

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## Jasons of 1860

The lure of the frontier has ever been a potent urge in the breast of the young manhood of America. Not only the exploration of unknown land beyond the pale of civilization, but the possibility of finding wealth, especially gold, has incited hardy spirits to seek fame and fortune farther west.

Gold brought California into the Union in 1850. The discovery of gold near Pike's Peak in 1858 and both silver and gold in the rich Comstock Lode in 1859 caused such an influx of population that Colorado and Nevada became Territories in 1861. Overland routes were crowded with caravans of prairie schooners. What strong young man, foot loose and fancy free, could resist the temptation to join the quest for golden fleece less legendary than Jason sought?

In the spring of 1860, five neighbors near Winfield, Iowa, were seized by an irresistible urge to share in the adventure of finding ready-made for-



tunes. Already experienced in pioneering, these hardy optimists, like every generation of Americans before them, could not be satisfied where they were without seeing for themselves what opportunities might be available farther west. And so James M. Willis, Alexander M. Smith, and Hiram Dunn joined the gold rush to Pike's Peak, while Robert Willis and John H. Dunn went along to have a look at Kansas.

"This was a beautiful morning, ushered in by bright sunshine, and a balmy breeze", wrote James M. Willis in the journal he kept of their odyssey. It was April 3, 1860, when they set out. The birds were singing, and "all this glory was very acceptable, under the pressure of leaving kind friends." At noon they ate dinner on the bank of Big Creek northeast of Mount Pleasant, and by one-thirty they were in town buying cooking utensils and other equipment. Then they drove on, crossed the Skunk River at Rome, and camped a mile west of that village.

Thus, day by day, Willis described the trip through southern Iowa and across the plains, related the adventures of prospecting, and commented upon human nature as he observed it in primitive circumstances. The diary has been preserved by his daughter, Miss Kate Reed Willis, who lives at Gravette, Arkansas. James Madison



Willis came to Iowa on the last day of 1853; he attended Howe's Academy and taught school a while; and he was twenty-seven when he started with his uncle Robert and three friends on the journey "to, through, and from the Rocky Mountains". Most of the story of that expedition can be told best in his own words.

The travelers reached Fairfield a little after noon on the second day. It was "a flourishing town, of some size, on elevated ground, through which the Burlington and Missouri river rail road runs." Near Batavia, they found a bridge burned because campers had neglected to put out their fire, and so the creek had to be crossed at a ford below. They camped that night by the side of the road four miles east of Agency City.

At eleven o'clock on April 5th, they arrived at Ottumwa. "It is the county seat of Wapello County, located on the east bank of the Des Moines river; on uneven ground. It is the present terminus of the Burlington and Missouri river rail road, and hence it is a lively place." But the gold hunters did not stop. They forded the river "and dined one mile west of town." At one o'clock they "started for Albia, buying some eggs on the way, and camping at Blakesburg, on an old brick yard." It was "a calm warm day," according to the diarist, "and we had more fun than enough",



which may account for his opinion that there were worse towns than Blakesburg in the world.

After half a day's travel over rough land, they arrived at Albia, where they dined and bought some beans. "Albia is distinguished only as being the county seat of Monroe County, possessing a good court house, and being nicely located, it bids fair for the future. Monroe is a rough county."

Having camped on the prairie with some Kansas emigrants, they moved on to Chariton, "at one time the seat of a United States land office, infested with land sharks". Though respectably located, the town was considered unimportant. Pushing on in the direction of Leon, the party halted eight or nine miles southwest of Chariton. The day being exceedingly warm, James Willis "drank too much water and suffered the consequences" of his folly, "becoming very sick at the stomach and throwing up."

The next day being Easter, Sunday, April 8th, the party remained in camp. "I am still unwell", wrote Willis. "A. M. Smith and H. Dunn went to church, while John Dunn, Robert Willis and myself remained in camp as guard. During this time John D. takes advantage of H. D.'s fondness for smoking, by making a cob pipe, filling it with dry cow manure, covering the top slightly with tobacco. On H's return, John commenced a feigned



smoke, and as we anticipated, H. wanted a draw. The pipe was passed over with the greatest gravity. H. puffs away but 'don't like the taste' finally takes the hint, discovering the joke at which the camp laughed heartily, though not endorsing the caper, which was well contrived, and will do in place of eggs, as this is Easter."

But fun and pranks were followed by a heavy hail and rain storm on April 9th, after which the party passed through Garden Grove, "a handsome little town", and near by "saw a man planting corn" — a fact which proclaims that the spring of 1860 must have been very early. Leon, county seat of Decatur County, was said to have a good location, though "the town is small, surrounded principally by brush land."

Halting at Decatur City on April 10th, the Henry County prospectors bought a supply of bacon and a knit coat apiece. Concluding that they were dry, "each drank a glass of sweet wine for his stomach's sake." But that indulgence was a mistake "for the filthy adulterated stuff had a bad effect, those having weak stomachs serving it as the whale did Jonah, puked it up, on dry land, making a good joke of the misfortune, which wound up by H. Dunn paying John back for his Easter loan handsomely."

An early start was made the next morning and



by eight o'clock they were in Mt. Ayr, the county seat of Ringgold County. "It stands on the summit of a high hill and is no doubt airish, surrounded with rough land, and is certainly remarkable for its insignificance; though we here saw two spry ladies, with long gowns, capering on horse back."

Bedford, "seat of justice of Taylor County", was passed on April 12th, and "we came to a school house, having a forsaken look, indicative of hard treatment. The doors being open, some of us went in and cheered up the old thing, by engaging in a regular French four, to the tune of 'Over the Hills and Far Away'." That night they camped on the East Nodaway, "in a heartsome place. The white plum bushes, with other vernal flowers, filled the warm air with a fragrance not at all unpleasant. As the evening was warm and the water clear we concluded to have a social swim, after supper".

At Shambaugh's Mill, on the West Nodaway, "no doubt a valuable stream," they laid in a supply of 400 pounds of flour. Clarinda, the capital of Page County, was described as "beautifully located in open prairie" and "surrounded by a good agricultural district. Look out for Clarinda."

On Saturday, April 14th, while camping fifteen miles east of Sidney, a minor calamity was noted.



"H. Dunn broke our skillet handle, through rashness." We are left to wonder if Dunn merely dropped the skillet, or did he use it for a hammer?

After crossing the wide fertile bottoms of the two Nishnabotnas, they ascended a high hill, "on the summit of which stands Sidney, which is a thriving town, though not very large, and contains a very respectable court house. Here we bought our fitout very cheap, receiving at the same time a present of 4 gal. of good ale, on which we had a jollification."

The company camped at the foot of the bluffs, "certainly a glorious place to camp and spend the Sabbath, on such a trip as this. Good water and wood in abundance, also great natural scenery. At our feet is the margin of a wild fertile bottom, extending to the Missouri river. Above our heads are high, picturesque bluffs peering far above us, terminating in sharp points. Having time, we ascended one of the principal [peaks] and took a telescopic view of Nebraska City, ten miles in the distance. In the evening some hard cases camped with us and gave the camp a bad appearance."

On April 16th they moved on to the Missouri, opposite Nebraska City. "The river is low. Here I viewed for the first time, Big Muddy. I have no eulogy to pass upon it. It is a muddy and homely stream, full of sand bars." In camp "Hiram Dunn



is baking bread for the future, while I am writing a letter to Wm. T. Willis; Smith is writing to his lovely woman." They were at the port of the great plains. "All creation is here on their way to the Infernal regions. A great deal of sport going on in camp, with free tickets to the pit."

Crossing the river, they camped in Nebraska Territory and took time to explore Nebraska City. The town, being a place for outfitting miners, had "several extensive stores", but the steamboat landing was limited. "Here is the site of old Fort Kearney, nearly gone up. A battery here, well worked, the river being normal, would deal death to an enemy's fleet."

Willis recorded that many people were coming and going daily. In his journal for April 18th he described their own means of travel. "Robert Willis and John Dunn took their leave of us to-day, and started for Kansas. A. M. Smith exchanged his horse team for two yoke of oxen." John Dunn and Robert Willis also had a team of horses which they drove on, to Kansas.

Though hints of loneliness began to creep into the diary, the party of three moved on. Soon they joined a company from Dodgeville, Iowa, also bound for Pike's Peak. By noon of the second day out of Nebraska City they came to "a rapid, clear and beautiful little stream called Weeping



Water." "When a youth, I read an account of this creek in Lewis and Clark's Journal, but was not then aware that I would today [April 20th] eat my dinner on its banks. It took its name from the crying sound which it makes when running over the pebbles."

The next day in camp the "cattle stampeded, while feeding, but fortunately no harm was done beyond a chase." Timber and grass were becoming scarce and the soil thin. Cottonwood Creek had only a few cottonwood trees on its banks. Traveling was monotonous and slow. In six days they went only a hundred miles from Nebraska City to the Platte Valley.

Finding wood, grass, and water became more of a problem every day. Whenever possible they camped near a slough. Sometimes they dug for water, and found plenty within three feet. Guarding the cattle became an organized chore. The nights were cold and the wolves howled.

By April 28th, the weather had changed, so they made a windbreak of cedar brush, under the bluffs of the Platte, fifty miles east of Fort Kearney, beside a deserted Indian encampment. While waiting for the wind to subside, some of the company went exploring on the islands in the Platte. "Trees 20 inches in diameter are to be seen, cut down by the beaver", reported Willis. The river



itself "is a curiosity, it is full of islands of all sizes, frequently several in a breast. The timber is almost invariably on islands."

Four days later they were in Fort Kearney which was on the south side of the Platte, several rods from the river, "at the convergence of three inclined planes". At Kearney City, two miles west, a bit of frontier difficulty was adjusted by the party. "Here we were detained, to try two hard looking young gents, who had this morning, left by the wayside, a man and his wife, and a part of their baggage, who and which they were to carry to Denver city, having received the transportation fee." The result of the trial was that "the trespassers should give up to the injured all things belonging to them, and refund the money paid for conveyance."

Cottonwood Springs was "the most noted place" west of Kearney. It contained "two respectable trading houses". About three o'clock the wind began to blow hard from the northwest, "raising clouds of dust". The travelers found shelter on a heavily wooded island and "secured plenty of dry wood for morning." This was a wise provision, for when they awoke on May 8th, the air was full of flying snow, "equaling the worst of Iowa snow storms." While two of the men searched for the cattle, the others prepared



breakfast. The storm abated about nine o'clock, the sun shone brightly, and the snow soon disappeared. Nevertheless, a few miles farther they helped bury a young man who had perished in that storm.

On May 11th they traveled about twenty miles — a record day for ox locomotion. "At sunset an old gray headed man, rolling a wheel barrow, came to us, bound, he said, 'for Deniver'."

It was Saturday evening, May 12th, when they arrived at the lower crossing of the South Platte, where the Salt Lake and California road crossed the river. A French trading house and an Indian lodge marked the spot. Bands of Indians were more numerous. Several war parties aroused considerable apprehension, for the men spent half a day cleaning their guns and revolvers. But apparently their fears were allayed by a visit with Chief Good Bear, who had "all the appearances of an intelligent and humane man". He and his daughter "ate supper with Smith, Dunn and me."

Their route was by way of St. Vrain's Fort and Fort Vasques. After more than seven weeks of constant travel, they reached Denver, "the metropolis of the Rocky Mountains and center of all trade." In the opinion of James Willis, the site of the city could scarcely be excelled for salubrity and beauty, though the surrounding country was



"poorly adapted to agriculture". Hundreds of people were continually arriving and leaving for the diggings.

The Iowa prospectors did not tarry in Denver, however. They were anxious to reach the gold fields and so moved on to the foot of the mountains where "proud nature stands aloof and unveiled." Following the Platte up into the mountains, they came to South Park. There, on the first of June, they left their cattle at a ranch and prepared to begin prospecting in earnest. Hundreds of people were camping in the vicinity of the Terryall diggings.

Leaving H. Dunn with the wagon because he had sore eyes, Smith and Willis, in company with several others, "shouldered our grub, blankets and tools, and set out for the Blue River diggings beyond the snowy range, over all kinds of road except good." Following up ravines, climbing hills, plunging through deep snow drifts, having to halt occasionally to catch their breath in the rare air, they reached the summit of the snow-capped ridge by noon. The cold wind soon drove them down the western slope and late in the afternoon they reached the miners' fort on the Blue River. "We are now in the field of action, and *will or wont*", wrote Willis.

Just two months from the date of starting to



seek a fortune in the golden west, they "prospected a claim in Three Nation Gulch", but without success. Many leads were followed during the next few days. A claim was purchased in the Hamilton district for \$20, and \$30 was paid for 200 feet of lumber for a set of sluices. But after setting the sluices and working the prospect, they accepted an offer of \$160, and sold the claim to T. P. Wilson of Columbus City, Iowa, "and glad of the chance". Next they tried prospects in Nevada Gulch, near Gregory, but to no purpose. On June 21st they ranched their cattle, looked for work, "but found none, at any price. Tried to sell some surplus clothing, at cost. Gulch mining here does not pay board."

This hint of discouragement soon became a conviction. Hopes of finding a gold mine took a decided slump. On Monday, June 25th, William McPherin and C. H. Hall of Burlington, Dunn, and Willis "determined to return to the states, and made preparations accordingly." They bought a good wagon the next day for \$20, and Hall traded his blacksmith tools for a yoke of cattle. Retracing their steps, they reached Denver on June 29th, where they spent a few hours "for perhaps the last time" and then, proceeding by way of the "cut off", camped out on the plains four miles east. Another day's journey took them



past the first stage station on the road, near which appeared a provision train of forty wagons, headed west.

Sunday, July 1st, was a memorable day. "As Dunn and I, during the forenoon were going up the ravine, to look after our cattle, myself in advance, a very large timber rattle snake sprang toward me, with all its venom. I perceived it in time and evaded the stroke. We gathered some stones and bruised its head, according to the scriptural injunction. Had 19 rattles. It was about five feet in length, and thick in proportion. In the evening, I trod close by another not so large. However, I shall remember the place and the day, by two narrow escapes." About midnight, a large wolf approached the wagon. Dunn shot at it but missed completely.

The homeward road presented various difficulties, such as lack of water and grass. Added to this, one of the party, McPherin, decided to go back to work at the carpenter trade in Denver and the others reluctantly bade him adieu. Having decided to reach the Platte before sleeping, they urged Buck, Berry, Bright and Brandy steadily along the trail to the end of the cut off by ten o'clock that night.

The next day was the Fourth of July which they celebrated by trading with some Indians.



"While bartering, the thieving, lying and greasy villains stole my celebrated butcher knife from out the wagon", but they all pretended to be as innocent as lambs; and the knife was not recovered. An old squaw was making off with one of Hall's blankets at a rapid rate, when he espied her entering her wigwam. Seizing his revolver, he gave chase and recaptured the lost blanket.

The real surprise, however, was still in store. "Friend Hall produced a fruit cake for dinner, having saved it for this purpose. It was baked by his wife, in Burlington, Iowa." How much that long-saved fruit cake must have been appreciated!

The route home was practically the same as the one they followed going out. The heat of mid-summer was very disagreeable, however, and the "low bottom, along the Platte, beats thunder for musketoes, and other insects." Large herds of buffalo were encountered below Fort Kearney. The wide bottom land along the Platte was "blackened with them, from the bluffs to the river." Many dead ones were lying along the road, having been wantonly killed. On the night of July 17th, the bison "kept up an eternal bellowing all night" and the next morning Willis witnessed the killing of several, merely for sport, prompting him to comment characteristically, "which I think is wicked."



By July 22nd they reached the Platte Valley House, where the good-looking landlady served them a good supper "of which we partook heartily." Real food proved so alluring, that the next day they traded "spare traps for roasted chickens, pies, sweet cakes and bread enough to do to Omaha."

Near Omaha they met two big trains of Mormon immigrants. One was composed of a hundred wagons and the other of forty-eight. These Mormons were "all foreigners and as ugly as soot."

The disillusioned Jasons arrived at Omaha on July 25th. They had no trouble in selling Mike and Brandy for \$40 in gold, but parted with them reluctantly, for they had "served us faithfully, going and coming." Willis traded his buffalo robe for "a pair of good pants." Meanwhile, Hall traded his cattle for a good Indian pony and "Dunn bought himself a dress coat."

At Council Bluffs "Dunn and I bade Hall adieu and left [by stage] at 4 o'clock A. M. for Des Moines City. Breakfasted at 7 o'clock. Dined at Lewis, County seat of Cass Co. Here we were re-shipped, into a mud wagon — there being six of us, all Pike's Peakers, we were badly crowded, but had a general good time of it. Lodged on Nodaway River."



The next day they started at two in the morning and passed through Fontanelle at daybreak. They breakfasted at a farmhouse at eight. By ten they were in Winterset, "a respectable town, surrounded by a good country." At five they "arrived in Des Moines city, and put up at the Des Moines House. Enjoyed ourselves exceedingly well during the day, having a jolly old Englishman to spin yarns for us. Dunn left, late in the evening for Boonsboro."

The remainder of the party took the stage to Newton, arriving at noon, July 29th. "Here I parted from my jolly crowd" and "set out a foot and reached Thomas Clossen's at 5 o'clock in the evening, where I intend resting a few days, as I am tired." While resting on his "oars not ores", he celebrated his birthday by giving "Mary Clossen a two dollar and a half gold piece", notwithstanding his lack of ores.

On Friday, August 3rd, just four months after starting for Pike's Peak, Willis walked to Monroe, took the stage to Oskaloosa, and thence to Ottumwa, where he arrived at noon the next day. "Here we took the cars at 3 P. M. and arrived in Mt. Pleasant at 5 P. M." Setting out on foot for home, he was delayed by bad weather and did not arrive until Monday morning, August 6th.

The final entry in the diary is full of calm phi-



losophy. "Reached home in the morning, and accepted the accustomed hospitalities. Thus ends my wearisome and abortive search for gold, having traveled, the meanderings considered, about 3000 miles, spending four times what I made. And yet the scenery and human nature which I have learned, amply repays me all."

BESSIE L. LYON