

John Y. Nelson: Plainsman

By O. J. PRUITT

Mr. Pruitt is a former curator of the Pottawattamie County Historical Society. A frequent contributor to the ANNALS, his main interest for many years has been the study of the archeological remains of western Iowa Indian cultures.

The Sioux, Otoe, Iowa and Missouri Indians signed a treaty in 1836 giving the United States government possession of a triangular strip of land in northwestern Missouri, bounded by the Missouri River, but not originally included within the boundaries of that state. This tract was known as the Platte Purchase. It encompassed the counties of Platte, Buchanan, Andrew, Holt, Nodaway and Atchison, extending from the Blacksnake Hills near Kansas City to the southern boundary of Iowa.

The area was insufficient for the number of Pottawattamies and Ottawas to be removed from Fort Dearborn and northern Indiana in 1833-34. The government by a treaty adopted at Prairie du Chien in 1830 had obtained lands in southwest Iowa that extended north to the Minnesota boundary, onto which the above named Indians were settled. Their removal to Iowa was not fully consummated until two years later.

A company of dragoons from Fort Leavenworth built a blockhouse to protect the Pottawattamies against their most dangerous foes, the Sioux. The latter resented the government's action and attacked several hunting parties sent out by the newly arrived Indians. The blockhouse, however, was not garrisoned for any length of time, if at all. Captain Kearny shortly turned it over to Father De Smet, and it became a mission. Father De Smet, known as a peace-maker among the Indians, was entrusted with the task of preventing them from warring against each other. He visited the Sioux twice during his two years at the mission to persuade them not to molest the Pottawattamies. How well he succeeded is a part of history.

The Pottawattamies had been moved from Fort Dearborn under contract, sent by boat down the Illinois River, and up the Mississippi and Missouri. The contractors unloaded the Indians at Blacksnake Hills on the Platte Purchase lands claiming they had fulfilled their contract. The Indians marched overland from there. The greater number came to Millers Hollow below the site of the blockhouse. The Ottawas under Chief Big Foot made their way to Iowa entirely on foot arriving some three months later. All were too late to raise any crops that year.

Millers Hollow was the original name given to Kaneshville, as it came to be called during the Mormon days, and later incorporated as Council Bluffs. The settlement was known to river men as Hart Bluff, the Grand Battier and the old Otoe village site reported by Lewis and Clark. Millers Hollow, also later known as Indian Creek, is the valley of a fifteen mile-long stream that drains a large area. It intersects the bluffs at an obtuse angle, and in the past the city was often under water during the annual spring floods which caused much damage and loss of property. The creek is now walled-in and covered with concrete through the main part of the city.

We can only speculate as to whether there was an actual person named Miller from whom Millers Hollow took its name. Possibly he was a soldier by the name of Muller who received his discharge from the command of General Atkinson, and married a squaw of the tribe of Bad Heart. Miller or Muller no doubt kept a flock of ducks for only a duck could navigate the Mud Hollow valley during the spring rains. That portion of the stream outside the city today is still known as Mud Hollow. Log cabins built by pioneers may still be seen along a road true to the name Mud Hollow that parallels the creek.

Supplies and ammunition for the Pottawattamies and Ottawas had to come by boat from St. Louis except during the winter when ice blocked the river. Game was scarce and there was much suffering. Many of the In-

dians failing to provide sufficient shelter for the severe winter lived in tents supplied by the government. Father De Smet reported that he and the Indians watched for days from the top of the bluffs for some sign of the relief boat bringing supplies. Then one day when almost in despair they saw the thin white smoke of an approaching steamer curling upward fully fifteen miles distant. Across the four miles to the landing they raced, arriving just in time to see the boat sinking. Four articles were saved: a plow, a hand saw, a pair of boots and a container of liquor. The handsaw was helpful in remodeling the blockhouse, now used as a mission. The plow turned sod for gardens and Father De Smet took the boots unto himself, for he was in need of covering for his feet. The liquor is presumed to have been used for sacramental purposes, though the good father made no further mention of it. He vigorously opposed traders furnishing liquor to his charges because this practice was a consistent source of trouble for him while serving at the mission.¹

The Indians located there at this time had long been in touch with white men and liquor had contributed much to the decadent and exploited state in which the missionary found them. One of the Pottawattamie chiefs, Sagonash or Billy Caldwell, educated by the whites, and a French Canadian named Williamette, connived in many ways to defraud the tribe. They were on hand for each payment of annuities, and always had some plausible scheme for the supposed betterment of the Indians, one example being the collecting of funds to build a grist mill. It was finally built on Mosquito Creek after they had collected money for two years.

But neither of these men lived to see the mill in operation. Both died in the spring of 1841. They were buried near the present site of Pierce school on the same bluff where the blockhouse was situated. Their graves were uncovered in the grading of Franklin Avenue several

¹ Hiram Martin Chittenden and Albert Tolbok Richardson, ed., *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S.J.*, Francis P. Harper, New York, 1905, pp. 183-4.

years ago. They were re-interred in the Catholic cemetery, their graves marked with the single word Indians.

The date when John Y. Nelson came to Millers Hollow is undetermined. However, he was there before the coming of the Mormons. He was one of a number of squaw men, and had the reputation of an expert bull whacker, rifleman and guide. Nelson had worked for the government using his three yoke of oxen and Conestoga wagon probably hauling supplies between Fort Leavenworth, Bellevue and Fort Atkinson.

Nelson was at Millers Hollow at the same time as Father De Smet. It was the missionary who perhaps saved the life of one of the plainsman's squaws when she came to the mission for protection from him during a drunken spree. Returning to their tepee and not finding her, Nelson began a search. After going from tent to cabin he saw a light in the mission and approached the building swearing in a loud voice. His long awaited arrival was thus revealed to the waiting Indian woman and Father De Smet. Nelson threw open the door without the formality of knocking, and to his surprise, saw his squaw and the father kneeling in apparently devout and earnest supplication. Disgusted, the uninvited visitor strode out slamming the door. The pretended prayer was only a bluff, a sacred ruse, the good man later reported. Nelson was hide-bound for a fight, and later in the night was accommodated by someone who gave him a beautiful black eye. He later abandoned this Indian squaw when he was hired to pilot the Brigham Young party across the plains to Salt Lake.

A mixed crowd of humanity always gathered to watch John Nelson whenever he decided to put on a public exhibition of his talents. Indians, Mormons, French traders and steamboat men came to witness the show dressed in all kinds of apparel, from buckskins to linsey, Quaker bonnets, robes, blankets and some very nearly nude. Nelson was usually in a mood to perform after returning from a trip across the plains, and the entertainment would begin as soon as he had had a few drinks stored away. His squaw in a bright red blanket

usually tagged along trying to persuade him not to drink too much for she knew it meant punishment for her later. She also knew that this business was a way of expressing his very considerable ego. When Nelson felt his audience did not properly appreciate his act, he brought his musical ability into play. He sang well with good rhythm, using the chromatic scale and divided cuss words that would shame a drunken sailor.

With a twenty foot whip and a two foot cracker, the bull whacker popped the heads off sunflowers growing at the road side. He strutted and clowned, going through the motions of brushing dust from his clothing, preening his mustache, pretending these accomplishments mediocre and trifling. The real act began with the climax. This was to select an extra large bloom and pick the petals one by one reciting richman, beggarman, thief, etc. If he missed he sang the chromatic scale, throwing in a coda of a few additional bars.

Brigham Young, having heard many stories of John Nelson, found occasion to invite the guide to his home. They talked for some time before Young revealed his contemplated trip to the west. The meeting resulted in his hiring Nelson to guide their wagon train across the plains.

The Mormon leader had learned of the mountain country and the great Salt Lake valley from Father De Smet on one of the missionary's visits to Kaneshville. Brigham Young envisioned the possibilities of a permanent place for the settlement of his followers. It would be a long and difficult trip, filled with hardships and danger requiring a large train and many sturdy men. Five hundred men had been recruited in 1846 to form a Mormon battalion for service in the Mexican War, seriously depleting their numbers of able bodied men. This unit, part of the command of Colonel Stephen W. Kearny, subsequently performed the longest infantry march on record, over 2,000 miles of desert and mountain country from Fort Leavenworth to California. Though their service involved little fighting, their contribution was a notable and honorable one. In the meantime Brigham

Young had negotiated with the Omahas and Winnebagos for land on the west bank of the Missouri on which to build a winter headquarters for his band of followers strung out through camps in southern Iowa. A ferry was established and construction began. The camp soon reached proportions beyond the expectations of the Indians. Large stands of timber were rapidly consumed for building material and fire wood. Large parties were sent out to hunt buffalo, deer and elk. The Mormons' herds of cattle increased. After occupying this site for two years, the federal government compelled the Mormons to quit the Indian lands and return to Kaneshville. This act helped to bring about their decision to move on across the plains.

Preparations were made for the hazardous trek during the long winter, and spring was awaited with eagerness. The journey could not begin until the plains were again verdant and food was available for the live stock. When the important day arrived the contingent struck out, strung along the trail for five miles with John Nelson at the head of the column. He wore a big slouch hat, high leather boots, corduroy trousers, a buckskin coat made by the Pottawattamie squaw, and carried his huge bull whip. His rifle was slung in a scabbard on the side of the saddle. Nelson wore his hair long at this time; and it was streaked with grey although the veteran plainsman was only about forty years of age.

The last Mormon wagon train, a party under Orson Hyde, did not leave Kaneshville until 1852. Those who traveled across Iowa with hand carts departed later that same year, being piloted across a part of western Nebraska by W. F. Cody. While in camp on the Garner farm waiting for stragglers, Uncle Billy Garner warned them of the hardships ahead, but it did not affect their determination.

Brigham Young's lead group encountered difficulties before it had gone over fifteen miles. The ford at Papio Creek became a loby lolly under their crossing, and one team after another was unable to drag its heavily laden Conestoga through the mire. Many of the inexperienced

drivers were driving teams of oxen not well broken. Nelson was kept busy doubling and tripling the teams to enable the wagons to cross. He was well worn and tired when the last team, equally exhausted from the day's work, lay down in the mud and refused to be disturbed. The drivers employed every means they knew to get the oxen up and going. Even the twisting of tails, the lashing of whips, and starting of fires failed.

Nelson had all day avoided wading into the muck. He took great pride in his personal appearance and his boots and buckskin coat looked just as neat and trim as when he started the day. He stood the full length of the whip-lash, popped the cracker very near the ears of each oxen, and began a rhythmic swearing, interspersed with, "Ho Buck." This was something new to the tired teams. They pricked up their ears at the pop of the whip, stood up and leaned into the yoke. They began to move, literally dragging the Conestogas onto dry land, mud and slime dripping from their chassis. The operation, witnessed by Brigham Young, fully sustained Nelson's reputation. With the wagon train on the move again, he brushed the dust and mud from his trousers, gave the same attention to his hat, carefully rolled up the bull whip, and mounting his bay horse, rode to the head of the column.

Nelson was missing from camp one morning in western Nebraska. The Mormons suffered a three day delay while a search party was sent out to look for him. Young feared that their guide had fallen a victim of the savage tribes in the territory. They found him the morning of the third day at an Indian camp negotiating for a squaw. It was only after they threatened to withhold his wages that he agreed to return to his duties.

Upon his return from Salt Lake John Nelson settled in western Nebraska along Medicine Creek to hunt and trap beaver in partnership with Doc Carver. Since both despised cooking and washing dishes, they decided to secure a squaw. Nelson, having more experience in such matters, was elected to purchase one from a nearby chief. He first bought several ponies with the money he had earned from Brigham Young, and then traded four of

them for an Araphoe squaw who was brought to the little shack occupied by the two men. But she thereupon refused to cook, wash their clothing and prepare their hides and furs. Instead she sat sulking day after day, crying and refusing to engage in conversation. Nelson decided to punish her with a cuffing after this had gone on for some time. The Indian woman stoically accepted this treatment without uttering a word of remonstrance. She slept during the day while the men were away tending their traps, and stayed up at night wailing and weeping to disturb the trappers' rest. Nelson said she was the worst Indian he ever knew.

One day while the two men were out working their traps, she struck out across the plains toward her father's camp 150 miles away. It took her six days to reach her former home. She had no sooner arrived than Nelson rode in seeking the runaway.

"How," greeted her father, a sub chief.

"How," replied the white hunter and trapper in the Indian tongue, declaring further that he wanted her or the four ponies back, and stating that he had been cheated.

"Um, you keep squaw; me keep ponies."

They argued for awhile. Nelson tried to persuade the squaw to return, promising her many presents. It was all to no avail. He returned to his cabin empty-handed.

Nelson visited another Indian camp later that same year, and paid six ponies for another squaw. She proved to be much like the first; and a third was no better. They obtained from the Ogalallas on a fourth and last attempt a woman who was a distant relative of Chief Red Cloud. An old timer has written that she and Nelson lived happily ever afterward.

The Indians often robbed the traps of Nelson and his partner, Doc Carver. Nelson had reported this fact a number of times when Carver one day checked the traps along the creek usually run by his partner. Carver caught three Indians in the act of removing beaver from the traps, shot all three, and returned to camp to breakfast on pancakes, sorghum, bacon and black coffee. He

retired without the formality of telling Nelson what he had done. It was not until the snow had thawed in the spring exposing the bodies that Nelson learned of the deed. Suffice to say the traps of the two men were never molested thereafter.

Carver later won a buffalo shooting match with Curly Jack McCall, taking three hundred dollars on a side bet. Nelson counted the buffalo killed by his partner and a man named Miller counted those shot by McCall. Some people thought bad blood would result, and predicted that McCall would kill Carver at the first chance. However, Curly Jack knew that both Nelson and Carver were dead shots and quick on the draw. McCall went to the Black Hills shortly afterwards where he lost heavily in a poker game with Wild Bill Hickok, who then staked him enough money for a meal and a bed for the night.

Though McCall left the gaming place, he soon returned, got behind Hickok and shot him at close range. The bullet passed entirely through the head of the famed gunfighter, and entered the shirt bosom of a soldier on the opposite side of the table. The murderer was arrested. But the Dakota territorial boundaries were in dispute, and it was questionable whether he could be tried under the laws of the territory. McCall was released and quickly cleared the country, going to Laramie, Wyoming. He was again arrested for the crime in 1882, six years later, and brought back to Dakota. The trial lasted several days. McCall was convicted of the crime, and hanged three miles north of Yankton, South Dakota.

The author can recall seeing John Nelson driving a stage coach in the first Buffalo Bill wild west show to play in Council Bluffs many years ago. Three half breed children by his last wife, said to be a distant relative of Chief Red Cloud, rode atop the stage, hanging on to the iron railing as their father put the horses on the run when the Indians "attacked" twice daily.

John Y. Nelson has been inadequately credited with guiding Brigham Young and his followers to Salt Lake, and historians have largely neglected his further contributions towards the taming of the West. An associate

of Captain Cook who related many of these incidents to the writer,² the North Brothers, Doc Carver, Buffalo Bill, General Dodge, and many other characters of the old west, John Nelson had the ability and reputation of being one of the best of the bull whackers, Indian fighters, hunters and squaw men. His unmarked grave is somewhere out along Medicine Creek. No one now living recalls its location, but the above may help to preserve the memory of his life and exploits.

² John H. Cook, who was an active participant in the taming of the old west and knew many of its outstanding figures, died at his well-known Agate Springs Ranch in Sioux County, Nebraska in 1944.

More Criminal Cases in Iowa Courts

Except for the years of World War II, the courts in the respective counties of Iowa have had to deal with an increasing number of criminal cases each year over the past quarter-century, according to a recent study prepared by Walter A. Lunden of Iowa State University. The 6,151 cases heard in 1958 represents a rise of approximately 44.3 per cent over those of 1935, and may be compared to a 10 per cent growth in population during this period.

Banking Department Superintendents

G. A. Messenger	July 4, 1917—January 30, 1920
M. V. Henderson, Jr.	January 31, 1920—June 30, 1921
W. J. Murray	July 1, 1921—May 3, 1923
Robert L. Leach	May 4, 1923—June 30, 1925 (Deceased)
L. A. Andrews	July 1, 1925—June 30, 1929
	July 1, 1929—June 30, 1933 (Deceased)
D. W. Bates	July 1, 1933—June 30, 1941 (Deceased)
M. W. Ellis	July 1, 1941—March 16, 1946 (Deceased)
N. P. Black	April 9, 1946—June 30, 1957
Lee Chandler	July 1, 1957—October 14, 1957 (Deceased)
Joe H. Gronstal	December 1, 1957—Present

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