

Grandfather's Adventure

My grandfather, Shubel D. Owen, and his two brothers, Jonathan and Boyd, migrated from east central Pennsylvania to Green Lake, Wisconsin, in 1847, my grandfather then being twenty-four years old, Jonathan two years older, and Boyd twenty-two. They were reared near Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania, along the banks of the Susquehanna River, in a lumber and mining district.

In December, 1857, my grandfather and Jonathan decided to go to Minnesota near what is now the city of Faribault, with a view of buying government land. There being a great deal of snow, they determined to make the trip with horse and sled. About the third day out they came to a tavern a few miles from La Crosse, where they stayed all night. From this point, I will narrate the story as my grandfather told it to me nearly eighteen years ago, when he was eighty-three years old.

The next morning we hitched our horse, a powerful animal of the roadster type, to the sled and started for La Crosse, where we expected to cross the Mississippi River on a ferry. On our arrival, however, we found that the ferry had gone over and that it made no more trips that day. The ferry was owned by the hotel keeper and he found it profitable

to keep travellers in La Crosse, so when he told me that we would have to stay with him until the next morning, I turned to Jonathan and said we would go back and stay at the tavern where we had spent the previous night.

So we drove back to the tavern. I noticed a good-looking team of horses, hitched to a sled, tied in front of the tavern and on entering I found a well dressed stranger, wearing a particularly fine fur overcoat, sitting by the fireplace. I told the innkeeper that the ferryman at La Crosse had refused to take us over until the next day, so we had come back to stay with him for the balance of the day and for the night. Whereupon, the stranger inquired, "Where are you going?"

"Over into Minnesota," I told him.

"Why don't you go up the river and cross over on the ice and stay all night at Dresbach City?" he suggested. "I stayed there last night," he continued, "and if you follow my tracks through the timber you will see where I crossed the river and you will find a good place to stay at Dresbach City."

I turned to Jonathan and said, "Let's go."

So we proceeded through the timber, easily following the trail made by the stranger, and along 'bout half past three in the afternoon, we came to the place where he had crossed the river. We had to unhitch the horse and lead him down on to the ice. We then carried the sled down, hitched the horse up again, and Jonathan went ahead and

tested the ice while I drove the horse. The ice was dangerously thin, as the river was just beginning to freeze over and the ferry, a few miles below, was still in use. But we crossed over safely and came to a basement house, with two stories above, built on the edge of the river at the foot of a great, high bluff. Outside of a stockade and a stable, where horses were kept, there were no other buildings.

I got out of the sled and went over and knocked at the door and a man came and opened it, and I said, "Where is Dresbach City?"

"This is Dresbach City," he answered.

I looked around and said, "Where is the City?"

He repeated, "This is Dresbach City."

"Well," I said, "I met a fellow this morning down near La Crosse, who told me and my brother that we could come up here and stay all night. We are going into Minnesota looking for land." Another man then came to the door and told us to put up our horse and come in. It was beginning to grow dark, as the high bluff cut off the sun early and, besides, the days were short.

So we unhitched our horse, put him in the stable, watered and fed him, and then came in. There were no women about the house, but some fifteen men, all rather rough-looking characters. About six o'clock they served supper and we had a fine meal. I never ate a better one. After supper two of the men cleared away the dishes, and then we all sat around in the big room and smoked and talked.

I was sitting beside a man who appeared to be the oldest in the group — a man about fifty years of age. By and by he said to me, "Where do you hail from?"

I replied, "Hail from Wisconsin, originally from Pennsylvania."

He said, "Pennsylvania! You come from Pennsylvania? Where 'bout in Pennsylvania, did you come from?"

"Well," I said, "I don't s'pose you'd know if I told you. But I lived on the old pike road between Scranton and Wilkes Barre, seven miles from Tunkhannock. In front of our house was a long watering trough where the stage-coach drivers used to stop and water their horses."

The man threw up his hands and exclaimed, "Then your name must be Owen."

I said, "Yes, sir. That's my name."

"I drove a stage-coach over that pike for many years," he went on, "and watered my horses many times at that trough. The Owen boys, who were little fellows then, used to come out and hang on to the back of the coach and ride to the top of the hill."

"Yes, sir," said I, "I did it many times."

Well, we talked on about Pennsylvania, and by and by he said to me, "I'm going over to the other side of the room. After awhile I want you to come over and sit by me. I have something to say to you."

So he moved away, and after fifteen or twenty

minutes, I joined him and then he said to me, in a low voice, "You are from Pennsylvania, and I'm from Pennsylvania. I never go back on my countrymen. You and your brother are two able-looking men, but you're in the worst place to-night you ever was in all your life. Look out for yourself."

When he said that I jumped to my feet, clapped my hands together, and with an oath yelled out, "I never yet was in a place where I had to be carried out." Everybody looked at me in some astonishment, including my brother, Jonathan, but no particular attention was paid to what I said, and by and by it came time to go to bed.

One of the men took my brother and me to the top floor. This floor was divided into four rooms by heavy curtains. On the floor was a carpet so thick that when you walked over it no noise was made. I never walked over so thick a carpet in my life. After the man had left us, Jonathan turned to me and said, "What in thunder made you jump to your feet and yell, 'I never yet was in a place where I had to be carried out'?" Then I told him what the man from Pennsylvania had told me, but Jonathan didn't show any concern. We turned in and Jonathan was soon apparently sound asleep, but I stayed awake. We had eight hundred dollars in cash and no weapons.

I had lain there for I don't know how long but long enough so that my eyes were becoming accustomed to the darkness and I could make out the

outlines of the room. By and by I saw the curtains move. Then I saw a man's hand slowly begin to pull the curtain back. Then a man's face appeared, and I yelled out, in a loud voice, "What in hell do you want?" Whereupon Jonathan shouted, "Shoot him."

"I beg your pardon, gentlemen," the man said, "but I have made a mistake."

"Well," said I, "don't you make a mistake like that again. It might cost you your life." He then withdrew, but Jonathan and I did not sleep any more that night.

Along about dawn we heard a great commotion downstairs, but concluded not to go down until day-break. When we did go down there was no one about but the cook. He prepared us a good breakfast and told us that the man whom we had met at La Crosse had come home during the night and had tried to cross the river. The ice had given way and his team had been drowned, while he barely escaped with his life. The rescue of this man was the commotion we had heard just before daylight.

After breakfast the man went out with us, helped us to get to the top of the high bluff, and there, for miles and miles as far as we could see, were the snow covered prairies of Minnesota. Not a tree nor a house did we see. We were directed to drive in an almost straight westerly direction to reach our destination. We drove steadily until past noon before we saw a house. Then we came to a little patch

of timber, crossed a stream, and came to a clearing where there was a group of men raising a barn. We drove in and one of the men, evidently the owner of the farm, came down and we asked him if we could get something to eat for ourselves and our horses.

"Certainly," he said, and then asked, "Where did you spend the night?"

When I replied, "Dresbach City", every man on the job came down and gathered around our sled. I told them the whole story, and when I finished they declared that we were the first men who ever stayed all night in Dresbach City and lived to tell the story.

The foregoing is substantially the story as it was told me by my grandfather, but it lacks the dramatic touches which he gave it. He stood six feet three in his stocking feet, and his brother was almost as large, so they were, as the man from Pennsylvania told him, "two able-looking men".

Dresbach is now a little station on the Milwaukee railroad between La Crosse and Winona, and the bluff which my grandfather climbed that morning, nearly seventy years ago, is just as he described it.

The trail which my grandfather took from Green Lake to La Crosse was, some eighteen years later, followed in covered wagons by his two sons, Charles and A. J. Owen, and his son-in-law (my father) C. S. Parker, on their way to western Guthrie County, Iowa, where they settled and still reside.

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