

# Buffalo Tales

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2010

## “TO THE BLACK HILLS, IF NOTHING BIGGER THAN A PUMKIN GOES THROUGH US”

*FROM THE GREAT LAKES TO THE GREAT PLAINS: THE 1877 TREK OF  
EDWIN ALFRED LAMB*

*Part II*

*By Chuck Real*

With his cousin's blessing and encouragement, Lamb began preparations for a journey across the arid northwest Sand Hills country. His preliminary training in such adventure came, as it did to his father and male relatives before him from "having been before the mast." In 1877, he learned that challenges faced on the Great Lakes paled in some respects compared to the challenges he faced as "supercargo" for a train of wagons trekking to the gold fields.<sup>1</sup>

As with sailing, Lamb quickly learned that trekking to the Black Hills with two wagon loads of supplies along with oxen teams would not happen overnight. For several weeks after the two cousins made their agreement, Lamb spent his time waterproofing the wagon covers, training oxen for pulling the wagon, working with Russell on how to drive an oxen team and discussing with Captain Real what supplies were likely needed in the mining camps.

At one point both he and Russell concluded that young oxen could not be teamed together with any realistic hope of drawing a wagon without one or the other of the pairs going off in a different direction. Finally, he and Russell were persuaded by more experienced wagon drivers to pair each young ox with a more mature ox.

After the wagon cover had been further waterproofed through a process of sizing, painted with several coats of probably a milk-based white paint and allowed to dry, the oxen finally made ready to pull the wagon, and supplies loaded. Lamb and Russell had one more task. Along with the dry goods and canned food from the Real general store, they planned on taking flour with them. On the day they departed Grafton with bags of wheat from the Real elevator, they drove north about 4 miles to the Fillmore Mills (Seely's) on the West Blue River and had the bags of wheat milled into flour and loaded into sacks.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the two wagons provided by Real, two other wagon parties asked to join Lamb and Russell's trek to the Black Hills. The two men now found themselves responsible for four wagons. In addition, they also received a request from Ben Lashell of Grafton to go with them. He would travel on foot along with a milk cow. Lashell convinced them that not only would the cow bring a good price when they reached their destination, but also be a steady source of fresh milk for the party. Lashell's father-in-law, a Mr. Wright, asked to join the ever increasing party with the promise to maintain his keep by loaning out his skills as a carpenter and handy-man. It was agreed that the other wagons would meet Lamb and Russell in Sutton, about 10 miles west from Grafton.

With arrangements made to meet up in Sutton, Lamb and Russell set out for the mill. It would be on this short journey that one of the more humorous events of the trek took place. For some unknown reason, Lashell had left his milk cow with Lamb. As the loaded wagon driven by Lamb left Grafton, the animal had been tethered to the back of the wagon. At this point, Lamb narrates "Ben's cow incident:"

*I remember we had to cross a bridge over a creek between town and the mill and I had tied Ben Lashell's cow at the back of my wagon. Ben was also to meet us at Sutton, when he should have been looking after his cow. I had Tom take the lead as I knew he was more experienced than myself, and I would follow until I felt more sure of myself in managing a Prairie Schooner. I had taken every precaution insuring a safe getaway from town.*

had a rope on my lead team. The wheel team could be relied on but the leaders were young and frisky and no telling what they might do, so I was absorbed in them and had forgotten all about Ben Lashell's cow, particularly when crossing the bridge. All at once I heard a lot of hollering and looked up and my chum Tom was running toward me waving his hands and shouting "cow." I stopped my team, looked back and the cow was not on the bridge. She had essayed to go the creek for a drink and when I looked back for her, her hind legs were still on the ground but had I moved a very few feet further ahead she would have been hung in the air. Well, we got the cow down on her four feet again and onto the bridge and tied her with a shortened rope, sailor like."<sup>11</sup>

After they made it to the mill and waited for the wheat to be ground, bagged and loaded on the wagon they went on to Sutton for their first night on the trail and to meet the other outfits. The next morning as they were finishing breakfast and preparing to yoke the teams they were visited by Captain Real.<sup>12</sup> Soon after Real's arrival, the other two four-oxen teams entered the camp with everyone prepared for the next leg that would take them from Sutton to Kearney. Except for some soft places that had to be maneuvered with Lamb's wagon relegated to the rear, it would appear there was only one bit of excitement before reaching Kearney.<sup>13</sup>



Captain Patrick Real  
- 1864

In one of the softer spots along the Platte River, Lamb felt he had sufficiently observed how the others had successfully made it through similar areas of swamp and soft sand and when his turn came, he intended to do the same. He was impressed by the liberal use of whips and the accompanying "whooping and hollering" of the drivers. In practice, however, he came up short. When his lead team

refused to accept either Lamb's use of the whip or his yelling, the wagon came to a sudden stop.

An old frontiersman by the name of Chamberlain was driving the wagon immediately ahead of Lamb. Walking back to Lamb's wagon, the more experienced driver immediately sensed that Lamb was not cut out of the same cloth as the other drivers. Seeing the stubborn oxen eyeing Lamb, the old-timer simply said: "Now stranger, cut out the Sunday school talk and use cattle language if you're meaning to reach the hills this summer." And without hesitation, Chamberlain "ripped out an oath and a whoop, cracked his whip and those oxen straightened out and pulled the wagon to dry ground." Lamb went on to note that Chamberlain calmly informed him of his "sentiments against swearing but when I drive oxen I use the language they understand."<sup>14</sup>

Having reached the Platte River and preparing to cross to its north side, the party decided that Lamb's experience in the soft soil may have been a harbinger of what could happen in crossing the Platte. It was noted that while the crossing could be made by way of a shallow ford they had heard tales that there were quicksand holes in the area that could engulf wagons, cattle or horses that became stalled midstream. At this point, it was decided that the oxen behind the lead wagon would be unyoked so that either four or six oxen would be yoked to each wagon in relays with the crossing being made in a rush. While Lamb seemed bothered by the time lost in this tactic, it was successful without any loss and the rest of the way to Kearney remained incident free.<sup>15</sup>

Reaching Kearney in late May or perhaps early June, Lamb's party found their wagons almost lost in a crowd that he noted as being "hundreds of wagons camped out with the intention of forming into trains." Rumors abounded in Kearney that small outfits traveling to the Black Hills did so at their own peril because of "hostile Indians that were out and infesting the trails to the hills." Lamb noted that he was surprised to learn of any danger and had assumed that the "Government having made a treaty with the Sioux right after the Custer massacre that our trouble so far as Indians was concerned had been wiped out and here we were on our way with a valuable outfit that could bring us good profit if nothing happened to us on the way."<sup>16</sup>

In spite of the talk about danger, Lamb determined he had a great deal of responsibility and debt owed to Captain Real and as the self-appointed supercargo, he was expected to go on and not be turned back because of any "small matter." After discussion with Tom



Russell who agreed with Lamb's assessment, it was decided that if they were going to advance into a place of possible danger they needed to go armed and with a formed group of wagons. In the evening, after the "oxen and horses had been "lariat" out where the grass was good for a night's feed," the other members of the train were consulted. By this time, the Lamb party had grown to "6 wagons with 4 of the heavily loaded wagons pulled by oxen and two not so heavily loaded pulled by mule teams." The latter two were owned by two men from Walla Walla in Washington Territory now trying their luck in the newly opened Dakota Territory. In all, Lamb counted 16 men and one woman in his forming train.<sup>33</sup>

Because of the numbers and probably different opinions on how to proceed as a small train, it was decided to seek out other trains headed to the Hills and see if they could team up. To this end, Chamberlain, due to his own experience of working similar trains, was elected as the group's spokesman to seek out accommodation with a larger train. Lamb noted that not only did rumors persist about hostile Indians that might be encountered, but also the danger of "road agents." As travelers along the Kearney-Black Hills trail would learn before the end of summer, the most evident danger to travelers came from the latter.

Advancing into a camp estimated at 75 wagons with 100 men, Chamberlain apparently attempted to explain how his group would lend both bodies and firepower in case of an attack. This braggadocio did not set well with the wagon boss. He saw that Lamb and some of the others were from the "tenderfeet class" and wanted nothing to do with them. He also reminded the newcomers that most of his men in the train were Civil War veterans who had been "tried by fire." A second attempt the same day to join up with a formed train had the same result with the warning that if Lamb's group attempted to follow at a safe distance and fighting broke out they might be caught in "careless fire."

Without the hoped for welcome from the other trains, which Lamb, Russell and Chamberlain believed may have been due to the size of their small group, the remainder of the evening was spent by Lamb searching for more firepower. At the time they left Grafton, Russell was armed with "one of the latest Colt long barrel revolver." Patrick Real had loaned Lamb a "Smith and Wesson short barrel with the caution to always fire low as it kicked badly."<sup>34</sup>

Lamb's search led him to a Kearney hardware store that was the only one of several that had a weapon for sale at the price he was willing to pay. For \$5.00, he became the owner of "an old Army musket that the proprietor said would shoot anything". Arriving back at camp, he soon found that his inexperience in buying or using firearms was open to outright ridicule from the more experienced westerners.<sup>35</sup>

With the added dubious armament, the small train was prepared to get on the road to the Black Hills. As they prepared to pull out of Kearney in early June they discovered they had yet to decide on a route. In 1877, explained Lamb, there were two routes opened between Kearney and the Dakota Territory. The first considered was a cut-off from the famous Oregon Trail that headed north out of Sidney, Nebraska. The other was somewhat shorter, but less traveled except by stage coach and freight wagons. The latter route led northwest from Kearney and trailed along the western origins of the South, Middle and North Loup and Snake Rivers.

#### Sources:

<sup>1</sup> Supercargo is a nautical term used to describe an officer on a merchant ship responsible for the commercial concerns of a voyage. <http://jaguar.eb.com/dictionary/supercargo>

<sup>2</sup> Although referred to by Lamb as Seely's Mill, the mill in question was most likely the Fillmore Mill as pictured in this article. The picture can be found in both Fillmore County Nebraska A Pictorial History, E. Jane Graff, Donning Co. Publishing, 1999, 24 and online at Nebraska Memories Making Nebraska's Past Unforgettable, [http://www.memories.ne.gov/edm4/item\\_viewer.php](http://www.memories.ne.gov/edm4/item_viewer.php). The mill was built in 1873 and was still in use up to World War I. Picture used through permission of Wanda Marget and the Fairmont, NE, Public Library.

<sup>3</sup> "Memoirs," 6.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>8</sup> "Memoirs," 8. During the summer of 1877, those Lakota who had not yet submitted to the government's order to return to their reservations were being chased by General Nelson A. Miles and rumors abounded as to their presence in northwest Nebraska. James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), 144-146. Sheryl Schmeckpeper, "Catching Crazy Horse: Following the Final Days of the Oglala Hero," *Nebraska Life*, Spring, 2009, 20

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 11.



## 2010 Calendar of Events

Sunday, April 18th from 1-3 pm: BCHS Annual Meeting

Sunday, June 13th: 3rd Annual ½ Marathon: Buffalo County Stampede—Reg. @ 6 am. Race begins @ 7 am

Tuesday, June 15th from 6:30-9:30 pm: 4th Annual Trivia Contest & Soup Dinner

Saturday, July 3rd from 9-10:30 pm: Members Only Night (watch city fireworks)

Saturday, July 10: 25th Annual Wagons West Celebration—Music and Exhibitors from 10-6 pm

\*\*Includes fiddle contest and "What is it?" portion\*\*

Saturday, August 7th from 10:30-1:30 pm: Genealogy Open House with spotlight on One-Room School w/ a picnic!

Saturday, December 4th from 12-1pm: Members Only Preview of the 23rd Annual Christmas Tree Walk

Saturday, December 4th-Sunday, December 12th from 1-5 pm daily: Open to the public: 23rd Annual Christmas Tree Walk

Volunteers and sponsors are still needed for these events. Please contact any staff member to help!

---

Volunteers, chairpersons, and sponsors are still needed. Please contact the office for more information on supporting your Buffalo County Historical Society!

PO Box 523, 710 W. 11th St., Kearney, NE 68845  
(308) 234-3041 www.bchs.us bchs.us@hotmail.com

We hope you enjoy these stories about Buffalo County. We would love to have a stock pile of Buffalo Tales ready, so they can go out in a more timely manner. Please submit your memories and stories to us by e-mailing them to [bchs.us@hotmail.com](mailto:bchs.us@hotmail.com) or sending them to the post office box: BCHS, PO Box 523 Kearney NE 68848.

**We appreciate your support!**

## Director's Report

-Jim Miller, Aaron, and I met to go over the grant paperwork and come up with a plan of action for the **log cabin restoration**. I feel very confident in these two doing the job correctly. The book that the state recommended for us to use will be guiding their decisions. The interior patch work will be completed this year and the exterior will be started in the spring.

-**Teachers Time Out** was a huge success with over 65 teachers attending. I promoted the Trunk Tales and the teachers were eager to check them out. I contacted June Flesner-Becker and she will be helping BCHS with checking these in and out. Free school group tours were also promoted.

-While attending the Connecting to Collections, I picked up an application for another **Smithsonian traveling exhibit**, "**Journal Stories**". The application is due on the 15. Bernie agreed to help me with this.

-Al and Aaron moved the **north outhouse** back against the fence by rolling it on extra fence pieces. They did scrape and paint the back before putting it up against the fence. They are working on repainting the rest of it. It still needs work done, though, as it is very unstable.

**Be sure to Join the Buffalo County Historical Society group or the Buffalo County Historical Society/Trails & Rails Museum fan page on Facebook!**





**Trails & Rails Museum**  
Buffalo County Historical Society  
710 West 11th Street Box 523  
Kearney, NE 68848-0523

Visit us at  
[www.bchs.us](http://www.bchs.us)

**Return Service Requested**

Non-Profit Organization  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Kearney, NE  
Permit No. 7