Boyhood on the Frontier

I was born in Clarksburg, Virginia, August 27, 1834, of Scotch descent. The Stuarts seem always to have been pioneers. An old memorandum book of my grandfather's, James Stuart, tells of his trading with Indians in Virginia in 1793. My father and mother, Robert Stuart and Nancy Currence Hall Stuart, with their two children, James and Granville, left Virginia in 1837 to try their fortunes in the then frontier State of Illinois.

They loaded their household effects on a steamboat at Wheeling, Virginia, and went down the Ohio River to its mouth and then up the Mississippi to Rock Island. There they left the steamer and journeyed by wagon to Princeton, Bureau County, Illinois. They arrived in the early summer, having been one month making the journey.

There was a school in Princeton which my brother James attended and, although I was not of school age, I often accompanied him. The school teacher was not particularly desirous of my attendance and mother tried to persuade me to remain at home. Al-

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though it almost killed me to sit still so long I preferred that to remaining home alone.

About this time the government purchased the land west of the Mississippi River from the Indians, and Iowa Territory was created and settlers began moving into that fertile region. In 1838 my parents also moved across the river and took up a claim, number sixteen, west of the river, on a stream called "Wapsanohock" which means crooked creek in the Musquawkee Indian language. The name, as is usual among Indians, exactly describes that miserable muddy little creek, which could not have been more crooked.

The bottom land, along this and other small creeks, was covered with timber of good size; consisting of walnut, elm, linden, hackberry, oak, hard maple (the blessed sugar tree), butternut, hickory, and some other kinds. These strips of timber land, however, were narrow, from a quarter to a half mile wide, while all the rest of the country was treeless, but covered with good grass and many wild flowers. The distances between streams were great, often being from ten to twenty miles. After the grass became dry in the autumn, fires of great extent, driven by high winds, became a source of great danger and serious loss to the settler, who for this reason usually built his cabin on the edge of the woods where the fire could be more easily checked.

My father built his one-room log cabin in the woods a short distance from the creek, on a little

run (the Virginia name for a small brook) which took its rise out on the prairie and flowed into the creek. This was pretty safe from the furious prairie fires, but Oh! Oh! the mosquitoes that swarmed there, and almost devoured us in the spring, summer, and fall, until frost came. Some idea of their incredible number may be gathered from the fact that the water in the run (which we had to use) was so full of their larvae, commonly known as "wiggletails," that we could neither drink nor use it until it was strained through a cotton cloth. I think that many of these mosquitoes must have carried the germs of malaria fever for we all had fever and ague, for several years, it being the worst in the autumn.

A few families of Musquawkee Indians lived in bark huts near us; my brother James and I used to play with the little Indian children of about our age and their good mothers would give us all the maple sugar we could eat, and then give us a cake of it to take home to our mother. These were good kind-hearted people although the whites were rapidly settling up their old hunting grounds, and exterminating the game. In about a year after we came, they moved further west and we saw them no more.

One of our neighbors, named Andrew Phillips, had three sons, William, John, and Solomon. One day the Phillipses, my father, James, and I were at the bridge crossing the creek, near where some Indians were camped. William Phillips, who was then

about sixteen years old, was wrestling on the bridge with a young Indian of about his own age. Getting a good hold he flung the Indian over his shoulder, off the bridge and into the creek. He swam out in a furious rage, and ran to the camp to get his bow and arrows, saying he would kill young Phillips. The older Indians and women caught and held the young one, and William's father and mine went to explain how it happened, gave them some trifling presents, and the trouble ended. These Indians would listen to reason, and were not vicious.

In the spring of 1840, my parents moved out of the creek bottom into a house on high ground, on the edge of the prairie. There was more or less wind and consequently a few million less mosquitoes. Near-by, a small schoolhouse was built by the three or four families of the vicinity, and James and I went to school with five other young children.

The first school building I remember was a small cabin. The logs composing it were not even hewed or peeled. The windows — there were none — but in their stead a log was cut out of each side of the cabin, about three feet from the ground, and nearly the full length of the room, and in this space were fastened sheets of greased paper, which let in a somewhat dim and uncertain light, especially on dark, cloudy days. The door was at one end of the house, while a large open fireplace occupied the other end, and the floor was simply earth, wet and then beaten down smooth and solid. All the chil-

dren attending the three months term of school in summer time, were barefooted. The seats, however were triumphs of mechanical genius, being nothing more than rough unplaned slabs, without backs or desks of any kind. It was pretty rough sitting I can tell you. These slab seats were about ten inches wide and had slanting holes bored in them near the ends, into which short pieces of saplings were inserted for legs. They were made so high that the children's feet were from six inches to a foot and a half from the floor. Of course the trustees were not to blame for the children being too short to fit the benches. At any rate the effect was to effectually double us up, and we could beat Wellington at Waterloo in wishing that night would come. For a teacher we had some young woman in the neighborhood whose educational possibilities were embraced in the three R's (reading, ritin, and rithmetic) and who was generally a little shaky on the last R. This fortunate young woman commanded the large salary of five or six dollars a month and the right to board in turn among the parents of her scholars.

I remember one of my first teachers giving me a reward of merit which was a kind of thumb stall which was put on my left thumb with which I held my book open, and was to keep my thumb from soiling the book. It was made with wings on each side and painted red and yellow to resemble a butterfly. I thought it very beautiful and kept it for long years

afterward, until the house burned down and destroyed it along with my carefully preserved early school books. Perhaps this little work of art is responsible for my love for red and yellow colors to this day.

This summer saw the famous political campaign between the Whigs and Democrats. The Whigs nominated William Henry Harrison for President and the Democrats nominated Martin Van Buren. Harrison was familiarly called "Old Tippecanoe," because he defeated the Indians in a battle of that name, where the famous Indian chief Tecumseh was killed by Colonel Richard Johnson of Kentucky. While this campaign was in progress my father was building a frame dwelling house, and had in his employ several carpenters. Among them was an old chap named Ben Sailor, and I well remember one of his quaint sayings. There were large numbers of prairie chickens all about, and in the spring when mating, they had a melodious song or refrain which sounded like "Boo-oo-oo Boo-oo-oo" long drawn out. One morning when the air was full of their music, Ben, who was an ardent Whig, said, "There, listen to that, even the birds are saying, 'Tippecanoie-oo and Tyler-too-oo-oo.'" If the Democrats had any rallying cry it escaped my infantile memory.

During all this time we just shook, and shook, and shook, with the ague. We could only eat when the chill was on us, being too sick when the fever was on. I well remember how the cup would rattle against my

teeth when I tried to drink and how, while trying to put the food in my mouth, I would nearly put it in my ear, and how my spleen (commonly called the "melt" in those days) was swollen and felt hard as a piece of wood just below my ribs. This was known as ague cake. Almost everybody in that thinly settled part of Iowa would have the ague part of the time. Fortunately it was seldom fatal, but I can still see how thin and pale and woe-be-gone everyone looked.

In 1843 my parents moved a few miles to a farm on the bank of Red Cedar River, a lovely stream, about two hundred yards wide, with sandy bottom and water as clear as crystal. Best of all, it contained great numbers of fish, which were a welcome addition to the rather limited variety of our menu; although there was never any lack of enough, such as it was. In the winter of 1843 there was a two-months term of school a mile and a half up the river, and on the farther bank at a little village called Moscow. The river was frozen over and brother James had a pair of skates, and we just flew up that lovely river to school. James did the skating and I just squatted down and held to his coat tail. For text books we had Webster's spelling book, with that discouraging frontispiece, a picture of a very lightly clad young man weakening when half way up a high mountain with a little cupola on top of it and on its front gable the word "Fame" in large letters, and a rough looking female ordering him to climb or bust. I attribute my failure to achieve greatness to that

picture. The constant contemplation of it so impressed the difficulty of being famous (in that costume) upon my youthful mind that hope died within me. After we had worn our spelling books all to tiny little bits, we began on arithmetic, and each scholar seemed to have a different kind. There were Doboll's, Pike's, Colbert's, and many others whose names as well as their contents have escaped me. Along toward the close of my education we had McGuffey's readers, which I thought were the very "ultima thule" of progress in the way of a reading book. Attending this school was a red-headed boy about ten or eleven years old, a bright intelligent lad named Erastus Yeager, who twenty-one years later was hanged by the Vigilantes in Montana for being a road agent. In Montana he went by the sobriquet of "Red" and it was not until he was hanged that I learned he was my former schoolmate in Iowa.

The winter of 1843-4 was one of great severity in Iowa. Snow fell to a depth of two feet and laid nearly all winter with much weather below zero. The spring was very late. The ice in Cedar River did not break up until April 8, 1844, when we saw many fearful gorges, the ice piling up in huge mounds and ridges, and all pushed far out of the river banks wherever the shore was low and flat. The snow was hard-crusted that winter, and many deer and wild turkeys perished from the extreme cold and the great difficulty of getting food.

In the summer of 1844 my father and two other men went up Red Cedar River with a pair of horses and a wagon on a hunting trip. There were but few people up the river in those days and they found plenty of elk and deer, where is now the town of Cedar Falls, and also many bee trees full of wild honey. They killed much game and trapped a few beavers. They dried a quantity of elk meat and filled a barrel with honey; they sold their horses and wagon, and made a large canoe out of a big walnut tree, and floated down the clear waters of Cedar River, feasting by the way on game and fish of all kinds which were there in greatest abundance. They met a few Indians, but they were all friendly. I remember how well we feasted on that dried elk meat, which was the first we children had ever eaten. The honey in the barrel was all candied and was delicious.

The big walnut canoe was so broad and steady that it could not be overturned by two men standing on one edge of it. Mother let brother James and me use it, and we soon became expert canoe boys and fearlessly went everywhere in it. We very often paddled it at night for our father, who would place on its bow a tin lamp holding about a quart of lard with a rag wick in its spout which, when lighted, would cast a strong light for several yards in front of the canoe. The water of the river being as clear as glass our father could plainly see every fish as far as the light shone on the water. He used a

three-prong spear called a gig, with a red cedar shaft about ten feet long. Fish were attracted by the light and did not seem alarmed by the canoe. In two or three hours he would spear fifteen or thirty fine large ones of various kinds with occasionally a gar, which was a fish three or four feet long, not fit to eat but which had a snout over a foot long filled with long sharp teeth. The next morning after a night's fishing James and I had the task of carrying the surplus fish as presents to the neighbors.

About half a mile from our house there was a pretty little lake about seven hundred yards long and four hundred yards wide; along its shores on the west side were pleasant woods with some crab-apple and plum thickets. Amid these beautiful surroundings on the shore of the lake the settlers of the vicinity built a small log schoolhouse which was rough plastered inside. It had glass windows and a real board floor, but best of all, there was a good swimming hole near-by. We scholars just thought that anyone who wanted a better schoolhouse than that was too hard to please for any use. In this schoolhouse was held a summer school for three months (in 1844) where my three brothers and myself increased our small supply of knowledge.

At this time, 1843 to 1850, there was an abundance of game in the wooded creek bottoms and on the prairies and as my father was a good hunter we always had plenty to eat of squirrels, prairie chickens, wild turkeys, deer, and elk, and after the first

year there were cornmeal and vegetables. The scarce articles for the larder were coffee, tea, and sugar, although we had plenty of maple sugar and syrup, pure from the tree, something that one seldom ever gets in this year, 1916.

This was still the era of tallow-dip candles for lighting and of open fire-place for heating and cooking and the cast-iron skillet and Dutch oven for baking. The first cooking stove I ever saw was in 1845 and it was rather a crude affair, but a great relief from cooking over an open fire, although some of the first to use the new invention had more or less trouble getting used to it. My father-in-law used to tell a story about an old couple who were the first to invest in a cook stove in his neighborhood. They got the stove in St Louis and brought it up the Mississippi River and home. The neighbors came from near and far to view the stove and it became the center of interest and subject of gossip for the entire neighborhood. Finally the excitement subsided, and little was said or heard of the new stove, when one day someone asked Mr. Jones how he liked the new stove by this time. "Well," the old man answered, "the stove is all right I reckon, but mother and I are getting too old to lift the tarnal thing on and off the fire-place, so we jest cook the old way."

The guns used for hunting in those days were flint-lock rifles brought by the frontiersmen from Virginia and Kentucky. They were full-stocked,

that is, the wood of the stock reached to the muzzle of the barrel. They were heavy, weighing from eleven to thirteen pounds, all hand work with small calibres, running from about sixty round bullets to the pound of lead. A cousin of mine bought a four-foot barrel, full stock rifle, carrying one hundred and fifty bullets to the pound of lead, for which he paid six dollars in cash. Money was very scarce, nearly all trading being carried on by barter.

Father had two guns which I well remember, as it was with these guns he taught me to hunt. One was a flint-lock that he used when hunting along streams where there was timber and little wind. If the weather was cold and snow on the ground he could quickly start a fire with his flint-lock by which he would dress the deer he had killed. With the gun he was sure of killing a deer, if it was within one hundred and twenty-five yard distance. The other gun he used while hunting on the prairies or out in the wind. It was a small-bore rifle fired with percussion caps placed on the nipple. The cap would not blow off as did the powder in the pan of the flint-lock.

In our neighborhood was a widow with several children whose husband had been a good hunter. His rifle was a flint-lock half stock, of large calibre for those days, using forty round balls to the pound of lead. A half-stock rifle was one in which the wood only extended along the barrel about one-third of the way to the muzzle, and from its end to

the muzzle, on the under side of the barrel was a slender piece of iron called a rib, on which was soldered from two to four small pieces of iron or brass tubing called thimbles, in which the ramrod of tough hickory wood was carried. All rifles in those days were muzzle loaders and the Johnson one was the first half-stocked gun I ever saw. My father used to borrow it occasionally because its large balls were more fatal to the deer than those of his small calibre rifle. When he was successful the Johnson family always received half of the venison. This rifle was much better finished than most of the guns then in use. It had an oval silver box set in the butt stock on the right side, a few inches forward was a hole in which to carry an extra flint for the lock, and a greased piece of rag to use in keeping the gun from rusting if it got wet. On the inside of this lid Johnson had scratched or roughly engraved three letters, "B", and just below it, "D", and below that, "F". After B he marked the list of bucks killed by him (numbering 16); after D, the list of does (numbering 13); after F the list of fawns (numbering 10). My father, leaving a little space after each of Johnson's list, added those killed by him when he used the gun. How I would like to have that gun now as a souvenir of the ancient days and conditions when life was just unfolding to me.

In the spring of 1849 the news of the discovery of gold in California reached Iowa, and my father at once determined to go to the gold fields. He formed

a traveling partnership with three other men and they bought a wagon and four yoke of oxen and about four months' supply of provisions, clothing and ammunition. About the middle of April, 1849, they started on the long dangerous journey across the plains and mountains; eighteen hundred miles through an unknown and uninhabited country, save the settlement of Mormons in Great Salt Lake valley and the roving tribes of Indians who had no fixed abode. They reached Sacramento valley without a loss, late in the fall of 1849.

My father mined part of the time, hunted large game, elk, deer and antelope, which he sold at a good price.

In the winter of 1851 he returned home to Iowa via the steamship line to Nicaragua, across that country, and then by Garrison's steamer to New Orleans and up the Mississippi river. He kept a journal all the time but unfortunately our house burned down and with it many other valuable family records were destroyed. I remember well reading his journal which was a perfect pen-picture of the days of forty-nine.

In the spring of 1852, in company with my father, my brother James, and a jovial Irishman named Fayal Thomas Reilly, I started from near the village of West Liberty, Muscatine County, Iowa, on the long adventurous journey to California; overland across the vast uninhabited plains, then known on the maps as the "Great American Desert," but

now (in 1916) forming the wealthy States of Nebraska, Kansas, Colorado, and Wyoming. Iowa then was very sparsely settled, and there was not a single railroad west of the Mississippi River, and I had never seen one, and never did until fourteen years later in 1866, at Atchison, Kansas.

Our outfit consisted of two light spring wagons each drawn by four good horses. In the wagon boxes we carried our supply of food and extra clothing. A loose floor of boards was placed across the top of the wagon boxes on which we placed our bedding, and on which we slept at night. The wagons had the usual canvas curtains which buttoned on to each end of the canvas roof. Inside we slept dry and comfortable through the worst storms. The storms along the Platte River were regular cloudbursts, accompanied by such fierce gales of wind as often to blow down the tents, which were used by most of the emigrants, and thoroughly soak their bedding. My father having had that disagreeable experience when he crossed this region in 1849, had so arranged that we slept in our wagons, using no tents, and thus were always dry, though many times we were obliged to picket the wagons to the ground to prevent their blowing over.

My father and brother occupied one wagon, and Reilly and myself the other. We each had a rifle and father had a small five-shooter revolver of twenty-five calibre, using black powder and round balls. I think it was called "Maynard's patent". No one

would carry such a pistol nowadays, but revolvers were then just invented. This was the first one I had ever seen and I longed for the day when I could possess one, and bid defiance to whole villages of Indians, little knowing that the Indian with his bow and arrows, was quite beyond the reach of such a puny weapon. Our rifles were hung up in leather loops fastened to the sides of the wagon boxes, always loaded (they were all muzzle loaders), and ready for instant use. Our journey across the State of Iowa was a most disagreeable one. The western half of the State was very thinly inhabited. We had great difficulty in crossing the deep miry sloughs that at that period filled every low place. There being few people, there were still fewer bridges, and when our horses and wagons mired down, which usually happened about twice a day, we were forced to wade in mud and water up to our knees while unloading our wagons and then lift with all our strength on the wheels to enable our horses to pull them out. Somewhere between Des Moines (then a small village) and Council Bluffs, we came to a Mormon village called Kanesville. These people, mostly Welsh and English, had wintered here in 1851 while on their way to Great Salt Lake, and now found it profitable to stay this summer and repair the wagons and shoe the horses of the emigrants, who were passing through in large numbers on their way to California. We remained with them two days waiting our turn to get our horses shod.

After many annoyances and much profanity we at last arrived at Council Bluffs on the east bank of the Missouri River. The village consisted of some twelve or fifteen one-story log cabins. We had to cross the river here, and when I saw the ferry boat, a flat scow, large enough to hold one team and wagon, the motive power of which was three men with oars, I looked at the wide swift flowing muddy river and thought we might possibly get across safely, but that the chances were rather poor. The price for crossing was ten dollars for each wagon and horses, which seemed to me exorbitant. However, we got across and from the way those oarsmen had to pull I concluded the price was reasonable enough. On the west side of the river to our astonishment, we found a considerable town of log houses, but every house was dismantled. We afterwards learned that this had been the town where the Mormons had waited in 1846-47, until their leaders went on ahead and looked up a future abiding place for them. They called the settlement on the bank of the Missouri, "Far West". This is the site of the present city of Omaha.

GRANVILLE STUART