

"Doc Wilson's Story of 1863"
Brother of Margaret Adeline (Wilson) Miller
(Written in Doc's own words April 12, 1931 at Fort Jones, Cal.)

We have amused the kids for many years with tales of the wagon trains on their long trips across the plains from St. Jo, Missouri to the Pacific Coast. These stories have all been on the funny side, but to put them down on paper and write it all is another thing, for the other side has more than a tinge of sadness.

My father and my oldest brother, Joe, and my 3 uncles, (my mother's brothers, the Walkers) had just served two years in the U.S. Army. To re-enlist or join the trains fitting out in St. Louis for California was the question. The cold winters of the middle west decided them--they would cross to California.

The wagons were made in St. Louis, 12 of them--3 each for the four families, (my family, the Wilsons, and the 3 Walker families.) In St. Jo, Missouri, they bought tents, new harnesses, and supplies and we left there in May, 1863.

We passed through Omaha, Nebraska, then a prairie town. There were 8 of us boys, 2 in each family were just learning to ride. Joe Walker of Etna, Calif. was the biggest one of us. Joe, and my brother, Bill Wilson, of Yreka, Calif. and I, are the only ones left of the 8 boys.

After we passed through Omaha, other small trains joined us until we were one of the largest trains that crossed the plains that year. My father had spent many years in the southwest when young, and he was an experienced Indian fighter. He was chosen Captain of the train. He always said to hold a commission in the Army was one thing, but to bring an emigrant train across the plains in safety was another thing. The Captain might be left sometimes where he had nothing but his six-shooter to back him up. Two rules had to be kept, he said: first, the train must never be corralled on low ground by streams where the willow and cotton woods grow--it was certain death, because the Indians could sneak up through the trees; the train must be corralled on high ground and wood and water carried no matter how inconvenient; the second rule was, the front right hand corner of each wagon box had to touch the left rear corner of the wagon in front until the circle was completed. Every man had to take his turn at guard, two with the horses, and two at the corral.

Some of the Indian Chiefs on the plains had a record, such as Chief Little Turtle, and they could count their warriors by the thousands. One day we met an old French trapper and trader. He had 5 squaws ranging from his own age down to about 16. From a boy of 21, his kids tapered down to a papoose.

He had 20 ponies loaded with bales of beaver skins, 3 with beaver traps, and 1 carried 2 large bear traps. He was going to St. Louis to sell his winter catch, then visit his brother in Montreal, then return and go back up the Yellowstone for the next season. Almost the first question he asked was, "Has Richmond fallen?" When told it had not fallen, he seemed disappointed. It was plain to see that he was a strong northern man. He said a man had been killed on the Little Box Alder by a band of Redcloud's warriors, under Chief Silver Horn, and they had carried away the man's wife, a handsome young woman, and taken her up the Yellowstone River. He didn't think the Calvary stood much of a chance to re-capture her. We afterwards learned this woman was Fanny Kelley, and she was rescued 5 months later by Captain Logan of the U.S. Army in the territory of Montana.

We soon began to overtake the prairie schooners drawn by 4 and 5 yoke of oxen. Denver, Colorado was the point for most of them. Soon the choice had to be made between 2 roads--one was the North and the other the South Platte. We took the South Platte, and when we reached the first ford it was 3/4's of a mile wide. The wagon boards had to be blocked up to keep above the water, and then a rope tied around the coupling pole and bed to keep it from floating off. The men went ahead to look for quicksand holes which made it a very dangerous crossing. I don't know how many times we forded the Platte, but I remember crossing it twice.

Our four families had several extra horses. The 8 boys had the job of bringing up the rear with the extras, riding one and driving the rest. It wasn't bad at first, but soon it began to get hot and the alkalie dust began to get deeper and deeper. The freight schooners soon began to leave dead cattle behind them. They would barely roll them out of the road. The buffalo had just passed through on their way north. The rear of the train came near being caught in one herd. In these herds, wagons had been over turned and women and children trampled to death. The buffalo left more dead than the freight teams and they often had to be rolled or dragged from the road. Water became scarce and bad. Water kegs were filled each morning for the horses at noon. Each horse had 3 gallons of water with one pint of flour stirred into it.* When the drinking water keg was filled about 2 ounces of horseford acid was poured in to kill the alkalie. Still it was bad. Women and children began to take sick. The dried fruit my mother and aunts had taken such pains to dry began to spoil and had to be thrown away. Fruit dried in the middle west in the sun won't keep like it will in California dried the same way. Butter packed in cans soon became strong and spoiled. Each of our 4 families had packed a chest of jellies and bottles of fruit juices. These had to go for the sick women and children. It seemed their lives depended on it. There was plenty of flour, meal, and bacon. The bad water and no vegetables began to tell.

(* The flour was put into the horse's drinking water to neutralize the alkalie.)

Bands of antelope began to show up. First small, then large, at times, it seemed like several hundred. Small bands of warriors now began to show at a distance on each side, and scouts had to be kept on each side of the train. These scouts were hunters and often brought in antelope.

One day a white cloud with a yellow base was seen coming from the north. It was a hail storm and tornado. The teams were headed south and while the drivers unhitched, the women and boys staked the wagons down. Two of my sisters with hammers were driving stakes, and ropes were thrown over the wagons from stake to stake. I held stakes for one of my sisters. First the wind and sand struck us, then the hail. We staked two wagons and while my sister was pounding the last stake on the third wagon, a hail stone struck her in the face. She dropped the hammer and ran for the wagon--she crawled in and I scrambled under it. My oldest brother unhitched his 4 horses and tied the 4 halters together. He was in the center and the horses were going round and round, pulling against each other. This was the only team that was held. My cousin Jim Walker unhitched his 4 horses and they tore away with the lines dragging behind. Someone had picketed one horse alone. He ran the length of his rope and the iron pin raised out of the sandy ground. The horse flew past Jim and the pin turning on it's swivel just missed his head. The storm was gone as quick as it came and the horses huddled together a half mile away were brought back. In one hour, the train again moved on.

The Sioux were the strongest tribe on the plains and we were now in the heart of their country. One day the scouts came in early and reported a large party of mounted warriors on each side of the road traveling the same way as the train. They were said to be under an old chief named Spotted Tail. He had once worn a leopard skin cloth with the spotted tail still on it and he had gone by that name since. The water kegs were refilled at once and the train carefully corralled on a knoll, for we were sure we would be attacked that night. After supper we took the beds from the wagons and carried them to the center of the corral. The men laid around the rim with rifles at their sides and some shotguns loaded with twelve buckshot. Some young women came over and sat by their husbands and brothers. In times of danger a boy clings to his Dad--the young boys came over and laid down behind their fathers, with a saddle blanket over them and fell asleep. At 3 in the morning a burning arrow went up into the sky, then two more. The Indians had a code of signals, and they were always agreed upon before parting, and they were simple. We were sure the attack was coming. At 4 a.m., a faint streak of light showed in the east--"now is the time", we thought, and every man buckled his belt tighter--but they never came. The signals had meant something else. This was as near as we came to having an attack by a strong force of Indians.

We soon overtook an emigrant train with ox teams known as the Arkansas train. Their cattle had the longest horns we had ever seen. They were all well armed, many of the men carried long rifles as they walked beside the train. On the inside of the sheets hung some of the largest shotguns we had ever seen. Every wagon had wood axles with a tarbucket on the coupling pole for grease. The back wheels were as high as a man's head, and were held on with a pin thru' the spindle. One man, named Grimes, seemed quite a character. He didn't belong to the train, he had only fallen in with them. He hadn't the least sense of danger and carried no arms. He and his wife and 11 children had one wagon. Instead of an ox team, Grimes had 3 yoke of cows, all giving milk, and the calves had been left behind. One of my brothers met Grimes in Sacramento years afterwards. He said after we passed them, his cows, after their milk had dried up, had out-traveled the ox teams and he had gone on alone. He reached Susanville, Calif. in November, 1863, when his last sack of meal was gone.

Denver, Colorado had none of the fine stone buildings she now has. Only a few permanent ones and they have been remodeled or replaced. We camped one night in the Valley of a Thousand Springs. They were more like wells than springs. and you couldn't see the bottom of them. The mothers had their hands full herding the kids away. After supper a man who seemed to step out of the hills, came to my father's tent. He was middle aged, tall and very straight. He wore a new suit of buckskins, trimmed with Hudson Bay beads. His hat and shirt were of fine quality. His slender white hands and his fancy gold watch and chain, showed he hadn't worked, and was evidently a man of means. My father gave him some fine books, for which the man was very grateful. Something he wanted my father didn't have, but said he would be glad to send it back to the man, his first chance. "No", the man said, "I couldn't think of troubling you that way." He wasn't going to tell his name. He said a train had camped there before us, and a small boy had fallen into one of the wells, before they could get him he sank for the last time. He told how man after man had gone down, at the risk of his own life, all night long, but they couldn't find the boy. He told of the mother's agony and that of his older brothers when forced to leave without him. If they could only have found him, it wouldn't have been so bad. The man said he came to tell us, for we ought to know.

Later, we were warned by the Army officers against the Mormons as we neared Utah. "They will come to meet you, and if you trust them, they will steal your horses", we were told. Their plan was to turn their own horses loose with your horses, after catching another horse to ride, then they would stampede the band, using their own horses as leaders. In this way, they could be 50 miles away by morning. Sure enough, one evening two men rode into our camp. They were Mormons. They said the Indians had stolen their horses and they had tracked them for several days. Now they wanted to travel with the train for protection

until they were back home. After supper, they said they would take their turns as horse guards through the night. They were told they were not needed, and they were placed in a tent to themselves and a guard walked in front of their tent all night. They were protected in this way for two nights--then they just slipped away.

At Fort Bridger, we found the soldiers very bitter against the Mormons. The Mountain Meadow Massacre was laid to Mormons dressed as Indians, and it was still fresh in the minds of the soldiers and emigrants.

We camped one night on the Green River, and the next day we traveled 16 miles by 1 p.m. We stopped to water the horses from the water kegs. My father was going to get on a horse to go ahead of the train to look for a night camp--he stepped down from the high seat of his wagon and the muzzle of his revolver caught on the seat, tipped it up and it slid from it's holster--the hammer struck the wheel, discharging it and shot my father through the temple, killing him instantly. This was a heavy blow to all. It nearly killed my mother--but she rallied and we went on.

Salt Lake City mostly was wooden buildings and it looked fine. Ditches carried water from hot springs miles away and the water crossed the streets. The gardens and fruit and shade trees looked nice. We camped one night in Echo Canyon. The Devil's Gate didn't take long to get through but we stopped and had a good look at it. When we reached the scene of the Mountain Meadow Massacre the train was stopped for an hour. The soldiers showed us around and said the government should take it up and run down the guilty parties. In Nevada, we laid over a day at the edge of the desert. Then we filled the water kegs and started across at 4 in the afternoon to cross in the night. The horses would stand it much better at night. At midnight the horses had 3 gallons each of water with a pint of flour in it. That night was a long one, but at last daylight began to show. The forward wagons had reached the edge at sunrise and were camped by a clear stream and were frying bacon and antelope steaks when we came up..

Two roads crossed the Sierras. The Donner route, and via Susanville, Lassen County. The Donner route was grazed out, so we took the other. The mountains were the grandest sight we'd ever seen. Susanville had no permanent buildings, but the streets were full of schooner bed wagons, that nearly touched the sign boards in front of the stores. At the Pitt River a man named Lockhart ferried us across on a pole raft, just below where the town of Fall River and the power plant now stand. At Buñey Valley the Indians had killed the hostler and burned the stage station and what is now known as the Asey White Ranch. From there we crossed the mountains on the older road that went down Stillwater Creek. Things began to look fine in the Sacramento Valley. First small ranches, then larger. Men on horseback met us--they opened gates for us and showed us where

to drive in and find good camping ground. The fields of wheat and barley, and the apricot and fig orchards we had never seen before. Red Bluff was the head of navigation on the Sacramento River. They had one boat a week and they forwarded freight to all points north. Three pack trains were loading for Fort Walla Walla in Washington territory. One ten mule team was starting for Silver City, Nevada. About a dozen teams were loading for Scott Valley, most of them for H. J. Diggles, Fort Jones. He had just built a new big brick store there, now occupied by the Reichman Mercantile Co. (now Edgecombs'). The last time I visited Red Bluff the only old land marks I could find was three old warehouses on the river front. They were built of clay and stone. One was Crafts', one Loamans', and one, Comstocks'. From here all the freight was forwarded north.

Kind regards to all,

(Signed) Alex Wilson

(Original story at Etra Museum)

First copy was typed by Peggy Whipple for Clinton and Pansy Custer's 50th wedding anniversary, July 21, 1969. (held on the day man first landed on the moon)

Re-typed by Dolores Eastlick, at the request of Leland Custer, Dec. 1980.