

## TWO LETTERS FROM KANSAS: ECONOMICS AND ADVENTURE

### AS HOMESTEADING MOTIVATION

by

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William Bolitho observed: "The adventurer is within us, and he contests for our favor with the social man we are obliged to be. . . . We are born to wander, and cursed to stay and dig."<sup>1</sup> In deference to the "social man" within him, the individual settler of the Kansas plains tended to explain his willingness to risk life and fortune in socially acceptable terms of free land, new occupational opportunities, and the promise of future economic security. Except in unguarded moments, the homesteader rarely spoke of the excitement of adventure or the stimulating challenge of new experience. Historians also have tended to give emphasis to the economic man and his response to town-site boosters, land speculators, and promotional-tract writers. While it is true that these propagandists did attempt to entice settlers to the western plains with exaggerated accounts of the generous hand of nature's bounty, they did not neglect the romantic allure of the prospect of adventure "in the great outdoors." If the homesteader came "to stay and dig," he was, of necessity, from the very beginning required to be bold enough in spirit to venture into the unknown.

It was to the interest of every landowner, homesteader as well as seller, to extend "the myth of the garden beyond the Missouri." The inspired slogan, "Rain Follows the Plough," became a conviction based solely on faith, as well as a persuasive argument for encouraging settlement.<sup>2</sup> The older myth of the great American desert was to be refuted and replaced by the myth of the West as an undeveloped Garden of Eden. But the Garden was not without its excitement and romance. Even Eden had brought adventure to those first, original pioneers, Adam and Eve. Walter Prescott Webb demonstrated that the American West was to remain through the nineteenth century a land "considered Spectacular and Romantic."<sup>3</sup>

In Kansas, the enthusiasm of land speculators frequently converted barren town sites and unspectacular river crossings into marvels of beauty and productivity through use of names designed more to attract than to describe. Yet, for every town name in Kansas eliciting images of bucolic prosperity--Pretty Prairie, Belle Plaine, Garden City--there was a companion which conjured more exciting images--Medicine Lodge, Elk City, Pawnee Rock.

It also should be remembered that the professional propagandists probably were not the most important stimulators of settlement. As every detergent salesman knows today, the most effective advertisement is the word of mouth testimonials passing between friends. People tend to trust a neighbor's opinion more than the suspect judgment of promoters expressing what is an obvious vested interest. Letters home from young

pioneers in the early euphoria of settlement had more impact than the brochures of speculators. The word of a cousin who "had gone West" had immediate influence on the other young folk back home. The "folksy" letters of enthusiastic settlers sent back East by the homesteaders in Kansas were frequently as effective in stimulating interest in the new land as the promotional tracts. Two such letters from Pearlette, Meade County, Kansas, illustrate the importance of both the prosaic and the romantic description of the new land.

Pearlette had been planned as a mutual aid colony by the citizens in and around Zanesville, Ohio.<sup>4</sup> In all, sixteen families moved together to their homesteads in 1879. The Colony changed its promotional name of Sunshine to Pearlette in honor of Pearl Atkinson, a child of some sixteen months, who died within days of reaching Kansas. Arriving in the midst of a prolonged drought, the Pearlette colony was to fail miserably within two years. Only two families remained to fulfill the requirements of "proving up" their claim and only the members of one family remained for the rest of their lives in the community.

Among the more zealous settlers was George M. Williams. When he moved his family to the plains, he left a partnership in a livery business in Ohio.<sup>5</sup> Since he had more capital to back his venture, he felt the severity of the initial hardships less than most of his fellow Ohioans. He had been an enthusiastic organizer and remained convinced during the early months that the colony would prosper. Throughout the first year, Williams wrote thoughtful, informative letters back to the newspaper in Zanesville, filled with details of climate, soil, rainfall, costs, and the progress of the settlement.<sup>6</sup> Obviously, he was one who came to "stay and dig." Perhaps because he was older (almost 40), his motives, at least those he made public, were decidedly economic in nature. In his own words, he expected to "gain wealth" and "grow fat with honors."<sup>7</sup>

Typical of his correspondence was a letter printed in the Zanesville Daily Courier:

Editor Courier:

Through your very interesting paper I wish to communicate with many friends of Muskingum, nearly all of whom are readers of the old Courier, and to whom I had promised to write of the Zanesville Colony--of which I am a member--its prospect, and the country which is to be the future home of its members. We had a pleasant trip, Mr. Smith, the agent, doing all he promised to do, and gaining the respect and esteem of every member of the colony. We arrived at Dodge City on Friday after leaving Zanesville. This town is located in a very beautiful part of the State on the Arkansas river, about five miles from Fort Dodge, where is quartered about one hundred and fifty soldiers and families . . . . It is a good place for business, and labor. Mechanics get about \$3 per day. Eatables are cheap, if not cheaper here than East,

and other articles are about 25 to 50 percent higher than East.

We have all located claims in the northeastern part of Meade County, township 30, and range 27, and most of the families have moved on their claims, and the rest will in a few days. 'Dugouts,' half-'dugouts' and sod houses, are the fashion. In some respects we were disappointed. And some of the members dissatisfied for a day or two, but on such soil, in such a climate, and such a glorious future spread out before them, sound reason and good judgement could not prostrate them, and when action did come, a beam of joy and satisfaction illumined every thin and laggard visage, except one or two women. And now I do not think there is a man with us who could be hired to relinquish his right with any reasonable sum of money.

Our place lies about thirty miles southwest of Dodge City, on a beautiful rolling prairie. Soil is about eighteen to forty-eight inches deep. There are two good Springs on our land, and a small stream (Crooked Creek) about two or three miles distant. Fuel is very scarce. It is fifteen miles to the Sand Hills where we can get timber for fuel, to do us until we can grow it. The Peat Bed<sup>8</sup> is a success about five miles distant. I have tried it and it burns quite well. We can burn chips this summer, as there are a great many scattered all over the prairie. There is no scarcity of rain, and the soil will produce any vegetables that we wish to grow, but not so well on the sod as the second year. The wind is no harder here than in Ohio, but blows more steadily, though we have had some very calm days since we came. The weather is very pleasant, and there has been no snow for some weeks. There was a six inch snow this winter, which lay on the ground for about six or seven weeks.

This part of Kansas is filling up very fast. Every day brings crowds of immigrants to Dodge City, and the greater part locate in Meade County. It will not be long before all the government land here will be taken up. We will have two post offices and a mail route in and through our township by the first of June. A grocery is already opened. There is some report of Indians wafted around that causes a chill to run through the vein of some members. I am compelled to say, that there was more brotherly love manifested in the Council Chamber of the Court House of Zanesville, than has ever been seen since. It is every one for himself, and the devil will get the major part.

Yours,

G. M. Williams<sup>9</sup>

During the first summer, a young friend of Williams' from Zanesville, John Eddie, came for a brief visit and to assess the prospects of the area. His letter to the Daily Courier reflects a different view of the plains. Eddie, like so many others who came late to the region, was anxious to hunt buffalo. The large herds were gone in that section of Kansas by 1879, but, with diligence and a knowledgeable guide, a few isolated animals could be found. George W. "Hoodoo" Brown, one of the early and more efficient hunters, organized a small party of johnny-come-latelys from Meade as late as the fall of 1886. Although that party did find a few scruffy stragglers northwest of Meade County, the killing was a shabby travesty of the old glory days.<sup>10</sup> But the dime novels, newspapers, and magazines continued to glamorize the great hunts. Still vivid in memory of most reading Americans were the stories of the hunts sponsored by James Gordon Bennett, led by Buffalo Bill Cody, and the excursion with the Grand Duke Alexis and George Armstrong Custer as guests of General Phil Sheridan. Buffalo hunting became fantasized in the minds of venturesome adolescents as well as Eastern visitors to the plains, prospective settlers, and late-arriving homesteaders.

Eddie's account of a ten-day excursion, even in its failure to kill a single buffalo, exuded a spirit of manly fun and macho adventure, which appealed to many caught in the prosaic day-to-day living in settled Ohio. It also, incidentally, suggested that George M. Williams might have had his adventurous side. The Pearlette excursion hardly resembles Bennett's, which traveled in more resplendent style with a French chef, ample champagne, and sixteen supply wagons, including one for ice. Bennett's final tally of 600 buffalo and 200 elk killed was not to be equaled. Still, the spirit was there and the thrill was somewhat the same.

#### The Kansas Colony

A Party of Muskingum County Boys Down in  
the Indian Nation on a Buffalo Hunt  
Wolf Meat for Breakfast  
A Freighter's Herd  
Trespassing on Mr. Lo's Domain

To the Zanesville Courier:

Pearlette, Meade Co., Kans.  
July 17, 1879

Thinking a letter from this section of the Country might interest some of your readers, I shall proceed to give an account of a buffalo hunt participated in by your correspondent.

G.M. Williams, L.T. Phillips and myself started bright and early from our beautiful Pearlette Valley, on Thursday, July 8th, for the Indian Territory, to hunt the wild bovine of that section of the country. Our Outfit consisted of rations for ten days, three of Sharp's second rifles, caliber, fifty-one, breech loading shotguns, and ammunition enough for a small arsenal. We also took a keg of

water for our stock, should it be needed, and in passing the famous Salt Well of Meade County, I filled up another with Salt Water, which gives 45 percent pure salt to jerk our meat in should we be lucky enough to get any. With this outfit and our spirits at about 98 degrees in the shade, we wended our way through one of the loveliest valleys it has ever been my lot to see. Rich, fertile and beautiful are only idle words to what its real merits are. We continued along the bottom lands of Crooked Creek until our Shadows looked so diminutive that we stopped to fill upon a curliou that G.M. Williams had winged as he sailed too close to the team. After a hearty repast we again took the road for the Cimarron river, our first camping place. Here we tethered our horses, and had a fine repast on the delicious meat of a goose that sailed within the dangerous reach of a shot gun. After supper and a smoke, we took up our rifles to scout about and see if we could not bag an antelope for our next day's provision, but after a long search with no success, we turned about face and started for camp, when a noise in bushes attracted the attention of L.T. Phillips, so he cautiously hied away, when lo! there appeared a fine young antelope about forty yards off. He up with his Shot gun and bang it went--and bang went the antelope at about the rate of Parole in the English Handicap races.

Nothing of interest occurred during the night, except the killing of a wolf that prowled about our camp and worried the horses. When the sun arose it found us busily preparing our morning roast upon a fine fire of buffalo chips, and as Louis said, 'it was a stem winder.' '[F]or,' said he, 'we will have wolf steak both boiled and fried.' But, Mr. Editor, take my advice and do not eat wolf cooked in any style. Better eat coon, or fox, or dog, or any other four-legged 'critter,' for could you have seen Williams first trying to get a piece down, and then the comical expression of his face trying with might and main to get it up again, I am sure you would be satisfied that wolf is only a fit repast for crows and buzzards.

We crossed the Cimarron and took a southerly course across the Stock plains of the territory, rather a beautiful country, still nothing to compare with the Meade County Valleys. Nothing worth noting took place until we were startled by Williams pointing out in the far distance what seemed to be a vast hill of sawdust spread out on the plain. But now the illusion faded, for as we neared the vast barren spot we discovered it to be a part of the famous Black Jack region, which is a range of sand hills some twenty miles in length, and three across. The lower strata is a pure golden sand, while the tops of the hills are as black as a coal, and although the sand is constantly on the go, yet it

never mixes owing probably to the evenness of the under strata.

'But what is that in the far distance?' shouted Louis. 'Buffalo as sure as I live,' echoed Williams. 'Let us get on the windward side of them,' stammered I. 'Let us surround them,' said Phillips, as he dragged his gun from the wagon. 'That's the idea,' chimed in W., so we all picked our station and started cautiously to try and surround the unsuspecting innocents. We crept on all fours up the rugged ravine to get within good gun shot of the herd, and when by a certain signal we picked out our buffalo, took aim, and would have fired but a man with spectacles abridge his nose rushed upon us and yelled for us not to shoot his steers, and also demanded an explanation. What was our chagrin to find that we had actually attacked a freighter's camp, and were mistaking a dozen steers for a herd of buffalo. We apologized, and owned up to being greeners, and then wended our way back to the wagon with our spiritual thermometer in the decline.

At this point we took a westerly course and camped on Beaver's Creek that night. The next day we succeeded in killing an antelope or two and hunting wild turkey among the Jacks. This [is] one of the most exciting sports that I ever had a hand in, yet for a tender foot, as the old Settlers call us new ones, I did first rate.

It was our intention to go on further south the next day, but we met some freighters who warned us that if the Indians found us poaching on their hunting ground they would cause us some trouble so we turned about face and after pulling through two more nights with heathenish mosquitoes brought up at home, feeling the better for having taken our first lesson in the exciting chase of the buffalo.

J. Eddie<sup>12</sup>

These two letters are representative of the kinds of appeal personalized reporting might have. Both apparently had some impact. Dr. William Ward, a Zanesville physician, after reading Williams' letters, informed the Daily Courier he was going to join the Pearlette colony in order to establish a son-in-law on a homestead and to find a suitable place for retirement in his own declining years.<sup>13</sup> Mrs. L.D. Copeland, credited with being "one of the oldest citizens of Zanesville," joined her family in Kansas.<sup>14</sup> The papers also carried an account of the misadventures of a trio of teenagers who, undoubtedly, were responding more to Eddie than Williams. They had taken a broken pistol and a little cash from the family cookie jar and set out for Kansas in the midst of a blizzard. Two of the boys returned home on the third day, considerably more humble than when they left; the third, with firm resolve, continued on his way.<sup>15</sup>

When the colony ran into serious difficulties caused by the drought and the inexperience of the settlers, the letters home changed to pleas for help and condemnations of the area. But while their hopes were high, the personal letters and the frequent reports to the Zanesville papers did much to encourage others to contemplate or to actually leave Ohio. Both improved economic expectation and anticipated adventure were fed by the kinds of letters Williams and Eddie had sent. Which played the more important role is difficult to assess. It is clear, however, that the chance to "improve one's lot in life" had different meanings for different individuals, and could be understood in terms of improved material fortune or a changed, less dreary life style.

#### NOTES

1. William Bolitho, Twelve Against the Gods (New York: The Readers Club Press, 1930), xiv.
2. Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), 210-213.
3. Walter Prescott Webb, The Great Plains (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1931), 491. How relevant the image of the Garden was to the contemporary scene is illustrated in the Dodge City Times. In reporting the coming arrival of the Zanesville colony, the editor added:  
 "You've often heard of Kansas  
 The Garden of the West,  
 Whose soil, everyman says,  
 Of all the Union is the best."  
Dodge City Times, 15 February 1879.
4. C. Robert Haywood, "Pearlette: A Mutual Aid Colony," Kansas Historical Quarterly (Autumn 1976): 263-276.
5. Ninth Federal Census, 1870, Muskingum County, Ohio; Muskingum County, Ohio Marriage Record (Typewritten copy, Ohio Historical Society Archives-Library, Columbus), 5; Zanesville Signal, 22 February 1879.
6. See as examples Zanesville Daily Courier, 25 March and 9, 21 May 1879.
7. *Ibid.*, 5 July 1879.
8. The peat bed was located on A.M. Norman's farm and was used for a number of years by the family as a welcome substitute for gathering buffalo chips.
9. Zanesville Daily Courier, 11 March 1879.
10. George W. Brown, "Life and Adventures of George W. Brown, Soldier, Pioneer, Scout, Plainsman and Buffalo Hunter." Ed. by William E. Connelly, Collection of the Kansas State Historical Society, 1926-1928, 17 (1928), 133-134.

11. This "well" appeared as a sink hole on or about 17 March 1879, two miles south of present-day Meade, Kansas. The cave-in swallowed part of the ruts on the Jones and Plummer Trail. Dodge City Times, 6 April 1879.

12. Zanesville Daily Courier, 25 July 1879.

13. *Ibid.*, 3 May 1879.

14. *Ibid.*, 3 March 1879.

15. *Ibid.*