J. W. GIBSON

THE RECOLLECTIONS OF A PIONEER

J. W. Gibson

The Recollections of a Pioneer

EAN 8596547388111

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

FOREWORD.
CHAPTER I. Early Days in Buchanan County.
CHAPTER II. First Trip to California.
CHAPTER III. Gold Mining in '49 and '50.
CHAPTER IV. Back Across the Plains.
CHAPTER V. Across the Plains With Cattle.
CHAPTER VI. A Bear Hunt.
CHAPTER VII. Home by Way of Panama and New York.
CHAPTER VIII. Another Trip Across the Plains With Cattle.
CHAPTER IX. Sojourn in California.
CHAPTER X. Beginning of the War.
CHAPTER XI. The Battle of Lexington.
CHAPTER XII. Back to the South.
CHAPTER XIII. Home for Recruits.
CHAPTER XIV. War in Arkansas.
CHAPTER XV. Back Into Missouri.
CHAPTER XVI. Worse Than War.
CHAPTER XVII. Across the Plains in Sixty-five.
CHAPTER XVIII. The Return to Missouri.

FOREWORD.

Table of Contents

The following pages are entirely from memory. I kept no notes or other record of the events I have attempted to relate, but I am sure my memory has not often deceived me. My early responsibilities compelled me to give close attention to the things which transpired about me and thus fixed them permanently in my mind. In fact, most of the experiences which I have attempted to relate were of such personal consequence that I was compelled to be alert and to know what was passing.

I undertook the present task at the solicitation of many friends and acquaintances who urged that my recollections of a period, now fast passing out of personal memory, ought to be preserved. It is probable that I have made a good many errors, especially, in my attempts to locate places and to give distances, but it must be remembered that we had no maps or charts with us on the plains and that but few state lines or other sub-divisions were in existence. The location of the places where events occurred with reference to present geographical lines has been my most difficult task.

J. W. (WATT) GIBSON.

St. Joseph, Mo., August 15, 1912.

CHAPTER I.

Early Days in Buchanan County.

Table of Contents

I was born in Bartow County, Georgia, on the 22nd day of January, 1829. Sometime during my infancy, and at a period too early to be remembered, my father and his family moved to East Tennessee, where we lived until I was ten years old. About this time reports concerning the Platte Purchase and its splendid farming land began to reach us. I do not now recall the exact channel through which these reports came, but I think some of our relatives had gone there and had written back urging us to come. My father finally yielded and in the spring of 1839 sold his Tennessee farm and prepared for the long journey overland. I was old enough at the time to take some note of what passed, and I remember that my father received four thousand dollars for his land in Indiana "shin plasters." I recall also the preparations that were made for the journey—the outfitting of the wagons, gathering the stock together, and most important of all, the part assigned to me. I was provided with a pony, saddle and bridle and given charge of a herd of loose cattle and horses. We had a rude camp outfit and carried along with us all the household plunder with which we expected to start life in the new country. As may be well imagined, there was not a great deal of it, although the family was large. In those days the people had to be satisfied with the barest necessities. Some idea of the

extent of this part of my father's worldly property may be given by saying that the entire outfit, including camp equipment, was loaded into two wagons.

I shall never forget the morning we started. Everything had been loaded the day before, except the articles necessary to the sojourn over night. We were up bright and early, had breakfast in little better than camp style, and were off before sun up. My father, mother, and the younger children took the first wagon, and one of my brothers and my sisters the second. I was upon my pony and in my glory. The wagons moved forward and I rounded up the cattle and horses and forced them along after the wagons. I was too young to feel any tender sentiment toward the old home or to appreciate the fact that I was leaving it forever, but I remember that my father and mother often looked back, and as we passed over the hill out of sight, I saw them turn and wave a long farewell. Many times since I have thought of that scene and have learned to know full well its meaning to my father and mother.

I cannot recall all the particulars of this toilsome journey, and if I could, they would hardly interest the reader. I remember that I soon lost the enthusiasm of that early morning on which we started and grew very tired and longed for the end of our journey. For a great many days it seemed to me we traveled through a rugged mountain country. The hills were long and toilsome, the streams had no bridges and had to be forded, and I frequently had great difficulty in getting my cattle and horses to follow the wagons. On such occasions, the caravan would stop and the whole family would come to my aid. Of course, there were

no fences along the sides of the road and my stock becoming wearied or tempted by the green herbage alongside would wander out into the woods and brush and give me much trouble. When I think of these difficulties, I do not wonder that I became wearied, but as my life was afterwards ordered, this boyish experience taught me a lesson which many times proved useful.

I remember when we crossed what they said was the line into Kentucky. I could see no difference in the mountains, valleys or the rivers, but somehow I felt that there ought to be a difference and that Kentucky could not be like Tennessee, and yet it was. Here I learned, thus early in life, what so many people find it hard even in later years to appreciate, that names and distances do not make differences and that all places upon the face of the earth, no matter how they vary in physical appearance, are after all very much alike. I believe it is the realization of this fact that makes the difference between the man who knows the world and the one who does not. After a long time, as it seemed to me, we passed out of the mountains and into a beautiful rolling country improved even in that early day with many turnpikes and exhibiting every indication of prosperity. There were negroes everywhere—many more than we had in Tennessee, and I remember hearing them singing as they worked in the fields. I now know that this country was what has since been known as the "Blue Grass Region" of Kentucky, though at the time, I thought the mountains of my old home a much better place to live.

For a long time, even before the journey began, I had heard a great deal about the Ohio River and knew that we

must cross it, and when the people along the road began to tell us that we were nearing that stream, I became filled with curiosity to see it and to know what it would be like and to see and experience the sensation of crossing it on a ferry-boat. Finally we came to the top of a long hill and away off to the north we saw the river winding through a deep valley, and some one, my father, I think, pointed out a mere speck on the surface of the water and told us it was a ferry-boat. When we reached the bank of the river we found the boat tied alongside, and to my surprise, horses, wagons and cattle were all driven upon it. I had no idea that a ferry-boat was such a huge affair. It was run by horse-power, and it took us only a few minutes to reach the farther shore, and I was disappointed that my trip was not a longer one. The landing and unloading took but a few minutes. My father paid the man and we started immediately to climb the hill on the other side. I must not neglect to mention that somewhere on the road in the northern part of Kentucky or immediately after we crossed the river, my father exchanged the "shin plasters" for which he had sold his farm for silver, that currency being at par in that locality. He received four thousand silver dollars. I saw them with my own eyes. He put them in a strong box and loaded them into one of the wagons along with the other luggage.

I do not remember at what point we crossed the Ohio River. I did not, of course, know at the time, and if my father or any member of the family ever told me the place afterwards I have forgotten it; but the event is as vivid in my mind as if it had occurred yesterday.

There was little in our journey across Indiana and Illinois to impress that portion of the road upon my memory. All I recall is in a general way that I could see no familiar mountains, and over parts of the journey I remember that the country appeared to me to be monotonously level. I cannot give the length of time that was required in making this journey, but I do remember when we reached the Mississippi River. We crossed at Alton, if I am not mistaken, and in place of a horse ferry we had a steam ferry, which was to me a much more wonderful contrivance than the horse ferry on the Ohio. Then the river was so much wider. I remember wondering where all that vast body of water could come from. They told us, when we landed on the opposite shore, that we were in Missouri, and I thought my journey must be nearly ended, but I was never more mistaken. Day after day our wagons trundled along, night after night we went into camp, worn out with the day's journey, only to get up again early in the morning and repeat the same experience.

We reached Tremont Township, Buchanan County, on the 29th day of May, 1839, and straightway settled upon a tract of land about a mile and a quarter southeast of what is now Garrettsburg. A house of some character was the first thing to which my father turned his attention, and it was not long before a rude log cabin was under construction. I was too small to take much part in this work, but I remember that such neighbors as we had were good to us and came and helped. The logs were cut in the woods and dragged to the site of the house and the neighbors and friends came and helped us at the "raising." The house consisted of a single

room with a wide fireplace built of rough stone extending nearly across one entire end of the room. The roof was of long split boards laid upon poles or beams in such a way as to shed the water and weighted down by other beams laid on top of them. I do not think a single nail or other piece of iron entered into the construction of the building, but we thought it a great improvement upon the tent life we had experienced on our journey, and my father was quite proud of his new home. I will not attempt to describe that country as it appeared to me in that early day. In fact the changes have been so gradual that it seems to me to be still very much the same country it was when I first saw it, though when I stop to reflect, I know that this is not so. Most of it was heavy timber. A glade or skirt of prairie passed in now and then from the almost continuous prairie of what is now Clinton County. And I remember distinctly that a stretch of prairie extended from Platte River directly across from where Agency is now located in an east and south easterly direction toward Gower, and thence around to the left where it joined the main body of prairie land. There were no fences to speak of, and deer were as plentiful as in any country I have ever seen. There were few roads and no great need for them and no bridges. The county seat of the county was at old Sparta, and Robidoux's Landing was the most talked of place in the county.

In 1846, my father built a brick house, the first, I think, that was ever erected in the county. It stood about a quarter of a mile south of the present residence of Thomas Barton, a respected citizen of Tremont Township. The brick were made upon the ground and I was old enough at that time to have

quite an important part in the work, and it was hard work, too. I helped cut and haul wood with which the brick were burned, and I "off bore" the brick as they were moulded. I carried the brick and mortar as the house was being erected and assisted in putting on the roof, laying floors and finishing the house. It was quite a commodious structure when completed and was considered by all our neighbors and friends who still lived in their log houses as quite a mansion.

Our farming operations were not very extensive. The land all had to be cleared of heavy timber, and I have seen thousands of feet of the finest white oak, walnut and hickory burned up in log heaps, but there was nothing else to be done with it. We had to have the land and there was no use to which we could put such a quantity of timber. The few rails that were needed to fence the field after it was cleared, required only a small portion of the timber that was cut away, and as all the land except the fields was allowed to remain unfenced, there could be no profit in expending time and labor in making rails to be piled up and allowed to decay.

Most of our work was done on the farm with ox teams. Our plows were rude, home-made implements, and the hoe, axe and sickle, or reaping hook, all home-made, were about the only other tools we had. With these and with our slow plodding oxen, we thought we did very well to produce from our stumpy ground enough for the family to subsist on. Even the accomplishment of this small result required the efforts of almost every member of the family. My mother and sisters frequently worked in the fields, and I often saw, in

those days, a woman plowing in the field, driving a single cow, using a rude harness without a collar. We cut our wheat with a sickle and our hemp with a hook. We hackled the flax by hand and spun and wove it into linen. My mother and sisters sheared the sheep, washed and picked the wool, carded, spun and wove it into blankets and clothing for the whole family. They took the raw material, green flax and wool on the sheep's back, and made it into clothing for a family of ten. They milked the cows and washed the clothing besides, and then found time to help in the fields. It must not be thought that the men were idle while this was going on. They worked just as hard, but their tools were so poor and the difficulties so great, and they could accomplish so little that even with all their efforts they sometimes fell behind the women in their tasks.

As may well be imagined, there was little time for a boy or a girl under those conditions to go to school, even if the opportunity had presented itself. We had a school in the neighborhood, however, held for a time at the homes of various members of the community, and later we built a school house. The erection of this building was the first public enterprise, so far as I know or have ever heard, that was undertaken by the people of that community. I was old enough to help in it, and I remember very distinctly the meetings the neighbors had to plan the work of building, and afterwards, I recall the meeting of the men with their teams to do the work. Each man furnished two logs which he had previously cut and hewed to the proper dimensions. These he dragged to the site selected for the building which was, by the way, upon the ground now occupied by the

Stamper School House. When the logs were all assembled, the men and boys came in bringing baskets of provisions and food for their oxen and all went to work. The house was "raised," as we called it, by laying the logs one upon the other in the form of a pen, the length exceeding the breadth by about ten feet. The logs were carefully notched and fitted down at the corners so as to eliminate space between them and do away with the necessity of "chinking" to as great an extent as possible. The floor was of logs split half in two and laid the flat side up. The door was of hewed timber and must have been fully two inches thick, and was hung upon wooden hinges. At a proper height from the ground, one log was sawed out the full length of the building to afford light. The roof was of clap-boards with logs laid upon them to hold them in place. The benches were puncheon—that is a long round log split half in two and hewed to a smooth surface with legs driven into auger holes beneath. The fireplace extended nearly all the way across one end of the room. It was built of rough stone as high as the mantel, and from there up the chimney was of sticks, plastered inside with clay to keep them from burning. A long puncheon was placed at the proper angle just underneath the opening which served as a window, and this constituted our writing desk. When the writing lesson was called, each pupil took his copy book and went to this rude "desk" where he stood until his lesson was finished.

I cannot at this time recall the names of all the men who participated in the work of building that school-house, but among them were George Reynolds, George Jeffers, Donald McCray, Philip McCray, Henry Guinn, Ambrose McDonald,

William Bledsoe, Robert Irvin, James Poteet, James Gilmore, Ransom Ridge, Bird Smith, Isaac Auxier, Tom Auxier, my father, George Gibson, and my uncle, James Gibson. Most of these names are familiar to the citizens of this county, and their descendants are still substantial citizens of that community. I had the inestimable privilege of attending school in this building as much as three terms of three months each, and this constituted my entire educational course so far as schools are concerned. The sons and daughters of the men I have named were my school mates and, at this writing, but few of them survive. The men of that day, of course, have all passed to their reward many years since.

It will be easy for the reader to understand me when I say that in that day money, that is currency or specie, was very hard to procure. Fortunately for us we needed very little of it, because there was nothing to buy with it that we could not procure by a sort of trade or barter. We could raise our horses, hogs and cattle, but there was no market for them. If a neighbor happened not to have what another neighbor had beyond his own necessities, some means was devised by which a trade could be entered into and each secure thereby the things he did not previously own. I think hemp was about the only thing we could sell for money. This we took to Robidoux's landing now and then where we procured cash for it, and we then bought such few necessities as our farms did not afford.

It must not be understood that the men of that day were without enterprise. When I look upon the great undertakings of the present day and then recall a venture which my

father and older brothers and myself undertook in 1847, I am compelled to believe that of the two, that early enterprise required the greater business courage. I have related how my father received four thousand dollars for his Tennessee farm and how he converted this into silver on the way to Missouri. He had in addition to this quite a sum of money besides and had accumulated some money during the years of his residence here.

In the spring of 1847 he began to purchase from the neighbors around about and from the men in other communities, their surplus cattle, and in this way collected a herd of five hundred. These cattle were driven overland to Iowa where a few of them were sold, thence on to Illinois and across Illinois and through Indiana and Ohio, peddling them out as we went, and into Pennsylvania, where the last of them were sold. I went along, and we had many hardships, but somehow I did not think so at the time. The trip broke the monotony of my life upon the farm and I was glad to go, even though I often grew very tired and had to endure the exposure to hot sun, wind and rain. We made some money on the cattle—quite a good deal. We got every dollar of it in silver and carried it home on horse back. In 1848, brother Isaac and I took another drove over about the same route for Peter Boyer, who lived near Easton. Our experiences on this trip were very much the same as those of the former trip, and the enterprise netted Boyer a handsome profit.

CHAPTER II.

First Trip to California.

Table of Contents

Late in the year 1848 or early in '49, we began to hear wonderful stories about gold in California. News traveled very slowly in those days, and we could depend very little upon its accuracy, but the reports that came convinced us that the discovery had actually been made and we readily pictured in our own minds the fortunes to be had in that country. Difficult as the methods of travel were in those days, we were not without information as to the route and character of the country intervening between us and California. Robert Gilmore, a neighbor of ours, had been overland to Oregon and back, and could tell us very definitely about the country out to a point beyond the Rocky Mountains. The talk of gold, and of an expedition to the country where it had been found, soon became general and it was not long until a party of men was made up to try their fortunes in California. Brother William, brother James and myself agreed to become members of the party, and we rigged up a wagon and four yoke of oxen, laid in a year's provisions, provided ourselves with guns and plenty of ammunition and joined others of a company who had made like provision. I must not neglect to mention that as an important part of our commissary we added a half barrel of good whiskey. We started on the first day of May and stopped over night at St. Joseph. The next day, everything

being ready, we crossed the river on the ferry boat and pitched our tents the first night out on Peter's Creek. Our party consisted of twenty men and boys, all from Buchanan County. They were Robert Gilmore and his son Mat, James Gilmore and his son Dave, Ben Poteet, a man by the name of Spires and his son, Milt Gilmore, Lum Perkins, a man by the name of Fish, Charles McCray, Henry McCray, Liel Hulett, Mitch Hulett, old man Greenwood and his two sons, Brother William, Brother James, and myself. We had seven wagons, fifty-eight head of cattle and seven horses.

Robert Gilmore was our pilot. His previous journey over the road as well as his peculiar fitness for the task made the selection of any other person out of the question. He had an accurate memory concerning every point along the road. He knew the courses of the rivers and how to cross the desert divides at the narrowest places to avoid long distances without grazing and water for our cattle. He also knew better than any of us the habits of the Indians, and his experience with them often avoided trouble and saved our property and most likely our lives. He was cool-headed and prudent and as brave a man as I ever knew. It must be remembered that we made no provision whatever to feed our cattle and horses. We expected to move slowly and allow them time to graze for subsistence. During the first part of the journey at the season of the year in which it was made, we experienced no trouble whatever, as grass was very plentiful, but later on, as I shall relate, we often felt sorry for the poor dumb beasts that we had taken from the fine pastures of Buchanan County and driven out into that arid country.

Our second day's journey brought us to Wolf River. During the next few days our journey led us by gradual ascent up on to a high prairie, which must have been the water shed upon which the town of Sabetha is now situated. The whole earth was covered by abundant verdure, and I recall very distinctly the expansive view which presented itself in every direction from the crests of the ridges as we passed over them. There was not a single human habitation in sight and no evidences that human foot had ever been set upon this land, except the dim outline of the trail we were following. Only one or two companies were ahead of us and the tracks of their wagons and oxen made but little impression upon the fresh grown grass. Farther out the almost total absence of trees made the most vivid impression upon my mind, accustomed as I had been for so many years to a timbered country, and though I could see no evidences that the soil was not productive, I could hardly believe this place would ever be a fit habitation for men. We traveled some days over such country as I have described and no doubt passed over the sites of many present flourishing towns. The sixth or seventh day out, if I remember correctly, we reached the Big Blue. In our journey thus far, we had occasionally seen deer and antelope, but when we began to descend into the valley of the Big Blue we saw great numbers of these animals. On the banks of the river we found in camp a party of eastern emigrants who had left St. Joseph a few days in advance of our train. Their teams were all horses and they had camped for a time in order to lay in a supply of venison. Their horses were then in fine condition and they were riding them out on the

prairies chasing the deer and antelope. We camped for the night and next morning, as usual, plodded on. Later in the day we were overtaken by these emigrants who trotted by us with their faster teams and made fun of our equipment. They told us, as they passed, that they would have the gold in California all mined out before we got there. Some of us, the younger members at least, who had had no experience on the plains, felt that they might be telling us the truth; but Gilmore assured us that we had taken the safer course and that we would reach California long in advance of those men, and that it was doubtful if they would ever get there at all. Weeks later Gilmore had the satisfaction of verifying what he had told us, for we overtook and passed these very trains. Their horses were thin and poor, starved out on the short grass, and famished for water.

From Big Blue we crossed a rolling divide to Little Blue and followed that stream a long distance, then across a high prairie, that seemed to be almost perfectly level. It was on this part of the journey that we had our first disagreeable experience. Up to that time, the boys of the party at least, had looked upon crossing the plains as a great frolic. The weather had been fine. The company was congenial and the novelty of the whole thing kept us well entertained. Shortly after we broke camp one morning and started on a twenty mile drive, it began to rain and continued all day long a steady downpour. We had found no wood with which to cook dinner and had eaten cold victuals, with some relish, believing we would find plenty of firewood at night. We traveled until quite late and finally stopped at a small creek, where other emigrants had camped, but there was no wood,

not a stick to be found. The only thing in sight was a tough old log which had been hacked and hewed by preceding emigrants until scarcely a splinter could be chopped from it. The buffalo chips were all wet and it was still raining. The boys were not so gay that night. They managed, after hard work, to get splinters enough off the old log to heat up the coffee and that was the only warm article of diet we had for supper. We made the best of it and after supper prepared to crawl into wet tents to sleep if we could. Bad as the prospect was, I was happy that it was not my turn to stand guard. It rained all night and next morning the boys who had been on guard were sorry-looking fellows and the cattle and horses little better. I do not remember how we managed to get breakfast, but I do recall that we started early and pushed on still through the rain. The moving warmed us up and we were much better off traveling than in camp.

We reached Platte River late the same day at a point which must have been some miles above the location of the present city of Grand Island, probably about the site of the City of Kearney. The river was running bank full and the only fire wood in sight was on an island out in the stream. The stream, though wide, was not deep, and we rode our horses over and carried back wood enough to make a fire, though it was a very bad one. It stopped raining about night, but remained cloudy and cold and we passed the night with less comfort, I believe, than the night before. Next day we made only twenty miles but stopped long before night at the mouth of a little stream or gulch that descended down into Platte River which we knew as Plum Creek. The wind had blown from the north all day and had chilled us through and

through in our wet clothing. The principal inducement to the halt was the canyon through which Plum Creek emptied into the river. It afforded a sheltered camping place and its sides were covered with red cedar which made splendid firewood. We pitched our tents in behind a high bluff and immediately built a blazing fire. Everybody was busy. Blankets were stretched upon poles before the fire and the wet extra clothing was hung out to dry in like manner. We cooked the best meal the stores would afford and prepared plenty of it. Before night we were all dry and warm, had had plenty to eat, and were again in a happy frame of mind. There was but one thing to prevent complete satisfaction with the situation and that was that at this very point in years gone by several vicious attacks had been made upon emigrants by the Indians. It was a fine place for the Indians to ambush the unwary traveler. Gilmore had learned the story of these attacks on his previous trip and immediately after we had supper he started the members of the company out in various directions to look for Indians. It was an hour or more until sundown, as I recollect, so we climbed to the tops of the hills and inspected the country for miles around. There was not a single sign of Indians anywhere to be seen. He told us to look particularly for smoke as we would probably not see the Indians but would discover the smoke from their fires coming up out of the valleys. The favorable report made to Gilmore did not satisfy him. Weary as we all were, he ordered a double guard that night. I stood with the boys the first half of the night. At sundown the sky had cleared of clouds and the wind had ceased to blow. The whole earth was as still as death. The only sound that broke the silence

was the howl of a wolf now and then away off in the distance.

The next morning the camp was astir bright and early. The oxen and horses were rounded up and hitched to the wagons and after a good breakfast we packed the camp outfit and started on our journey up Platte River, following the south bank. The clear sky and bright sunshine soon made us forget the hardships of the two previous days, and our company was again in good spirits. I have not been able to locate the exact position of Plum Creek. It was out some distance beyond the Grand Island and almost at the beginning of what we called the sand bluffs. I do not recall any incident worth mentioning on the journey up this stream except that in a few days after we left Plum Creek we passed the junction of the North and South Platte. The trail followed the South Platte and we followed the trail. About fifty miles beyond the junction we crossed the South Platte and went over a high ridge and down a steep canyon about five miles in length into the valley of the North Platte. I have never known why this early trail led up the South Platte instead of crossing the main stream at the junction and moving directly up the North Platte, as was done later by all the emigrant trains.

We reached North Platte about night and found a large tribe of Indians in camp. It was no very pleasing prospect to most of us to go into camp so near the Indians, but Gilmore told us that we would not likely have any trouble as Indians were always peaceable when their squaws and pappooses were with them. I never forgot this remark by Gilmore and had occasion many times afterwards, as I shall relate, to