

Railroad Grading Among Indians

by

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The year of 1868 was a busy time in western Kansas, especially at the army posts. Forts Harker and Hays were active. Indians had committed many depredations on the Solomon river and at other places. The Nineteenth Kansas cavalry was being organized. This regiment, with General Custer and the Seventh cavalry, was getting ready for an Indian campaign. Horses, mules, wagons and other freight were shipped by rail to these military posts. From here soldiers and wagon-trains followed the Indians south to the Indian Territory. After a battle they were brought to terms and then fed by the government at a place named Camp Supply. I had been working for the government and came to Fossil Creek station in November to work on the railroad.

Ellsworth and Hays City were small frontier towns, with no others between or west of Hays to Sheridan, a small place at the end of the road near the state line. From there freight was hauled by wagon-train to Denver.

Fossil Creek station had no depot or telegraph office. A water-tank and a small frame box house, the shape of a freight-car, were the only buildings. The side-track was about one mile west of the station. I think it had been built for the purpose of loading building stone for culverts and bridges.

A man named John Cook was in charge of the station, pumping water for locomotives by horse power (one horse). He and his wife also boarded the section men, generally six or seven. Several small dugouts were the quarters of the men and a large one was occupied by the boarding boss and his wife, which was also the dining-room for all. It had small windows on all four sides and could be used as a fort in time of need. Large herds of buffalo were in sight many times and other game was plenty.

The railroad had been built the year before and was named Union Pacific, Eastern Division; afterwards the name was changed to Kansas Pacific. There were no regular passenger trains running; only a mixed train, one a day each way, and once in a while an extra. Indians had been troublesome more or less ever since the road was built, and men had been killed along the line. The company had armed its men with guns for their protection, six or seven of which belonged to the equipment of each section gang, the same as the tools. We called them railroad guns and we carried them with us when going to work, but, seeing no Indians, some of the boys would get careless and leave them at home. They were breech-loading rifles of an unusual caliber. The ammunition could not be found for sale



Crew laying track along the Kansas Pacific right-of-way.

anywhere, and it was furnished by the railroad company in such limited quantities as to allow no practice, and we were generally out, or nearly so.

Three of us, George Seeley, the boss, Charles Sylvester, and myself, intended to stay together and with the job at the station for some time. Each had bought a Spencer carbine, a seven-shot repeating rifle, which has the magazine in the butt of the gun, and was one of the best at that time.

About May 20, or a week before the raid, a man on horseback was passing through and stopped with us for dinner. I think he was a scout or some kind of government employee. He told us the report at Fort Hays was that the Indians had broken out at Camp Supply and were coming north, and we had better be on the lookout.

On May 28 there were seven of us. Besides us three who had the Spencers there were George Taylor, Alexander McKeefer, John Lynch, and a man whose name I have forgotten. The latter had taken his gun with him, but had forgotten his ammunition and had left it at home. The other three were armed.

I was the youngest man among them, but the oldest hand on the job at the time, and can say for myself that I was the most careful. Only a few days before I had urged one of the men who was killed to take his gun with him when going to work. I had sixty rounds of ammunition, and the other two men about thirty rounds each. We were working on the track about

one and three-fourths miles west of the station, and about 300 yards east of a large ravine running north to the Saline river; a branch of this one heads about a quarter of a mile east of where we were at work, and so we were between the two.

While busy at work in the forenoon I overheard an argument between two of the men about Indians. They were looking north, and one contended that he had seen Indians; the other said they were not. On looking up I had seen what might have been a bay animal. It had dropped out of sight, and the distance was too far to be sure. The hand-car was standing on the track with the guns in the rack. I started for the car to load my gun. Charles Sylvester, who was our funny man, always full of stories and jokes, made fun of me, calling me a coward, because I had done the same thing once or twice before when it turned out to be nothing but antelope, or something of that kind. I laid down my gun without loading it and went back to work. About an hour later, and when we had forgotten about it, one of the men shouted, "Yes, they *are* Indians." It had flashed through my head as another of Charlie's jokes, but the same instant I saw Indians on their ponies coming out of the ravine west of us, yelling like demons.

I ran for my gun, and, seizing my cartridge bag, grabbed a handful, but, loading in haste, got one too many in the gun. I could not shut down the magazine and had to pull it out and take out one. This occupied several moments. The Indians were right on our heels, firing at us, and the bullets made the dust fly all around me. Some one called, "Come on." Looking up I saw the boys on the car leaving me. I ran and got on the car. We tried to get the car under headway, but had gone only a short distance when Indians came out of the ravine ahead of us, and the next minute we were surrounded and they were firing into us from all sides. We had to take to our guns.

The Indians were also in danger of hitting one another. They opened out in front and let us pass, keeping up the fire from both sides and behind. I thought it impossible to reach the station alive. A culvert was ahead of us. I called to the boys, "Let's get into the culvert." Some one said, "No." I think it was one who had no gun. These words, and "O God!" by one of the men killed, were the only ones spoken during the run. On we went. It was impossible to get the car under headway, as the Indians came so close we had to take to our guns, which slackened the speed of the car; but before we could get them to our shoulders, like circus riders, the Indians would slip on the other side of their ponies, and we would let drive at them now and then.

About half-way, Alexander McKeefer and John Lynch were killed, and fell from the car a few hundred yards apart. Each time a crowd of Indians jumped off their ponies and gathered round. The last one exclaimed "O God!" I turned to look at him and saw he was struck. The Indians were

pressing us hard. I turned back towards them and the next moment saw him lying on the track behind us. Again the Indians gathered round and I fired a shot into the crowd. When their guns were empty and no time to reload, we received a shower of arrows. One struck George Seeley in the thigh. He jerked it out the next moment. About one-half mile from our dugout the Indians turned and left us. When within a few hundred yards of the station we met John Cook, with his rifle, coming toward us.

All got into the large dugout with our guns, placed the ammunition on a table in the center of the room, where it was handy, and waited for the Indians to come. We expected to be attacked. As none appeared, we spread some quilts on the floor, and four of us, who were wounded, George Seeley, Charles Sylvester, George Taylor, and myself laid down, while the man that was not hurt kept watch outside, in turn with John Cook. Nothing was seen for several hours. In the afternoon twenty-eight Indians passed that station on the south, but out of range, walking one behind the other, leading their ponies, to a point on the road about two miles east, where they tore up the track by breaking off the heads of the spikes and setting fire to the joint ties. They were the old-fashioned chair rails. In that way they removed some rails. The smoke was plainly seen from the station, and we suspected what they were doing.

Both trains were due at midnight, to pass one another on the side-track one mile west. The one from the west came first and found the road-bed damaged, but a wreck was prevented on account of the train going slow to go onto the side-track. John Cook intended to flag the train from the east, but would not venture out to the other side of the damaged track. When the train came in sight he made a fire in the center of the track at the station by burning a bale of hay, but the signal was not understood by the engineer on account of the distance, and the train ran into the ditch.

The nearest telegraph station was Bunker Hill. A wrecking train to arrive and repair the track required nearly two days. We were taken to the government hospital at Fort Harker, later to Ellsworth, and treated by a doctor in the employ of the railroad company from Salina.

In the fall I went back to Fossil Creek station. Things had changed. The place was a busy tie camp. The railroad was being extended from the state line to Denver. Wood-choppers were making ties and chopping cord-wood on Paradise creek for the new extension, and teams were hauling them to the station. Locomotives then burned wood. We had a telegraph office. The name of the operator was John J. Burns. A squad of soldiers were stationed here, as at every other station along the line. They were of Gen. Nelson A. Miles's regiment, the Fifth infantry, with headquarters at Fort Harker. Twice more we saw Indians; one time a mile west, at nearly the same place. Eight were coming from the south. Seeing us, they turned and took a course west and were soon out of sight. We were feeling all right that time, and would have just as soon had a round or two with them.

The soldiers at the station had also seen them and were coming to where we were. It was not known whether there were any more in the vicinity or not.

In the spring of 1870 I left the station. At the time of the raid we were criticized by some, claiming that we acted cowardly in taking to our heels; that we should have made a stand and that we could have easily whipped them, and so on. For myself, I will say at the time I had no other thought than my gun. Although we had plenty of warning we were completely surprised. In a very short time the prairie seemed swarming with Indians, and the majority of us were without means of defense. By the way the firing commenced, we knew they were well armed. The place there is level and hardly any ditch for us to get into. But this was not all. Leaving myself out, I will say the boys had reason to believe we could outrun the Indian ponies, as we had done once before when we had a race with some of the best horses at Fort Hays. This can best be told by relating the whole story.

About February, I think it was, we had a blizzard that filled ravines and railroad cuts full of snow and left very little on the prairie. The sun came out warm and we were shoveling snow to clear the track. We had had no train for a week. We had our section clear except one cut six miles west. While going there one afternoon to finish, a few miles from the station we met a big, burly looking fellow with a pair of six-shooters strapped to his side coming on foot. Answering a few questions as to the distance to the station, etc, we passed on and forgot about him. Arriving at the cut we shoveled snow on the east end, when one of the boys had occasion to go up on the high ground. He came down immediately with the report, "Indians are coming." Another went, to know the truth of the statement. He also came down with the same report.

All seemed to think the dugout would be the best place for us; so without argument we pulled for home. We had gone but a short distance when horsemen appeared on the high ground behind us, and one of them fired a shot. Here the railroad makes a long bend. Four or five of the best mounted on the north side took across the prairie to head us off. A lively race followed. We had a good car and down grade, and I might say we fairly made her fly. The bend in the road was not short enough and we easily outwinded the horses.

Being out of reach, we took it moderately. Getting home, we all got into the large dugout with our guns and got things ready for a reception. A while later those horsemen who had run the race with us came in sight. One was carrying a stick with a white handkerchief tied to it as a flag of truce. Coming nearer, we saw that they were army officers, and later there came about thirty privates of the Tenth cavalry. They were Negroes and those our two men had taken for Indians.

They were following the track in the snow of the man whom we had met in the afternoon. He was said to be a horse thief, and when they saw the car going they thought he was on and tried to head us off. On reaching the station, they took a circle around the place looking for his tracks, to see that he had not left; then the darkies made a search of our dugout with drawn guns. Finally they located him up in the water tank, made him hand down his guns and come down. The officers then had him tied by his wrists with the rope over the beam in the tank building and made him stand on his tip toes. In that way they tried to get a confession out of him as to who his pals were. They worked with him all night.

An organized gang of horse thieves were about Hays City, and some of the best horses and mules had been taken from the government corral. The snow came at the wrong time, and it got too hot for the thieves, and this one tried to get away on foot. One of the soldiers told me the thief must have traveled forty miles that day, but the snow was not melted enough but what they could track him.

The next morning all started back to Fort Hays. The man had to walk with his hands tied, and a rope to the saddle of one of the Negroes. Later we heard that he never reached the fort, but that he was found in an abandoned sod house on the way, with bullet holes through him and some sod thrown over him. Our supposition was that the officers rode on ahead and left him to his fate in the hands of the soldiers, who killed him.

In conclusion, I will say that I believe the chances taken in getting on that car were greater than otherwise, and don't think I would have been in favor of it; but as soon as we started and saw Indians coming out of the ravine ahead of us I thought it was a mistake, and I hardly expected to reach the station alive. Hundreds and hundreds of shots were fired at us, and twenty-eight bullet marks were counted on us and the hand-car. It was a wonder we were not all killed. On the other hand, if the car had been off the track there would have been no time to get it on, and it might have been better for us, as we would have been compelled to make a stand. We three were fairly good shots, and they could not have got us without our getting some of them, perhaps a large number; and after killing a few, they might have left us alone. Being near the railroad, we would have had relief.

The trouble was we were not organized. Those who had no guns would not depend on us three; but, in justice to the boys, I will say they were not cowards any more than the average citizen. They expected to outrun the Indians, as we had the army officers, and could we have gotten the car under good headway they could have done us little if any harm. When it was over we did not know that we hit any one, but the next day one pony was found dead in its tracks on the south side, and the carcass of another was found later, some distance north and west.

When the train that had been on the side-track during the night came down to the station the next morning, the trainmen picked up the dead bodies on the way. They were stripped of clothing and horribly butchered up. They were scalped, and rings of telegraph wire were through the calves of their legs and fleshy parts of their bodies, and arrows stuck into them. Being hurt myself, I was advised not to see them. They were wrapped in blankets and buried about 300 yards south of the railroad-track and a little east of the water-tank, somewhere near what is now the main street of Russell. (On the lot now occupied by Hill's store.—Ed.) In the winter of 1869 I put up a headstone for each—common limestone, the only kind I could get—on which I cut their names, native state, and the words: "Killed by Indians, May 28, 1868." Alexander McKeefer was a Canadian, and John Lynch a New Yorker, of Irish descent. Both were between thirty and thirty-five years of age.