

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers I*, 1885 – 1886 Oct 3, '85 to May 29, '86) The original is very badly faded.

## The Cowboy's Return

We were a party of eight. Five of us were riding, three were with the large four horse wagon that carried our bedding and provisions. Seventeen loose horses driven ahead of us constituted our complement of changes. It was noon on the 11th of November, and so, when we passed the great stone monument which marks the corner where meet the great state of Nebraska and the great territories of Dakota and Wyoming, the cattle were turned loose for the winter, in a country where as yet grass was plenty, and the broken country channeled with running streams, and we were southward bound for our own winter quarters in Denver, Colorado. We had had a flurry of snow a few days before, but now the skies were clear, and the sun was warm, and we cared not a fig for the nights, however cold they might be, now that we no longer had to turn out from our warm blanket beds for a cold and lonely watch of two hours over a herd of sleeping cattle.

We were a very jolly and good-natured party notwithstanding our brigandish appearance, for every man had a "forty-five" strapped to his thigh, and wore the approved leather leggings, red silk neckerchief, and sombrero fiercely fitted in true cow-boy style.

I suppose it was the thought of the homes we were approaching that softened us down after the long summer of roughing it, and the final certainty that work and hard-ship were over, and that these were but the first bright days of a long vacation in one of the most beautiful spots in the country. However that may be, the first few days flew by as quickly as the miles behind us.

Our course, at first westerly, turned abruptly south at Hat breach post office, once a famous place, and one that had stood many an Indian siege, in the early days of the Black Hills excitement. It was not long until we had crossed the head waters of the Niobrara River, and had encamped at Rawhide Buttes, which earns its ghastly name from a tradition that here the Sioux in 1849, flayed a white prisoner alive, and fast[en]ed the untanned hide to a tree upon the trail as a warning to the emigrant trains bound overland to California. It was here that we learned that a furious storm was then raging along the line of the Union Pacific Railroad some hundred and thirty miles still south of us. Trains were snow-bound, wires were down,

herds bound for shipment were turned adrift per force, and missing cow-boys who, under calmer skies would scarce have been inquired about, were given up as lost in snow-drifts in the creeks or frozen in their blankets.

We congratulated ourselves upon our luck, feeling certain that, ere we reached the plateau upon which the railroad ascends to the base of the Rockies, the storm would have spent itself, and the bright sun and the warm south-west wind of that lofty country would be busy removing the snow from the trails and sheltered banks. We pressed on, and the next day swam the North Platte and the Laramie Rivers, and took our dinner within sound of the post band at Ft. Laramie, which seemed to welcome us back to civilization and the amenities of life with the airs of Fatinitza and Boccaccio.

That night we encountered the first discomfort which had attended upon our hitherto very pleasant journey. We had descended into that great sink in the prairie which is known as Goshen's Hole, and were encamped upon the banks of Cherry Creek:— by what warrant given that name it is impossible to say: — probably that same grim facetiousness that impels the bold pioneer to call a wayside grocery store and bar Cloud City, and have it so put down upon our reliable maps:— for that a cherry tree ever did or ever will grow upon its precipitous banks, is in the highest degree improbable.

We spent that night in a very uncomfortable manner. We divided ourselves into two watches:—the duty of each watch being to prevent, by all the means within their power the tent from being blown over their sleeping comrades. The fierceness of the struggle kept the watchers faithful and sleepless, and the uncertainty as to when snow would begin to fall forbade even the suggestion of taking down and folding up our shelter, or allowing it to do the same of its own accord if it was at all possible to prevent it. By daylight, the wind had dropped to a cutting breeze, but the skies were lowering, and it was very cold. Our horses had scattered badly during the night, and it took us several hours to find them; so that we concluded it would be better to stay in camp until dinnertime, and then pull out for Box Elder Creek, a much more reasonable name where we were sure of plenty of timber for shelter and fire-wood.

We made an early start, and had traveled about half our proposed journey, when the first fine flakes of an impending storm began to fall. We looked anxiously at the skies, which made us no promise of a respite; and hurried forward. Soon, very soon the air was full of hurrying snow. We realized then

perhaps, [more than] at any other time during the succeeding days, our danger, and insensibly our pace was increased until the horses, mounted men, and even the great four horse wagon were literally flying almost in the teeth of the storm toward the promised haven, only a few miles ahead. Twenty minutes of this racing, and one of the loose horses stumbled and fell. He had never fully recovered from a terrible night-ride he had been put to some weeks before, when northward bound on this same trail, but his bronco pluck had kept him up till now. His sometime rider stopped to urge him up and on, but the rapid disappearance of the rest of the party in the clouds of whirling snow warned him of fate in a race like this, and he speedily rejoined us.

So densely was the snow falling by the time we reached the creek, that we could not see the dense belt of timber that lines its sides until we had almost ridden in amongst the trees, and it was with a spontaneous shout that we plunged in among their welcome branches, and then turned back again to guide the now laboring wagon to a smooth and sheltered spot where the tent could be pitched. Lustily we worked. It was good to be afoot once more; to shake the snow from hats and coats; to see a bright fire blazing near the cook's box at the rear of the wagon, and to warm ourselves up, scraping clear a space in which to set the tent, into which beds were hastily thrown, and spread.

Our two axes were ringing in the timber close at hand and we soon saw enough wood piled within our reach of the fire to last week, should the weather decree that that should be the term of our imprisonment. In and around our retreat, the snow fell softly, silently, but deeply. It did not bluster and rave, as it did upon the open prairie, but its intent seemed nonetheless deadly as it piled itself in ramparts above our well-trodden camping space. There was no fear of our horses straying on such a night as this. They knew full well the value of the sheltering trees, and with no misgivings of their whereabouts we ate as good, as comfortable, and most certainly as well relished a supper as any I can remember in looking back over the numerous suppers I have eaten in my life time.

We slept well. Our experience of the past twenty-four hours had prepared us for this. The morning was a particular one such a one, I think as could be seen only under such circumstances as surrounded us. It was cold, terribly cold. The air to us in our retreat seemed still, and the sun to be shining through a golden, glinting mist. Our horses were close at hand. Those who

saddled and were first abroad reported that the storm was practically over, and that an advance was a matter of no difficulty. Half an hour after breakfast we were moving. We had been encamped within a quarter of a mile of the great perpendicular bluffs, that guard the western side of Goshen's Hole. A mile to the south of us, one trail climbed the steep walls, and emerged upon the great plateau. We labored on, and when the steep ascent was reached, four rawhide supports reaching from the horns of four saddles to the pulling gear of our wagon, made eight horses helping that half empty vehicle up to the prairie above. It was like going from a misty harbor out upon a storm driven sea. An icy wind came tearing at us, bearing great drifts of snow, which seemed to tumble over one another until finally they were dense enough to resemble the breakers at high tide upon some sandy beach. We could not see the air ahead of us at all, but, fortunately it had been worn so deep by the passing tread of the thousand herds that had passed over it that the fierce wind robbed its little elevations of their snow to fill its hollows more completely full, and thus made it distinct enough to follow. At times we were forced to stop and seek shelter under lea of the wagon; but these halts could be but momentary, for as soon as we ceased to urge our loose horses they turned tail to the storm, dropped their heads and ears below the poor protection of their shoulders, and drifted speedily out of sight into the vast clouds of falling and drifting snow.

Our wagon crew were having the best of our holiday excursion at this time. The driver was sitting bolt upright, tied and strapped into his bed, and appeared nothing more than a large, shapeless mass of tarpaulin. The other two had also unrolled a bed, and from its warm, dark depths were occasionally to be heard shouting a snatch of song.

Ten weary miles to Bear Creek; Polar Bear Creek certainly from the temperature at which we found there; for as the hours since breakfast lengthened, the temperature seemed steadily to drop. Another horse goes. A "pinto" mare the most vicious of her race and sex; whose teeth and heels were always ready to hold one at a respectable distance, gradually became ob[li]vious to the urging whip and dropped to die upon the frozen trail. That afternoon was passed in bed. Even the fire was allowed to die out as we must hoard our scanty supply of wood for the cooking fires. The next morning the storm was really over, & the sun was shining again. But it was bitter cold. The snow seemed packed and frozen hard already, and it was with difficulty that our horses, by diligent pawing of the prairie could uncover sufficient grass to make a scanty meal.

We must push on. Our little stock of wood is nearly gone, and it is 18 miles to the next timber on Horse Creek. We did bravely that morning, camping for an early dinner at which we used our last stick in the way of fuel. Our team was getting very much exhausted, so we gave them a rest of several hours before setting out. At last we started, but our progress was very slow. The sun had long set, and a full moon was pouring a brilliant flood of light over the white prairie, while as yet we were several miles from our destination. As we mounted to the summit of each long role of the prairie, we strained our eyes to catch a glimpse of the longed-for timber. Our hearts sank as mile after mile seemed to pass, and yet no sign appeared of the haven we would reach. The intense cold would urge us who were riding to the action of a trot while the men with the wagon would beg us not to get so far ahead of the now nearly exhausted team, as they might need assistance at any moment. Some one rode ahead. We saw him suddenly wheel his horse and come galloping back to us. "We were off the trail." It seemed suddenly to grow colder, almost cold enough to make our hearts stand still. It was too true. We were on cattle trails leading to the creek but were off the wagon road leading to the timber. There was nothing for us but to go ahead. But we now kept close together, riders and wagon; for that gallant prairie schooner must be used as fuel if no drift wood could be found upon the frozen banks of the creek. Perhaps, too, the uncertainty of the coming night made companionship more comfortable. Some good angel must certainly have blessed us unaware for one mile more of silent struggling through the cold and snow, and we came down suddenly upon the Creek just at the point where stood an old deserted cabin.

We wasted no time in congratulation, for it was frightfully cold. How cold, may be gathered from the incidents of that camp. The wagon and team crossed the creek upon the ice, and pulled up beside an unexpected succor. Shovels soon cleared the cabin of its contained snow, and an ax soon brought down one of its great side logs to start a fire. The axe then did duty in chopping a hole in the ice of the creek to give us a bucket of water, which later absolutely froze nearly solid while being carried thirty yards to the camp fire. Here its surface had to be broken with the axe to admit the introduction of a tin cup, which was afterwards used as a hammer, for it was soon transformed into a nearly shapeless lump of ice. Our meat was also cut with the axe; no knife could hope to penetrate the frozen tissues of that leg of beef and when the rather unshapely masses of stake were put into the frying pan their contained tallow rose up to, and congealed upon the yet

uncooked side. Our roaring fire, – it is a wonder we did not burn our shelter down, furnished us with a plentiful supply of live coals which were scraped out and arranged in eight little tables upon which to set our tin plates. That night we slept right in a bed, or at least a combination of beds. The tent nicely folded did duty as a mighty counterpane. Our disrobing for the night consisted in taking off our overcoats and spurs; and these latter would have probably been kept on but that they interfered with “spooning”, a synonym for a sort of recumbent and motionless lock-step much affected by those in situations similar to ours.

We allowed the sun to arise next morning before we did. Three more of our horses had perished in the night and lay, frozen into a horrible stiffness, within a hundred yards of camp. Something must be done, and that speedily. Twenty eight miles below us lay the Union Pacific Railroad and the cattle shipping station of Pine Bluffs. Not a creek flowed nor a tree grew in all the space between us and it. Our horses had been pushed to the very verge of starvation and hard work, and our own provisions were beginning to get low. Some shelter must be found for man and beast before another night set in and that could be attained only by abandoning our wagon, packing everything of value upon the horses, and making the trip to Pine Bluffs without pause or halt. We took an early dinner and started. What a journey that was. Hurrying forward, yet afraid to go too fast, for fear of having our beasts fall under us. The sun had sunk, and rapidly disappeared when as yet we were only passing the seven-mile land-mark north of the railroad. The intense cold and the steely color of the sky frightened us from our saddles, and with our bridles reined over our arms we tried to keep up a steady jog-trot for an hour or more.

We had proceeded in this way for at least six miles when a welcome signal met our site. It was the light of the station at Pine Bluffs, not more than a mile away. Our horses seemed to see it too, and to recognize its significance. Our pack-horses lifted their heads once more and stepped out with a brisker pace; and as we climbed back into our saddles once more we needed not the spur to urge our own nags into a good round lope.

Our progress finally became a veritable race; the sharp wind brought the tears to my eyes which froze upon my lashes and glued my lids together. That was nothing; shelter, warmth and tables, chairs and floors were close ahead; and soon the promise was fulfilled, as eight, frosted, hungry cow-boys were discussing ginger cakes and California canned fruits, and sardines

around the red-hot stove of the Pine Bluffs grocery, and asking the bar-keeper what the thermometer was. To which he replied: "Thirty eight degrees below zero."

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January 23<sup>rd</sup> 1886