EXPERIENCES OF A PIONEER ARIZONA WOMAN

(By Sarah Butler York)

I have been asked to give you some sketches of my pioneer life, and if you will excuse a simple story told in a simple way, I will try to give you a few of the experiences which came to us: first on the long journey from Missouri to New Mexico; second, on the trip from New Mexico to Arizona, and others during our life on the cattle ranch on the Gila River, twenty miles south of Clifton, Arizona.

In the spring of 1873, a party of sixteen persons, four women, seven men and five children, started from the central part of Missouri to find homes in the far west; all were hoping to better their fortunes, and a few, including myself, were seeking health; some kind neighbors advised my husband to put a spade in the wagon thinking it might be needed, but I was anxious to make the trial.

Our train consisted of covered wagons, drawn by oxen and a herd of cattle, driven by the younger men who were on horses. Our long, tedious journey required four months. You will realize that our progress was slow because all our possessions such as food, clothing, bedding, cooking utensils and tents were packed in the wagons, besides the women and children. Nine miles a day was the average distance we covered. Travelers now going over the same route at an average of fifty miles an hour will, no doubt, think of us with pity—but though slow we were sure. We were fortunate in regard to the weather as there was not much rain. On stormy nights the men did the cooking while the women and children remained in the wagons or tents, but we were usually so cramped from sitting all day we were glad to get out for exercise, if possible. After we reached the plains, wood for cooking was our greatest problem and it was some time before the women would consent to use a fire made of buffalo chips. Afterwards we made a joke of it, and would laugh to see some of the fastidious young men come into camp with a sack of chips on their shoulders; the old chips that had lain there for years through all kinds of weather certainly made a wonderful fire. By that time another party of
four men, driving a larger bunch of cattle, had joined us and we welcomed the addition, believing there was more safety in numbers. We could hear the prairie chickens most every morning and passed large herds of buffaloes at different times and saw many antelopes. Our men killed several antelopes and two buffaloes on the way and the fresh meat was very acceptable; however, I would not care for a diet of buffalo meat. One day they had wounded a large buffalo and chased it until it was very tired. Our camp happened to be in the way, so he came right through. The women and children took refuge in the wagons, much disturbed over the uninvited guest. The work that has been done to preserve the buffaloes reminds me of what I saw when we touched at one point in Western Kansas. The Union Pacific Railroad, sportsmen on board the trains had shot the buffaloes down until they lay by the hundreds, and were left to decay without even removing the skins. It was pitiful to see an act of such vandalism.

When we came through the Sioux and Fox Indian Reservations in Western Kansas one of the men missed his dog. After we were camped he went back to look for it, but was unsuccessful, but when he became angry and drew his revolver the Indians took him into a tepee where the dog was tied; no doubt they were preparing to have a feast of dog meat.

The government had built good stone houses of two rooms for these Indians, but they would not use them and were living in ragged tepees nearby. They had used the floors and the window and door casings for fires.

We saw many Indians, but no hostiles, although we had been warned before starting not to cross the Arkansas River. I was fortunate in being the first to see the mountains, which to me was a glorious sight, as it was just at sunrise. None of the party had seen a mountain and all were very much excited with our first view of the Rockies in Colorado; we rejoiced, too, that we were nearing the promised land, and a land of promise it indeed proved to most of us. Some felt they were too far from civilization and returned to the old home, but the families remained and prospered. It was a rough life, living in log cabins with dirt roofs, forty miles from a post office or supplies. An ox team was our only
means of travel and yet we were gloriously full of life and health. We had lived at this beautiful place at the foot of the Rocky mountains three years when we learned that we were on the old Maxwell Grant and could get no title to the land. We had read of the possibilities of the Gila Valley, pronounced with a hard G, of course, so my husband decided to come still farther west and left us in the spring of 1877. In October of the same year he made arrangements with a Mr. Chandler, who owned and operated a large ox train, to bring us a distance of five or six hundred miles; so with my two little daughters of eleven and six years and a baby girl fourteen months, we boarded an ox train, which consisted of sixteen immense wagons, each drawn by ten or twelve yoke of oxen. The one provided for us was a good sized spring wagon with bows and canvas cover, trailed behind the last wagon. In this we carried our clothes and bedding; the bed was rolled up in the back of the wagon during the day; at night we spread it in the bottom and made a fairly comfortable bed. The man who owned the train promised to make the trip in six weeks, but on account of having poor oxen and encountering stormy weather, we were almost three months on the way. Some nights the oxen would wander so far they could not be found in time to move on next day and we would be compelled to remain in camp much against our will, for when we were moving, even if it were ever so little, we felt we were drawing nearer the end of our journey. The drivers were all Mexicans. After camp was made at night and the teams were turned loose a large fire was built for the men, and a smaller was made near our wagon. The provisions and cooking utensils were brought to my wagon as, unless it was very cold or snowing, I did my own cooking. In case of stormy weather food was brought to us. If there was snow the men would scrape it off, cut pine boughs and build a wind break, then we would wrap up and sit out by the fire. They were good to the children and would want to hold them. This would have been a rest for me, as I had to hold my baby all day to keep her from falling out of the wagon, but they were so filthy and infested with vermin I didn’t dare allow them to help me, and as it was we did not entirely escape. We learned a few Mexican words, the alphabet and how to
count. Mr. Chandler said we were not to ask the meaning of their songs as we could enjoy them better not to know. Since we were so long on the road our provisions gave out and we had to use the same food provided for the Mexicans; beans, flour, coffee, bacon and dried fruit. One night we camped near a white family who were going in the opposite direction; the man had killed a bear and gave us some of the meat, which we enjoyed. These were the only white people I saw after leaving Albuquerque and we passed through no towns except little Mexican plazas.

Mr. Chandler had told us what route we would take and the towns we would pass through so I could get mail, but after he started he changed his route twice and I had not a line from anyone for almost three months. My people back in the old home, thinking we were at the mercy of half savages, as they judged the Mexicans to be, were very anxious, and my husband was anxious, too, although he had confidence in the man’s promise to bring us through safely. Fortunately, we were perfectly well all the time. If any of us had been seriously ill nothing could have been done. One Mexican did die one night in the wagon next to ours. We heard him moaning and calling on God to help; it was bitterly cold and no one went to him. The next morning they seemed very much surprised to find him dead. We had to stay over one day so they could carry the body to a little plaza and lay it in consecrated ground. I thought it would have been more Christian to have taken care of him while he was alive.

The train moved so slowly we would take turns walking in good weather and could easily keep up with the wagons. The children gathered quantities of pinon nuts and in the evening the men helped to roast them. We passed many hours cracking and eating them as we moved along.

The first word I had from my husband was a note sent by some teamsters. This message reached me fifty miles out of Silver City. Two days afterwards he met us with a light wagon and a team of large mules. That was a joyful meeting and we gladly said goodbye to the plodding old oxen. It seemed that we were flying as we bowled along the last twenty-five miles to Silver City, where we arrived at six o’clock in the evening to
find our little adobe house all ready for us, even the wood was laid ready for a fire in the Mexican fireplace, built in one corner of the room. How good it was to feel a floor under our feet and to have a comfortable bed on which to rest! My husband was very proud to think I would undertake such a journey to be with him, but I told him to make the most of it for, knowing what it meant, I would never do it again, alone.

I have made other journeys equally as tiresome and dangerous, when one was afraid of Indians behind every tree or rock. If we were traveling by night we imagined every soap weed was an enemy running, but he was with us and told us never to look for an Indian, because he would always hear the shot first.

Silver City, where we arrived the last of December, 1877, was quite a small place then. It is the county seat of Grant County, New Mexico, and at that time the silver mines were in active operation. There were also many large and small cattle ranches and sheep herds scattered over the country and a number of small farms or ranches, as we call them in this western country. These were located in the valleys around and all were drawing their supplies from Silver City, which trading made the town a very flourishing and prosperous place. It is beautifully situated and has a fine climate. We remained in this place, where my husband was engineer in the smelter, for over two years, then he took a herd of cattle on shares from Harvey Whitehill, sheriff of the county, and moved them out on the Gila river only a few miles from the Arizona line. After the cattle were located he returned for the family and we again embarked in a wagon, but this time it was drawn by horses. We were only two days making the trip over the Continental Divide, through the Burro mountains by way of Knight's Ranch. There we saw the burned remains of a wagon, household goods and wearing apparel scattered about where the Indians had massacred a family a short time before. We passed over a long dry mesa to a crossing on the Gila and drove down the valley past a few scattered ranches to the cattle ranch where we were to live for a year in a Jacel house, made by setting posts close together in the ground and daubing them with mud. It had a dirt roof and floor. While we lived at this place I taught school in one of the rooms, having an
enrollment of nine children, including my two. With the proceeds of this venture I bought my first sewing machine. After a year we moved fourteen miles down the river into Arizona and settled on government land, which is now called York Flat. There were a few shacks on the place, and my husband soon had built a large adobe house with shingle roof, windows and floors which were a real luxury. Here we felt at home once more. Our house was a stopping place for travelers going from the railroad at Lordsburg to Clifton and the Longfellow Mines, which were owned and controlled by the Lesinskys. We entertained a number of interesting people; men who would be welcome guests in any society and more than welcome to us. They were very cordial and friendly and made an effort to give us the news of the outside world. Some of those I like to remember were Colonel Lee and Governor Sheldon, of Santa Fe; H. W. Lawton, Gen. John A. Logan, the Churches, who were the first owners of the mines at Morenci; many army officers, and Archibald Clavering Gunter, a story writer, who wrote profusely. One of his most interesting stories is “Miss Nobody of Nowhere,” a rather exciting story of Indian troubles in the neighborhood of the ranch. The Indians were hostile and made a raid somewhere through the country twice a year, in the spring and fall when the grass and water was plentiful for their ponies. One time all the settlers got together about twenty miles up the river, making the trip at night because the Indians never attack at night or during a storm. We stayed at that ranch a week; sometimes the men would fill gunny sacks with sand and pack the windows half way and we would stay at the ranch. At other times everyone forted at Duncan and on this occasion the cowboys followed the Indians several days and pressed them so closely a squaw dropped her papoose which was strapped in the basket. The baby was so filthy the women had trouble getting it clean. A family named Adams took the child, a boy, and as he grew he developed the Indian traits. He was very cruel with other children and often struck at them with a hammer or rock. At one time he slashed a little boy with a knife, but was caught before the boy was badly hurt. The Indians traveled fast, only stopping long enough to run off the horses or kill a beef or human being they found. I do
not remember them ever attacking a house, for the Apache Indians are great cowards and never fight in the open. A rattlesnake is a more honest enemy, because he, at least, warns one before striking. At one time five hundred Indians passed the ranch and, as it was round-up time, they killed a good many cattle and one man in sight of the house and two others a few miles above. Another time we heard the shot that killed a young man who had been at the ranch an hour before, playing croquet. There are many other incidents I could mention, but will not at this time.

If the men were late coming in from their rides after the cattle I was very uneasy and could not rest. My husband would scoldingly say that he always trailed a cow until he found her, and that I must get used to his being away. I often told him the day might come when he would wish I would become uneasy and send men to hunt him. This proved true, for if I had known it was Indians instead of rustlers who had stolen our horses three years later I would have sent men to his relief and he would not have been ambushed and killed.

After my husband's death I was compelled to remain at the ranch, as all we had was there. With the five children, the oldest sixteen and the youngest eight months, I went through many rough and dangerous experiences. The children's education was a serious problem. I tried taking them to California, but things went wrong at the ranch and I was sent for. I brought with me a young lady teacher, who stayed with us two years and took entire charge of the children; then we had another teacher for the same length of time. Altogether we had four and this arrangement proved much more satisfactory than sending them away from home.

Many things crowd into my mind, but I shall bring my story to a close by saying to you dear young people, who are starting out in life and are feeling, sometimes, that you are having many hardships to contend with in these rough mining camps, that if you just stop and think how much better you are situated than we of the earlier days were, you will have very much to be appreciative and thankful for. SARAH BUTLER YORK.

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