

# Buffalo Tales

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2011

## “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 III

By Chuck Real

From their conversations with other trains, the Kearney route was disparaged as not having the same guarantee of a supply of water as did the Sidney route. Lamb, however, was in favor of the shorter Kearney route primarily because a stage-coach line set up in the spring of 1877 ran the same route.<sup>1</sup> He reasoned that if a stage coach driving six mules could find water then his group could do the same. In addition, Lamb's group agreed they would set off early enough to be ahead of any other Black Hills bound train using the same route. In this way, Chamberlain seemed to have reasoned that if they encountered any trouble there would be another group of wagons not far behind.

On the morning set to leave Kearney, Lamb, Russell and Chamberlain were still discussing the route to be taken. As they were hitching the oxen teams, their camp was hailed by a stranger. The unidentified newcomer stated that he had overheard some of their conversation with one of the other teams and wanted to “join up with your merry party.” After being introduced to the group and brought into the conversation about deciding the route to the Hills, he suggested: “Well, it's only a toss-up. Why not flip a coin? Heads for the Kearney short route and tails for the Sidney.” Without any reference to what kind of coin was tossed, the end result was the “Kearney short route.”

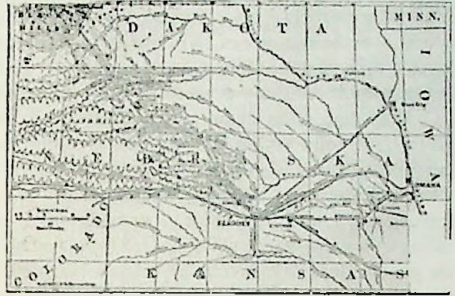
As the group moved away from Kearney they were hailed by yet another wagon and driver who wanted to join up. The new driver referred to only as Joe appears to have been from the Kearney area. An enterprising sort, he was bent on taking a wagon full of eggs to the miners. Although no note is made by Lamb of whether the eggs were fresh or pickled or how they could possible survive the several hundred mile trip in the Nebraska heat, Joe was quickly added to the train that now consisted of 8 wagons and 18 men, plus the one lone woman.<sup>2</sup>

One of their first adjustments made in how they changed their daily habits on the trail came with setting up nightly camps. Chamberlain suggested that the other wagons would “follow the lead team off the road . . . forming a circle large enough to accommodate all the wagons leaving the last wagon to close the gap between the first and next to the last wagon.” This resulted in “making a complete circle with the tongues of the wagons inside the circle. This would be our fort in case of trouble.” Each night the teams were watered at a point where they could find a good grazing place outside the formed wagons.

For Lamb and Russell, the various responsibilities on the trail were divided based on their relative experience. As it turned out Russell “was quite a good cook” and Lamb “was willing to wash dishes, pans and kettles . . . made of metal to withstand hard usage.” Lamb recalled that while aboard ship, he had been called in service more than once “about the cabin . . . and felt pretty much at home with the work.”

The first few days of the trek north found the Lamb group establishing a rhythm to not only the division of labors along the way, but toward the general movement of wagons and animals. On the average, they were advancing toward the Hills at a clip of “15-20 miles a day.” The teams and the few individual horses, along with Ben's milk cow did well on the summer grass. Lamb wrote that oxen were much more adaptable than horses, noting that “cattle would stand more work with just grass feed than horses and if one had to carry grain to feed horses on the road we could not carry very much of anything else.”

On the third day out from Kearney, the men discussed how best to rest the pull teams “already showing fatigue and on hot days shoulders were getting sore from constant hauling.” An occasional longer night camp would be needed to rest the teams and to check the loads that had been moved around with the gait of teams and wagons. At one point they had encountered a heavy rain storm and there were concerns that some of the supplies may have gotten wet. Since the next day was a Sunday they decided that every Sunday would be a day of rest for men, woman and beast. During



*Kearney-Deadwood Trail 1877*

their day off, the men would busy themselves with "general housekeeping and repairing" along with "doctoring of cattle and mules where needed."

Lamb wrote that on one of evenings on the trail leading to the first Sunday of extended rest, he had demonstrated to everyone in camp his inexperience in the west. He had walked out about a "quarter of a mile from camp" to relieve a man assigned to watch the grazing herd. Sometime after dusk and before the cattle and mules would be led back to the camp, he "heard a bloodcurdling yelp—then another and another." His imagination began to play tricks about an impending raid on the wagons. He "hopped at the cattle-lashed at them with a rawhide whip—rounded them into a bunch and started them for the camp whopping and urging them into a run. When he "neared the camp the men were coming . . . and wanted to know what was the matter?" Without hesitation, Lamb exclaimed, "hells bells, don't you hear the Indians coming?" The more experienced countered, "Indians nothing, all we hear is a few coyotes. Let them cattle graze you crazy tenderfoot." To add insult to injury and further damage Lamb's reputation with his companions was his reply: "Well, what's a coyote anyway?"<sup>iii</sup>

After an uneventful week, their second Sunday on the trail found the train gathered in camp for what became their regular Sunday routine. Most of the small talk between the men centered on news items. In the summer of 1877, it had been rumored that "soldiers on the frontier may be called to the east on account of labor troubles, railroad strikes, etc." Lamb noted the group's trepidation at losing possible military protection since they believed the "Indians were more or less hostile again." This discussion eventually got around to the late General George Custer's unfortunate demise "in the Yellowstone Country" the previous summer. With the mention of Custer and the 7th Cavalry, comments soon turn to a general tone of "censure" of Indians.

Leading the more negative comments about Native Americans was "the old frontiersman Chamberlain." Lamb had made a valiant effort to speak protectively of the native tribes by revealing to his fellow travelers that his family at home had discussed the "treatment of the Indian by the government." He noted that treaties between the tribes had been broken by the government and that the government had "doled out rotten rations through grafter politicians who became rich by exploiting the poor redman." Having heard Lamb's take, Chamberlain countered that he could not understand why the Indians "should overrun the whole country for thousands of miles when civilized people can make use of it?" Lamb countered: "They were here first and own the country if anybody does, and we must be fair to them if we expect them to be good to us." Chamberlain's parting remark noted he would "think about their good qualities after we are out of their reach."<sup>iv</sup>

During the next week, as they were "following the South Loup River toward its head," they saw renewed signs of civilization when they came upon a "stockade belonging to the stage coach line where fresh mules were kept for changing off." Lamb wrote that he learned such stations were about 20 miles apart and were good places to pick up "information from the tender, who was willing to talk as he was alone and only met freighters and stage coach people that were few and far between." Perhaps to Lamb's and Chamberlain's chagrin, the tender also noted that the Lamb group was the first wagons he had seen in a month.

As they moved through the third week on the trail they were in the "vicinity of the Middle Loup River, camped on the Dismal River." Lamb estimated they were some 100 miles from Kearney." By this time, the train's "cattle and mules had sore shoulders and sore necks . . . from the chafing of the harness." Lamb notes the animals were treated with "salted water and oiled each night." More importantly, they found that some of the oxen were developing sores that required re-shoeing. The increasingly hot summer days were having an effect on the wagons, especially the rims that were "becoming loose and had to be reset." Joe, the "eggman" was beginning to see his egg supply getting lower and lower as he weeded out heat-spoiled eggs each night. Lamb commensurated that it "was looking bad for Joe's investment."<sup>v</sup>

As they entered their third week on the trail they stopped one night and set about staking out their cattle and mules. One of the men temporarily tied an ox to a yoke while he tended to another. As the tied ox tried to reach the grass within the range of the tether, he began to pull on the yoke. As the yoke was pulled toward the munching ox, the moving grass frightened the animal to the extent that it "started pell mell down through the camp and frightened all the other cattle and mules waiting to be moved outside the wagon circle. There was a stampede on before the teamsters knew what had happened. As Lamb surveyed the result, he found "those that had been tied, pulled their pins and went into the night right on the back track of the way we had driven all day." Only a securely tied horse and Ben Lashell's cow did not join the rest of the stock.

It was at this time, that Lamb experienced "careless firing." While herding stock within a half-mile of camp, he found himself under gunfire. Quickly diving to the sandy soil, he hand-scooped a small depression in which to hide. After what he described as "some minutes" of firing, the gunshots ceased and he pecked up from his hiding place. Once he was sure who ever had been doing the firing had left, he made a bee-line back to the camp to report. Arriving in camp, Lamb learned that the source of gunfire from across the river had been members of his own party who he claimed had killed a "panther." He equated his brief trial under fire with being aboard a rolling ship caught in a storm and not knowing if the next wave might send the ship and crew to the bottom.

Some four weeks after leaving Grafton they closed in on the North Loup. And although slowed by the sandy soil, they hoped to pick up the pace when they reached the area of the Niobrara River. In approaching the vicinity of the Snake River, Lamb wrote that once they left the Snake there would be "long pulls for water" before reaching the Niobrara. As they slowly made their way north the availability of water for the animals became less. On several nights the animals had to depend on the dew covered grass to "help to appease their thirst" with the following day resumed during

the cool of the morning before sunrise.<sup>vi</sup>

In between the Snake and Niobrara they learned from mail carrier that their route did hold potential danger. Lamb claims they were told that only days before one of the stage drivers "had been shot off his wagon." Leaving the carrier, they soon came on to the site of a freshly dug grave they assumed held the body of the stage driver. According to Lamb, "we found the fresh grave on the roadside and erected a marker."<sup>vii</sup>

As they came into sight of the Niobrara River, Lamb again learned how little experience he had in driving oxen, especially thirsty oxen. As he started down a fairly significant incline to the river bank he learned that once his thirsty team sensed nearby water they began ignoring his pull on the reins. At the same time, he noted what appeared to be riders in the distance. This caused him to suddenly engage the wagon's brakes. That sudden action ended up frightening his jittery team. Before he knew it, the team was on a mad dash to the river. The oxen were strong enough to shear off the brake-blocks and at that point Lamb became a passenger.

With Lamb yelling at the wagons in front to get off the trail, his runaway team ran past the wagons in the process of their own descent. Suddenly, "the air was blue," as other drivers and passengers began hollering for Lamb to control his team. There was no control of the team until they reached the "middle of the river and then stuck their heads into the water and drank until they were satisfied." After checking the conditions of the other wagons, the old frontiersman Chamberlain advised Lamb that in his close escape with disaster, "there is just one thing that saved you, and that is you were talking cattle language when you went by—you were cussing like a trooper."<sup>viii</sup>

With the thirsty livestock sated, the members of the party decided that with both timber and water in abundance, they would spend the night and the next day looking after their loads. It was decided that when they resumed their trek they would follow one of the tributaries of the Niobrara that led into the Badlands. And from there it would be an easy pull to the mining camps.

Once Lamb's group had rested and attended to repair of the wagons and loads along with caring for the livestock they struck out for what Lamb described as a stretch of the Badlands in which they would be hard-pressed to find suitable grazing or guaranteed water. After crossing into the Dakota Territory, however, he must have thought that the hardest part of the trek had been accomplished as his narration suddenly ends.

The May 1935 letter by Lamb appears to have been his last word on the outcome of his 1877 venture. In that letter, he wrote that after reaching the "mining district in the Black Hills, I returned to Nebraska where I was engaged as a salesman and on the road a great deal of time." At some point during this time, he returned to his Port Huron, Michigan home where he met Agnes I. Spinks of nearby Marine City. In 1881, he and Agnes journeyed to Nebraska and performed their marriage vows home of Patrick S. Real.

After their marriage, the new bride and groom homesteaded in what became Nelson County in the state of North Dakota. By this time he was joined by some of his own family members and because he helped relocate so many settlers from Michigan, the Lamb's soon named a growing new village Michigan City.<sup>ix</sup>

Agnes Lamb died in 1892 and in 1895 Lamb married Elizabeth Ward. At the time of his death in 1937, Lamb retained property in North Dakota and Minnesota and had residences in Minneapolis and Sarasota, Florida. <sup>x</sup>



*Edwin Lamb  
1913*

i The Kearney-Black Hills Trail originated through the efforts of Kearney banker C.W. Drake. The Central Nebraska Press and Weekly Kearney Times extolled the route in comparison to the Sidney cut-off. Later, having won a mail contract to deliver mail to the miners in the Hills, the route became traveled by stage coach passengers, wagon trains and prospectors. More reading on the trail can be found in: Mardi Anderson, "Freighting In Buffalo County," Buffalo Tales Vol. 8, No. 2. Buffalo County Historical Society (February 1985).

ii "Memoirs," 11.

iii Ibid., 13

iv Ibid., 15

v Ibid., 16.

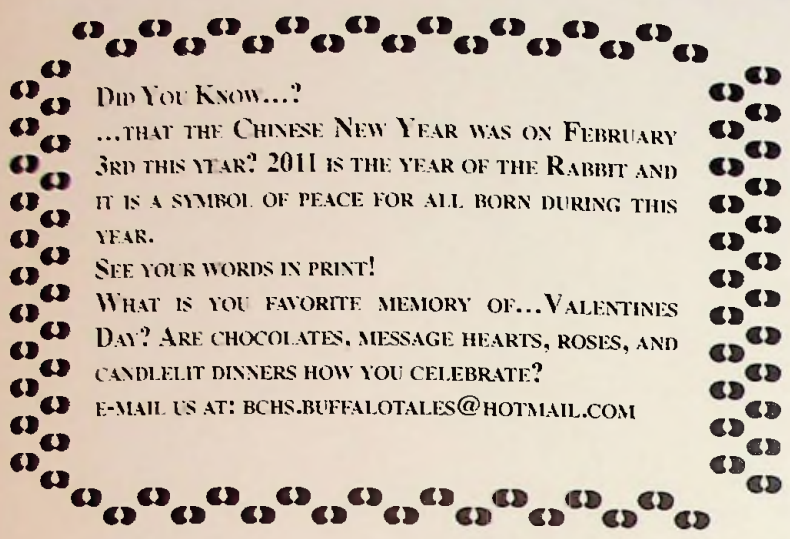
vi Ibid., 20.

vii On June 18, 1877, a stagecoach driver with the Kearney and Black Hills stage line would be shot and killed while driving his 20 mile assigned stretch between Swan Lake and the Snake River in Nebraska. Reports to the Kearney sheriff said the young driver had been killed and scalped by Indians. However, a later U.S. Army investigation found that the driver had been killed by a white man and an investigation by the military found no signs of the body being mutilated. Mardi Anderson, "Gilbert C. Fosdick II, Stagecoach Driver," Buffalo Tales Vol 25, No. 3, Buffalo County Historical Society (May-June 2002).

viii "Memoirs," 22.

ix Joseph Lamb, Letter to Chuck Real, 26 October, 1995.

x "Lamb Letter," "Descendants," 49-50. Unspecified March 19, 1937 Sarasota newspaper news clipping. Office of the County Judge, Fillmore County, Nebraska, Marriage License and Certificate of Marriage, No. 307, September 22, 1881.



**Did You Know...?**

...THAT THE CHINESE NEW YEAR WAS ON FEBRUARY 3RD THIS YEAR? 2011 IS THE YEAR OF THE RABBIT AND IT IS A SYMBOL OF PEACE FOR ALL BORN DURING THIS YEAR.

SEE YOUR WORDS IN PRINT!

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE MEMORY OF...VALENTINES DAY? ARE CHOCOLATES, MESSAGE HEARTS, ROSES, AND CANDLELIT DINNERS HOW YOU CELEBRATE?

E-MAIL US AT: [BCHS.BUFFALOTALES@HOTMAIL.COM](mailto:BCHS.BUFFALOTALES@HOTMAIL.COM)



**Buffalo County Historical Society's Annual Don't Come Event!**

Don't dig out the tux or the ball gown and make plans of your own that evening! We won't give you a time or a place because we don't want you to come! Invite only for the biggest gala that Buffalo County will never see!! You will receive a souvenir ticket after you RSVP for the most FABULOUS event of the non-season!



**Celtic Festival**

Come to the Trails & Rails Museum March 19th 1-4pm to enjoy Celtic culture and music! The Thunder Craic Musicians and Dancers from Lincoln will be performing at different times during the day. The Highland Pipers bagpipe band from the Kearney area will also be performing. Free Admission! Come dressed in Traditional Celtic costume and add to the festive air!

BUFFALO TALES is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization, whose address is P.O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848-0523.  
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Katherine Wielechowski, Editor

2011 Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

Individual .....	\$35.00
Family .....	\$40.00
Institutional Membership .....	\$50.00
Supporting Membership .....	\$75.00

\*\*We have replaced the word 'Basic' to 'Family' \*\*

**Directors**

Term expiring June 1, 2011: Dr. Mark Ellis, Sharon Martin, Duane Muhlbach, Barb Riege

Term expiring June 1, 2012: Mary Kenny, Janice Martin, Dan Speirs, Garry Straatmaan

Term expiring June 1, 2013: Vicki Bissell, Jim Cudaback, Chad Henning, Lynn Rauner

**Officers (1 year term)**

President .....	Dan Speirs
Vice-President .....	Sharon Martin
Secretary .....	Barb Riege
Treasurer .....	Lynn Rauner

## 2011 Calendar of Events

Date Time TBD: Don't Come Event

Saturday, March: Date Time TBD: Irish Festival

Sunday, April 10th from 1-3 pm: BCHS Annual Meeting

Sunday, Date TBD: 4th Annual 1/2 Marathon: Buffalo County Stampede—Reg. @ 6 am, Race begins @ 7

Saturday, June 25 (time TBD): 26th Annual Wagons West Celebration \*\*Includes fiddle contest\*\*

Date Time TBD: Golf Tournament

Tuesday, October (date/time TBD): 5th Annual Trivia Contest & Dinner

Saturday, Oct. 22 (time TBD): Old-fashioned Halloween Party

Saturday, December 3rd from 12-1pm: Members Only Preview of the 24th Annual Christmas Tree Walk

The first two weekends in December (3rd/4th and 10th/11th) from 1-5 pm: Open to the public: 24th Annual Christmas Tree Walk

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

Education notes:

March hours: Monday-Saturday 1-5 pm daily (crane season)

Wild Science Thursdays will return in the summer!

Ghost Hunting classes-check the web site for more info.!

Kearney Public Schools have the museum reserved for two weeks: May 2-14, 2011

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  
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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

-68, of the 150+ Lutherans that were in town for a state-wide convention on Sat. Nov. 20th, came to the Museum to help decorate the grounds for Christmas. Bernie and Marilyn organized the groups and provided refreshments.

-John Robbins was going to come in and add in a couple more outlets to the front of the stage to help alleviate the issues we had during the 2009 Christmas Tree Walk with blowing fuses. However, he said he couldn't do that because the electricity can't be carried over anymore without being a fire hazard.

-The Mid-America Arts Alliance received a grant to continue the HELPers program and offered BCHS to continue in the program. Carla Patterson, the same lady that came and spoke to the board a couple times in 2009, called me and specifically asked that we apply. I did submit an application and we should hear soon. This program would be about community engagement, strategic planning, and resource management.

-I am starting to work with our summer intern already b/c she is willing to chair the golf event as a fundraiser. The planning has begun.

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



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