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I Was A Bullwhacker (From The Reminiscences Of George E. Vanderwalker, 1864)

George Vanderwalker

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"Stage Ride to Colorado," Harpers New Monthly Magazine, July 1867
Theodore R. Davis

I WAS A BULLWHACKER

(FROM THE REMINISCENCES OF
GEORGE E. VANDERWALKER, 1864)

My first experience in "whacking" was in 1864 when I was sent out from Leavenworth to Diamond Spring, just west of Council Grove.

The company that hired me sent men and wagons out, but most refused to go any further West (than Diamond Spring), owing to the Indian scare. I was accepted; the company, no doubt, considered, "half a loaf is better than none." Thus it happened that on an early June day in 1864, I was dumped from a west bound coach at Diamond Springs in the middle of an odd collection of human family. Generally speaking they were long on everything but money, clothes, and religion.

After our arrival in camp we tenderfeet were being instructed in the art of how to handle a wagon with a live end to it, and the proper manner of carrying an ox yoke and bow in yoking the cattle for hitching them to the wagons. A whip was given each driver of the outfit, the lash being about sixteen feet in length with a "popper" (whipcracker) added and fastened to a whip stock eighteen inches in length by a buckskin thong. This instrument of torture required my constant manipulation during my first two hundred miles of the trip before I became proficient enough in handling it to prevent it from going about my neck and hanging me. A gun was issued each man for protection of his life and property. Mine was just one removed from the blunderbuss vintage. Among its interesting adjuncts was a tape cap arrangement on the side of the lock. The original intention of its maker had been that in cocking the gun the

side arrangement pushed the tape over the nipple of the piece, and the hammer striking the tape on the nipple ignited the priming below, thus saving the time of capping the gun in the old way. But a strong wind would often crowd the tape out of place. At times the tape became damp causing a misfire, and often at a very critical time. As a “has-been” relic it could set up among the most ancient; but for actual everyday business it was a failure.

Everything necessary for the handling of the train was furnished by the company, even gunny sacks for the buffalo chip depository. We all carried ten-gallon kegs on the reach poles of our wagons at the rear for water in case of long drives between drinks or of an accident on the road. Each man belonged to a particular mess, where he was supposed to have a vested right to seat himself on mother earth and fill up. (Bullwhackers walked the entire time.) All members of an overland freighter in the early days were called fictitious names foreign to his regular one. They dubbed me “Yank” and Yank I was during that trip. But a fine bunch to “stick,” under any circumstances than our mess I’ve never seen.

An outfit was usually composed of twenty-six wagons—one mess, the other twenty-five freight, with six yoke of cattle to the wagons (12 cattle in all). My previous experience in the bovine line

having been with nothing more fierce than a milk cow, caused me to show up rather awkward in yoking any cattle into teams for my wagon. Consequently I picked the most unruly and meanest of the herd. Two of my teams were never unyoked during the whole trip. They were so contrary, though yoked together, they mutually agreed to disagree and always tried to pull in opposite directions. After the teams were hooked up to the wagons and everything being shipshape to the captain’s satisfaction, the big overland freighters commenced to slowly drift toward the setting sun.

There was with every outfit a bunch of loose cattle driven in the rear of the train by two extras. The loose cattle were called the “cavey yard” and were for use in case of an accident to the teams. The choir of such an outfit consisted of one wagon master and his assistant and two extras. These four rode mules. One night herder, who was supposed to sleep in the wagons while the train was on the move. If he did, I don’t know how he managed to do so, for when one of those wagons fell into a rut, it fell in with a chunk. And then there were twenty-six irresponsible bullwhackers who walked and took the dust. The bullwhackers received forty-five per month and feed. Only a stomach capable of digesting feathers in a wad could long survive the food before indigestion took a fall out of it. Taos



She Eateth Not the Bread of Sloth II
Matthew Regier

Lightning, or “Mule Skinners’ Delight” was frequently used as an antidote. Then there was the water. In the plains country the men and animals were frequently compelled to depend on buffalo wallows and soft mud deposits for water to supply their needs. In making camp the driver’s first duty was to unyoke his cattle. After being unyoked, the cattle would

invariably make directly for these water holes, riling up the already disagreeable appearing fluid and then standing in it to cool off, thus making it still more unpalatable for domestic use.

George Vanderwalker’s reminiscences appeared in “On the Santa Fe Trail” edited by Marc Simmons.