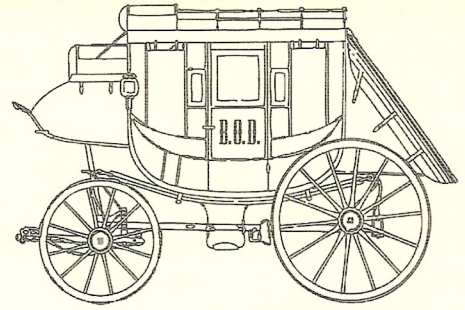


OVERLAND DESPATCH



Volume IX No. 2

Remember the Smoky Hill Trail

Winter 2016

AWARDS GIVEN AT CONFERENCE



Randy Huser accepts a Heritage Preservation Award on behalf of the Steel, Fisher and Schippers Families.



Jim Gray received an Award of Merit



Mike and Sandy Sprague accepted the Award of Merit given to the Philip Ranch



The Howard C. Raynesford Lifetime Achievement Award went to Mike Baughn



Kay Homewood received the Donna Malsom Ambassador Award



Mr. and Mrs. Don Befort received a Heritage Preservation Award

The Hays Convention and Visitors Bureau also received an Award of Merit.



PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

We are moving into the 21st century and trying to learn how to use Skype to do a board meeting. Wish us luck. The first trial will be Thursday, December 15. This is a special meeting called to do initial planning for the fall 2017 conference. We usually meet at the end of the annual conference to do this work, but due to the extensive conference activities there was no time to include such a meeting. If such an arrangement is successful, we will probably have some regular board meetings done in this fashion. We have members of the board from a wide geographic range, extending from Ellsworth, Kansas, to Pueblo, Colorado. This adds to the difficulty and expense of holding a face-to-face meeting at one location.

We have had some informal discussion about the theme and activities of the fall 2017 conference. The site for the conference has been chosen to be Burlington, Colorado. Some groundwork has been done by Mike Baughn and Jim Mayhew to check out meeting venues and possible tour sites in that area. Also tentative themes have been discussed, including "Calamities and Catastrophes Along the Smoky Hill Trail." Many such occurred and would make for an interesting and informative conference. Speakers have been suggested and we will finalize plans on the 15th. We invite responses from the membership about themes, speakers, tours and activities for the conference. Specifically, we are hoping that our Colorado members will provide us some insights into their section of the trail. Please give some thought to such and feel free to advance your ideas to any board member. Email addresses are included in the Despatch.

OVERLAND DESPATCH is the official publication of the Smoky Hill Trail Association, Inc., a nonprofit, 501(c)(3), corporation chartered in the State of Kansas. Primary missions of the Association are to preserve, protect, promote, and interpret the Smoky Hill Trail for the benefit of present and future generations, and to promote awareness of the historical legacy associated with the remnants and locations that represent the historic trail and Butterfield's Overland Despatch (BOD) and its successors as well as the railroad that replaced the overland trail. Letters and articles are welcome and can be sent via email to the newsletter editor at <rjwilh@gmail.com> or via USPS at **Smoky Hill Trail Association, PO Box 978, Hays KS 67601**. They become the property of SmHTA and may be edited or abridged at the editor's discretion. All rights reserved.

Membership in the Association is open to all individuals, families, institutions, and businesses. Annual dues are \$25.00 for individuals, \$30.00 for families, \$40.00 for nonprofit organizations, \$50.00 for businesses, and \$100.00 for patrons. Life membership, individual or family, is \$500.00 (may be paid in quarterly installments during one or two years). Membership fees should be sent to **Smoky Hill Trail Association**, at the address above. Other donations are always welcome.

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The fall 2016 conference was a great success, as usual. I want to express my appreciation to the members of the board for their hard work in planning and execution of the details of the meeting. We have a great board. When you have an opportunity to do so, please express your appreciation to them. So many new and interesting facts are always brought to light at each conference. That is one of the major benefits of membership for me. The selection of speakers and topics always adds so much to my appreciation and understanding of the history of our area of the United States.

In my last column in this newsletter, I bade you farewell and said I would be stepping down from the presidency. Well, like a bad penny, I'm back. Kay Homewood worked diligently to find a replacement, to no avail. She prevailed upon me to do one more year. In a weak moment I said yes, but I really need to pass on the mantle. So, be forewarned, someone else needs to take over. I am sure that there is lots of talent out there. The new president would be fortunate to have a great bunch of people on the board with which to work. It's a rewarding experience and everyone should have the opportunity to experience it. Give some thought to it.

Since this issue will reach you about the time of Christmas, it affords me the opportunity to wish you and all of yours a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.



WELCOME NEW MEMBERS!

The Smoky Hill Trail Association welcomes the following members who has joined since our last newsletter was published:

Jim Huenergarde
Terry Kohls
Linda Kohls
Baron Shively

Welcome all!

NEWSLETTER DEADLINE

The deadline for articles to be included in the next edition of the Overland Despatch is **February 28, 2017**. Please have your articles, announcements, notes, etc. sent to the newsletter editor either by US mail or E-mail by that date (addresses in box above). Thank you.

“‘The Glorious Orb of Day has Rose,’ A
Diary of the Smoky Hill Route to Pike’s
Peak, 1858,”

By Wilbur Fiske Parker

Edited by Norman Lavers, Professor of
English, Arkansas State University and a
Fulbright Senior Lectuer in Bangkok,
Thailand.

NOTE: Mr. Lavers is a novelist, short story writer, and literary critic. Among his family’s letters and diaries, Mr. Lavers found this account of traveling the Smoky Hill route to the goldfields written by his great grandfather, Wilbur Parker. The article was originally published in Montana the Magazine of Western History, Volume 36, Number 2, Spring, 1986, Montana Historical Society, pps 50-61, and is reprinted here with permission.

During the year following the Panic of 1857, an economically depressed United States was more than ready to hear about gold strikes in the Pike’s Peak region of Kansas Territory. Among those who dropped everything to try their luck in the goldfields

was a small group of men from Pontiac, Michigan, including eighteen-year-old Wilbur Fiske Parker. (1) On October 24, 1858, the men set out overland from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. They left in drenching rain,



later nearly died while lost in a snowstorm, and finally reached the goldfields about three months later.

Writing in pencil with a very clear hand, Parker kept a daily diary of his journey to the goldfields. This charmingly written diary contains the first mention of many features along the route that would be noted by those who followed. But its significance goes beyond that. To the best of my knowledge, it is the only existing diary of the Smoky Hill route for the 1858-1859 period, and it is evidently a record of the first party to use the route.



Wilbur Fiske Parker, ca. 1863

Although it was not until late spring of 1859 that sizable amounts of gold were found in the Pike’s Peak area, optimistic rumors had started the rush a year earlier. Several groups followed reports of the strikes, crossing to the region from the summer of 1858 through the fall and winter, with numbers reaching a crescendo during the spring of 1859. The gold-seekers took three principal routes: the Southern route, which followed the Santa Fe Trail from Westport (present-day Kansas City) to where it crossed the Arkansas River and then up the Arkansas to Cherry Creek, where most of the miners gathered; the Northern route, which followed the Platte River from Atchison to Cherry Creek; and the Middle or Smoky Hill route, which ran west from Fort Leavenworth to Fort Riley and then up the Smoky Hill Fork and across to Cherry Creek. The Southern route had the best road but was the longest. There were settlements along most of the Northern route, so that water and wood for fuel were available, but it was also a long and out-of-the-way route for the miners to take. The Middle route, at just over 600 miles, was the shortest and most direct; but past Fort Riley the way was unknown, and each party had to

virtually pick its own path. The route also crossed long stretches where there was no water or wood or forage for teams. (2)

Toward the end of the summer of 1858, as gold fever was reaching its peak in Fort Leavenworth, several enthusiastic public meetings were held to discuss route to the goldfields and methods of getting there. One result of the meetings was that on October 3, 1858, a party led by General William Larimer set out from Fort Leavenworth to take the Southern route to Cherry Creek. A party led by A. W. Bacon, of which Parker was a member, left Fort Leavenworth only three weeks later, using the Middle or Smoky Hill route. In the absence of a track to follow, they navigated by compass. The winter was unusually mild, and their luck held. The many prospectors who followed them in the spring of 1859 were not so fortunate. The weather was bad, forage and fuel were gone, and many of the gold-seekers starved to death. One grisly tale recounts brothers dying one at a time, with the survivors feeding on each sibling body in turn.

The route of Parker's journey can be followed easily on a modern map. Most of the rivers he crossed still have the same names; and the natural features- the chalk, the high mounds of rocks - are still scenic attractions. Parker noted many of the landforms in his diary.

The writing in the diary is a boyish blend of the literary and the ungrammatical, shifting hastily into a simple letter-substitution code when he meets a "good looking squaw" and becoming laconic at moments of stress. While crossing a swollen river, for instance, he wrote "we got in a bad place, and Spanish, Balked, hit him to hard, and killed him, rained awfully"; of "4 days to day our lives have been suspended on a single hair" - with no further word to explain what he meant.

Nowhere does Parker carry his reticence under stress further than in the brief entries beginning on December 27, when he set out for a "tramp" with Corb and Alverson, two other members of the party. By the next day, they had had a heavy snowfall, and Parker's ankles and toes were so

sore that he could hardly walk. Parker's next entry is on January 1, when he was alone, lost, and down to the last meal in his pack. At 4:30, not long before dark, he found his camp. His next entry is on January 10, when we learn that he laid in camp for ten days. His son, Edward Wilber Parker, placed this note with the diary: "What immediately followed the Dec. 28 entry was, I believe, one of the most dramatic episodes in the life of W. F. Parker, about which he says nothing in this his dairy (sic). Such a silence was characteristic of him. It was his nature to keep silent concerning events that affected him deeply . . . Many years later, however, when the edge had worn off his memory of the adventure, he told it to me."

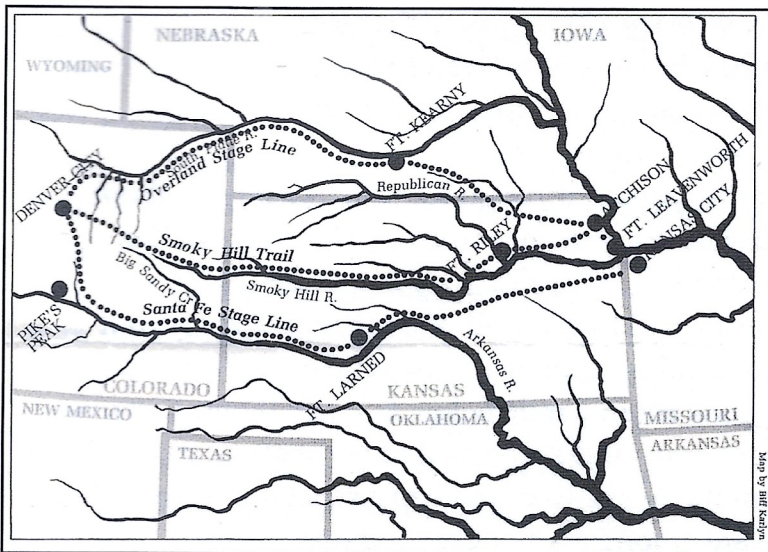
Either Parker or his son could have embroidered the story a bit, but its main outline is consistent with the diary entries. According to Edward Parker, after the snowfall transformed the landscape, Parker, Corb, and Alverson lost their bearings; but remembering that they had followed a stream part of the distance, they concluded that they need only follow it back to their camp. Having camped on a divide, however, they became confused and followed a stream that went in the opposite direction. Carrying the limping Parker between them, Corb and Alverson traveled farther and farther from the camp. Parker kept saying they were going the wrong way, but they ignored him, thinking his mind was wandering. Finally, he became too great a burden; they left him, telling him that the camp was just ahead and they would send help. Parker told them they were going to their deaths.

As Parker waited, the last light of the setting sun picked out a curious feature that he recognized in the mountains behind him. He watched the spot until dark and then used the North Star to give himself a compass heading. Ignoring his half-frozen feet, hallucinating wildly, and followed by the sound of howling wolves, he began the three-day walk back to camp. He not only got back in time to save his own life, but in time for a rescue party to chase down Corb and Alverson.

After Parker and his companions arrived at Cherry Creek, they met General Larimer. Larimer's son,

William H. H. Larimer, recorded their arrival: "About the last to arrive from the States during the winter was Mr. Bacon and a party of five from Pontiac, Mich. Mr. Bacon's party was the first to make the trip by the Smoky Hill route. They left Leavenworth on October 24th and arrived at Denver on the 15th of January. They followed the Smoky until they reached the head of that stream, then, by the aid of a compass they managed to strike Cherry Creek about twenty-three miles from Denver. The weather being favorable they came through without much suffering, though usually this was not a good route (as was learned afterwards) because water was very scarce. (3)

Parker stayed in General Larimer's cabin in



Denver City. In a letter for the *Leavenworth Times*, dated February 2, 1859, Larimer gave a report of Parker's group and their journey to the goldfields: "A. W. Bacon, Parker, and three other men, from Pontiac, Michigan, came through by the Smoky Hill, the whole distance. They were delighted with the route. They made their own trail with one wagon; passed through a beautiful route the whole distance, and found no trouble crossing the streams. They left Leavenworth on the 24th of October, and were caught in your heavy rains. They took their time, often laying up a week at a place. Mr. Bacon speaks highly of that country the whole distance." (4)

In a letter to the *Herald of Freedom* on February 12, 1859, another writer, D. C. Collier, also gave a glowing account of travel on the Smoky Hill route: "Several companies have come through by way of the Smoky Hill. Their representations make it the best route traveled. They report a good supply of wood, water and grass. They found deposits of iron, coal and chalk, all of the best quality and in the greatest abundance. The Indians were extremely friendly, and ever ready to point out the road" (5)

Since everything Collier mentioned appears in Parker's diary and since the letter was dated only two weeks after Parker's party arrived at Cherry Creek, it is likely that the "several companies" is no more than this one party. There was competition among those who advocated using the various trailheads to the goldfields. Larimer, and perhaps Collier, were eager for prospectors to travel through Leavenworth to benefit family or friends there; thus, their descriptions may have been exaggerated.

Parker remained in the goldfields at least until March 9, 1859. There are no family traditions of how long he stayed or what success he had as a miner. During the Civil War, Parker was involved in Parker's Express, a family business, with main offices in St. Louis. He was present when Vicksburg fell and was a telegraph operator in Pontiac, Michigan, receiving the first report of Lincoln's assassination for transmission to the western frontier. He married a young cousin in about 1870, and they lived in Detroit, where he had a bookstore. In 1885, they moved to San Jose, California, and bought a ten-acre prune and apricot ranch. He served s county auditor from 1902 until he died of a stroke on March 13, 1915.

DIARY OF WILBUR FISKE PARKER, OCTOBER 24, 1858 TO MARCH 9, 1859 (6)

Sunday Oct 24th 1858 Started from Leavenworth for Pikes Peak, the agua farely poured out of the heavens. Traveled all day; in the mud ankle deep; encamped a 8 Ock, when twas dark as Egyptian darkness, the water still poring, *not raining*. Oh how I did curse the day that I left Pontiac.

Oct 25th Encamped on the bank of Stranger River, water so high cant cross; will probaly have to stay 2

days about every half hour, a fine shower of rain, beautiful prospects, everything & everybody wet through, how I wish I was home

Oct 28th Crossed the Stranger yesterday noon. Water quite high. We are now encamped on the banks of the Grasshopper River 18 mls fr Stranger waiting for it to fall so we can ford. But I do not think it will come down very soon as it has been raining all the while. It has been one continual rain ever since we started for the Peak. Still I could enjoy myself very well if I could have one good nights rest ones in a while. My bed is composed of corn Shovels and sundry other soft and downy articles, so that I should rest beautifully if I only had an Indian Ruber back.

Oct 31st Have not yet crossed the grasshopper. It has been a very fine day yesterday and today, the first we have had since we have been on our journey, Twas so fine Mr Weeks & myself thought we would take a little walk to see the country, went about five miles, killed a price [prize] lot of Quails, and returned about dinner time with fine appetite.

Nov 1st Crossed the Grasshopper to day, had to cary all or our things over in a small boat. I think I never saw it rain so hard, and it was so cold that I was num with the rain and cold we had a gloomy time, & slept in wet Blankets

Nov 2nd very cold & windy to day waded through mud & water, 4 inches deep, crossed the Rock River about noon encamped on the banks of the Muddy River, a cold rain set in about dark

Nov 3rd had good luck fording the River & good roads, had to stop at noon and wait for the Soldier River to go down We begin to have to keep an eye for Indians (Sunday Oct 24th we had got in a bad place, and Spanish, Baked, hit him to hard, and killed him, rained awfully)

Nov 4th Snowed quite hard last night, still on the bank of the Soldier carried a ½ bushel of potatoes on my back, through a swamp 2 miles; to the camp

Nov 5th Crossed the Soldier, cold & snowing, river deep, got half way crost the river & the horses got entangled in the harness with me on

their back had to jump into the river walked 12 miles

Nov 6 Crossed the

Vermilion had a bad time had to take Oxen & horses to draw our load up the banks, bad road all the way

Nov 7 Started at noon, snowed very hard & wind blowed terrible forded the Big Rock River without any dificulty

Nov 8 Been a find day, went 20 miles, walked all the way the scenery was perfectly supurb

Nov 9 *Today (7) we passed Fort Riley, stoped there quite a little while they have here a beautiful view of the country for miles around. Crossed the Republican Fork this afternoon tis a very bad crossing*

Nov 10 passed through Kans Falls a city of about four houses, and encamped on the banks of the Solomon

Nov 11 had to carry all of our things over on our backs and walk on driftwood, take our horses & wagons about a mile below & swim them. Got over about noon and encamped to night about two miles from the Saline have to keep a strict watch to night as we are among a lot of Caw Indians

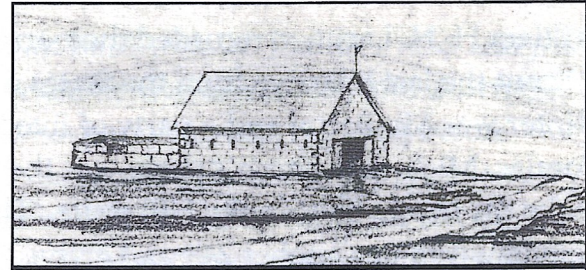
Nov 12 It rained about 2 hours this mng just enough to make the banks of the Saline very slipperry we had to buck all of our things over this stream, and walk on a slipperry tree which has been fell for a footbrige had very hard time of it encamped to night just within sight of civilization

Nov 13 to day we are farely afloat we have left the white man for a long tramp in the wilds of Kansas plains, perhaps never to see him again nor ever come back

Nov 14 To day we have been climbing hills & very hard going

Nov 15 still among the big hills going a W. W. by S course

Nov 16 begin to be alarmed at not finding the Smoky the hills seem to be growing larger and more of them



White Rock Station

Nov 17 did not go over 2 miles this morning before we wer completely blocked in by hills turned about & went back to our old camp left *George Alverson* and myself to keep *camp* while all the rest went out in different directions to find the smoky, Corb and another man went directly south and found it in about two hours, we immediately took up camp and went within eight miles of it that afternoon and had nothing but buffalo chips for wood twas very cold

Nov 18 walked 8 miles this mng before breccfast to wood

Nov 19 fowling [following] up the river. Fine and cold wether

Nov 20 had a hard drive to day some very beautiful scenery

Nov 21 a fine day seen packs of white wolfs and heards of Buffalo

Nov 22 seen immense bluffs of lime Stone and beautiful mirage on the hills in the distance

Nov 23 found immense beds of Chalk of the finest quality

Nov 24 Killed a Buffalo this afternoon. I went on with the teams and encamped 3 miles from them on the Smoky The men did not get in until about 8 Oclk all heavily loded with meat

Nov 25 encamped to day on buffalo chips to celebrate Thanksgiven had a variety of meats for dinner

Nov 26 have lost the cattel this morning and did not find them until late in the afternoon, the heards of Buffalo wer immense

Nov 27 traveled all day without water saw immense piles of Rocks, just at night found some water in a buffalo hole & encamp there, we suffered a great deal from cold as we had no wood

Nov 28 Struck the river this morning at 9 Ock, and in 2 hours drive we found ourselves among a nest of Indians the first wild ones we had met we wer somewhat alarmed and hurried on through them, encamped to night a few miles from them and every one kept watch all night.

Nov 29 passed through tall grass to day and heavy timber

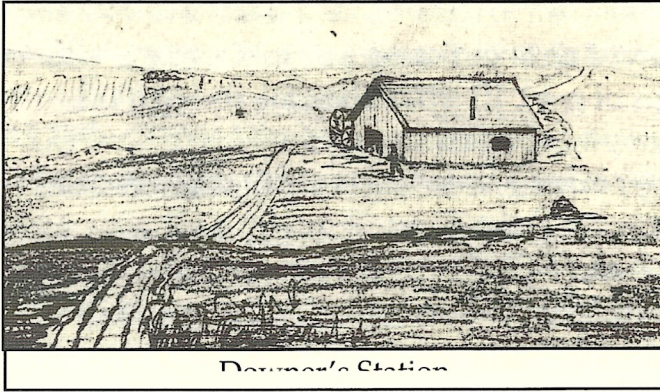
Nov 30 Cam to some more Indians a few of them followed us to our camp and told us there was heaps of gold, [(] while comeing through the encampment a *good looking squaw came to me and said if I would give her my hankechiy [handkerchief] she would let me lay with her)* Corb went with them to see and found immense piles of Iron ore

Dec 1st 1858 The morning is very beautiful, lovely in the extream the glorious Orb of day, has rose with redoubled splendor & makes us happy & our spirits buoyant, how well; experience learns us to appreciate the goodness of God 2 Oclk P.M. a change is coming over the aspect of the heavens, black clouds are hovering over and the wind is chily and cutting but still our spirits are buoyant 9 Oclk P.M. The storm is upon us, and tis no idle one tis not a warm south wind with rain, but a cold norwester blowing a perfect hurricane with a blinding snow, 1 Oclk A.M. we are awoke from our cold bed shivering & num by the Guard and told to take our blankets and cover our teams or they will perish Oh heavens my hearts blood almost froze within me, but our teams wer our lives, we dare not keep a fire for fear of the Indians we were so cold in the morning that we could knot find wood to make a fire

Dec 3 have moved our wagg[ons] under a bluff and have got quite comfortable tis clear & pleasant but so cold that sap oozing out of the wood 3 feet from the fire freeze and form icyckles

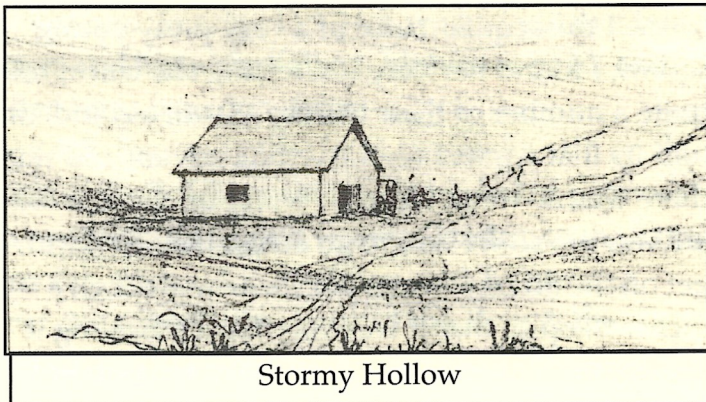
Dec 4 still encamped in the chalk beds waiting for the Snow to go off

Dec 5 concluded to move on to day, stoped an Indian encampment. when they wanted us to go in and eat with them which we did. I there formed the acquaintance of a very prety young squaw, I found her very interesting she learnt me quite a number of their words, (8) an old Indian told us that we wer on the wrong stream and that there was no more wood or water on the one that we wer on, so we had to go acrost the devide to get on the Smoky again, the snow was about 8 inches deep so that it was very hard wheeling it was awful cold, one of our horses gave out, but we made out to reach the Smoky by night



Danner's Station

- Dec 6** We have dug a hole in a slate rock bank, made sheds for our teams and have made ourselves as comfortable as possible
- Dec 7** Our teams are so disheartened we cannot go on so part of our company have left us
- Dec 8** we went about 8 miles to day to better grass and encamped
- Dec 9** went about 12 miles found fine grass and plenty of wood
- Dec 10** some most beautiful seneries
- Dec 11** came into an encampment of Arrapahoes the first we have seen they treated us very civil
- Dec 12** passed through som Apachies did not like the looks of them, (9) encamped on the last timber on the Smoky to night
- Dec 13** Traveled all day with out water had to melt snow to water our teams, had nothing but buffalo chips for wood
- Dec 14** not very good feed for our teams had to melt snow again
- Dec 15** great high bluffs and rocks, and a very great decent to the stream but we [no?] water in it, feed very poor, I think we must be very near the head of the stream



Stormy Hollow

Thursday, Dec 16th 1858 headed the Smoky Hill Fork at 1 Oclk P.M. 4 days to day our lives have been suspended on a single hair

Dec 17 Sited the Peak Today at 8,45 Oclk A.M. not much enthusiasm manifested, Pikes Peak is seen about 10 miles direct west of the head of Smoky Hill Ford (10)

Dec 18 traveled all day over hills had no wood & had to melt snow

Dec 19 Still going over hills with no prospects of wood or water

Dec 20 Struck the big Sandy this afternoon found plenty of wood & water

Dec 21 have a fine trail to go on, saw the parraris [prairies] on fire for miles this evening it was a most beautiful sight

Dec 22 Left the Big Sandy this afternoon and went west encamped without any fire it was very cold

Dec 23 crossed a stream of water to day at noon found plenty of wood

Dec 24 rose a large hill this forenoon and a most splendid view of the mountain saw immense bodies of Pine about 20 miles ahead of us as far as the eye could reach think we are beginning to get through, encamped to night and found a little water and some pine stumps for wood had a grand fire Our teams have almost given out and can hardly draw our load

Dec 25 went over a hill to day about a mile where we found plenty of water and fine grass, and lots of wood we found a bark hut which we used and concluded to lay over hear and let our teams rest We had a great Christmas dinner

Dec 26 conclude to take a tramp and see where we are

Dec 27 I start this mng with corb and Alverson with a pack on my back we walked about 25 miles and encamped on the bank of a stream

Dec 28 commenced snowing about 10 Oclk and kept on until about 8 Ock which made it very hard traveling my ankles got so sore that I could not hardly step also my toes

1859 Jan 1st Tis a most lovely morning but I am afraid it will not be a very Happy New Year to me, am on the Plains of Kansas, with only one meal in my Pack, and Lost, 2, P.M. have eaten my last meal, it

looks gloomy. 3, P.M. have shot a Rabbit, 4 ½ P.M., sighted the camp.

10 Have laid in camp, until to day, traveled 15 miles in the Snow

11 It has been hard traveling today in the snow, and awful hills, fine view of the mountains

12 1, A.M. a most splendid view of the mountains. We are encamped, for the first time that our vision is obstructed by timber tis a grant sight, hugh Pines as far as the eye can behold

13 We have crossed the last devide between the mountains and us. I never saw anything so beautiful as the mountains today. Pikes & Longs Peaks are the predominate points while the space is filled up with crags & Peaks and each separate present a diferent view. 12,M. have come to a well broken Road and are as happy as mortals can be. 1.45 seen the first wht men, and found out that we are encamped on the Cherry Creek

14 Have drove into some Willow Brush, & encamped, about 80 rods from Cherry Creek

15 Walked 25 miles to day & found quite a settlement Slept in a Cabbin for the first time in 88 days, tis Gen Larimers House

16 Have been up the Platt River to day, to see the Miners dig, I was most happily disceaved I watched 2 men Rock out 12 buckets of the surface not 2 feet down & when they paned out 80 cents.

(11) 10 Oclck P.M. have been out in front of a Cabbin in Denver City and herd some miners sing Nellie Gray I think it was the sweetest music I ever herd it almost made me homesick

17 have walked 30 miles in 8 hours to day, it has been very warm all day I carried a pack on my back that weighed 15 lbs

Feb

22 Encamped to night on Cherry all alone am imagining what fine times the White folks are having to night Tis a queer Life, this; tis one of many ups & downs. Tis divided into many parts, Tis a Theater on a great, grand scale

March 9th 1859 bought Venison for Company paid \$2.00

(1) My great-grandfather, Wilbur Fiske Koon, was born in Schnectady, New York, in 1844. His father, Dr. Joseph Koon, went to California in 1849, and his family never heard from him again. Seven years later, after his mother had the errant Dr. Koon declared legally dead and had married Israel Parker, she changed Wilbur's name to Parker. Koon eventually turned up in Stockton, California, an alcoholic and prominent town character, who was written up in the papers when he died at the age of ninety-one.

(2) Eventually, a variant of the Middle route won out over the other two, when an efficient coach service was established along it. Before then, however, as the *Rocky Mountain News* reported on April 11, 1860, "Three roads will be traveled next summer. The Arkansas, by those from the South and the Southwest, the Smoky Hill by the foolhardy and insane, and the Platte by the great mass of the emigration." Reprinted in LeRoy R. Hafen, Ed., *Overland Routes to the Gold Fields, 1859, from Contemporary Accounts*, Southwest Historical Series, vol 11 (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Porcupine Press, 1974 [1941]), 265. My introductory account of the gold rush relies heavily on volumes 9, 10 and 11 in this series.

(3) Herman S. David, ed., *Reminiscences of General William Larimer and of his Son William H. H. Larimer* (Lancaster, Pennsylvania: Press of the New Era, 1918), 142-143. See also Hafen, *Overland Routes to the Gold Fields*, 266.

(4) *Leavenworth Times*, March 5, 1859. Reprinted in LeRoy R. Hafen, ed., *Colorado Gold Rush: Contemporary Letters and Reports, 1858-1859*, The Southwest Historical Series, vol. 10 (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Porcupine Press, 1974 [1941]), 223-224. Larimer's account does not quite tally with Parker's diary. Larimer mentions "A. W. Bacon, Parker, and three others"; Parker names George Alverson, Mr. Weeks, and Corb. This could be the Pontiac party; but perhaps they traveled with another party, because Parker distinctly refers to "wagons," and on December 7 he wrote that "part of our company have left us." There must have been at least one other

wagon, which perhaps turned back. Larimer called Bacon "an old Californian," suggesting that Bacon had already had experience in the California goldfields. David, *Reminiscences*, 121.

(5) Reprinted in Hafen, *Colorado Gold Rush*, 230.

(6) The diary is a 2 ¼ by 4 ½ inch brown notebook with ruled pages. Parker occasionally skipped a few pages and then, as if not wanting those empty pages to go to waste, would use them to record later entries. For purposes of this article, I have arranged the entries to appear in chronological order.

(7) In a few passages in the diary, Parker experimented with a simple letter-substitution code. I have decoded those sections and used italics to indicate the words that he wrote in code. The original spelling and punctuation have been retained.

(8) In parts of a notebook that is separate from the diary, Parker wrote the numbers one through ten and a few common English words next to phonetic transcriptions of Indian words: for example, "Min,ne,cah) Gold."

(9) These may have been Kiowa Apaches, a small tribe originally from the northwestern plains country. This tribe had no actual connection with the Apaches who lived in the Southwest. See Frederick Webb Hodge, ed., *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico*, Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin no. 30, vol 1 (Washington, D.C.; Government Printing Office, 1907), 701-702.

(10) At this point, Parker's group is exactly 100 miles from Pike's Peak, which perhaps is the number Parker meant to write.

(11) This amount would have been quite respectable. A return of from two to five dollars a day was considered good enough to justify remaining in the goldfields.

(Note from *Despatch* editor: the Illustrations of station houses along the trail were originally included in Mr. Lavers' article although the stations were not in existence at the time Parker made his trip.)

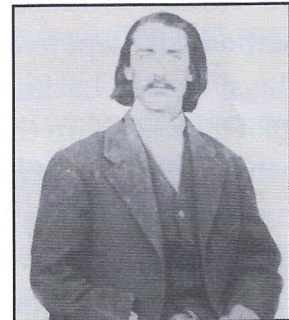


AIR TOWNS AND THEIR INHABITANTS

By W.E. Webb

(From *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 51, Issue 306, November 1875) Part 5, Conclusion.

The most remarkable man, as a specimen of plain-craft, that I ever met on the frontier was Comstock. (1) Learning the rudiments of his future pursuit while yet a child, his playthings had been revolvers and knives. Unlike the great army of pretenders who have flashed across the pages of plain-land fiction, he was an Indian scout and soldiers' guide after the pattern which went out of fashion with Boone and his ilk. From the sole of his nervous foot to the locks of his raven hair he stood out a bold man in council and a sleuth-hound on the trail. He was employed at Fort Wallace, and for a short period preceding his death at Fort Hays, in government service. This scout was the only one I ever knew who would execute the daring task of riding into hostile Indian camps with messages from United States officers. Was a request for a council with the tribes to be sent, he bore it. Alone, on the back of a fleet mule, a compromise himself between the Indian and the pale-face, he would take his way out into the wild waste, and fade against the horizon on a mission the further end of which seemed to lie at the feet of death. Comstock's mother was said to have been a Delaware. (2) Small and sinewy in person and dark in feature, this man's power lay in his grand eyes. Large and wild in their light, they seemed to flash over and around you, as if searching for a revolver at your back. I saw him first while standing in the door of a stage ranch at Pond Creek. He paused for an instant in front while on his way with a message from the commandant at Wallace to a hostile tribe on the Republican. Stopping but a moment to speak with Nichols, the ranch-keeper, he leveled those shining eyes at me with the precision a man would



Will "Medicine Bill" Comstock

have used with field-glasses. It was but an instant, and he was off, yet I felt that I had been photographed, and could be hunted the world over by him did he ever have occasion. I thought of it afterward as the most unpleasant optical experience of my life. This man's unpretending exploits would furnish a volume of really valuable history, all the more to be prized from a certainty of being under rather than over drawn. And it would be refreshing to have one tale of genuine borer experience, after the flood of stuff which has borne forward to fame our modern buckskin heroes. Yet Comstock had a full share of those blemishes which are held by all but ideal Leather-stockings. (3) To revenge a swindle of a few dollars he shot an unarmed man in the sutler's store at Wallace. (4) The victim was a former partner; and twisting in and out among the barrels and boxes in an agony of fear, he pleaded for life piteously and vainly. This murder, however, darkened and hung over the slayer's life like a cloud. Hitherto his reputation had been fair; now he felt the blot upon it. Always superstitious by virtue of his mother's blood, he brooded in silence, and fancied evil influences existing in certain signs and days. But he was still the man of all others for military necessities. His knowledge of Indian character and habits was perfect. I remember one instance in which he foretold to a day the death of some wood-choppers. These men had been cutting down a small grove of trees--a patch of foliage on a hundred miles of desert. Comstock warned them to beware, stating that the trees had for ages been the resting-places for the dead of the tribes crossing there. These red rovers never bury a corpse, but lash it to the limbs of a tree, or stretch it out on a high platform underneath. Notwithstanding the well-meant warning, the choppers plied their axes, and the scout affirmed that at the next full moon the savages would avenge the sacrilege. The desecrators laughed: no Indians had been in the country for months, apparently, and the wood could be safely housed in the fort before they knew that the first axe had sounded its alarm among their dead.

When the next full moon shed its light down among the fallen trees the beams fell upon the pale faces of two dead chippers. Some wandering savage, flitting by like a shadow, had seen the white men at their task, and carried the news to his distant village.

Not many months after this occurrence Death laid violent hands upon the bold scout who had so often laughed in his face. He had been dispatched by General Sheridan with a message to some Sioux, who were wavering between peace and war. Three days afterward the other scout returned alone, and reported that Comstock had been shot in the back as they were returning by a small body of "dog soldiers," who had trailed them from the council. There was a strong suspicion, however, at Fort Hays that the eagle-eyed scout had been killed by his companion for the sake of his gold, a quantity of which he always carried belted around the person. (5)

The passenger over the plains to-day will find at the station of Sheridan a solitary house, that of the railroad section hands. There are no streets, and no other vestiges of former habitation, except empty cans and old boots. The position of any former block could not be found without a new survey. Even the vaunted Philadelphia lawyer would not be able to fasten a mortgage within fifty yards of the lot he might wish to seize upon. Future generations of surveyors may have to determine upon the cellar of the "Dew-Drop Inn" for an initial point, as hundreds of Sheridan's old toppers will live long enough to point out to strangers with unerring memory the spot where the gentle Dew-Drop rested while it moistened parched lips. No title-deeds of the town property were ever recorded, and an air castle could not have faded out more completely than has the air town. It may, however, claim future recognition, as the region has been thickly sowed with bullets, for the noble twenty-six who homesteaded "high lots" did not absorb all the missiles that were directed at human life.

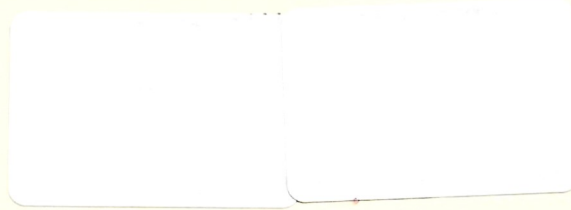
(1) William Averill Comstock was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan on January 17, 1842. Some said he was superstitious and always wore a medicine bag around his neck earning him was the moniker



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"Medicine Bill." A more interesting tale has Will standing close to a young Sioux woman when she was bitten on the finger by a rattlesnake. Will unhesitatingly grabbed the woman's hand and bit off the finger! He died on or about August 18, 1868.

- (2) Comstock's mother was Sarah Sabine Cooper. She was the niece of author James Fenimore Cooper, making him Will's Great Uncle. Sarah died when Will was four years old. His father remarried but Will went to Nebraska in 1858, when he was sixteen, to live with his older sister, Mrs. Eleazer Wakeley. His father died in White Plains, New York in 1861.
- (3) This is a reference to the book "Leather Stocking Tales" by Will's Great Uncle James Fenimore Cooper. It is said that the book inspired Will to live the frontier life.
- (4) H.P. Wyatt was a wood contractor for Fort Wallace. He owed Will money, which he refused to pay. Will was already angry at Wyatt, as were others at the fort, because Wyatt claimed he was with Quantrill during the sacking of Lawrence in 1863. Will ended up

shooting and killing Wyatt, after which he rode to Hays City where he was arrested. At the trial, Will admitted he shot Wyatt. The Justice of the Peace reportedly asked Will if he didn't want to change his plea and Will replied that he didn't. The Judge replied that he was a "damned fool for tellin' it," and promptly dismissed the charge "for want of evidence."

- (5) Will and fellow scout Abner "Sharp" Grover were sent from Fort Wallace by Lieutenant Fredrick Beecher with orders to find Cheyenne Chief Turkey Leg. Both Will and Abner had lived with Turkey Leg and Beecher thought they might be able to convince him to stop raiding along the Solomon and Republican Rivers. But the talks were unsuccessful and the two scouts were escorted out of the village. Suddenly, the Indians fired on them, killing Will and wounding Abner who was able to reach Fort Wallace. Some officers at Wallace thought Abner had shot Comstock but that was never proven. No official report exists describing the recovery and burial of Will's body and the location of his grave is unknown.

