

WOODIN WAGON TRAIN. MITCHELL ACCOUNT.

Early History Thurston County, Washington Together with biographies and reminiscences of those identified with pioneer days. Compiled and edited by Mrs. George E. Blankenship, Olympia, Washington 1914. p. -147).

The following biographical sketch of Mr. Wm. H. Mitchell, one of our most respected citizens, was typewritten by his son, A. B. Mitchell, who is wholly blind, and is so crippled from rheumatism that he cannot walk or care for himself.

This is a remarkable verification of the fact often noted that the loss of any one of the five senses renders more acute the others. In this, the sense of touch or feeling has produced a manuscript that is the equal of most experts on the machine.

It is, therefore, published verbatim:

"I was born in Chicago, Illinois, November 13, 1834, and a few years later moved with my parents to what was then South Port, Wisconsin. The name has, however, since been changed to Kenosha. When I had reached the age of 18, I had contracted a severe case of Oregon fever and had made up my mind to take the long trip across the plains, my objective point being Olympia. My parents objected at first to my going, but later acquiesced and assisted me in preparing for the trip.

Accordingly, arrangements were made with Samuel Holmes for me to travel with his family as they were leaving that Spring for the same part of the country to which I wished to go. A horse was also provided for me to ride and on the 9th of April, 1853, we left South Port and traveled about nine miles that day, and on the next day, Sunday, my father and mother, with my sister Eliza, drove out with a horse and buggy and overtook our slower moving ox team.

They took dinner with us there at the beginning of our long journey. They then returned home while we once more turned our faces to the setting sun.

"The trail across Iowa was a slow and tiresome one on account of the soft condition of the roads, the wagons often going down to the hubs in the mud. There were plenty of others, however, like ourselves, making for Council Bluffs, and there would often be quite a train of us. We were generally delayed in the mornings. I remember Mrs. Holmes, who would still insist on bathing her children every morning. She found this to be impossible later on, however.

Council Bluffs was at that time a central point, where the emigrants got together and formed their wagons into trains for the trip across the plains, and here could be found all types of the frontier life mingled together. It was here that a three-card monte man relieved me of nearly all the money that I had. This was a serious loss to me, but I think I profited by the experience.

"We crossed the Missouri River, June the third. Our train, consisting of about twenty wagons, was well organized, having a captain and train master. Our course now led up the north bank of the Platte River and there was no sign of human habitation to be seen anywhere. We met a trader

occasionally, sometimes on horseback and sometimes they would have a tent stretched beside the road with their goods displayed in front, but as they charged so much for everything they had to sell no one purchased of them until compelled to do so by sheer necessity.

There were also bridges built over some of the rivers and at such places there would be one of these men to collect a toll before allowing you to pass over the bridge. There were a few Indians also, but they were not hostile at that time and never attacked us. We also saw quite a few buffalo and at one time it was necessary for us to open up our train that a herd of them might go through, otherwise they would have run right over us.

I presume there must have been a thousand buffalo in that herd. It was in this section of the country that we encountered a severe thunder storm in which the tent where Mr. and Mrs. Holmes were sleeping was blown down and they were forced to come into the wagon where I was, to get away from the rain.

We arrived at Fort Kearney on July 4th, having traveled a little over a thousand miles since crossing the Missouri River.

"We now began to see more signs of the hardships to which those that had preceded us had been subjected, as the trail was strewn with deserted wagons and stoves, in fact, with everything that could be spared to make the load lighter and everywhere was to be seen the bleached bones of cattle that had either died or had been killed for food. The Indians were also more watchful.

On one occasion two young men of our train, thinking that could get along faster on foot, started on ahead one morning and that afternoon we came upon them. The Indians had killed one and the other was so badly wounded that he died soon after. We buried him in his blankets beside the trail on the bank of the Snake River and the next day we were overtaken by another train and they told us that the Indians had dug him up and taken his blankets and left his body on top of the ground.

I have often wondered since, though I thought nothing of it at the time, why they never picked me off, as I was in the habit of riding ahead of the train and after fastening my horse to my wrist, I would lie down and wait for the train to come up.

The only time that I was shot, however, was accidental. I was stooping down to get a drink from a river when my revolver slipped from its holster and was discharged, the ball lodging in my right forearm. It was removed by one of the men with his pocket knife, this being the best medical instrument to be had. The Indians were around us and we would often see their camp fires at night in the foothills surrounding our camp.

"We crossed the Snake River by caulking our wagon boxes with rags and using them to ferry the women and children across while the cattle were made to swim. Our stock of provisions becoming depleted, Mr. Holmes was compelled to buy from a trader at La Grande, Oregon. It was at this place that one of the men of our train had his wife stolen by the trader. I remember hearing him calling through the camp for her, but she had gone and taken the youngest child with her and he did not find her.

"At Fort Walla Walla our train divided, part going down the Columbia River while the rest of us went on north and through the Natchez pass in the Cascade mountains. When we arrived at the foot of the mountains we sent two men forward to see if we could get over and they returned, reporting too much snow for the wagons, so it was decided to leave our outfits at a Catholic mission that was there and proceed on foot, letting the women ride whatever there was to ride.

"Mr. Wooden and myself were the first to start over the pass and we found the way not nearly as bad as had been represented and by taking advantage of cut-offs, we made very good progress and without misadventure until the last night in the mountains we became separated. Mr. Wooden took what he thought to be a cut-off while I stayed on the trail, and, at night, as he did not rejoin me, I called him but received no answer.

So I went to sleep at the foot of a tree and the next morning when I awoke I found that I had rolled several feet down the mountain from where I went to sleep and it was raining hard, so after stretching a piece of canvas over some brush to keep the rain off, I built a fire and was cooking the last of my store of rice when Mr. Wooden came into my camp. We ate the rice that I had prepared and started on our way again, and that afternoon met a Mr. Connel, who gave us a little flour which we cooked on the end of sticks and ate.

Mr. Connel was a very good friend to the emigrants and often helped them with provisions, as he had a cabin on the west side of the mountains, on what is now Connel 's prairie. He was killed by the Indians in the uprising of 1855-6. We took supper at his house and then, after hiring horses from some friendly Indians, pushed on to Fort Steilacoom. I remained there but a short time, however, but went in a canoe with a Mr. Skidmore to Mud Bay, where I expected to go to work in his logging camp, but this I did not do, but went with him the next day in a canoe to Olympia, arriving there on the 6th of October.

"My first job, after arriving in Olympia, was to split and carry in a load of wood for J. J. Westbrook, who ran a saloon on the east side of Main street between Second and Third. After that I worked at whatever I could get to do. I joined the volunteers to fight the Indians in the uprising of 1855-6. serving but twenty-one days, when we mustered out. After this I was deputy sheriff under Isaac Hays.

"In 1856 I went into business with John Stewart. I was tending bar at the time for Mr. Westbrook and Stewart asked me if I wanted to go into business, to which I replied that I did. but that I had very little money. John, however, said he would speak to Mr. Hurd, who wanted to sell his baker shop, and Mr. Hurd agreed to give us time to pay for the business, so we bought him out and John, being a baker, took charge of that part of the business, while I did the best I could by tending the butcher shop, which we had also. The first year we cleared enough to pay what we owed and also to buy the two- story building which is still standing on the southwest corner of Third and Main streets.

"Perhaps it would be well for me to say a word about the rest of those who were in our train when we crossed the Cascade mountains. Mr. Holmes and his family settled near Olympia. Bird Wright and his two brothers, with their families, located in the Puyallup valley, as did a Mr.

Morrison, who was a minister. Mr. Wooden went first to the Nisqually, but later moved to Seattle, where he started the first tannery.

His son-in-law, a Mr. Schock, also settled a few miles out from Seattle. Mr. B. L. Johns, with his eight children, one of whom afterward became my wife, located a claim on White River, near Seattle.

Mr. Livingston settled in Seattle, while his two daughters, one of whom married Will H. Brannon, located near White River. Mr. and Mrs. Brannon, with their children, were killed by the Indians, and Joe Brannon, Will's brother, after the war, came to Olympia.

*'On the 13th of April, 1859, I was married to Martha T. Johns, in Olympia. To this union, five children were born. William Walter was born Feb. 29, 1860, and died about eight months later. Frank Wellington was born July 4, 1862, Henry William, July 30, 1865, Cora Edith born July 7, 1867. and Albert Bennett, born Aug. 7, 1870. There are also living nine grandchildren.

"My son, Frank W., died on March 19, 1914, in Portland. Oregon. My daughter, Cora Edith, is now Mrs. A. L. Young of San Francisco, California."