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Chapter 1 : The Western Trail | VIA Rail

Farnham's Travels in the great western prairies, etc., May by Farnham, Thomas Jefferson, Publication date

With these men we passed a very agreeable evening; they amused us with yarns of mountain-life, which from time to time had floated in, and formed the fireside legends of that wild border. In the morning, while we were saddling our animals, two of the Kauzaus Indians came within a few rods of our camp, and waited for an invitation to approach. They were armed with muskets and knives. The manner of carrying their fire-arms was peculiar, and strongly characteristic of Indian caution. The breech was held in the right hand, and the barrel rested on the left arm; thus they are always prepared to fire. They watched us narrowly, as if to ascertain whether we were friends or foes, and upon our making signs to them to approach, they took seats near the fire, and with most imperturbable calmness, commenced smoking the compound of willow-bark and tobacco with which they are wont to regale themselves. When we left the ground, one of [20] the men threw away a pair of old boots, the soles of which were fastened with iron nails. Our savage visitors seized upon them with the greatest eagerness, and in their pantomimic language, aided by harsh, guttural grunts, congratulated themselves upon becoming the possessors of so much wealth. The morning breezes were bland, and a thousand young flowers gemmed the grassy plains. It seemed as if the tints of a brighter sky and the increasing beauty of the earth were lifting the clouds from the future, and shedding vigour upon our hopes. But this illusion lasted but a moment. Three of my valuable men had determined to accompany the waggoners to the States; and as they filed off and bade adieu to the enterprise in which they had embarked, and blighted many cheering expectations of social intercourse along our weary way-faring to Oregon, an expression of deep discouragement shaded every face. This was of short duration. The determination to penetrate the valleys of Oregon soon swept away every feeling of depression, and two hunters being sent forward to replenish our larder, we travelled happily onward. The Osage River at this place is one [21] hundred yards wide, with about two-and-a-half feet of water. Its banks are clothed with timber of cotton-wood, ash and hickory. The portion of country over which it ran was undulating and truly beautiful; the soil rich, very deep, and intersected by three small streams, which appeared from their courses to be tributaries of the Osage. At night-fall, we found ourselves upon a height overlooking a beautiful grove. This we supposed to be Council Grove. The whole was so inviting to us, weary and hungry as we were, that we determined to make our bed there for the night. Accordingly, we fired signal-guns for the hunters, pitched our tents, broke up the boughs which had been used by the Indians in building their wigwams, for fuel, and proceeded to cook our supper. This encampment had been made by the Kauzaus six years ago, when on their way south to their annual buffalo-hunt. A semi-circular piece of ground was enclosed by the outer lodges. They were constructed in the following manner. Boughs of about two inches in diameter were inserted by their butts into the ground, and withed together at the top in an arched form; over these were spread blankets, skins of the buffalo, etc. Fires were built in front of each: Several yards from the outer semi-circular row of lodges and parallel to it, we found large stakes driven firmly into the earth, for the purpose of securing their horses during the night. We appropriated to ourselves, without hesitation, whatever we found here of earth, wood or water, which could be useful to us, and were soon very comfortable. They had scoured the country all day in quest of game, but found none. Our hopes were somewhat depressed by this result. We had but one hundred pounds of flour and one side of bacon left; and the buffalo, by the best estimates we could make, were still three hundred miles distant; the country between [23] us and these animals, too, being constantly scoured by Indian hunters, afforded us but little prospect of obtaining other game. In the morning we moved down the hill. Our way lay directly through the little grove already referred to; and, however we might have admired its freshness and beauty, we were deterred from entering into the full enjoyment of the scene by the necessity, which we supposed existed, of keeping a sharp look-out among its green recesses for the lurking savage. The grove is the northern limit of the wanderings of the Cumanches—a tribe of Indians who make their home on the

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rich plains along the western borders of the republic of Texas. Fortunately for us, however, [24] these Spartans of the plains did not appear, and right merrily did we cross the little savannah between it and Council Grove, a beautiful lawn of the wilderness, some of the men hoping for the sweets of the bee-tree, others for a shot at a turkey or a deer, and others again that among the drooping boughs and silent glades might be found the panting loins of a stately elk. Council Grove derives its name from the practice among the traders, from the commencement of the overland commerce with the Mexican dominions, of assembling there for the appointment of officers and the establishment of rules and regulations to govern their march through the dangerous country south of it. They first elect their commander-in-chief. He also divides the caravan into two parts, each of which forms a column when on march. In these lines he assigns each team the place in which it must always be found. Several objects are gained by this arrangement of the waggons. If they are attacked on march by the Cumanche cavalry or other foes, the leading teams file to the right and left, and close the front; and the hindermost, by a similar movement, close the rear; and thus they form an oblong rampart of waggons laden with cotton goods that effectually shields teams and men from the small arms of the Indians. The same arrangement is made when they halt for the night. Within the area thus formed are put, after they are fed, many of the more valuable horses and oxen. The ropes by which [26] they are fastened are from thirty to forty feet in length, and the stakes to which they are attached are carefully driven, at such distances apart, as shall prevent their being entangled one with another. Among these animals the guard on duty is stationed, standing motionless near them, or crouching so as to discover every moving spot upon the horizon of night. The reasons assigned for this, are, that a guard in motion would be discovered and fired upon by the cautious savage before his presence could be known; and farther, that it is impossible to discern the approach of an Indian creeping among the grass in the dark, unless the eye of the observer be so close to the ground as to bring the whole surface lying within the range of vision between it and the line of light around the lower edge of the horizon. If the camp be attacked, the guard fire and retreat to the waggons. The whole body then take positions for defence; at one time sallying out, rescue their animals from the grasp of the Indians; and at another, concealed behind their waggons, load and fire upon the intruders with all possible skill and rapidity. They slumber alone in this ocean of plains; no tears bedew their graves; no lament of affection breaks the stillness of their tomb. In this manner we marched half a mile, and emerged from the Grove at a place where the traders had, a few days before, held their council. The grass in the vicinity had been gnawed to the earth by their numerous animals; their fires were still smouldering and smoking; and the ruts in the road were fresh. These indications of our vicinity to the great body of the traders [26] produced an exhilarating effect on our spirits; and we drove merrily away along the trail, cheered with renewed hopes that we should overtake our countrymen, and be saved from starvation. The grove that we were now leaving was the largest and most beautiful we had passed since leaving the frontier of the States. The trees, maple, ash, hickory, black walnut, oaks of several kinds, butternut, and a great variety of shrubs clothed with the sweet foliage of June "a pure stream of water murmuring along a gravelly bottom, and the songs of the robin and thrush, made Council Grove a source of delight to us, akin to those that warm the hearts of pilgrims in the great deserts of the East, when they behold, from the hills of scorching sands, the green thorn-tree, and [29] the waters of the bubbling spring. For we also were pilgrims in a land destitute of the means of subsistence, with a morsel only of meat and bread per day, lonely and hungry; and although we were among the grassy plains instead of a sandy waste, we had freezing storms, tempests, lightning and hail, which, if not similar in the means, were certainly equal in the amount of discomfort they produced, to the sand-storms of the Great Sahara. But we were leaving the Grove and the protection it might yield to us in such disagreeable circumstances. On the shrubless plain again! To our right the prairie rose gradually, and stretched away for ten miles, forming a beautiful horizon. The whole was covered with a fine coat of grass a foot in height, which was at this season of the deepest and richest green. Behind us lay a dark line of timber, reaching from the Grove far into the eastern limits of sight, till the leafy tops seemed to wave and mingle among the grass of the wild swelling meadows. The eyes ached as we endeavoured to embrace the view. A sense of vastness was the single and sole conception of the mind!

They consist of a collection of dilapidated mounds, seeming to indicate the truth of the legend of the tribes, which says, that formerly this was the Holy ground of the nations, where they were accustomed to meet to adjust their difficulties, exchange the salutations of peace, and cement the bonds of union with smoking, and dancing, and prayers, to the Great Spirit. We had advanced a few miles in the open country when we discovered, on the summit to the right, a small band of Indians. They proved to be a party of Caws or Kauzaus. As soon as they discovered our approach, two of them started in different directions at the top of their speed, to spread the news of our arrival among the remote members of the party. The remainder urged on with the utmost velocity their pack-horses laden with meat, skins, blankets, and other paraphernalia of a hunting excursion. We pursued our way, making no demonstrations of any kind, until one old brave left his party, and came towards us, stationing himself beside our path, and awaiting our near approach. He stood quite upright and motionless. As we advanced, we noted closely his appearance [31] and position. He had no clothing, except a blanket tied over the left shoulder and drawn under the right arm. His head was shaven entirely bare, with the exception of a tuft of hair about two inches in width, extending from the center of the occiput over the middle of the head to the forehead. It was short and coarse, and stood erect, like a comb of a cock. His figure was the perfection of physical beauty. It was five feet nine or ten inches in height, and looked the Indian in every respect. He stood by the road-side, apparently perfectly at ease; and seemed to regard all surrounding objects, with as much interest as he did us. This is a distinguishing characteristic of the Indian. If a thunderbolt could be embodied and put in living form before their eyes, it would not startle them from their gravity. So stood our savage friend, to all appearance unaware of our approach. Not a muscle of his body or face moved, until I rode up and proffered him a friendly hand. From the careful watch we had kept upon his movements since he took his station, we had noticed that a very delicate operation had been performed upon the lock of his gun. Something had been warily removed therefrom, and slipped into the leathern pouch worn at his side. We expected, therefore, that the never-failing appeal to our charity would be made for something; and in this we were not disappointed. As soon as the greetings were over, he showed us, with the most solicitous gestures, that his piece had no flint. We furnished him with one; and he then signified to us that he would like something to put in the pan and barrel; and having given him something of all, he departed at the rapid swinging gait so peculiar to his race. As we advanced, the prairie became more gently undulating. The heaving ridges which had made our trail thus far appear to pass over an immense sea, the billows of which had been changed to waving meadows the instant they had escaped from the embraces of the tempest, gave place to wide and gentle swells, scarcely perceptible over the increased expanse in sight. While these movements were making, the cavalcade moved quietly along the trail for the purpose of diverting the attention of the Elk from the hunters. And thus the latter were enabled to approach within three hundred yards of the game before they were discovered. But the instant that anxious instant to our gnawing appetites the instant that they perceived the crouching forms of their pursuers approaching them, tossing their heads in the air, and snuffing disdainfully at such attempt to deceive their wakeful senses, they put hoof to turf in fine style. The hunters attempted pursuit; but having to ascend one side of the ridge, [34] while the Elk in their flight descended the other, they were at least four hundred yards distant, before the first bullet whistled after them. And we were obliged to console our hunger with the hope that three hunters, who had been despatched ahead this morning, would meet with more success. On the following day we made twenty-five miles over a prairie nearly level, and occasionally marshy. In the afternoon we were favoured with what we had scarcely failed, for a single day, to receive since the commencement of our journey, viz: No sleep; spent the night in drying our drenched bodies and clothes. On the 12th under weigh very early: But [35] another thunder-storm for a while arrested the prosecution of our desires. Having mingled their dreadful masses over our heads, for a moment they struggled so terrifically that the winds appeared hushed at the voice of their dread artillery a moment of direful battle; and yet not a breath of wind. We looked up for the coming catastrophe indicated by the awful stillness; and beheld the cloud rent in fragments, by the most terrific explosion of electricity we had ever witnessed.

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