

CHAPTER 16.

STAGING.

There seems to be a custom, or rather a habit, pertaining to frontier life, into which every one falls, particularly the first settlers—that of relating adventures and rehearsing the miraculous escapes and perilous dangers through which each old settler passed. There is no definite rule or system in regard to this kind of story-telling, but a spontaneous impulse on the part of those who, for lack of more exciting amusement, become transient weights upon goods boxes that adorn the sidewalks in Western villages, while they lavishly describe the early times, when they “went forty miles to mill, or to market their produce”—when Indian raids marred the pleasure of a hunt, and wolves howled around the cabins and “dug-outs” at night.

Since the advance of civilization, with its attendant improvements and facilities, has lessened the hardships of the first settlers, they enjoy a rehearsal of the scenes of that early time when the journey to the commercial towns was made in covered wagons, requiring several days to make the trip,

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before stage-coaches made their appearance to convey the weekly mail and transient travelers.

Staging in the Republican valley was a feature of enterprise, coexistent with the establishing of the Land Office, of which the writer had sufficient melancholy experience to venture a description of it in these pages, as a dividing link in transportation facilities, between a toilsome journey in a cumbersome farm wagon and the handsome railway coaches that now convey one over the same route of travel in a few hours.

“All aboard!” shouted the driver, as he sat on the driver’s seat in a small, cheerless-looking covered spring wagon, resembling a half-grown stage-coach of the present day, which the driver designated by the name of “jerky,” as it stood in front of the Land Office at early dawn, while the morning star was yet shining, and the mercury below zero.

The driver was almost obscured with robes and blankets, while he held in check the restless horses, which evinced sundry acts of disobedience, doubtless augmented by coming in contact with the cold air, on being brought out of the stable. “All aboard!” shouted the impatient driver. There was no way of avoiding the journey.

The rules of the Department required that the receipts of the office, semi-monthly, must be conveyed to the depository, and the nearest express office was sixty miles away, with no

stage route to it, and the "jerky" was bound for Junction City, seventy-five miles down the valley, requiring nearly two days to make the trip.

With doubtful prospects I entered the vehicle, the driver cracked his whip, and the "jerky" rattled away over the frozen ground down the valley. Two forlorn homestead settlers, who had taken claims and were going East for their families, were my traveling companions, and as the "jerky" rumbled over the rough ground, we were jostled, banged and battered sufficient to damage a cast-iron constitution. The sun rose bright, and the stillness of the morning, though cold, prompted us to hope for a mild day; but our hope ended not in fruition, but cheerless discomfort. As the damaged condition of the imitation of stage covering that inclosed the rickety bows of the "jerky" did not obstruct the vision, I discovered an embankment of dull, leaden-colored clouds lying along the northern horizon, that seemed to be slowly rising towards the zenith, while fitful gusts of small whirlwinds which dallied with "tumble-weeds" and detached portions of prairie-grass along the roadside, were omens that betokened an approaching snow storm.

No regular road had been established, and the trail made by immigrant wagons was the only guide for the driver, and while the route was down the valley, and a large portion of

it level, yet at intervals we had to cross a divide or range of hills.

At the base of the first hill we reached, an unlooked-for delay occurred, by one of the horses refusing to go up the hill, and not only stood still, but manifested a decided preference for pulling backward instead of forward. In vain the driver applied his whip, accompanied with the usual amount of emphatic language from the stage-driver's vocabulary. We alighted and "put our shoulders to the wheel," but without avail, however, for we were compelled to walk up the hill—an exercise our chilled limbs needed—while the driver made a wide circuit, approaching the summit obliquely.

Meantime the sky became overcast with clouds and the snow began falling.

Late in the afternoon we arrived at the station for changing horses. By this time the snow was drifting, and danger of becoming lost on the prairie induced the driver to remain over night.

The station consisted of the dwelling of the owner—a "dug-out" and log cabin combined, and so arranged as to resemble a "double" log cabin, with an open porch between, and a cheap straw-thatched Kansas stable, made by forks set in the ground, with poles laid across, covered with straw or

prairie grass, the whole structure surrounded with straw and corn-shocks.

One room of the dwelling house was used for kitchen and dining-room combined, and the other used as a sitting-room with a fire-place, the jambs and mantel-piece laid up in the rough.

Into the latter we were conducted by the host, who left us to occupy seats while he went to the wood-pile to procure fuel to replenish an apology for a fire that feebly flickered between a green "back-log" and "fore-stick," reminding one of the end of life. He seemed to be lamentably slow as he shambled along with an armful of green cottonwood sticks, which he deposited promiscuously on the fading embers; and after fanning the embers into brightness with his slouched hat, he left us with the consoling remark:

"I guess it'll burn."

The green cottonwood sticks hissed like so many writhing serpents, and for all the heat or warmth they emitted one might as well have been sitting by a vanishing camp-fire on the shore of Hudson's Bay in midwinter.

I had heard of the "every-day ague" and the "third-day ague," but if I had been afflicted with both those diseases, with the "dumb ague" thrown in, I could not have been

more chilled and uncomfortable than in that melancholy mood, as I gazed at that mass of cottonwood sticks hissing among the embers, while the storm without beat furiously against the clattering window-sash.

At length supper was announced, which might properly be called a second-class cold lunch, as the house was "out of coffee."

After supper I concluded our host had some redeeming qualities, as he brought in a basketful of corn-cobs, with which he built a roaring fire, and he entertained us with several lively airs on the violin, at which he seemed to be more expert than keeping a boarding-house or stage-station.

Our sleeping apartment was in that part of the building, in Western parlance, "up stairs," the route to which were the irregular rounds of a ladder, and the room, that which might be designated as the garret of a log cabin. Our sleeping-couch was a straw tick laid upon the floor, with a solitary blanket for covering. The gable end of the "up stairs" had a place or aperture for a window with the window left out, and in lieu thereof a segment of a wagon-cover fastened across it to prevent the snow and rain blowing into the room, which proved to be an insufficient barrier on the occasion of which I write. Sleep was out of the question with that wagon-sheet flapping, and the mournful sound of the wind

as it penetrated every crevice, conveying the drifting snow into the chamber. At day-dawn I thrust aside the wagon-sheet and looked out over the desolate landscape to the east. The clouds had disappeared, the wind was decreasing in velocity, and I beheld a cold, cloudless sky. Near by was the ice-bound Republican; on the other side of the river a range of dismal, snow-covered hills or bluffs, and beyond them the blue sky and twinkling stars fading away in the gray streaks of day-dawn.

We had a cold, cheerless journey on the following day to Junction City, where I deposited my package, consisting of a fragment of the Nation's revenue of considerable value, in the express office. Subsequently I made many such journeys over the same route, through storm or sunshine, varied only with the variations of the weather over which "Old Probabilities" had no control.

When the country became more thickly settled, and travelers penetrated this region, the Southwestern Stage Company put on the roads their commodious stage-coaches, with a daily line from Waterville to Concordia, and for several years I made semi-monthly trips in those coaches to Waterville, bearing the receipts of the office to the express office. Many of those journeys were enjoyable, barring an occasional trip during a rain or snow storm, and an occasional necessity

requiring that I should recline on top of the coach the entire route, owing to the interior being crowded with women and children. At such times the kindness of the gentlemanly drivers served to dispel the otherwise dispiriting prospect of comfortable traveling.

The early settlers of the Republican and Solomon valleys will long remember the daily arrival of the stage-coaches, when the prospects for a railroad were doubtful, only enlivened by transient railroad meetings, appointing committees and passing extravagant resolutions. But since the whistle of the locomotive has been heard in these valleys the stage-coaches are numbered among the things of the past. Yet they will be remembered among the scenes of frontier life, and the names of Scott and Benjamin as superintendents, and Murphy, Huggins, Conant, O'Toole and others, who handled the ribbons as drivers, will be remembered by those whose frontier traveling so long consisted of staging in Northwestern Kansas.