The Trail of the Covered Wagon

By: John K. Stockton

On the 27th of April, 1852, our family started from our home, near Nauvoo, Illinois, for the gold fields of California. Soon after the discovery of gold in '49 became known, we began talking of selling of the gold said to be so plentiful. It might have ended in just talk, but for the visit of a cousin by the name of Jamison, who came back from California for a short stay, and spend a few hours at our house. I was then only ten years old, but I remember how wonderful the nuggets of gold he produced from a canvas bag he had hidden about his person looked to us, and how thrilled we were over all that he said about the land of promise. That visit settled every thing with regard to our going. I was too young to understand much of the discussion that went on between my parents and the older boys who joined in the family councils, but I remember that all were more enthusiastic than mother (Susan Emily Kirkpatrick Stockton). Another baby was expected and she wasn't so sure she was in favor of selling our home, where she had lived ever since her marriage, where her children had been born and where some of them were buried in the little family burial plot, to travel hundreds of miles across an unknown land. However, her objections were soon overruled, for in those days, wives did as their husbands wished.

Preparations were begun at once for the undertaking. The first thing necessary was the sale of the farm. Father (Rev. James Montgomery Stockton) had bought the land from the government under an early territorial pre-emption law, at I believe, $1.25 an acre. It had been under cultivation now nearly twenty years, and was considered valuable, for the times. It wasn't easy however, to sell land for cash, even though it was in the most fertile of valleys, that of the Mississippi, and only four miles from the ruins of the famous Mormon Temple.

After several months of dickering and bargaining and changing of price, the farm was sold to a neighbor, who, on the day the deed was signed, brought the price of the land in gold pieces, carried in a stout bag, to the house and poured them out on the dining room table. More gold than any of the family saw for many long years.

There was still a great deal to do before we could set off. There were eight children (Samuel, Thomas, William, Willis, John, James, Sarah & Minerva) and for so large a family, at least four wagons were needed. These must be built especially for the purpose, with broad heavy wheels, and wide tires. Food must be provided for almost a year, not only for the ten members of our household, but for friends and fellow travelers who might be in need.

There were one or two small tents, and they, as well as our wagon covers, when no longer needed as such, were made into sheets, and were used for many years by the family. Beeves were slaughtered, the meat cut into stripes and dried. Hams and bacon sides were smoked and packed. Beans, corn meal,

flour and hard-tack was provided in large quantity. Canned fruit and vegetables such as we have now were unknown, but we had dried apples, peaches and pumpkin, sorghum molasses, made from sugar, furnished our sweets. The maple sugar was molded into cakes, and was looked upon as a luxury, as it is now. The food was packed in crates, made very tight, to keep out dust and moisture. These were fitted into the bottom of the wagons and on top of them, bedding, clothing and other necessities were packed.

After all the planning and measuring, many things had to be left behind. Almost at the last moment, a place must be found for a box of tools, and an extra ox yoke, and a small chest made of southern pine, which mother had brought from her own home in the south, had to be sacrificed. It contained her most precious personal treasures – a pair of shoes worn by the baby she was leaving in the little grave yard – some letters, perhaps they were love letters. I shall never forget her tears – they were rarely shed by pioneer women – father assured her that when we had gotten rich – which would only be a year or two, we would come back and get all the things that we were leaving behind. Three of the wagons were heavy, the other a little lighter, in which father, mother, and the twins, baby girls less than two years old, rode. This was drawn by four horses, and there was an extra horse for horseback riding. The light wagon even boasted a sort of spring seat, which had been rigged up by one of the boys. The other wagons were drawn by oxen, two four yoke teams, one six yoke. They were taught to obey the spoken call of the driver, and no lines or other harness was used. Each of the older boys, Sam, Tom, and Will, had charge of one wagon, and we younger boys rode with them, taking turns. I remember we liked to ride with Will best, he told us such fine stories.

We crossed the Mississippi river at Warsaw, on the ferry, The Missouri, at St. Joe, the same way, tho' we had a long wait for an opportunity to cross. We had to take our turn, a few among thousands, all setting out on the same mission. So great was the need that every conceivable kind of boat was pressed into the service. So anxious was the multitude to get on their way, that they were willing to risk their lives, in an old leaky skiff or raft. The river was high and muddy as usual, which added to the difficulties. Sometimes horses and cattle would become frightened and jump over board, upsetting the boat. I do not recall that anyone was drowned, while we were there, but few outfits got over with all their livestock. It was nearly then end of May when the long wagon trains began moving out through western Nebraska, on the California Trail. When we got across the river we thought our troubles were about over. Really, they were just beginning. The trail was nearly a quarter of a mile wide – that is, a row of wagons fifteen-hundred feet across, and extending in front and to the rear, as far as we could see – a vast sea of white flapping wagon covers, and a seething mass of plodding animals. There were few single team or single-family outfits; all such attached themselves to some group. These groups were made up of relatives, friends or neighbors, or those belonging to the same religious denomination, or drawn together by some common bond. They organized – to some extent – and usually elected one of their number Captain.

There were thirty wagons in our group, and Father, who was a Presbyterian Minister, was Captain. His duties were numerous, not the least of which was hunting out and deciding on the most suitable place to camp.

That was a backward spring, and grass was just getting started. It was impossible to carry food for our horses and cattle with us, so, had to depend on native grass, and the animals must get their food at night. There must be not only grass, but water and wood for cooking. Often, we did not find wood, oil stoves had not been invented, so, every scrap of wood was eagerly nabbed and stored away. Even then, we often ate a cold lunch, helped out by milk from the cows.

About three o'clock in the afternoon, the Captains of the groups would mount their saddle horses and begin scouting for a place to camp. Sometimes the place chosen would be a mile or more to one side and several miles ahead. Some days, we "struck camp", as it was called, by four thirty or five o'clock, other evenings, it took us till after dark to reach the place chosen for our temporary home. Then, if there was wood enough, small camp fires would soon be burning, as the families each chose a corner of the square made by the wagons. If wood was scarce, one or two fires were used in common. A care-taker, or herder, was appointed for the stock, from the younger men, in turn. Each owner had a bell for the leader among his animals, and I never heard any one complain of losing his own. The steers knew their own names, as well as where they belonged in the team. In the morning, we began calling them by name, the would stop grazing, lift their heads as though listening, and start sedately toward us, their bells tinkling as they came. They walked to their own side of their wagon, and stood patiently for the yoke.

After the evening meal, while the women cleared up the dishes, the men gathered together and discussed the events of the day, or the prospects of the next. Then – in our group at least – hymn books were produced from under dusty bundles, and as the fires died out, hymns were sung and prayers were offered, as at home.

The wagons were placed in a hollow square, as a precaution against Indians, but we never encountered any, except friendly ones. There was, however, another and more deadly enemy lurking in our pathway, disease – though we did not suspect it. Bad water, the entire lack of sanitation, and the unavoidable exposure to all classes of people, from all quarters of the globe. For the fame of American gold had reached Europe, and our train numbered those from every civilized nation. Asiatic Cholera was introduced inside of the first thirty days. Still, we pushed on, hoping that we might out-run the disease. We now started earlier in the morning, and traveled later at night. The men no longer smoked or chatted in camp in the evening, or sang songs, but, silently, with heavy hearts, went to their wagons, where they lay, often until nearly morning, without the sleep they so much needed. Soon, it was no unusual sight to see a wagon or a small group, pull out to the side of the trail and begin to dig. Then, we knew another life had gone out. Sometimes, we joined the sad little group that stood shivering and sobbing, in the spring sunshine. After a few minutes, a silent form would be carried from the wagon. Sometimes there would be a

rude, box coffin, more often there would be no time to get the necessary boards and tools, so only a blanket or patchwork quilt, would be both shroud and coffin. A short prayer would be the only service – then as soon as the shallow grave had been filled in, the mourners would climb back into the wagon, and go on their way. Just one of the many tragedies taking place in the great moving city of the plains.

Often, now we would meet two or three wagons, or sometimes only one, going in the opposite direction. Perhaps a woman with a baby in her arms, sat on the high, board seat, with little children beside her, going back – alone – no use to ask questions. We knew that somewhere on the trail ahead, she had left the husband father, in one of the nameless graves that now so thickly dotted our pathway. It was not unusual for a rider to halt us and inquire if there was a doctor or any medicine in our outfit. And more often, came the request for a minister. Father always went with the messenger sometimes in the dead of night, or early dawn. He would read the Scripture service for the dead, say a prayer, and come back, looking more, and more drawn and sad, as these incidents became more frequent. Still, we pushed on – hoping – against hope. Then one day, brother James was taken sick early in the morning. Before night, Father was stricken. At sundown, James, who was nine, died, and Father was not expected to live through the night. Part of our group went on with the train, about half stopped with our family. In the morning, others of the group were sick – including myself. I know little of what passed in the next several weeks, except what was told me later. We stopped in a little village where three members of our party were left in the cemetery.

Father never fully recovered his health, although he lived till the family was grown. In the Fall, they drove back across the Missouri River. The family bought four hundred acres of land in Page County, Iowa (for $250.00) and made it their permanent home.

The End

Copied by: Lillian Raymond, 1929

Transcribed by: Nancy Wanita Stockton Bernhardt
Further editing and transcription by: John P. Kirkpatrick