

Lavinia Honeyman Porter

BY OX TEAM TO CALIFORNIA



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A Narrative of Crossing the Plains in 1860

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INTRODUCTION

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When my two great, stalwart grandsons were little shavers, it was their favorite habit in the early hours of the morning to come creeping into bed with grandmother. Their soft little arms would twine lovingly about my neck and kisses from their dewy lips were pressed upon my cheek and brow. And were I ever so far away in slumber land their sweet voices clamoring for a story would banish all sleep from my drowsy eyelids. Usually they selected their own stories from the numbers I had so often repeated, but invariably wound up, when I had exhausted my fund, by saying, "Now, grandmother, tell us about crossing the plains."

The true stories appealed more strongly to them than all the illusory conceptions of fancy, from the fact, perhaps, that I could relate what really had occurred better than I could draw from my imagination. Be that as it may, they never wearied of hearing how I crossed the plains, climbed the Rocky mountains and traveled many months on my way to California. To gratify them and their dear mother I have consented to write up for them the history of my overland journey.

Those who may favor the succeeding pages with their perusal must not expect any attempt at fine writing, or glowing descriptions. The author's intention is to furnish a plain, unvarnished tale of actual occurrences and facts relating to her long journey. Nothing not strictly true will be admitted into its pages, and if some of the incidents related be found of a thrilling character the reader will experience satisfaction in knowing that they are not the results of

imaginary picturing. Whenever a personal adventure is narrated, it will be found to illustrate some particular phase of character, and none are recounted which do not convey information.

As I recall those years after the lapse of time, they are as vivid as the memory of yesterday's events. It has been a positive delight in the midst of this modern life, to live over some of those scenes. Those peculiar conditions no longer exist, for the advent of the overland railway and the customs and usages of more civilized life have done away with much of the fascinations of romance and adventure.

If I have not laid sufficient emphasis on the difficulties and discouragement which we encountered, it is not because there were not numerous obstacles to overcome, but in turning the mind upon the past, the more pleasant memories stand out in bolder relief; even when the cares and responsibilities weighed most heavily upon us, we had that saving grace of humor which enabled us to meet situations otherwise insuperable, and to gather courage whereby we might endure them all.

Necessarily in recounting these events so closely identified with our life on the plains this narrative has assumed an autobiographical character to a larger extent than the author could wish, and I humbly beg pardon of the reader if I have exceeded the canons of good taste.

All through that tedious and extended time I kept a journal of every day's happenings as they occurred, but after our arrival in California we settled on a remote ranch, and in those early and primitive days, books, magazines or literature of any kind were rare among the farming community where we were located. My journal proving interesting to our neighbors, was loaned and re-loaned from one family to another until at last it fell into the hands of

some careless persons who allowed it to be partially destroyed, particularly that part relating to the first months of our journey. Many names of rivers, streams and different points and places have slipped from my memory, but the principal places and events of our journey were so strongly impressed upon my then young mind, that they have become indelible and time cannot efface them. Perhaps the repetition of them over and over to my little grandsons and their young playmates served to strengthen them in my memory, and, while I may be lacking in ability to embellish this humble history I can still give the plain facts and incidents of that never to be forgotten journey.

CHAPTER I.

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PREPARATIONS FOR A JOURNEY—BIDDING FAREWELL— THE START.

It was in the fall and winter of eighteen fifty-nine that my husband and I decided to emigrate to the far West. Imprudent speculations and other misfortunes had embarrassed us financially to such an extent that our prospects for the future looked dark and forbidding; we then determined to use the small remnant of our fortune to provide a suitable outfit for a lengthy journey toward the setting sun. We were both young and inexperienced, my husband still in his twenties, and I a young and immature girl scarce twenty years of age. I had been raised south of "Mason's and Dixon's line." My parents were well-to-do Southern people, and I had hitherto led the indolent life of the ordinary Southern girl. My husband, educated for a profession, knew nothing of manual labor, and had no idea of any other vocation outside of his profession; nor had he the training to make a living on the plains of the West, or the crossing of the continent in an ox team a successful venture. However, we had youth in our favor, and an indomitable will to succeed, and I have since learned by experience that a kind providence watches over fools and children. Since that long ago time when I look back at the temerity of our undertaking I have wondered why, and how, our older and wiser friends permitted us to be turned loose upon the wilds of the West without a guardian. We were two such precious dunces, but with a most exalted ego, and the

utmost confidence in our ability to brave the dangers of the undertaking.

A journey across the plains of the West was considered a great event in those early days. It was long thought of and planned seriously with and among the various members of the family to which the would be traveler belonged. Whoever had the temerity to propose turning their backs on civilized life and their faces toward the far-off Rocky mountains were supposed to be daring with a boldness bordering on recklessness. Emigration then meant the facing of unknown dangers in a half-savage country.

After many lengthy debates over the manner of transportation, and a diversified quantity of advice from our numerous friends, as to the merits of horses, mules or oxen, we at least decided (and it proved to be a wise decision) to purchase three yoke of strong, sturdy oxen and a large well-built emigrant wagon; roomy enough to hold all we wanted to take with us, and in which we might travel with some degree of comfort. In due time the oxen were bought. The six animals were young and had never been broken, to the yoke. When they were driven to our home, turned loose in our barnyard, they were as formidable a lot of wild brutes as the eye ever gazed upon, as agile as deer, and as handy with their heels as with their horns. Not one of us was brave enough to venture into the corral with them, and we soon realized that we had six white elephants on our hands. Finally my husband found a negro man who agreed to break them to yoke and chain. It proved to be rare sport to our neighbors watching them in, the somewhat difficult task of training that bunch of young steers. But with time and patience they became more amenable to yoke and chain, and sullenly submitted to be attached and to draw the wagon. I shall never forget the first time I ventured to ride

behind them, we had invited some of our neighbors who were brave enough to risk their necks to ride with us. There were several ladies and children and a man or two included. It was our intention to drive our new team a short distance into the country and give our friends a foretaste of what a journey would be behind the slow-moving cattle, but before we had driven a block our skittish and newly-broken team took it into their heads to run away down the hilly streets of our village, pell-mell, first on one side of the street then the other. In vain my husband called "Whoa, Buck, whoa, Jill" to the leaders. It only seemed to add to their fury, and as they recklessly sped along in their blind rage, the way proper matrons and prudish maids climbed and scrambled out of the rear end of that wagon was a sight to behold if not to describe. After repeated trials and much patience on our part, our wild oxen became tractable, and long before the end of our journey we had become very much attached to them, and they in turn had learned to love us, becoming docile and kind as kittens, any one of them would follow me wherever I led, eat out of our hands, or allow me or our little son to ride on his back.

The strong wagon with which we had provided ourselves had a staunch canvass covering, made water tight and firm enough to defy the ravages of wind and storm. Then came the loading and packing of provisions, raiment, and all the other paraphernalia necessary for a long trip. What to take and what to leave behind us was the problem that confronted us every day. Many times was the wagon loaded and unloaded before it proved satisfactory. Many of our most cherished treasures had to be left behind to give place to the more necessary articles.

The report of fabulous mines just discovered in the Rocky mountains had extended far and near, and the Pike's Peak

excitement was then at fever heat It was at this time that thousands of people had set their faces westward towards that mecca of their hopes. While our friends imagined that we, too, would make that joint the end of our pilgrimage, yet we had decided and promised each other that if Pike's Peak and its enviponments did not come up to our expectations we would push on to California. With that final objective point in view we provided ourselves with provisions sufficient to last us for six months or even longer.

Young as I was at that time we had been married nearly live years. We had a dear little fair-haired son, Robert, who was the pride and joy of our hearts. I began at once to prepare an outfit for both him and myself which I thought suitable to wear on the plains. In this I showed the callow ideas of an immature mind which would not be guided by older and wiser heads—proving also that my conception of roughing it for six months was very primitive. Among the other necessary garments in my outfit I had made two blue cloth traveling dresses with an array of white collars and cuffs. When a sensible elderly neighbor suggested home-spun or linsey woolsey as being far more appropriate, I scorned her advice. These fabrics were worn only by the negroes in the South. I assured her that I intended to look as neatly and welldressed on the plains as at home. However, I soon discarded my cloth gowns and my collars and cuffs, as I will relate farther on.

When our plans were fully matured and all our arrangements nearly completed for an early departure there was revealed to me a most startling discovery that in the course of a few months the stork intended to make us another visit. Welcome as he might have been under more favorable circumstances, his promised coming in the near future brought consternation to our hearts, and we were

afraid our plans would all have to be changed. We feared the perils of our journey might prove to be too hard for me to endure under these new circumstances. But I was well, young and strong; had the courage and bravery of ignorance, besides, we hoped to reach the end of our destination and find a home and resting place before the final advent of the stork's promised visit, which I was careful to conceal from my friends. I did not wish to give my dear parents any unnecessary worry; they were already filled with dread and anxiety at the undertaking we had so lightly assumed. We concluded to make the best of what could not be helped, and with stout hearts still continued our final, preparations.

Everything being now in readiness, we waited impatiently for the warm days of spring, as we were to depend mostly on the wild grass of the prairie for food for our stock which now consisted of the aforesaid three yoke of oxen, a full blooded Arabian saddle horse and a milch cow.

It was the third day of April, 1860, that my husband and eldest brother, Sam, who accompanied us as far as Pike's Peak, left the little town of Hannibal, on the Mississippi River, and started overland across the state of Missouri for St. Joseph, where by rail and train myself and little son joined them. We remained in St. Joseph a day or two to make my farewell visit to my dear sister who resided there.

On the fourteenth day of April we left St. Joseph, driving aboard the ferry for the farther shore of the muddy Missouri River, accompanied by my sister, her husband and a few other friends. We landed in a little village on the Kansas shore, and drove our friends out a few miles on the prairie, and made our first halt for our noon-day meal in which our friends were to join us for the last time. It was a sorrowful picnic, for our parting hour was near at hand.

Seven and forty years ago it was a serious thing to say good-bye to all that was nearest and dearest, to uproot ourselves from home and go forth into the wilderness into many and unknown dangers.

My sister and friends were to return by the ferry to St. Joseph. My husband and brother were too tender-hearted to remain and witness our sad parting. They hurriedly gathered the cattle from where they were feeding on the short grass, yoked them to the wagon, put my little son into the wagon beside them and drove slowly away, leaving me to bid my friends a long and last farewell.

I never recall that sad parting from my dear sister on the plains of Kansas without the tears flowing fast and free. Even now as I write, although so many long years have passed since then, I cannot restrain them. We were the eldest of a large family and the bond of affection and love that existed between us was strong indeed. It was like tearing our heart strings asunder. But such sorrows are to be endured not described. As she with the other friends turned to leave me for the ferry which was to take them back to home and civilization, I stood alone on that wild prairie. Looking westward I saw my husband driving slowly over the plain; turning my face once more to the East, my dear sister's footsteps were fast widening the distance between us. For the time I knew not which way to go, nor whom to follow. But in a few moments I rallied my forces, and waiving a last adieu to my beloved sister, turned my dim and tear-stained eyes westward and soon overtook the slowly moving oxen, who were bearing my husband and child over the green prairie. Climbing into the wagon beside them, with everything we possessed piled high behind us, we turned our faces toward the land of golden promise, that lay far beyond the Rocky Mountains. Little idea had I of the

hardships, the perils, the deprivation awaiting me. When the reality proved to be more than my most vivid imagination had pictured it, I was still able to endure it with a staunch heart, but often as I walked ahead of the team and alone, thoughts of home and my dear father and mother would almost overwhelm me with grief. As each step bore me farther from them, the unbidden tears would flow in spite of my brave resolve to be the courageous and valiant frontierswoman. I had been taught that a wife owed her first duty to her husband, and hard as it seemed I had the courage to do what I had promised under the highest and most solemn sanction.

We had been several days on our journey before I began to realize the immolation and sacrifice I was to endure; giving up my comfortable home and all my dear ones, cut off from the congenial society of my associates and personal friends, the ease, luxuries and comforts of civilized life. Enduring the disagreeable drudgery of camp work, the constant exposure to the elements, the glare of the scorching sun, the furious and fearful thunder storms that so often overtook us, the high winds, and blinding, pitiless sand storms that blew for days without cessation, the dread that settled down upon us at nightfall for fear of wild beasts and the other dangers that so often menaced us in our utter loneliness, the necessity of still moving onward, each day, whether we were in the humor for traveling or not. At first the novelty attending the starting out on such a trip and the continuous change of our environment kept up our interest. But as the days wore on the irksome monotony of the journey began to pall upon me, and I spent many unhappy hours which I tried to conceal within my own breast, sometimes confiding to my journal my woes and disappointments, but managed to keep up a cheerful

exterior before my husband and brother. Gradually, however, I became used to the peculiar situations by which I was surrounded and learned by daily experience how to surmount the trials and difficulties, and with a naturally cheerful and optimistic temperament soon became philosophical enough to take things as I found them and make the best of the situation.