

CHAPTER XXIV

SCENERY ON THE LINE OF THE OLD SANTA FÉ TRAIL.—THE GREAT PLAINS — THE ARKANSAS VALLEY — OVER THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS INTO NEW MEXICO — THE RATON RANGE — THE SPANISH PEAKS — SIMPSON'S REST — FISHER'S PEAK — RATON PEAK — SNOWY RANGE — PIKE'S PEAK — RATON CREEK — THE INVASION OF THE RAILROAD — THE OLD SANTA FÉ TRAIL, A THING OF THE PAST

George J. ...



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HE tourist who to-day, in a palace car, surrounded by all the conveniences of our American railway service, commences his tour of the prairies at the Missouri River, enters classic ground the moment the train leaves the muddy flood of that stream on its swift flight toward the golden shores of the Pacific.

He finds a large city at the very portals of the once far West, with all the bustle and energy which is so characteristic

of American enterprise.

Gradually, as he is whirled along the iron trail, the woods lessen; he catches views of beautiful intervalles; a bright little stream flashes and foams in the sunlight as the trees grow fewer, and soon he emerges on the broad

sea of prairie, shut in only by the great circle of the heavens.

Dotting this motionless ocean everywhere, like whitened sails, are quiet homes, real argosies ventured by the sturdy and industrious people who have fought their way through almost insurmountable difficulties to the tranquillity which now surrounds them.

A few miles west of Topeka, the capital of Kansas, when the train reaches the little hamlet of Wakarusa, the track of the railroad commences to follow the route of the Old Santa Fé Trail. At that point, too, the Oregon Trail branches off for the heavily timbered regions of the Columbia. Now begins the classic ground of the once famous highway to New Mexico; nearly every stream, hill, and wooded dell has its story of adventure in those days when the railroad was regarded as an impossibility, and the region beyond the Missouri as a veritable desert.

After some hours' rapid travelling, if our tourist happens to be a passenger on the "California Limited," the swift train that annihilates distance, he will pass by towns, hamlets, and immense cattle ranches, stopping only at county-seats, and enter the justly famous Arkansas valley at the city of Hutchinson. The Old Trail now passes a few miles north of this busy place, which is noted for its extensive salt works, nor does the railroad again meet with it until the site of old Fort Zarah is reached, forty-seven miles west of Hutchinson, though it runs nearly parallel to the once great highway at varying distances for the whole détour.

The ruins of the once important military post may be seen from the car-windows on the right, as the train crosses the iron bridge spanning the Walnut, and here the Old Trail exactly coincides with the railroad, the track of the latter running immediately on the old highway.

Three miles westward from the classic little Walnut the

Old Trail ran through what is now the Court House Square of the town of Great Bend; it may be seen from the station, and on that very spot occurred the terrible fight of Captains Booth and Hallowell in 1864.

Thirteen miles further mountainward, on the right of the railroad, not far from the track, stands all that remains of the once dreaded Pawnee Rock. It lies just beyond the limits of the little hamlet bearing its name. It would not be recognized by any of the old plainsmen were they to come out of their isolated graves; for it is only a disintegrated, low mass of sandstone now, utilized for the base purposes of a corral, in which the village herd of milk cows lie down at night and chew their cuds, such peaceful transformation has that great civilizer, the locomotive, wrought in less than two decades.

Another five or six miles, and the train crosses Ash Creek, which, too, was once one of the favourite haunts of the Pawnee and Comanche on their predatory excursions, in the days when the mules and horses of passing freight caravans excited their cupidity. A short whirl again, and the town of Larned, lying peacefully on the Arkansas and Pawnee Fork, is reached. Immediately opposite the centre of the street through which the railroad runs, and which was also the course of the Old Trail, lying in the Arkansas River, close to its northern bank, is a small thickly-wooded island, now reached by a bridge, that is famous as the battleground of a terrible conflict thirty years ago, between the Pawnees and Cheyennes, hereditary enemies, in which the latter tribe was cruelly defeated.

The railroad bridge crosses Pawnee Fork at the precise spot where the Old Trail did. This locality has been the scene of some of the bloodiest encounters between the various tribes of savages themselves, and between them and the freight caravans, the overland coaches, and every other kind of outfit that formerly attempted the passage

of the now peaceful stream. In fact, the whole region from Walnut Creek to the mouth of the Pawnee, which includes in its area Ash Creek and Pawnee Rock, seemed to be the greatest resort for the Indians, who hovered about the Santa Fé Trail for the sole purpose of robbery and murder; it was a very lucky caravan or coach, indeed, that passed through that portion of the route without being attacked.

All the once dangerous points of the Old Trail having been successively passed, — Cow Creek, Big and Little Coon, and Ash Creek, Fort Dodge, Fort Aubrey,¹ and Point of Rocks, — the tourist arrives at last at the foot-hills. At La Junta the railroad separates into two branches; one going to Denver, the other on to New Mexico. Here, a relatively short distance to the northwest, on the right of the train, may be seen the ruins of Bent's Fort, the tourist having already passed the site of the once famous Big Timbers, a favourite winter camping-ground of the Cheyennes and Arapahoes; but everywhere around him there reigns such perfect quiet and pastoral beauty, he might imagine that the peaceful landscape upon which he looks had never been a bloody arena.

I suggest to the lover of nature that he should cross the Raton Range in the early morning, or late in the afternoon; for then the magnificent scenery of the Trail over the high divide into New Mexico assumes its most beautiful aspect.

In approaching the range from the Old Trail, or now from the railroad, their snow-clad peaks may be seen at a distance of sixty miles. In the era of caravans and pack-trains, for hour after hour, as they moved slowly toward the goal of their ambition, the summit of the fearful pathway on the divide, the huge forms of the mountains seemed to recede, and yet ascend higher. On the next day's journey their outlines appeared more irregular and

¹ Now Kendall, a little village in Hamilton County, Kansas.

ugged. Drawing still nearer, their base presented a long, dark strip stretching throughout their whole course, ever widening until it seemed like a fathomless gulf, separating the world of reality from the realms of imagination beyond.

Another weary twenty miles of dusty travel, and the black void slowly dissolved, and out of the shadows lines of broken, sterile, ferruginous buttes and detached masses of rocks, whose soilless surface refuses sustenance, save to a few scattered, stunted pines and lifeless mosses, emerged to view.

The progress of the weary-footed mules or oxen was now through ravines and around rocks; up narrow paths which the melting snows have washed out; sometimes between beetling cliffs, often to their very edge, where hundreds of feet below the Trail the tall trees seemed diminished into shrubs. Then again the road led over an immense broad terrace, for thousands of yards around, with a bright lake gleaming in the refracted light, and brilliant Alpine plants waving their beautiful flowers on its margin. Still the coveted summit appeared so far off as to be beyond the range of vision, and it seemed as if, instead of ascending, the entire mass underneath had been receding, like the mountains of ice over which Arctic explorers attempt to reach the pole. Now the tortuous Trail passed through snow-wreaths which the winds had eddied into indentations; then over bright, glassy surfaces of ice and fragments of rocks, until the pinnacle was reached. Nearer, along the broad successive terraces of the opposite mountains, the evergreen pine, the cedar, with its stiff, angular branches, and the cottonwood, with its varied curves and bright colours, were crowded into bunches or strung into zigzag lines, interspersed with shrubs and mountain plants, among which the flaming cactus was conspicuous. To the right and left, the bare cones of the barren peaks rose in



multitude, with their calm, awful forms shrouded in snow, and their dark shadows reflected far into the valleys, like spectres from a chaotic world.

In going through the Raton Pass, the Old Santa Fé Trail meandered up a steep valley, enclosed on either side by abrupt hills covered with pine and masses of gray rock. The road ran along the points of varying elevations, now in the stony bed of Raton Creek, which it crossed fifty-three times, the sparkling, flitting waters of the bubbling stream leaping and booming against the animals' feet as they hauled the great wagons of the freight caravans over the tortuous passage. The creek often rushed rapidly under large flat stones, lost to sight for a moment, then reappearing with a fresh impetus and dashing over its flinty, uneven bed until it mingled with the pure waters of Le Purgatoire.

Still ascending, the scenery assumed a bolder, rougher cast; then sudden turns gave you hurried glimpses of the great valley below. A gentle dell sloped to the summit of the pass on the west, then, rising on the east by a succession of terraces, the bald, bare cliff was reached, overlooking the whole region for many miles, and this is Raton Peak.¹

The extreme top of this famous peak was only reached after more than an hour's arduous struggle. On the lofty plateau the caravans and pack-trains rested their tired animals. Here, too, the lonely trapper, when crossing the range in quest of beaver, often chose this lofty spot on which to kindle his little fire and broil juicy steaks of the black-tail deer, the finest venison in the world; but before

¹ Raton is the name given by the early Spaniards to this range, meaning both mouse and squirrel. It had its origin either in the fact that one of its several peaks bore a fanciful resemblance to a squirrel, or because of the immense numbers of that little rodent always to be found in its pine forests.

he indulged in the savoury morsels, if he was in the least superstitious or devout, or inspired by the sublime scene around him, he lighted his pipe, and after saluting the elevated ridge on which he sat by the first whiff of the fragrant kinnikinick, Indian-fashion, he in turn offered homage in the same manner to the sky above him, the earth beneath, and to the cardinal points of the compass, and was then prepared to eat his solitary meal in a spirit of thankfulness.

Far below this magnificent vantage-ground lies the valley of the Rio Las Animas Perdidas. On the other verge of the great depression rise the peerless, everlastingly snow-wreathed Spanish Peaks,¹ whose giant summits are grim sentinels that for untold ages have witnessed hundreds of sanguinary conflicts between the wily nomads of the vast plains watered by the silent Arkansas.

All around you snow-clad mountains lift their serrated crowns above the horizon, dim, white, and indistinct, like icebergs seen at sea by moonlight; others, nearer, more rugged, naked of verdure, and irregular in contour, seem to lose their lofty summits in the intense blue of the sky.

Fisher's Peak, which is in full view from the train, was named from the following circumstance: Captain Fisher was a German artillery officer commanding a battery in General Kearney's Army of the West in the conquest of New Mexico and was encamped at the base of the peak to which he involuntarily gave his name. He was intently gazing at the lofty summit wrapped in the early mist, and not being familiar with the illusory atmospheric effects of the region, he thought that to go there would be merely a pleasant promenade. So, leaving word that

¹ In the beautiful language of the country's early conquerors, "Las Cumbres Espanolas," or "Las dos Hermanas" (The Two Sisters), and in the Ute tongue, "Wah-toya" (The Twins).

he would return to breakfast, he struck out at a brisk walk for the crest. That whole day, the following night, and the succeeding day, dragged their weary hours on, but no tidings of the commanding officer were received at the battery, and ill rumours were current of his death by Indians or bears, when, just as his mess were about to take their seats at the table for the evening meal, their captain put in an appearance, a very tired but a wiser man. He started to go to the peak, and he went there!

On the summit of another rock-ribbed elevation close by, the tourist will notice the shaft of an obelisk. It is over the grave of George Simpson, once a noted mountaineer in the days of the great fur companies. For a long time he made his home there, and it was his dying request that the lofty peak he loved so well while living should be his last resting-place. The peak is known as "Simpson's Rest," and is one of the notable features of the rugged landscape.

Pike's Peak, far away to the north, intensely white and silvery in the clear sky, hangs like a great dome high in the region of the clouds, a marked object, worthy to commemorate the indefatigable efforts of the early voyageur whose name it bears.

In this wonderful locality, both Pike's Peak and the snowy range over two hundred miles from our point of observation really seem to the uninitiated as if a brisk walk of an hour or two would enable one to reach them, so deceptive is the atmosphere of these elevated regions.

About two miles from the crest of the range, yet over seven thousand feet above the sea-level, in a pretty little depression about as large as a medium-sized corn-field in the Eastern States, Uncle Dick Wooton lived, and here, too, was his toll-gate. The veteran mountaineer erected a substantial house of adobe, after the style of one of the old-time Southern plantation residences, a memory, per-

hips, of his youth, when he raised tobacco in his father's fields in Kentucky.¹

The most charming hour in which to be on the crest of Raton Range is in the afternoon, when the weather is clear and calm. As the night comes on apace in the distant valley beneath, the evening shadows drop down, pencilled with broad bands of rosy light as they creep slowly across the beautiful landscape, while the rugged vista below is enveloped in a diffused haze like that which marks the season of the Indian summer in the lower great plains. Above, the sky curves toward the relatively restricted horizon, with not a cloud to dim its intense blue, nowhere so beautiful as in these lofty altitudes.

The sun, however, does not always shine resplendently; there are times when the most terrific storms of wind, hail, and rain change the entire aspect of the scene. Fortunately, these violent bursts never last long; they vanish as rapidly as they come, leaving in their wake the most phenomenally beautiful rainbows, whose trailing splendors which they owe to the dry and rare air of the region, and its high refractory power, are gorgeous in the extreme.

In 1872 the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad entered the valley of the Upper Arkansas. Twenty-four years ago, on a delicious October afternoon, I stood on the absolutely level plateau at the mouth of Pawnee Fork where that historic creek debouches into the great river. The remembrance of that view will never pass from my memory, for it showed a curious temporary blending of two distinct civilizations. One, the new, marking the course of empire in its restless march westward; the other, that of the aboriginal, which, like a dissolving view, was soon to fade away and be forgotten.

The box-elders and cottonwoods thinly covering the creek-bottom were gradually donning their autumn dress

¹The house was destroyed by fire two or three years ago.

of russet, and the mirage had already commenced its fantastic play with the landscape. On the sides and crests of the sparsely grassed sand hills south of the Arkansas a few buffaloes were grazing in company with hundreds of Texas cattle, while in the broad valley beneath, small flocks of graceful antelope were lying down, quietly ruminating their midday meal.

In the distance, far eastwardly, a train of cars could be seen approaching; as far as the eye could reach, on either side of the track, the virgin sod had been turned to the sun; the "empire of the plough" was established, and the march of immigration in its hunger for the horizon had begun.

Half a mile away from the bridge spanning the Fork, under the grateful shade of the largest trees, about twenty skin lodges were irregularly grouped; on the brown sod of the sun-cured grass a herd of a hundred ponies were lazily feeding, while a troop of dusky little children were chasing the yellow butterflies from the dried and withered sunflower stalks which once so conspicuously marked the well-worn highway to the mountains. These Indians, the remnant of a tribe powerful in the years of savage sovereignty, were on their way, in charge of their agent, to their new homes, on the reservation just allotted to them by the government, a hundred miles south of the Arkansas.

Their primitive lodges contrasted strangely with the peaceful little sod-houses, dugouts, and white cottages of the incoming settlers on the public lands, with the villages struggling into existence, and above all with the rapidly moving cars; unmistakable evidences that the new civilization was soon to sweep the red men before it like chaff before the wind.

Farther to the west, a caravan of white-covered wagons loaded with supplies for some remote military post, the last that would ever travel the Old Trail, was slowly crawl-

ing toward the setting sun. I watched it until only a cloud of dust marked its place low down on the horizon, and it was soon lost sight of in the purple mist that was rapidly overspreading the far-reaching prairie.

It was the beginning of the end; on the 9th of February, 1880, the first train over the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad arrived at Santa Fe and the Old Trail as a route of commerce was closed forever. The once great highway is now only a picture in the memory of the few who have travelled its weary course, following the windings of the silent Arkansas, on to the portals that guard the rugged pathway leading to the shores of the blue Pacific.

