

The Water Scrape

“Funny thing about water is you don’t think much about it until you don’t have any.”

I could hear my grandfather’s voice, with its Irish accent, talking to me across the years. His name was Jeremiah Stokes and he was about twenty-four, he thought, in 1865, the year he soldiered in the west. That summer his company of the 2nd US Volunteers was assigned to escort a train of army supply wagons to Santa Fe, New Mexico.

“Hundred fifty miles west of Fort Leavenworth we passed Council Grove, the last hardwood on the Santa Fe Road. Beyond was the ‘Prairie Ocean.’ There was still water though, in Cottonwood Creek, Turkey Creek, Walnut Creek. 392 miles, sixteen days march’n, we forded the Arkansas.”

“At Fort Larned, on the Pawnee Fork, every man was issued a second canteen which we filled at the ford, and the leaky water barrels on each wagon for the animals. In the river I could see little sunfish swimming in the deeper parts. I stopped to eat a tin of chocolate I’d bought at the sutler’s store at Fort Dodge. It only made me thirsty. Up ahead was the water scrape.”

They had reached the line of the 100th Meridian, once the boundary with New Spain. Across the Arkansas River lay a dry, featureless, windswept area of sand dunes and stunted buffalo grass stretching south for over a hundred miles from the Arkansas to past the Cimarron: “And the Cimarron was nothing but a dry river bed most times of year. The place was known to the old fur traders as “the water scrape.” Spanish explorers called it *El Jornada del Muerte*.

Soon they encountered a maze of buffalo traces that obliterated the trail and made it impossible to find the few springs that offered life sustaining water. Here, in 1826, Jedediah Smith left his dehydrated and desperate party and went out alone to try to find water, only to be found himself and killed by a war party of Comanche, who ruled the *Jornada*.

“We continued the march, twenty miles a day.” There was no shade. They marched in ‘shirtsleeve order,’ not much relief from hundred degree heat. The sun burned exposed skin, lips cracked, eyes dried. They struggled on, one staggering step after another after another, punished by an unrelenting sun, by a fierce, dry, south wind, and by clouds of buffalo gnats and mosquitoes. “And ‘chiggers’ that found ways into your underwear and into your skin. What water we found was foul with the putrid remains of old buffalo wallows.”

“On the fifth day into the “water scrape” everyone’s canteens were empty and we were drinking the animal’s water. That was the day of Comanche appeared.

“It was a war party by the look of their paint and feathers. They never attacked. They didn’t have to, just shadowed us at a distance making it impossible for us to send out scouts to try to find fresh water.”

“They’re just waiting of you to make a mistake, Lieutenant.” warned Sergeant Kerwin. But old Lieutenant Otis, he never did. We just trudged on, crushing beetles every step. Past the dry Cimarron, where even the water barrels ran bone dry. Sure, we was pretty parched by the time we finally reached McNee’s Crossing on the North Canadian. Did we ever splash in it.”

One month later they marched into the sophisticated and cosmopolitan city of Santa Fe, full of those Spanish ladies that every young Irishman wants to get to know, and delivered their supplies at the Palace of the Governor. They had marched 775 miles and survived the infamous “water scrape.” I like to think of Jeremiah walking into the bar at the old Exchange Hotel just off the Plaza of Santa Fe and ordering his first *margarita*. But perhaps he settled first for all the cold water he could drink.