

LEWIS BODWELL'S ACCOUNT OF ASSISTING SLAVES CONTAINING DESCRIPTION OF THE RITCHIE HOUSE

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Hear: *For I Will Speak Of Excellent Things*—Prov. 8-8

A Home Missionary Journey Never Before Reported

It was by a road which did not advertiso; whose stock was not quoted in the market reports; the route not laid down on any map; and trains running mostly at night. It was in Kansas Territory, some of whose fields were still being cultivated by slave labor. A line in my old journal of 1858, reads:

“July 11th—Preached at Topeka a.m.”

On that Sunday it was whispered about that a family of “emigrants” had arrived, and were at the station of the U. G. Ry. Co., Bro. John Ritchie’s cabin near the Shunganunga. The little company whose wants and dangers moved us, was a family of five. Their market value being not less than five thousand dollars, it seemed probable that they would not be allowed to escape without a sharp race, and possibly an equally sharp skirmish; and the small stone house was the scene of a close watch, and of serious consultations.

Of those to whom all this is meant so much, George, the husband and father, was a bright young mulatto, who in service with his master, a U. S. army officer, had acquired an alert, soldierly manner, some acquaintance with the Spanish language, and attainments and information so varied on many points as to make him a very agreeable companion and an efficient helper; while they added greatly to his value as “a chattel personal,” and marketable. Fanny, the young wife and mother, was also a light mulatto, of attractive appearance and modest ways; very quiet, perhaps by habit, perhaps also by long care, and now by the special pressure of time. Another Fanny of about six years and for her own good, dangerously winsome; a second sturdy George of four, and a baby made up the group, for whom a future of parting and pain, of servitude and shame, or a chance for home-life, purity, and peace, all seemed depending on wise counsel and guidance, and fearless and faithful care of friends, who were before this hour all strangers.

When duty called the master to a distant post, it seemed best that George should stay behind in charge of a brother officer of his owner, who should look after his safety, and collect a nice sum, which as a skilled house servant, he could command at. “The Planters.” In like manner, the frugal mistress, an Alabama lady, had left “her property,” Fannie, to carry on her lucrative employment of laundress, supporting herself and little ones against the time when they too should be “marketable” at the prices which youth and good looks might command. But the favorable surroundings and circumstances: the master far west, the mistress far south, some good friends near, and their only responsible keeper having her cares and duties taking precedence of this, truly “The cat was away and the mice might play,”—truant, if they would, which they also did in short order. Through night journeyings from point to point, true friends had guided them to our care. Knowing the wide awake and desperate men not far away, to whom it would be both pleasure and profit to win the “salvage” on such a cargo, every hour was full of danger and not one was to be lost. A fresh, long, young span of iron grays was found, with canvass covered wagon. “Emerson,” (a true lover of man and soldier of freedom) and “the preacher” volunteered as guides and guards, and as the record reads:

“14th. Started for the north; spent night in the rain on the prairie.”

In the thick darkness, preceding the storm which soon swept away that bridge, watchful for any sign or suspicion of pursuit, we passed the river; over the rough forest road which took us to the north bank of Half-day creek at about midnight; all there, seven within the space of old wagon box, we somehow passed the long and rainy hours to the first break of day, of whose slow passing and muddy march the record is:

“15th. In Holton at 11 a.m. Rainy night.”

That night, on the north bank of Groomer creek, the little mother and her children found shelter in the small log cabin of a true friend, ...the father and his guides “holding down” the wagon bed; while another pouring rain filled bank full, with a muddy torrent, the creek we had just crossed a few hours before. Thus we were for a little while safer from pursuit, but also cut off from travel by the known and usual route, and the journal entry for the day is:

“16th. Heading creeks north of Holton. Another heavy rain.”

Turning west we found and took about noon, a faint northward trail. Thirty-five years have not blunted the memory of a scare” which at least one of us had soon after, when on the next rise but a few rods away and coming towards us, were five hard looking fellows, of whom, the first thought was, “They’ve outrun us; swam or forded the creeks on the Lane road; failed to find us, guessed our plan; turned west and trapped us.” Only the preacher spoke, and he briefly...he said to Emerson, who was driving, “They have us, but keep driving, “They have us, but keep moving. Don’t let them look in. Don’t let them have the first shot.” To George and Fanny: “Lie close and don’t let the baby cry.” For, if (as God willing, they might be) friend, or neutrals, it was still well that they should not know of our load. I don’t know if the next three minutes seemed more like days or seconds as we waited to see “what next;” but I know it was with hearty thanksgiving that we saw them wheel right and left, and pass on with only the question, “How far to Holton?” I know that with the strong revulsion of feeling the day grew brighter; the comfortless camp on the north bank of Soldier creek, quite home like; and the night long rain, which filled the valley behind us with a ten-foot flood seemed sent of God, to put a wall between us and what we most feared.

“17th. At the Nemaha at noon. Spent the night on Tennessee creek.”

Had hoped today to put the Nemaha behind us, but found its bank full; its first small affluent so impassable and so high that we had to “head” it by a long slow journey of some miles over the prairie, toward its source. Finally we got over with no other mishap than the submersion of the preacher at the crossing; and at dark, on the eastern bank, we at last made camp; gave Fanny, the nursing mother, and her little folks what they would eat, put them to bed up stairs; then took our rations, half a biscuit each (all there was); water from the creek, ad libitum; and made our beds on the ground floor.

“18th. By Richmond to Central City.”

This morning made eight-four hours during which time we had been inside of but one house and in sight of only three. We had started with but scanty provisions for seven; and cut off by floods from friends and supplies we had hoped to reach; last night the last crumb was eaten. Seneca was somewhere near; and for the sake of the mother and her little ones we must find it and some supplies. Seeking for our unknown way across the prairie we came toward noon out upon a hill side, within sight of our desired haven; and also of what we least wished to meet, three large wagon trains from Leavenworth, and like us, water-bound at the Nemaha. With our load, we were, though a mile away, too near to that crowd of fellows, coming from the very point our guests had just left; and to most of whom, hunting their cattle on the prairie, we would have been the finest kind of game. We looked, longed and hesitated; but hunger said we must go, and Emerson suggested that it would take a border ruffian to go through that crowd in safety, and finally, with his laugh provoking stutter: “I’m a G-g-good T-t-templar and c-can’t d-d-rink, but if y-y-you’ll go along and d-d-drink I’ll s-s-swear.”

He finally went down and in an hour or two came back with a humorous report of his visit, and the needed supplies. A good meal was very quickly and thankfully eaten; and as our map suggested, we made our slow way along the high ground toward Central City where we hoped to find a night’s shelter, and some way across that muddy, watery barrier. Just at night, and when near the point we sought, another creek, many feet too deep for us to ford barred our way and again drove us into the brush for shelter and a hiding place.

“19th. To Sabetha, and camped on Pony creek.”

Again a slow journey over the sodden rolls and hollows of the prairie, toward the headwaters of the creek which stopped us, but finally into a road with a crossing which we dared to attempt; and from a log cabin near by, two women smoking cob pipes and three children came out and took seats on a log to watch our efforts. We safely passed the stream but on the farther side, and just in the midst of the slippery, miry ascent, one of our high spirited but under-fed, tired, and collar-galled young horses balked, with the evident determination to pull no more than an empty wagon up that place.

How to disembark that load in the presence of that sharp-eyed company of witnesses, who were evidently of the “wrong stripe,” was a serious question. Fortunately the creek and some forty yards of space separated us: so George was advised to slip out at the front of the wagon and team and take to the brush, which he did. Then to

Fanny, with sunbonnet tied close, and baby under her shawl, the preacher said, "Come mother, you'll have to get out," which she did in plain sight of the provoking curious crowd. The others followed and all were sent on ahead. The preacher then, wading the creek nearly to his armpits, borrowed a rail from the fence near the corncob pipes. Again the creek was forded and the wheel pried from its miry bed, the balky grey coaxed to help take up the lightened load, and enjoying the luxury of a fairly well beaten road. About sunset we rolled in among the half dozen houses and out-houses, which with the dry goods-grocery-post-office-store, made up what was then called Sabetha. We had been told that we should here find "a friend," but when he learned what our freight was he was just friendly enough to counsel us to go on to Pony creek, which we did, glad that he should send us along rather than sell us out, as we feared he might, if he could and dared. Well on into the evening we found what we supposed was Pony creek, and there lodged; Fanny and the little ones "upstairs" and the rest of us under the same blanket and wagon as usual.

"20th. A long day's drive through Plymouth and nearly to the falls; not able to cross, and back to the camp of last night."

Baffled, disappointed, tired, we made our not over cheerful meal and waited through another night for strength and wisdom to make another effort to pass that barrier.

"21st. Found friends, and at night went to Salem; again no crossing, and returned."

With not a house then in sight we ventured to search for one, that we might get for the poor mother and children the unwonted luxury of a draught of milk; found a Yankee house and a Yankee greeting; was led to another of like character; and for friendly shelter and friendly counsels and aid; shall ever hold the names of Graham and Whittenhall in grateful remembrance. Knowing the times, the place and the people about them, they felt with us that no time must be lost; and just at dusk with a sturdy trio of mounted guides and guards we set out to try the ford at Salem. Creeping along through the darkness over (when not under) the miry road across the bottoms; about midnight we came into the thicker forest shadows on the riverbank, at the top of the slippery "dug way." Down the slimy surface we crawled a few yards to the brink of that familiar, whirling flood of muddy water, which now as for days only offered us our choice to drown or turn back. Beaten again, we spent the rest of the night toiling wearily through the sloughs back to the bluff. About two o'clock, to lighten the load, one of us mounted behind each of our guides, and pushing on ahead, at the first available bit of higher ground, under the shelter of a low scrub oak, we flung ourselves in a tired out heap on the ground; and without any "conflict of races," under one blanket, black and white slept heavily till at daybreak the wagon came up with us and we again sought together the hearty and delightful hospitality, shelter and safety of the same friendly roof for a few hours.

"22nd. Started at dark for Central City. Fast in the mud, and staid till daylight."

Our friends getting word of possible passage at an upper ford, we set out, taking with us the memory of one good day's safe rest, plain directions, and warm farewells. Dragging slowly through the darkness and mire; we failed to make our point and the early morning crossing we had hoped for; but did reach a little wooded rise, on which we made a fireless camp till daybreak and then took the road again.

"23rd. Finally across the Nemaha, (South Fork) at Central City, and traveled north, up Turkey Creek nearly to Pawnee."

We made "a very early entry," and sought no "introductions" in the little hamlet; to our joy found the ford, if not safe, at least possible to any who must dare it, as we must; and having in eleven days and three nights made (in an air line) a journey of sixty-five miles; with a feeling of unwonted relief we left that danger-our barrier behind us, followed a fairly good road upward to higher grounds in Nebraska; and toward sunset veering aside, in a quiet nook at the border of a wooded hollow, made our camp, and (for the first time) a camp fire, with a feeling of comfort, safety, and good cheer, which as a whole we had not felt since our start; and miles from any known or suspected neighbor, the children freely used their limbs and lungs in a long uproarious romping spell. Then in and under the wagon, we slept with a kind of home feeling which was a delightful as it was novel.

"24th. Through Pawnee, and Table Rock, to camp twelve miles east."

A sunny day, fair, and fairly dry roads along the high prairies, and a freedom from some care for our charge, made this stage of our journey, if not enjoyable, at least more comfortable than any previous one of our trip, and though we were not yet "spoiling for company," it was not unpleasant meeting one traveler on the way.

“25th. Crossed the Little Nemaha by bridge at St. George, and reached Nebraska City about sunset. The team went on and ferried the load at Wyoming.”

Not coveting the chances of “city life” for our companions, or caring to risk any meetings on the Missouri river ferry, and so near that state, it was thought best to take a short night journey, and cross the Big Muddy at a less frequented point. To lighten the load, the preacher stayed behind, faithful Emerson took the duties of conductor, driver, and guide; and before morning, and twelve days from Topeka, saw his charge safely landed on the free soil of Iowa.

“26th. Walked up to Civil Bend (in Iowa) and back. Slept in the wagon.”

The walk of ten miles was in hope of one more meeting with our emigrants, in freedom and safety; but it had been thought best for them to go on. On returning, the guard, team, and wagon, were found in camp, and preacher and layman enjoyed the luxury and novelty of a long night’s unbroken rest, three feet above ground, with the spacious quarters of a whole wagon box, and its canvas cover, all to ourselves.

The homeward trip though slow, to favor our weary team, and by reason of still heavy roads, was lightened by the comfort of a duty done, and a heavy care thrown off, and the record is but brief.

“27th. Started about noon and camped twelve miles south.”

“28th. Passed Nemaha City, and the Little Nemaha, and camped.”

“29th. Reached the Muddy about noon. Rising. Camped again.”

“30th. Held through the day.”

“31st. Creek fordable. Passed also North Fork of Nemaha, by bridge at Salem, and went up five miles to find a crossing of the South Fork.”

“1st—Crossed, and reached Sabetha about noon.”

“2nd—Camped on Spring Creek.”

A friendly settler here asked, “Where from?” “Nebraska City.” “Where going?” “To Topeka.” “Do you know the Congregational preacher there?” “Yes.” “Heard anything of him up north?” “No! Why?” “Well, he and another man left Topeka with a slave family almost three weeks ago. Not a word has been heard from them, and their friends think they must either be shot, hung, or in jail somewhere over in Missouri.” We were glad to be able before we drove on, to show our kind friends, how we knew that the missing ones were neither dead, nor in jail.

“3rd—Spent the night in Holton.”

“4th—Kansapolis.” Bridge gone.

“5th—Crossed the river at Calhoun, and so reached Topeka.”

The floods which had swept away the bridge not many hours after we had passed over, had driven us away from the homes and help of friends, and had multiplied many times the days and hardships of the journey; but what it all might have saved us from; only One can ever know. It was at any rate a pleasure to be able in person, and in the affirmative to respond to the greeting of one “anxious friend,” to wit, my brother “Sherm,” who said: “So you’ve come back to trouble your heirs, have you?”