

Bandy

BREAKFAST ON THE BIG HORNS

Surveying the Free Lands, Reminiscences of W. R. Bandy

This colorful oil painting by artist Shorty Shope is of a camp scene on the summit of the Big Horn Mountains where my survey party spent the night of August 12, 1912. The painting is based upon a kodak picture of the camp I took at breakfast time the following morning. At that time I was employed by the U. S. General Land Office to assist in surveying the remaining unsurveyed public lands in the outlying areas of the mountainous West. Such a survey was necessary to enable the homesteaders to locate the boundary lines of their claims and to obtain title to them. That was a free service furnished the citizens by the Federal Government to promote the settlement of the Western states. The job was a somewhat nomadic one, requiring much moving from one district to another to meet the needs of new settlers coming to look for homesteads of free land. My party consisted of five survey aids, a teamster and a camp cook.

✓ My wife, Inez, and I had not been married very long when I got that survey job. I had worked several years before that on other engineering jobs in Wyoming and Idaho, but was out of a job at the time. That position with the Civil Service of the Federal Government appeared to be more or less permanent, so I was glad to get it. We saw it would take me away from home for months at a time, camping throughout the mountains, and she wanted to go along, stay in camp where she could be helpful to me, and, incidently, see a lot of new country. Regulations prevented anyone from living in a government maintained camp unless they were employees of the Government, so

she volunteered to give the cooking job a try. I was glad to find her willing and desirous of sharing in the camp life, which meant living in a tent with a dirt floor, sleeping on the ground, with the wind flapping the canvas and kicking up dust all day long, together with many other inconveniences foreign to a Missouri girl fresh from home! She was a little dubious as to whether she could please the men with her cooking. She had never cooked before except to help her mother. I encouraged her by saying the boys would be easy to cook for because they were always hungry. The field men took sandwiches every work day for lunch, and they put up their own lunches while at the breakfast table, which made it easier for the cook. So I bought her a White House Cook Book and she was in business! It worked out fine. She stayed with it for three summers, while we had no children. Being raised in Missouri, camp life in a tent on the Western Frontier presented many problems she had never heard of, most of which arose when she was alone in camp and had to cope with them the best she could, such as: A wind storm might swoop in and flatten the tents, or the wind sometimes worked the stove pipe loose from the stove with a fire going. At such times she would have to grab a gunny sack and fit the pipe back on the stove before the canvas caught fire -- soot flying all over and settling on the table and dishes. There was seldom a dull moment, it seemed. Her more vivid recollection was her first encounter with a packrat, which she had never seen before. One morning while washing dishes at the stove, she looked back at the cupboard and spied an animal watching her over the edge of the ginger snap keg. She said its big ears, bug eyes and long whiskers looked pretty savage to her! We were all

in the field at the time, leaving her alone in the wild and unknown land. She remembered the old revolver I kept under my pillow. She had never shot a gun, but she hurried to get the pistol. Taking rest on the table, she fired at the beast. When the smoke from the black powder shell cleared away, up pops the head again, eyes glistening and tail slapping the side of the carton. She shot the remaining shells with no result except to riddle the messbox. Not to be outdone, she courageously wrapped a gunny sack around the ginger snap box and nailed the package tight in an empty egg crate. When we returned to camp she proudly pointed to the egg crate and asked us to take a look, and name it! She enjoyed telling the story to her wide-eyed grandchildren! One day a rattlesnake coiled up between the stove and sugar sack. She knew how to deal with it! On the plus side of this story, it was not long before she acquired a pet magpie that learned to squawk a few words -- later on she picked up a "bum" lamb that stood at the oven door wagging its long tail for biscuits!

At the time we camped overnight on the summit of the Big Horns we were ^{on} a long move overland in wagons from one section of the country to another. It was from Martin Ranmael's homestead farm about 10 miles southeast of Cooke City to the W. T. Broderick homestead and the Hilton Lodge east of the Little Horn River and south of Wyola, Montana. Mr. Ranmael, a native of Norway, had waited several years for a survey because his ^{homestead} was such a difficult place to reach. When he built his house the nearest road to his place was at Cooke City. He was most friendly and courteous, and a man of unusual dexterity. According to reports he had built his nice house, all with smooth shingles and weatherboarding, entirely from native logs, using only the broadax, foot adz, and hand saw. It was a show place, really.

Having completed surveys around Ranmael's place the for part of August, we were directed to proceed to the Little Horn area some 150 miles east, by a round about road. Mr. Ranmael bade us a fond farewell as we left with wagons piled high with camping equipment and supplies. As was the practice in those days, we carried with us food supplies, horse feed, tents, bedrolls, dishes and everything needed for us to live off the country for weeks at a time. There were no swank motels or garish hamberger stands dotting the landscape as at present. It was then the custom throughout the West for travellers to stop over night wherever darkness over took them. They thought nothing of pitching camp on the edge of town rather than go to a hotel or rooming house.

As we were going through Sunlight basin some bad mudholes and steep hills making it almost impassable. One time we got stuck with the bedwagon and had to carry a part of the load by hand ahead to dry ground. In Sunlight we met Forest Supervisor R. W. Allen, now President of the Shoshone National Bank of Cody, who was helpful by advising us about roads. We passed over Dead Indian Hill, the famous land mark where one going west must drag a good sized tree with the limbs still on it, to keep the wagon from getting ahead of the horses! The first night out we camped on the head of Pat-O-Hara Creek at the foot of Hart Mountain. There the wolves kept us awake with their blood-curdling howling.

The second night out we were at the Cody bridge. There we replenished our supplies and also soaked ourselves in DeMaris Hot Springs, the outdoors bathing pool of boiling sulphur water that gave the river its Indian name,- "Stinking Water".

We did not expect to see much of interest on our trip east from Cody across the Dry Creek basin, a wind whipped desert of salt-sage and greas wood. However we did observe several native inhabitants. First to greet us was a happy yellow-breasted meadow lark, with a black spot on his chest. He was singing from his perch on a greasewood. Also present was a bob-o-link, a black bird with a white spot on his wings. He did his usual "thing" by flying straight up 30 or 40 feet high, then gracefully float down as he sang ^{his} standard song, quoted by the poet as being "Bob-o-link, bob-o-link, spink- spank- spink." Often seen were prairie dogs barking from the side of its hole, their short tails bobbing with each effort.

We continued our trip, crossing the Big Horn River at Kane, Wyoming and camped at the foot of the mountain. The next day Inez and I took a short cut and walked ahead while the men doubled up the teams and pulled each wagon up one at a time. For us it turned out more of

a climb than anticipated. About noon we got hungry and discovered we had inadvertently left our lunches in the wagons! Seeing a sheep wagon over by a spring we swung over to it. There was no one home, but a part of a mutton hung in a tree wrapped in a flour sack. It looked like "manna from heaven" to us. She fried some mutton chops, opened a can of tomatoes and of corn and we had a feast. A thank you note was left for the nice shepherd. About four p.m. we luckily joined up with the wagons and joyously climbed aboard. It was a great relief to again settle ourselves in a spring seat. We could then enjoy the interesting scenes of nature much better from that vantage point. As the caravan continued along the old crooked Indian trail that's "nobody knows how old", my brother, Willis, spotted a covey of ruffled grouse and bagged a few young ones for breakfast with his "22 Special" Colt revolver.

It was getting near sundown before we found water for an overnight camp. We began to wonder if we could find water before darkness closed in on us in that vast solitary wilderness. We were at an elevation of 9,500 feet above sea level, and not even a road in sight. Seeing the big snow drift ahead, it looked promising. Karl pulled down and parked the wagon on a level spot below the snow drift by a small trickle of water seeping from beneath it. Everyone was tired and hungry and no time was lost in getting supper started. Groceries were hurriedly dug out of the wagon. Some got the stove out and set it up, others got wood. Potatoes were peeled and ham cut. It was not long before the fragrant smell of frying ham filled the mountain air! Road dust was wiped off the granite dishes and supper was ready, with plenty of gravy and hot biscuits. A tent

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was put up for my wife. Karl had fed the horses their oats. After supper the horses were hobbled, a cowbell put on one, and all turned loose to graze during the night. The men slept out beneath the star studded dome.

Waking up during the night and hearing the gentle tinkle of the cowbell, I turned over and went to sleep again with the comfortable feeling that ~~everything~~ ^{At least we still had a saddle-horse.} was well! The next morning the stream had quit running, pools were frozen over, and ice on the water pails I had thoughtfully filled the night before. It being a little breezy, Karl put the piece of striped canvas under the edge of the wagon box to protect Inez from the cold north wind, "the fierce kabbabinokka" of Hiawatha fame, while getting breakfast. After breakfast we all went up on the snow to frolic so the boys could write home about snowballing in August. The snow was too hard to make snowballs, it was hard to stand up on. Although we were well above timber line, and it froze ice every night, many alpine flowers and shrubs were seen growing along the edge of the snow bank, struggling to live out their life cycle in spite of the many handicaps. As soon as the snow edge moved slowly upward, uncovering the dormant plants, the impatient buttercups, clustering rock asters, snowdrops, and other alpine flowers lost no time in doing their "thing" to brighten their part of the world. Even with an inch or more of snow yet to go, the sun's life giving rays penetrated the icy pane, causing the struggling bulb to push up through the ice, straighten up, and unfold in all its glory. We stuck some of the flowers on our hats. How else could those little flowers get up in the world? That was their only chance to add their bit! Had it not been for our visit those beauties might have lived in vain! Probably a long, long wait before other

visitors came!

The idea to take a picture of the breakfast scene came to me on the spur of the moment as I glanced at the busy camp there at the foot of the huge bank of last winter's snow. As I stood there downwind from the outdoors kitchen waiting for breakfast and enjoying the aroma of frying mountain grouse and the coffee pot, the rising sun at my back cast its warming glow over the colorful scene ahead. I then snapped the picture catching a perfect view of my wife, Inez, as she stood, rosy-cheeked that frosty morning. Standing between the cook stove and the red and green painted wagon, she dominated the scene as the center of attraction. A scene so aptly emphasized by the skillful artist! With the stove loaded with frying pans and skillets, she deftly speared herself a choice piece of grouse with that ever busy left hand of hers! So intent was she, my picture taking went unnoticed. It was that unforgettable scene I wished to record for the admiration of future generations!

It was 58 years later, 1970, that my daughter, Zoe, and I requested Artist Shope to execute an oil painting of that memorable scene in nature's unspoiled wilderness, which painting we have dedicated to the memory of that Missouri girl who cheerfully braved the rigors of camp life on the wild frontier to be with her husband and his nomadic survey party, assisting him, and sharing their exciting experiences and fun. The painting's continuing values are the memories it recalls to mind, and also its historic worth in depicting numerous items of equipment in everyday use in their own environment, and in addition it illustrates a way of life for a segment of frontiersmen in an era past!

One needs but to sit before the picture in serious contemplation to relive deeds of yesteryear; to have associations and friendships come alive; possibly moments words cannot describe! Wide is the range one's imagination may take him if he gives it free rein.

At the time I took the photograph we were many miles from any settlement or traveled road. There was no thought the scene might at some future time have historical values. Fortunately, a close study of the painting does reveal many interesting items and practices peculiar to that age, such as:

Heavy "dead ax" farm wagon with spring seats, side-boards, mountain brake, jockey box for spare horse shoes, rasp, hoof-knife, horseshoe nails and shoeing hammer, curry comb and axle grease.

A team of horses with harness of the period is shown.

Wood burning camp cook stove.

Long handled frying pans for open fire.

Heavy 16 inch top hobnailed leather boots.

Homemade cupboard fitted to back of wagon box, with cooktable made from hinged door.

Coal oil lanterns.

The scene showing the difference between camping methods then and now.

Given the right mood, persons with nomadic inclinations could ponder this painting and read much more early Americana between the lines!!