or when struggling with the angry waves, have striven to glean.

Neither, while writing, have I been freed from care, or abounded in physical health; I have not hied myself away to a little "sanctum sanctorum," there to get inspired with rich veins of thought, to gush out into profuse descriptive language; but I have sat right here in my little kitchen—have been provider, distributor, mother, mistress of the house to receive and entertain all who might chance to come, (and the number has not been small;) have been housekeeper, "chief butler and baker," laundress, sewing girl, chore boy, sick nurse, and invalid besides; for as often as once in three weeks (during the six months I have been writing,) I have been confined to my bed for three successive days, with a dreadful sick and nervous headache.

I must ask the kind indulgence of my friends, knowing that my writing can be subjected to criticisms; but under the circumstances, driven by necessity, with a mountain's weight of inability resting upon me, if others can do more and better, I will give them God's speed.

If I awaken sympathy for the afflicted of earth, by patronage procure my heart's desire, and give courage to the suffering to "bear up awhile beneath life's pressures," until "one unbounded spring encircle all," then my labor has not been in vain.

MIRIAM D. COLT.

WEST STOCKHOLM, St. Lawrence }
 Co., N. Y., July 1, 1862. }

TABLE OF CONTENTS.

CHAPTER I.

Anticipations and preparations—Vegetarian Co.,—H. S. Clubb's circular—Going to Kansas—Preparations for journey—Letter from H. S. Clubb—Decision—Packing and starting.

CHAPTER II.

Our journey—Bid farewell to friends—Detained at Watertown—Stop at Buffalo—Take Lake Shore route for Cleveland—Stop at Indianapolis—Arrive at St. Louis—Go on board steamer for Kansas City—"The call to Kansas"—Journey into the territory—Fording rivers—Camping—Arrive at destination.

CHAPTER III.

Disappointments and discomforts—Find no mills—No place of shelter—"The centre Octagon"—Improve it—Our dormitory—Rainy season—Simple food—Manner of cooking—Hope revived—Expect a saw mill—Company leave—Receive calls—Washing—Baking—Take claims—Build cabins.

CHAPTER IV.

Ploughing and planting—A busy time—Ploughing by moonlight—Mrs. Herriman sick—Visit her, carry flowers—Climate of Kansas—Ramble in the bottom lands—The Neosho—Vines and berry bushes—Indians, dress and wild nature—Go with husband to plant corn—A spot selected for cabin—Don the Bloomers—Flowers—A novel picture—Church at Mr. Clubb's—The eager cattle—Spider wart—Thunder storm—The Indians gone on a hunt—Presentiments—Plough broken—Mr. Herriman leaves the Territory—Sabre gone—Sambo day—Tune for Flowers—Visit to the ruined wigwams—Indian utensils—Purslain plant.

CONTENTS.

vii

CHAPTER V.

The unsettled state of the Territory—Northern invasion—What Willie said—Mr. Buxton—No papers—The city of Lawrence destroyed—Osawatomie sacked—Mob threaten to come here—Trunks locked—I am made Treasurer—May Heaven save us—Air—Bugbear—Straw ticks filled with prairie grass—Musketoes—Fencing cornfields—H. S. Clubb's house—Soft stone for building—Limestone—Coal—Baking Days—White bread—Writing home—Letter from St. Louis—Dried apple and berries—Grasshoppers—Evening prim roses—Big creek—Whippoorwill—Frogs.

CHAPTER VI.

The fever and ague has surely come—Mother, Lydia, Mema, Mr. V. and wife all sick—Mr. V. intends leaving the Territory—I am taken sick also—Husband concludes to leave—Husband washes—We cook for journey—The water failing—Father hunts for water—Doomed to disappointment—Father takes mother and sister L., and goes to Indian house—Mr. V. and wife leave for Kansas City—What shall we do?—Submit to paternity—H. S. Clubb sick—Leaves the settlement—Sick at Mr. Adams'—Stewart's—Broadbent's—The Oliver brothers leave—Willie taken sick—Unhappy Fourth—Husband returns from cornfield sick—Thunder storm—We go to Indian house—Spring of cold water—Husband goes to Mr. Stewart's, is sick with fever and ague—All sick but father and myself—Father draws water.

CHAPTER VII.

All sick but myself—Mr. Buxton here—Writing home—Sick ones scattered about—Three months from Northern home—Go to settlement—Borrow a sieve—Mr. Stewart and wife visit us—Buxton takes sick and goes home—I am nurse and maid—Take care of oxen, cow and calf—Bring water—Attend to the sick—Mourning dove—Charnel house of red men's bones—Indian burial—Snakes—Mysterious personage—Take sick ones out to ride—Drive oxen—Storing water to wash—Wolves—Husband's

birth-day—Oxen run away—Go for them—Lose my way, but find lovely dells and grain fields—Go again for oxen—See Mr. Stewart—Ride home—Father Broadbent's visit—Prayer.

CHAPTER VIII.

Indians return from hunt—Timely warning—Critical hour—My proposal—Take leave of family—Kiss my Willie again—Start off—Walked, run or flew—Fear of being seized by Indians—At the cornfields by sundown—Osage's superstition—Hurry on for fear of darkness and getting lost—Reach Mr. Adams—Make known our danger—Mr. Adams makes ready men and teams—Mr. Stewart and Broadbent start with me—Thunder storm—Woolen quilt—Confused and bewildered—The oxen's instinct—The moon—Scattering trees—The cry of "a light," "a house,"—Thanks to Heaven—Embrace my family—Husband's anxiety—The men asleep—No sleep for me—The dawn of day—Bid a glad adieu to Indian house—Sweet corn and squashes—Arrive at settlement—Condition of cabin—"Puncheons" and heater, beds and trunks take their former place—Thanksgivings and rejoicings.

CHAPTER IX.

Life at the settlement again—A letter from Mrs. V.—Another terrific thunder storm—A walk of four miles for spring water—The Indians pass and re-pass, going to Cofuchigue with dried buffalo meat and tallow—Their hungry dogs—Buy buffalo meat—Green corn and squashes in abundance—Family some better—Mr. V.'s cornfield—Mr. V.'s flowers and tomatoes—My dream—Hot days—Mr. Adams, wife and child, and young men sick—Mr. Stewart's family sick—We go to see Mr. Clubb—A shower on our return—A long, drizzling rain—bring water through the wet grass—Chase after cow—Husband tries to persuade father again to leave the Territory, but all in vain; he must stay to sell land—Indians destroying our corn—Steal the melons—Oxen cannot be found—Sunday morn—Sister L. and Mema go with me for water—White crows—Quails—Another letter from Mrs. V.—Intend to leave the country—Washing, and white clothes—

Willie afraid the Indians will carry off his mamma—Trunks packed, and cooking done for our journey—Mr. Broadbent sick—Indian amenities—Our family better—Wagon sold—Agree with Mr. Morris to take us out of the Territory—Disappointed again—My husband's dream—He divides funds—Spike of flowers—Another chance to go—Make arrangements with Healy—The big melon.

CHAPTER X.

Our journey from the Neosho, &c.—View the journey before me—Camp at Conreal's—Pass the Catholic Mission—Camp on Cow creek—Lame ox—Cooking by camp fire—Bad water—Rumors of war—Reach marks of civilization—Driver obstinate—Husband stays in a house—A rainy night and morning—Look in at Mr. Decker's—Families propose a rest—Our ruffian driver demands our blood or our money—The scene overcomes my husband—He has a chill—Gives the crazy driver a little—He threatens to leave us by the side of the road—Find a place in a house for husband—Sleep with my children in the wagon—Insulted by drunken driver—He is persuaded to take us on a few miles—We stop at Carthage, Jasper Co., Mo.—Find a friend in one Mr. Wells—Husband and children sick some—Stop one week with Mr. Wells—Leave for Booneville, Mo.—Mr. Wheeler sick—Leave him at Melville—Willie taken sick with dysentery—Hold him on pillows all day—Watch with him all night—We travel on—Arrive at Booneville—Stop at Bullock's hotel—Mema sick—Willie very sick—Mema better—I still watch with trembling.

CHAPTER XI.

Willie's death—Bury him in the city burying ground, a lovely, retired spot—Receive much sympathy from stranger friends—Pack trunks to journey—Purchase grave stones for Willie, (pay with my own clothes,) marked, *Willie, the little stranger*—Husband tries to sell gold watch—My dream—Husband taken sick—See the stones placed at Willie's grave—Call Dr. McCutchen—Friends try to comfort me with hope of husband's recovery—My heart is sorrowful—husband no better—Friends kind—Hus-

band's advice in case of his death—My husband's death and burial—We go to Capt. Walter's pleasant home—A letter from St. Louis states that my goods are in Kansas City—I must not grieve, but up and attend to business—Much sympathy, and administering to necessities—The county fair, but no desire to go—Write a long letter in regard to goods—Headache—My husband's clothes sold at auction—The avails used to purchase him gravestones—A pleasant Sabbath—The negro servants—Notice of husband's death in the paper—Go to the burying ground to see husband's gravestones set—Take a last farewell—Have papers made out to send to Insurance Co.—Take leave of my kind stranger friends.

CHAPTER XII.

Step out on the sea of life alone—Journey from Boonville to Jackson, Mich.—Meet with a warm reception from friends—Ride about the city—Visit to the state prison—Visit a brother in Parma—Mema sick—Return to Jackson—Sad news—Father Colt's death and burial in Kansas—Mother Colt and sister L. start for the State of New York—They arrive in Stockholm, N. Y.—Mother Colt's death the 4th of November—Mema very sick with the chills—Hear O. S. Fowler lecture on Phrenology—Holidays in Jackson—Sister Lydia's death—Journey to Owassa, Mich.—Stop one night in Lansing—Stay one week in Bingham—Pass through thrifty towns—Owassa (bright spot)—Receive letters from friends—Visiting with friends—Letters from the Insurance Co.—Write to Montreal—Policy lost—Write to Hartford—Give bonds—Receive insurance money—Invest it—Leave Owassa for Jackson, on the cars—Visit and bid farewell to friends—Start for New York—Visit Niagara Falls—Sick at Syracuse—Arrive at Potsdam—In West Stockholm—Purchase a little land to make a home—Visit, and receive letters from friends—My goods arrive—My home ready—Move into it—Barn and henry built—The widow's home and heart.

CHAPTER XIII.

My early life—My pedigree—My father's character—My

mother—My place of nativity—Entrance upon this life—A puny childhood—Fifteen years of age before I had books or health to study—Joined the church before I was fourteen—My desire to dress well—Aspirations for knowledge—Kept house for a brother—Death of a little brother—Attended school winters—Taught school—Was successful—My minister's approval—Journey to St. Lawrence co.—My stay in Fort Covington—A pleasant time My father's moving to Parishville—Our pleasant home—My teaching and going to school—My marriage—Mema's birth—My life in the city, and love of the same—Our removal to the country—Boarding and visiting—Birth of my Willie—Living on a farm—Genealogy of the Colt family—My husband's birth-place—Removal to New York—His occupation and education.

CHAPTER XIV.

How the world goes with me—"Only waiting"—My intentions of improving my little home—Setting trees and cultivating flowers—My interest not paid—My effort for a livelihood—Called to mourn—My brother sells and leaves—Called to mourn again—Remembered by my Booneville friends—Adversity still reigns—The farm sold on which my security rested—I am called to pay my little debts—My health poor—The cold winter—My neighbors get me wood—My nephew sends a little money—Mema's poetry—Messages from my husband—My husband's whisper—The war—My neighbors—Fitting Mema to take care of herself—The poultry business—Poverty still gapes upon us—Relief from Montreal friends—Still try to improve our home—Praise God, and ask for grace.