

PIONEERING ON THE GREAT PLAINS

*By William E. Baker**

Slowly the covered wagon drawn by two weary and sweating horses moved westward. The sun this August afternoon 1901 bore down upon parched ground where no rain had fallen for many weeks, creating a temperature, taxing the endurance of both man and beasts. A death like stillness prevailed with only an occasional breeze to rustle the leaves on the Cottonwood trees. The meadow lark with wings lightly spread and bill open sought relief from the burning heat in the shade of fence posts, turfs of grass or weeds wherever possible.

In the wagon with me were my wife and our two small children, one two and one-half years old, and the other 6 months. The baby had become very ill soon after leaving our home near Guthrie, Oklahoma, and now lay listless on his pallet in the torrid heat of the covered wagon.

Our destination was a homestead upon which I had placed a filing the previous winter some 80 miles west of Guthrie in the Cheyenne and Arapahoe Indian Reservation. These Indians had previously selected their allotments of 160 acres each, which was generally nearby or adjacent to running streams, after which, that portion remaining was opened for settlement by the white men, April 18, 1892. The better agricultural land was quickly taken up by homesteaders; however some of the poorer and more hilly land remained unsettled for several years and was used by cattlemen for grazing purposes. It was upon some of this grazing land that I had placed a filing the previous winter.

Since our marriage I had been farming in a small way and teaching school. Two children had been added to our

* Soon after copy for the Autumn number of *The Chronicles* was sent to press, the Editorial Department received the sad news of the death of Mr. William E. Baker—"Uncle Bill Baker"—who personally had contributed this story of "Pioneering on the Great Plains," early last summer. With Mr. Baker's passing on Sunday afternoon, September 22, 1957, Oklahoma lost another of its fine old pioneers who gave much to the history and progress in this State.—Ed.

family and we had collected a small herd of cattle, which had created in us a desire for a home of our own where we could raise our children and pasture our cattle. This prompted us to file upon 160 acres of this grazing land.

The following June after filing upon the land my wife and I had proceeded to our new home where we built a half dugout, dug a well and broke out a few acres of land. Thus complying with the first requirements necessary to obtaining a patent to our new home. We then returned to our old home near Guthrie, planning to work through wheat harvest and threshing to obtain sufficient money to carry us through the winter. That summer being one of the driest ever known in Oklahoma. No wheat was raised and no farm work of any kind was available, making it imperative that I teach school again the coming winter. The regulations relative to a homestead were that the occupant must not be absent from the homestead for more than 6 months at any one time for a period of 5 years, to obtain a patent. To comply with these regulations we had planned to spend the latter part of August on the homestead, and then again a few days during Christmas holidays, and return to it permanently the following spring.

Travel with a team and wagon was very slow, thirty miles per day being a good average. We had started from our home near Guthrie and the first night camped amid large trees in a beautiful cove on the banks of Kingfisher Creek, a few miles west of Kingfisher. The next day we climbed the Gyp Hills, and camped that night among sand hills and black jacks on the east side of the North Canadian River. The next morning we crossed the dry bed of the river and continued on what we hoped to be the last day of our outward journey.

Slowly the sweating horses plodded onward through the intense heat and the soft sandy roads. We were now traveling due west from Watonga, through black jacks and sand hills. About mid-afternoon we came to the allotment of "Big Baby," a Cheyenne Indian, where we turned south one-half mile to the banks of the South Canadian River. This ford was known as the "One-Horse-Crossing," so named for a

Cheyenne Indian having his allotment adjacent to the south-east. The river at this point had a sandy bed near one-half mile across. The extreme drouth the preceeding summer had resulted in the drying up of practically all streams in this portion of the state.

One can well imagine our consternation when upon arriving at the river's edge we found that just recently it had been running almost bank full. And at this time a stream of water some three hundred feet across still flowing rapidly onward. Evidently there had been a flash flood on its head waters far to the west or in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. While the river had now receded to its present flow, no wagon had attempted a crossing since its recent rise. During high waters in this type of sandy bottom streams the swift current will erode out depressions in the river bottom to be filled quickly again with loose sand forming quicksand. After each rise it becomes necessary before attempting a crossing with a team and wagon to wade back and forth across the current to locate and avoid those quicksand traps, and outline a firm crossing. This I had done many times the last several years as we had lived on the north side of the Cimarron river and, Guthrie, our trading point was on the south side. With no bridge, fording became necessary.

The Cimarron and South Canadian rivers were alike in having a wide sandy bed except that the South Canadian was much the broader. One important difference which I learned later was, that the Cimarron where I knew it only had a drop of 7 feet to the mile while the Canadian at this point had a drop of 14 feet. This gave the flow in the Canadian, even when moderately low, sufficient speed to erode out depressions in current bed in a very few minutes and then be filled with quicksand.

I now waded across the current several times before feeling I had located a crossing sufficiently firm to be safe. By aligning trees on the river bank with hills in the distance marking the crossing I had selected, I mounted to the spring-seat beside my wife and at command the horses moved forward.

Either we veered from the crossing as outlined, or in the short space of time between wading across and starting with the wagon a quicksand area had been formed. We had not advanced more than one hundred feet into the current before both horses dropped into the quicksand; only the tops of their heads, necks and hips remaining above water. With a bewildering shock I now realized our situation and the danger confronting my wife and children. Also should the horses be drowned and the contents of the wagon destroyed we would be stranded eight miles from home and relation with neither food nor extra clothing. A very sick baby, and the only means of communication, several miles afoot to post office, thence by slow traveling mail hack to destination. Next to my wife and children the horses had to be saved if humanly possible.

My wife remained in the springseat holding both children while I rushed to the horses' heads and catching each by the bridal bit, with all my strength raised their nostrils above water, enabling them to get their breath. The off-horse soon began to struggle which settled the sand under his front feet raising his head and neck above water. Now centering my attention on the near-horse I soon had it struggling sufficiently to obtain the same results. Pushing back to the double-trees I withdrew the wagon hammer freeing them from the tongue. Then back to the front I unsnapped the breast-straps from the neck yoke, thus freeing the horses entirely from the wagon. All this time watching the wagon intently that the first indication of its starting to turn over I would abandon the horses and rush to my wife's aid. Thanks to the Unseen Forces to be, fortune now seemed to change and be with us.

A moderately heavy load aided materially in causing the wagon to sink in the soft sand to its running gears. Here the sand settled about the wheels up to their hubs holding the wagon firmly in place. The water was now flowing between the top and bottom box. My wife, born and bred on the frontiers of the great plains, sat calmly in the springseat about eighteen inches above the raging waters, clasping the two children to her breast without manifestation of

fear though well knowing the danger confronting us.

The end of a driving line properly applied to work horses can often produce remarkable results. I now exerted all the skill I could command in this particular act. The horses, struggling, to avoid the stinging blows falling upon their necks and shoulders soon settled the quicksand sufficiently firm about them to be driven ashore.

Dropping the lines I pushed back to the wagon and took the oldest child to shore and placed him on the quilt from the springseat. Returning to the wagon I took the baby in one arm, and holding to my wife with the other we reached shore altho at times it seemed the raging current would surely take us off our feet. My wife with the children now sought shelter in the shade of the large cottonwood trees on the river bank, while I hurried on foot across the river one half mile to a white settler with whom we had become acquainted the preceeding spring. Here I found two men willing and ready to help us. Just as we reached the water's edge, a cowboy who was riding range some distance away, espied our wagon stranded in mid-stream and came galloping down to aid in any way possible. First every thing in the wagon was removed and carried ashore. Next we detached the box from the running gears and floated it ashore. We then uncoupled the front gears from the back gears and by working the tongue and front wheels soon had them free and taken ashore. The same procedure was used with the coupling pole and rear wheels. Thus, after considerable time, we had every thing scattered about on the sand bar. We then re-assembled and reloaded the wagon. Just as the sun was going down, our benefactors started wading back across the river to their homes. And as we drove up the banks out of the river bed into the protecting cover of the large cottonwood trees, we experienced a feeling of thankfulness and relief seldom felt in a life time.

Camp was soon established, and with the many dried limbs from the fallen cottonwood trees a rousing fire was soon made.

Other than the quilt from the springseat, everything

in the wagon including wearing apparel and the clothes we had on were thoroughly saturated. Small saplings with forks were cut and placed in the ground adjacent to the fire, and other saplings were cut and placed in these forks. Articles from this saturated assembly were placed upon these poles for drying. The fire was kept replenished and as fast as one article became dry, it would be removed and another put in its place. The coyotes from the surrounding hills with their mournful howl and multiple barking kept up a nerve disturbing contest the whole night through. The great horned owls from their lofty perches in the majestic trees of the surrounding timber kept up their continuous inquiry of "Who, Who, R, U," from dusk to dawn. At the teepee of One-Horse, one-half mile to the southeast, the Cheyenne Indians were holding an Indian dance. The tom-tom with the "Ki Yies" of many voices would peal forth with all energy, after a time to loose some of its volume, only to break forth again with renewed energy and enthusiasm. This continued through the entire night. My wife and I had heard all of these many times before and ordinarily would not have given them more than a passing thought, but after the ordeal through which we had passed the preceeding afternoon, a sick baby lying almost motionless on his pallet except for an occasional outburst from pain, and distress, and the disappointment that our trip had been in vain made this one of the most distressing nights my wife and I have ever experienced during our fifty-nine years of married life. It was not until two o'clock in the morning that everything was sufficiently dry to justify out attempting to get a few hours rest. Even then when our tired nerves longed for peace and quiet, our slumber was continuously broken by the coyotes howl, the "who who," of the owl, and the continuous throb of the tom, tom, only one-half mile away.

Next morning a tired and disappointed couple retraced their weary way over the hot and dusty roads traveled by them the last few preceeding days. The Land Office at that time was at Kingfisher through which we had to pass. We stopped there to see what information we could obtain, and were advised that we could make application for an

additional six months leave of absence which if granted would give me sufficient time to teach school the following winter. This we did and the leave of absence was granted. Our sick baby speedily recovered after reaching home where proper care and medical treatment could be had. The next spring we returned and established permanent residence on our homestead.

My wife and I now frequently hear people speak of "The Good Old Days," but we have no desire to trade our present mode of travel and splendid highways for the old covered wagon and unimproved roads with few bridges. Nor do we care to exchange our present home, though modest, yet fully modern, for the old dugout, the open well, distant from the house from which water had to be carried in both summer and winter, the smoking coal oil lamp, and the men's "rest room" over one hill and the ladies' over another to be used in all kinds of weather. And we give thanks that we have been born and bred in a country, the most wonderful in the world, where such transformation in the lives of mankind has been achieved in so short a time.
