

CROSSING THE PLAINS IN 1856

by
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The following story has been edited only for content; specifically, grammatical and spelling errors reflect those in original manuscript, selected portions of story have been omitted to provide conciseness, and subheadings have been added to reflect audio version.

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Prologue

While I am a descendant of the Wagner family on my mother's branch of the family tree, I am a descendant of the Helm family on my father's branch.

My father was just as proud of his family heritage as my mother was, and rightly so. He used to often tell me how his ancestors had crossed the plains. The following story, as taken from the first hand account of my great, great aunt, Frances Helm McClure, in no small way emphasizes the hardships these pioneers endured on their journey west.

But before I begin to read from her story, I want to acknowledge that while my ancestors made it possible for me to sit here and proudly say I am a fourth generation Californian, my ancestors were not the first to occupy this land. As is true of all the United States, this land once belonged to someone else: the Native Americans.

Keeping this in mind, I have omitted some of the more derogatory remarks my great, great aunt made in describing her encounter with Native Americans. I also apologize for using the politically incorrect term, "Indian" but have done so in an

attempt to avoid corruption of her original manuscript. In her defense, I can only use that old, well-worn cliché, “That was then; this is now,” to address any concerns that may be voiced by the first true Americans. You are not your ancestors—nor am I mine. While we can be proud of them, we should also learn from their mistakes and not repeat them.

Had that member of the wagon train not been so quick-tempered as to hit a brave on the head with a plank, would there still have been a battle? Who among us can say?

Linda S. Helm
April 18, 2008

Starting For California

My father, Allen Helm, was born in Tennessee, December 25, 1801, and my mother, Elizabeth (McClure) Helm, was born in North Carolina, October 27, 1810. I was born on April 9, 1846, and when we started for California I lacked eight days of being ten years old.

Four deaths in our immediate family, delayed our start, and made it a sad one. On April 1st, 1856, however, we finally started, and oh how excited all of us children were at the thought of the long ride, about which everyone had been talking.

In our party were my four brothers, four sisters, two nephews, my little orphaned niece, and sister-in-law.

We went by a small town, called Chapel Hill, and our party stopped there, and did some trading, and bought some candy and gave it to us children, which was a great treat. In those days, we did not often get store candy to eat.

Our party had three wagons. One of these, a spring-wagon with a canvas cover, was drawn by a span of mules, and was driven by my father. The two other, larger covered wagons, were drawn by oxen.

Others had planned to travel along with us. Some of them were relatives of our family, and others were just friends. They had all agreed to start at the same time, from wherever they had been living, and join my father on the road. So, as we traveled along, these families “fell in” with us.

Each family had its own wagons, stock and provisions. But, for protection against Indian attacks, they wanted to camp as near to one another at night as

they could. Because the stock had to be fed, wherever grazing was to be had, made it impossible for such a large party to remain close together all the time.

Those that had loose cattle with them, had to stand guard at night, and be on the watch all day, to keep the Indians from driving off their herd. The whole train had almost to creep along. Wherever there was good grass, short stops would be made to let our stock feed. And, in desert regions, we had to travel by night on account of the heat. Tom Burton, who had been appointed captain, always rode ahead of the party and picked out the camping place for us.

A good average of ox team traveling was from nine to twelve miles in a long day.

The Troubles Begin

At first, we did not see any Indians; but, it wasn't long before our troubles began. And, all of them weren't Indian troubles. One time, the loose cattle got frightened and stampeded. All the men got busy, and tried to keep them back from the wagons. It couldn't be done, however, and as they went running past us, the oxen, drawing the two schooners, became frightened, also, and began to run away.

I was riding in the wagon with my sister Jane, and her two little children, at the time. (We children used to change about from one wagon to the other, whenever we could—just for the fun of it.) I don't know how long the stampede lasted. Only a few minutes, though, I guess. But, the big wagon shook and jolted us as we went pell-mell over the rough ground. My brother couldn't stop the oxen, any more than he could turn them from the direction that they were headed. But, luckily for us, one of the animals—named "Old Broad"—finally stumbled and fell. His body was dragged a little ways. Then, one wheel passed over him, and he was caught between the wheels. This, and his weight, stopped his team-mate—and, just in time! If we had gone ten steps farther that direction, we would all have been killed. It took the men quite a while to get "Old Broad" out from between the wheels, and yoked up again, so that we could go on. Another time, my youngest sister, Nancy Margaret, fell out of the wagon, and one of the heavy wheels passed over her. She was so badly injured, she couldn't walk for a long time, and all the rest of her life, she was troubled by that injury to her hip.

There were lots of buffalo on the plains, then, too. Often we sighted big droves of them. And, one time we saw a large bunch of them, not so very far from where we camped. They began to look as if they were headed toward us. So, our captain got on his horse and went to turn them another direction, for they said that whenever the leader of the buffaloes started, he hunched his head down and never looked up to see where he was going, or what was ahead of him, and that the whole herd would follow him that way, and run over anything

that happened to be in their path. So, our captain rode to where they could see him. As soon as they caught sight of him, they turned and went away in the opposite direction.

We had to cross some rivers that were pretty deep. The Platte River was so deep we had to stay there all one day, while the men cut down big sapling trees. They lashed these together, making a raft to ferry the wagons across. Ropes were tied to the trees, and the raft was guided with these, and the wagons kept from going downstream. They had to swim the stock across.

Pike's Peak And Devil's Gate

We moved so slowly, we were in sight of Pike's Peak for many days. In one place, we could see it so plainly that it didn't seem far from our road, but it must have been many miles.

At another place, where [we] camped, there was a spring of cold water, and about three steps from it, a hot one—so hot that it would burn your finger. There were no holes dug, where these springs were, the water was just running out over the top of the ground; [a]ll of us children had a lot of fun playing there. My sister, Melinda, and I always had to mind the smaller children, whenever we camped, and we were never allowed to go farther than a few feet from the wagons, for fear of Indians.

Even when we were gathering "buffalo chips" or sagebrush limbs to cook with, we had to stay close to the wagons. But, we were all young enough to have a good time playing every chance we had.

I think, it was at the [s]ame camp, where the hot and cold springs were, that we saw the rock pile, they called the Devil's Gate. It wasn't far from our camp, and when the grownups went to see it, all of us children trailed along.

That is how, I happened to get the chance to walk through it. It was a lot of rocks, with an open space between them, and with a long rock laid across the top—like a gate, with an arch over it. All of us walked through it, before going back to camp.

For miles we would travel and see nothing but sagebrush. And, the little prairie dogs would come up out of holes, like squirrel holes, and bark at us, then dodge back under ground again. They were as cute as could be. We, also, saw lots of coyotes, and a few mudhens. We never killed these, however for they weren't good to eat.

Encountering Indians

In all those months we were on our way, I don't think the fear of Indians ever really left us. And, our fears were not groundless. One time, my sister, Louisa, was riding horseback, a short distance ahead of our slow-moving wagons. She had a fine saddle horse, and liked to ride with my brothers, Wesley and Allen—who were driving the cattle—whenever our father would let her. This time, my brothers happened to see the Indians. They told my sister to ride as fast as she could to get to the wagons. The Indians had been hiding in some brush, waiting for us to come up to them.

When my sister started back toward the wagons, they took after her. Father saw her coming, and saw what was happening. He jumped out of the wagon, and started on a run to meet her. And, he was just in the nick of time, for as he grabbed the reins on one side of her horse's head, one of the Indians grabbed the other side.

In a flash, my sister was off the horse and ran to get in the wagon. If the Indian had beaten my father to her, they would have led her horse on a run into the brush and taken her captive. That was what they had intended to do, because that was one of their tricks.

As soon as the men saw what was taking place, they stopped the wagons, and got out their guns, ready to fight. But, when the Indians saw that, they fetched a blood-curdling whoop, and turned and went away—disappearing in the brush.

That was the last we saw of them, but it wasn't long afterward that we knew there was going to be more trouble. For three days, we knew that our train was being followed and watched. There were gulches and rocks and brush all along our road—and, during these three days, now and then, the men of our train, or the boys who were driving the loose stock, would see an Indian's head raise up, out of a gulch, or peer around some rocks or brush. And then, on the third day, when we had stopped to prepare and eat our dinner, quite a few of them appeared and came right into camp.

At first, they pretended they had come in to try and trade for tobacco, bacon and powder for their guns. But, the men could see that they were taking in everything about our train—seeing what we had, and how many of us were in our party, and all.

My father and mother had two small, light, sheet-iron stoves. These had been set up on the ground, a fire made in them, and Mother and my older sisters and sister-in-law were busy about them, getting our dinner ready. We had lots of provisions with us, and always had plenty of good hot food to eat. Dough would

be “set,” and bread baked in the stoves; and, we had lots of dried fruits and cans of honey, for sweets.

I remember watching the Indians as I helped take care of the smaller children. The Indians were all stark-naked, except for a breech cloth. They came right up to our stoves, shoving themselves in among our women-folks, who were cookin, and kept peeking into the pots that were boiling, whatever food that was being cooked for our meal.

Our men-folks my father and big brothers—kept telling them to keep back out of the way, and let the women get the cooking done. They paid no attention to these requests, though. Finally, one of our men couldn't stand [.....it any longer...]. He picked up a piece of flat board, from one of our wagons, and [...used it to hit one of the Indians who was stooping over to look at something in one of the cooking pots on the stove.]

Immediately, the whole lot of the Indians got on their horses and left the camp. Then, because we had heard so many of the awful things they had done to white people who had quarreled with them, or attacked them, we knew that our train would now have trouble with them over this blow struck with that flat board.

An Attack

Our men started getting the camp ready for a battle. They drew the wagons up in a circle, forming a corral. And, as other wagons came up, and heard what had happened, they joined their wagons in our circle. My brother, Benton, said there were thirty wagons altogether in our camp that afternoon and evening.

In this circle of wagons, was where all the women and children were told to stay, if an attack was made. And, two men were chose[n] to act as their guard—one at one end of the camp, the other at the opposite end. The rest of the men had to stay outside the circle to watch the stock, which had to be fed as long as possible. We all knew that the Indians would try to stampede our animals and drive them off, as soon as they started to attack.

A little later in the afternoon, just as we had expected, the Indians—now in a large party, which they had probably gone away after—rushed upon our camp. With whoops and yells, they started circling the camp, shooting with both arrows and guns, though most of them used arrows. And, besides shooting at our wagons, they set fire to the grass as they circled about, and the men, who were guarding the cattle had to fight these fires, as well as fight for their lives, and their stock.

As soon as the fight began, all of us children were put into the false bottom of one of the big wagons. Boards were then laid across, over us, and bedding and provisions piled on top. I had to take care of my little brother and sister, and nephews and niece. It was so hot in there, I thought I would smother. An[d], outside, in between the yelling and shooting, I could hear women-folk crying and praying. Some of them, too, were molding bullets as the fight went on; my sister Jane was one of those who helped make these.

Finally, the battle ended. An Indian, who had been fighting from behind a rock, and peeping over it, was hit by a bullet, fired by one of our men. [M]y brother Benton saw him when he was hit, and told us that he seemed to jump up about six feet, and then topple over backwards. Then, as soon as that happened, all the other Indians stopped fighting, and we always thought that the one we killed must have been their leader or chief—for they galloped to him, and put his body across one of their horses. Then, with a horrible whoop, they all rode away. We looked for more trouble than ever that night, but they never came back.

When the battle was over, both men who had been guarding the wagons, were found to be wounded. Both had been shot at with guns. The men, who had been guarding the stock weren't hurt, although Charles Burton's horse had been shot from under him. He had traded another horse for this much prettier one, from the Indians during that visit earlier in the day. And, they seemed to single him out to kill.

But, loss of the horse didn't make Burton stop fighting for more than a few seconds. The men said that he got to his feet "cussing" as hard as he could, and went right on shooting at the attackers.

After the battle was over, we didn't leave this camp, but stayed there that night. There wasn't much sleeping done, for everyone expected the Indians to come back to fight again and try to wipe out our train, like we had heard stories of them doing. But, they didn't bother us anymore.

Dr. Matthews Has His Say

The next morning, Dr. Matthews came to our camp, and took care of the two boys that had been wounded. The Matthews' party had been traveling just one day behind us. He had tried to make our camp the day before—when he had seen Indians following them, just as we had, and expected trouble with them—but had been unable to make it. The Indians attacked his party, that same day they did us, and he lost all of his stock. Having these, may have been why the Indians did not try again to drive off ours, our trains being so close together, as they were.

Dr. Matthews was a nice-looking man, much younger than my father. And, while he was there, another party came into our camp. These were a woman, two little children, her husband and brother. The Indians had taken everything from them. Their wagons and horses and food. They had just left one old white horse for the woman and two little children to ride. These children were so small, I remember, that she had to hold them both in her lap. And, the Indians had taken away every bit of their clothing, leaving them bareheaded, and I can see yet how their little faces were all blistered and the skin cracked open and sore. The woman was bareheaded, too, and the Indians had taken her shoes, and those of her husband and brother—and, these two men were left afoot. The sand was so hot that their feet were burned. They had been trying for three days to catch up with us.

They wanted my father to bring them on to California. They had no money—the Indians had taken it, too. So, my father told them, he would take them in and feed them, and make room for the wom[a]n and children in the wagons, and bring them to California, but that the two men, would have to walk and help with the cattle. The men said they wouldn't do it. And, when they said that, my father told them what he thought of them. Dr. Matthews was there yet, and he heard all that was said. And, when my father went to pay him for the care of the boys' wounds, he said, "Mr. Helm, you don't owe me a cent—for telling these men what you thought of them!" So, they got in with some other party besides ours. They were two big, stout men, and it looked like they ought to have been glad of the offer my father made them, as they had nothing at all, and with us, they would always have had plenty to eat, and been well taken care of, for my father was a kind and just man, thought he would not let anyone put anything over on him.

Sadness Along The Way

There were other anxious times for us, though. And, we saw lots of things that made us sad. Crossing the Rockies, a woman in another party we had met, died and had to be buried there where our wayside camp had been made. And, further on, when we were getting nearer to California, one of the youngest children of our train, the Kesterson's little boy, was stricken with fever and died. He had been the pet of our train, and it was one of the saddest moments of our whole journey, when he was buried there on the prairie, his little grave marked only by an oak sapling, and rocks heaped on the mound to protect it from burrowing wild animals.

We did not drive our wagons across the grave, as I have heard many of the trains did to keep the place a secret from the Indians.

My sister Louisa helped to take care of the little Kesterson boy during his long illness. In this way, she contracted the fever, herself. And, six weeks after we got to Stockton—on October 5th, 1856—she passed away.

There is one camp too, in Nevada, that I have never forgotten. We reached the place one evening, after dark. We drove our wagons out to one side of the trail and made our camp. It wasn't until the next morning that we found out we had camped on some graves. It gave us all a terrible feeling. But, we had not disturbed the mounds very badly. I remember, that they were in a clump of pine trees, the first pines we had seen.

My father...headed directly for Stockton, for by this time my sister Louisa was so terribly sick, he wanted to get her to where there was a doctor as soon as possible. I remember watching the wagons of the others driving off and leaving us to take another direction. But, while we all felt sad at parting from our kin and our friends, I can see now, that our anxiety over my sister kept us from feeling the separation as deeply as we would have otherwise. It was also the things connected with her illness and death which always remained clearest in my me[m]ory or our arrival at Stockton and our stay there. While it was heartbreaking to give her up—for she was a young lady, and we all loved her so much—it did not seem so bad as it would have been, had she died on the lonely plains, like that poor woman, or the little Kesterson boy. We could always remember her as being buried in a nice place, in the Stockton cemetery.

When she was gone, we again moved on—the last lap of our journey—going from Stockton to Merced County.

Home, At Last

On these final three days of our long, tedious journey, we crossed a number of creeks that had no bridges over them, as they do now. One night, we stayed with a friend of my father's at the Merced River. They treated us so nice, and the next morning, the woman fixed us a big lunch for us to take along with us that day, so that we did not have to stop and cook. On the third day, we reached Mariposa Creek, where my brother Henry was living, and near where the Savannah schoolhouse is now.

Here my father rented the Fitzhugh house for us to live in, until he bought a place from a man named Vance. From the Vance place—upon which my father built a house, which is still standing, although it has been moved to a different location near there, [m]y father and mother moved to White Rock, Mariposa County, and settled on what is now called the “Jim Helm Ranch.” And, it was here, in 1876,

that my father passed away, and where my mother also died, almost ten years later in 1886.

The[y] were always such a happy and devoted couple. I do not ever remember hearing them quarrel. And, both of them were always so good and thoughtful with us children. And, looking back, I know it was their love and kindness and forethought for us children that made the long trip across the plains one of so little hardship, actually, even in the midst of almost hourly dangers.

Epilogue

Three years after arriving in California, Frances, at the ripe old age of 13, married Henry McClure in a double-wedding ceremony with her sister. Frances and her husband settled in Mariposa Creek, where they raised four children, before moving to White Rock. By 1871, most of the Helms (including my great grandfather, Charles Taylor Helm) had migrated to the White Rock/Mariposa area.

Frances lived to be 91.

Remnants of the old Helm homestead still exist at White Rock, although much of the rock itself was removed for use during World War II. There is also a family cemetery there established by Jacob Lewis when his infant daughter died.

Frances was only one of Allen and Elizabeth's 13 children. Not all of their children reached adulthood. In 1857, when Allen sold his good friend, Nicholas Turner, 320 acres in Plainsburg, he stipulated that ½ acre be set aside as a family cemetery. This cemetery, nestled in the center of an almond orchard, is known as the Helm-Turner Family Cemetery and it is now the final resting place of Allen's family as well as descendants of the Turner clan.

Today, the legacy of the Helm family is still very much evident throughout the Mariposa and Le Grande vicinities. The Helm children married into other pioneer families, thus making the Lewises, Prestons, Probascos, Turners, and Westfalls, other branches on my family tree.

