Emigrant Life in Kansas

by

Percy G. Ebbutt

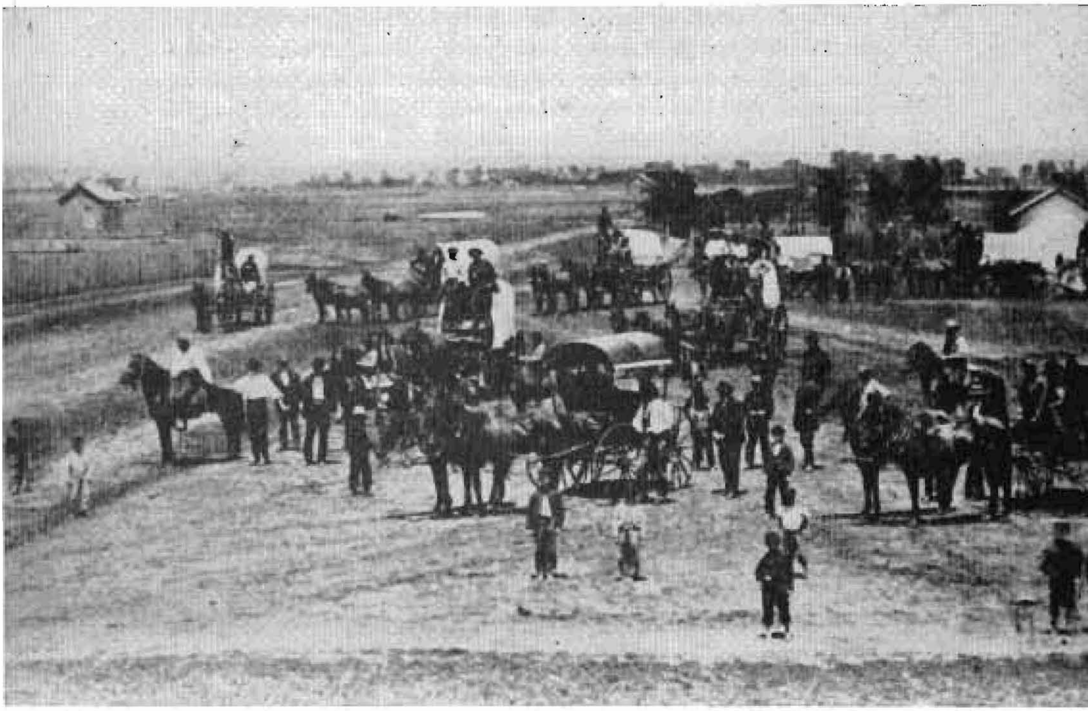
On Lord Mayor's Day, the 9th of November, 1870, there started from my native town of Blanxton, in the south of England, a party of six persons, bound as emigrants for the far west of America. It consisted of my father, brother, three young men, and myself. My father had been an uphosterer, doing a very good business, but having always had a great wish to go abroad, thought it, I suppose, a good opportunity, when his place was burned down in June of the same year; Harry Parker had been a shorthand clerk on the London and North Western Railway, but for some time past had been in my father's office; Walter Woods was a printer by trade, but had also studied engineering a little; Will Humphrey was the son of a Sussex farmer, and consequently the most useful man of the bunch, as we were going farming and cattle-raising; while my brother Jack and I were schoolboys of the tender ages of twelve and ten respectively.

With the exception of Humphrey, none of us knew anything whatever of farming; I might say that we scarcely knew a plough from a harrow (I remember one of our party speaking very enthusiastically of churning cheese), and we had certainly never done a day's work on a farm . . . . We took with us about enough luggage to stock a colony, all packed in ten great cases, four feet long by two feet six square, painted of a bright vermilion colour, and with our names and destination on. The latter was "Junction City, Kansas."

The contents of these cases were of a varied nature, and comprised tools, clothing, arms, and ammunition, besides tea, cocoa, etc., etc. Many of the things were quite useless we afterwards found, and a great number we could have bought in America quite as cheaply as in England. Among the totally useless articles was a hand corn-mill with a great flywheel of five feet in diameter, which, of course, required a larger box. The guns, however, were packed in with this, and we had quite a good armoury . . . .

Upon our arrival at Junction we put up at the Empire Hotel, and had a jolly time; for while the elder members of the party were looking about for land and shooting all the game they could, we two boys amused ourselves with sleigh-riding down the Bluffs, as the hills on the other side of the Smoky River were called, and with making divers excursions into the surrounding country. Sometimes we went to see the stone quarries a little way out of town, where very fine building material is obtained. Then again we used to watch the men sawing and pulling ice out of the river ready for packing away for summer. One day we went down to the slaughter-house, and we got a couple of cow's horns, which we made to blow, by sawing the ends off and cutting a small hole, and then we made the hills re-echo with the music.

At that time Junction was quite a small place, with a very few inhabitants, but was growing rapidly. It is situated on rather high land at the junction of the Smoky and Republican Rivers, whence its name. It is also now the junction of two railways, the Kansas Pacific, and the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas. Three miles distant, on a bluff overhanging the Kansas River, stands Fort Riley, a garrison for light cavalry and artillery, as a guard against Indians. These are getting rather scarce, however, by this time, as the country is too thickly settled by whites. One day, when Jack and I were out on one of our expeditions, we met three Indians, and,



Emigrant train at Junction City, bound for Arizona, on June 21, 1875. The city was founded in 1855 and incorporated in 1859.

as they were the first that we had seen, we were rather scared. We were a long way off, and so we hid in some bushes. Little stupids! We might have saved ourselves the trouble, for they probably saw us long before we saw them. But they passed by without molesting us. While we were staying at Junction we had some very cold weather, and one night three soldiers going home drunk to Fort Riley were frozen to death . . . .

Game was very plentiful, and we used to bring home lots for the landlady at the Empire Hotel, to make "sparing-pie" as she called it . . . .

One day we saw "Wild Bill," a noted desperado or "border ruffian," shooting quails in a stable yard in the city (they were so plentiful and tame). Wild Bill was a fine-looking fellow, with long curly hair hanging down his back, and was dressed in a rather dandified fashion. He was said to have twenty-seven nicks cut on the handle of his revolver, each signifying a man whose life had been taken by him. And yet he walked the streets as free as any man, and perhaps with more security than a less desperate criminal would, for he would have to be a plucky man to arrest "Wild Bill." He was afterwards actually elected "sheriff" of Wichita, a town down south, which was frequented by the Texas "cow-boys," and he was killed at last in some saloon brawl.

After we had stayed in Junction for six weeks we removed to Parkersville, a town some twenty-five miles distant, near where our party had taken land. Here we lived for a fortnight at a boarding-house, spending our time pretty much as before. The town, which at that time consisted of about nineteen houses, a drug store, a post-office, and a general store, is situated in Morris county, on the river Neosho, sometimes called "Noshow," as in summer it occasionally goes dry. The drug store was the rendezvous for all the farmers coming to town, for apart from its being also the post-office, it was the only place where "medicine" could be obtained. There was no regular saloon or drinking bar in the place, but every one that wanted a drink went to the drug store, and got a little whiskey "medicinally." His worship, the Mayor, ran the place, and I guess he did a good business. Another much frequented place was the general store, run by Captain Brown; we had about the usual number of captains in that town,—about three out of every five persons. Here the loafers congregated in good force, sitting round the roaring, red-hot stove, with their heels high up, and chewing tobacco, talking politics, whittling sticks, and eating crackers and cheese. Captain Brown was a man of considerable importance,—anyhow in his own eyes,—but I guess my father kinder took the starch out of him once. Captain Brown offered him two fingers to shake, and my father immediately hooked into them with one—the little one. The next time they met it was a whole-handed job.

One man staying at the boarding-house was a cattle dealer, and had a number of wild Texas animals wintering near at hand. We went to see them at the corral, and found several so weak that they could not stand. We assisted some to their feet only to get ourselves run after by the ungrateful brutes until they tumbled down again. Cattle frequently get like that during the cold winter, especially those from the south for the first time. My father bought one or two cows in the neighborhood ready for when we should go up on the prairie, but not having had any experience in such matters, I am afraid he was rather taken in. He also bought a couple of town lots as a speculation in case the town took to growing. Some money belonging to Jack and me he invested for us in a piece of timber land on the river, so that when up on the prairie, we might have some wood to burn or for fences, and not be entirely dependent upon "jay-hawking," which is the term for stealing wood off Government land . . . .

The country around had all been surveyed by Government previous to our settling, and divided into square miles, sections, they are called, marked with a stone set in the ground. They may then be cut up easily into the required lots—viz., eighty acres for an ordinary settler, and one hundred and sixty for any man who has been a soldier in the Federal Army . . . .

When we moved up we were the only settlers on the prairie for some miles round, but a few months afterwards several emigrants took land. I will introduce you to a few of them.

About the first was one who was soon known by the name of "Prairie" Wilson, having a farm on the highest land in the district. He was very poor when he first started, having only a wife, one child, and his bedclothes, but by dint of hard work he soon had a comfortable place.

Another family was that of George Dyson, who settled about a mile from our house. They were of rather a better class than some of the emigrants who followed.

Mrs. Dyson had been married before, at the mature age of thirteen years, and had been left a widow with two children at nineteen. The first husband was a great friend of Mr. Dyson's, and when he died he asked him to look after his wife and children, and he did so in the most practical way . . . .

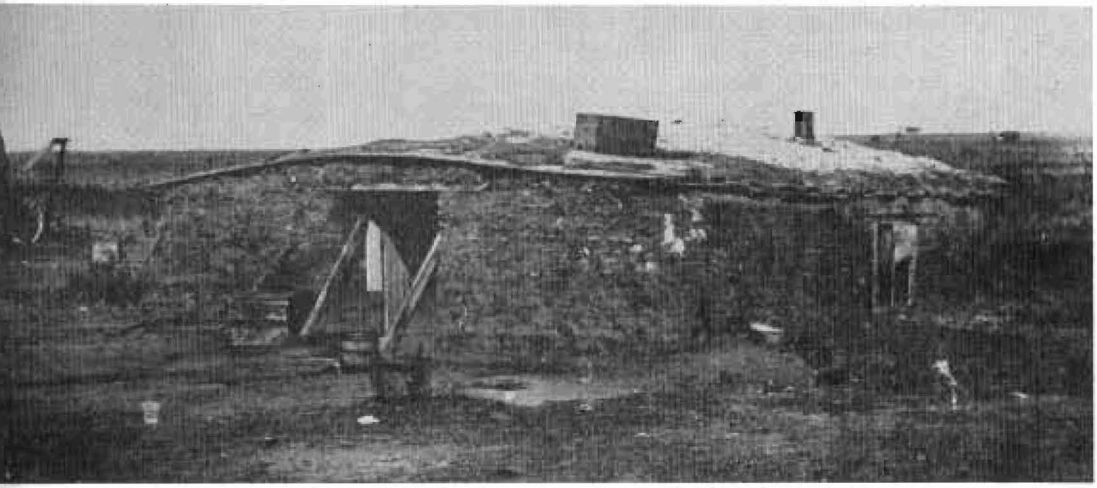
Living near them was old Anthony Prauss, a Dutchman, who could speak about twelve words in English; but he was a decent old chap, and we got along very well with him.

Another of our neighbors was a man called "Dutch Jake." He had a farm a few miles from us, and professedly lived with his "sister," though there was little doubt but that she was his wife. It was simply a trick to get more land, as an unmarried woman can have eighty acres of Governmen land free, the same as a man, but a married woman cannot. A widow may also take a piece of land, and, in fact, any one who is the head of a family, if even a boy or girl under age. There is no charge for land, except a nominal fee of about fourteen dollars . . . .

There were several Swedish families round about, who seemed good, thrifty people. One peculiar characteristic of them seemed to be that they could nearly all work well in stone, and, as a consequence, they all erected good, solid-built stone houses.

They seemed to be very hardy and industrious. I knew one, Olaf Swainson, who was one day quarrying rock, and cut one of his fingers clean off. He made very little fuss about it, but picked it up, rolled it in some grass, and put it in his pocket, and then went to the house to tie up his hand.

There were the Quinns, a large family of Irish-Americans, who also arrived with nothing save one or two horses and a few tools; but as there were several boys large enough to work, they soon got along swimmingly. We became acquainted in a very short time, and used to go over there very frequently. They broke some prairie and built a house with the sods, with a few boards for the roof, and then set to work in earnest with the crops, and they were soon able to live on the products of the farm and



A Kansas sod house, or "soddy," of the type described by Ebbutt.

garden. As they had no cows we supplied them with milk, which they much wanted, there being several small children among them; and so they undertook to do our washing in exchange for half-a-gallon of milk a day . . . .

Once in the wintertime when we two boys were at Quinn's, we had a lively time with a prairie fire. An old Swede, living a little way north of their place, had accidentally set fire to the grass, and as there was a most terrific north wind blowing, the fire was down upon us in a moment. Old Andy Johnson came in front of it, scorching himself whilst vainly endeavouring to check the progress of the flames by beating them with his coat. He arrived breathless and hatless just as the fire was coming over the crest of the hill in front of the house. We all ran out immediately, and set to work to "back fire" from the stables, and were only just in time to save the whole place from destruction, by burning a sufficiently wide piece of grass off, and thus stopping the rush of fire.

It was a bitterly cold day, and while working right amongst fire, moving a waggon out of the way, Jack got his hands frozen rather badly. Mrs. Quinn doctored him up though, and rubbed his hands with kerosene oil, etc., and they soon got well, without losing any fingers.

In a few minutes after the first alarm the fire had passed right by, and the whole face of the country was changed from a dry dead brown to an intense black, and ashes were blowing about in the clouds. For a long time we could trace the progress of the fire by a thick column of smoke, and at night there was a red glow in the sky, showing that it was still burning miles away . . . .

Some few miles from us lived the Garretts, an English family. They had not been used to farming, and did not succeed particularly well. Mrs. Garrett did not get along in what is usually considered the woman's department at all. She was not much of a cook, and as to milking a cow—"Oh! I can't, it feels so nasty!" said she at her first trial, and so poor old Garrett always had that job.

Near them lived a family named Samaurez, of Spanish descent. They rather considered themselves "some pumpkins," and their status may be summed up in the words of one of the Quinn boys. "They've got two kinds of sugar, and don't they just look at yer if you put white sugar in your coffee, or yaller sugar in your tea!"