

The Cottonwood⁷

By C. M. Older

In sixty-six, September tenth, as William Blunt (First lieutenant Co. G, Fourth—Cavalry during the Civil War) and his wife, Marjorie, topped a rise in the seemingly endless expanse of waterless plains of Western Kansas the yoke of oxen lifted their tired heads and stepped out with a bit of renewed vigor. It was four of the clock in the afternoon and Blunt, who had been in Kansas on two different skirmishes from Fort Leavenworth, was beginning to worry, although he did not tell Marjorie so. They were running low on water.

Across a slough-like depression and just over another rise he could see the top of a cottonwood tree. "Well, thank God for that," he said as he took a chew of Star plug. "For what, Will"?" asked the woman.

"Why Marge, see that cottonwood," he answered. "Well, that means there's water close. Even the cattle knew it . . . and here's my wife whom I did so admire don't even know as much as an ox." And a prairie dog fifty yards away scurried off as fast as his fat little legs could carry him as the big man laughed his loudest. The sweet-faced woman, with her big brown eyes, merely smiled and tucked a bit of auburn hair back under her sun-bonnet, from which it had strayed, because she knew this soldier husband of hers, and knew as long as he "poked fun" they were all right—and things were all right with the world.

"A cottonwood . . . and that means there is water close." We of today . . . of the streamlined train and the eighty-five-mile-an-hour auto . . . can scarcely realize what that meant to those who plodded slow day after slow day o'er these open plains in sixty-six. And also we are hard put to understand what the sight of a cottonwood meant to them, because we cannot comprehend the fact that the cottonwood was a beacon to them . . . a guidon of Hope set by nature on the trail of that vast Army of Pioneers to show the way.

How the cottonwood trees got here . . . where they come from . . . no one seems to know. But a trickle of water apparently drew the seed from afar—those fine, cotton-like seeds we curse so fluently today—and there, in after years would be the sentinel of the plains standing o'er the life-giving and life-saving fluid. When the winds, unchecked for a thousand miles, swept down in winter—when the blazing sun rose red and set red day after day in summer—the cottonwood stood along of all the prairie things . . . majestic and serene.

The good Lord alone knows how many of those pioneer women have stood in a soddie door and drawn inspiration from that tree as the low moon of the prairie land laced her home and flat acres with ribbons through its branches. A tiny seedling no larger than a spear of grass would be transplanted . . . cared for like a princeling—finally take root and grow . . . another and another nursed by patient work-worn hands as the shadows grew long and the wee winds played hide-and-go-seek o'er the land where the buffalo grass grew . . . and there was a cottonwood grove. A frame house was finally built in place of soddie or dug-out . . . fat cattle roamed the plains where the buffalo was king a few short years ago . . . children played under the spreading branches of the old tree . . . grew to manhood and womanhood . . . went away and came "home" on vacations with other babies who played there on buffalo grass sod 'neath the cottonwood' where the sunflower made a hammock for a smartie of a little old meadowlark who, from his proud way of telling you about it, seemed to think he'd created the whole thing by his homely little lonesome self.

We try to follow the trail of the men and women who adzed out a niche in the high hill of history by settling the West . . . but it grows dim to the sight of us. Their story is but half told—and not half understood. 'Tis impossible for one to sit in front of a grassfire with an electric reading lamp in a house all cozy and warm . . . not even ordinary chores to do . . . and grasp the full import of what Lieutenant William Blunt and his brown eyed, brave wife really accomplished . . . how they lived and how they worked. Also we cannot visualize what the cottonwood meant . . . because we are too far from it all,—as we are too far away from the sixty-mile gale that would set in the north by west and camp there for days . . . the three foot of snow in winter and the road that had "no bottom" in spring . . . the hot wind of summer that traveled constantly, and the low of thirsty cattle milling, milling, in a feed lot that held no feed.

Those people who settled the West were as different from us as was the cottonwood of the plains country merely distant kin to the pampered peach tree in a well-tended orchard in the Mississippi Delta. The first tiny frost of adversity will wither the peach because it has never had to take punishment. The cottonwood thrived on hard knocks and those who came before us learned much . . . lest they grow flabby and allow the canker of ill-luck to eat their fibre down to the raw . . . rot the bark and allow the winds of ill-chance to eat in their core.

The cottonwood as he stood on the bank of his water-hole gave shelter to his wee neighbors, the sunflower and the buffalo grass, and made of his seeds a down for the nest of his beloved bird, the meadowlark. The four are so interwoven into the lives of our Western forebears . . . so interspun is the warp and the woof of then in the shawl of our history, that to take

one from the fabric would allow the whole to ravel and snarl. Those who broke this sod . . . who asked nature but for a fighting chance . . . and who won . . . were more inspired by reading the lesson writ large and plain on the pages of the prairie than by any printed word in book, or any spoken word mouthed from pulpit, rostrum or platform . . . the wind in the cottonwood at the dawn of each day was more eloquent preachment than any trick of oratory conceived by man. The sight of a sunflower in his brave equipment is more inspiring than picture limed by Millet, the song of the meadowlark more heart-lifting than the grandest artistry of honey-throated Jenny Lind, and the enduring integrity of the buffalo grass a greater lesson than all the history of Arthur and his round table.

The pioneer learned from the cottonwood . . . just as we could learn from the pioneer . . . that to give and give—and finally give a little bit more—means eventually one will have it given upon him. As he beckoned them on and showed the way . . . so do they beckon us and show the way . . . are we but able and willing to read the symbols on the guidons set either side the trail by those scouts who have gone before.