



Nebraska History posts materials online for your personal use. Please remember that the contents of *Nebraska History* are copyrighted by the Nebraska State Historical Society (except for materials credited to other institutions). The NSHS retains its copyrights even to materials it posts on the web.

For permission to re-use materials or for photo ordering information, please see:

<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/magazine/permission.htm>

Nebraska State Historical Society members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* and four issues of *Nebraska History News* annually. For membership information, see:

<http://nebraskahistory.org/admin/members/index.htm>

Article Title: "Camp Life West of the Missouri: Among the Sand Hills of Nebraska"

Full Citation: George Bird Grinnell, "Camp Life West of the Missouri: Among the Sand Hills of Nebraska," *Nebraska History* 83 (2002): 47-49

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH2002SandHills.pdf>

Date: 9/21/2012

Article Summary: The fossil-hunting expedition that brought Grinnell to the Sand Hills in 1870 was the first of many trips recorded in his essays and books. This reminiscence contrasts the relative ease of travel into the West by train in Grinnell's time and the experience of emigrants bound for Utah or California just a few years earlier.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Ornis (George Bird Grinnell), O C Marsh

Nebraska Place Names: Sand Hills, Dismal River

Keywords: Ornis (George Bird Grinnell), Union Pacific Railroad, Central Pacific Railroad

Photographs / Images: C Barron McIntosh's "Proposed Correction of Route for O C Marsh's 1870 Sand Hills Expedition"

"Camp Life West of the Missouri: Among the Sand Hills of Nebraska"

George Bird Grinnell published six stories in Forest and Stream magazine under the pen name Ornith, five between October 1873 and February 1874, and one in 1909. "Camp Life West of the Missouri," also signed Ornith, and published here for the first time, describes the early days of a fossil-hunting expedition with O. C. Marsh in 1870. Ornith, Greek for bird, is no doubt a play on Grinnell's middle name, the source of the nickname "Birdie" given to him by other "pilgrims" on the Marsh expedition.

Although since the completion of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific Rail Roads, what was formerly termed the "Far West" has ceased to be the terra incognita that it was prior to 1868 [*sic*], nevertheless, there are still vast wildernesses of prairie and mountain territory that have never been visited by the white man. Exploring parties and detachments of government troops have traversed many unknown regions, and have laid bare many of the wonders of that marvellous country that lies between the Missouri River and the Pacific Ocean, and still new phenomena are being brought to light and fresh beauties are being discovered almost every day. During the past summer the existence of vast forests of pines is reported upon the head waters of the Niobrara by a party of surveyors who have penetrated into that unknown land, a land hitherto untrodden save by the foot of savage animals, or the still more savage red man. The strange beauties of the Yellowstone region, almost unknown until quite recently, are too familiar to every reader to need more than a bare mention.

The mind struggles in vain to form an adequate conception of the vast extent of country through which we pass. We attempt to estimate it in miles, but this measure is too small and fails us just when we most need it. While travelling on the cars indeed, the distances do not seem so great. Occupied as the traveller naturally is with book, cards or conversation, time and distance alike fly swiftly by, and the journey's end is reached almost before he is aware of it. Then too, the fresh scenes and novel objects that attract and interest him at each glance that he casts from the car window help to make the hours pass quickly, and soon after supper and a last cigar, he turns in not to be disturbed till breakfast time next morning. Thus five hundred or a thousand miles may be passed over by the careless tourist without costing him a thought beyond his own personal ease.

It is when we leave the Rail Road, however, and, mounting our horse, start off northward or southward that we begin to realize something of the distances to be traversed.

Look back a few years and contemplate the spectacle of an emigrant train on its way to Utah or California. Think of the tired men, women, and children who day after day, toiled along over the naked plains, frozen by the chill blasts of winter and scorched by the summer sun; of the utter weariness with which their eyes must have turned from the monotonous prairie toward the horizon and of the joy with which they must have hailed the sight of a wooded water course and the first glimpse of the mountains with their snowy caps. Observe

the heavy wagons with their shining white tilts, dragged painfully along over the dusty trail by the slow oxen as the patient mules. See the herd of footsore animals that follows in the rear of the train. Listen to the shouts and cries of the drivers, the barking of dogs and the shrill creaking of the wheels. Note carefully the thousand details of the march, for it is a picture that you will never behold again.

And, at last, when the camping ground has been reached, when the wagons have been corralled and the guard placed, men and beasts reposing from their labors prepare themselves for renewed exertions on the morrow. The animals, turned out to feed, luxuriate in the rich grass. Numerous fires cast a ruddy glow over the scene and the women, who with the children have been riding throughout the day in the wagons, prepare the evening meal. The little ones rejoiced at being released from their daily imprisonment play merrily though the camp; with the happy carelessness of childhood they take no thought for the morrow. The men lounge about the fires, or busy themselves in cleaning their arms or in repairing the accidents to harness or saddle. One or two indefatigables start off down the creek or back into the bluffs and return with two or three brace of grouse, or perhaps a fat doe or an antelope. The hard labors of the day gives relish to the meal and ere long the clean stars looking down from on high, shine upon the camp wrapped in sleep.

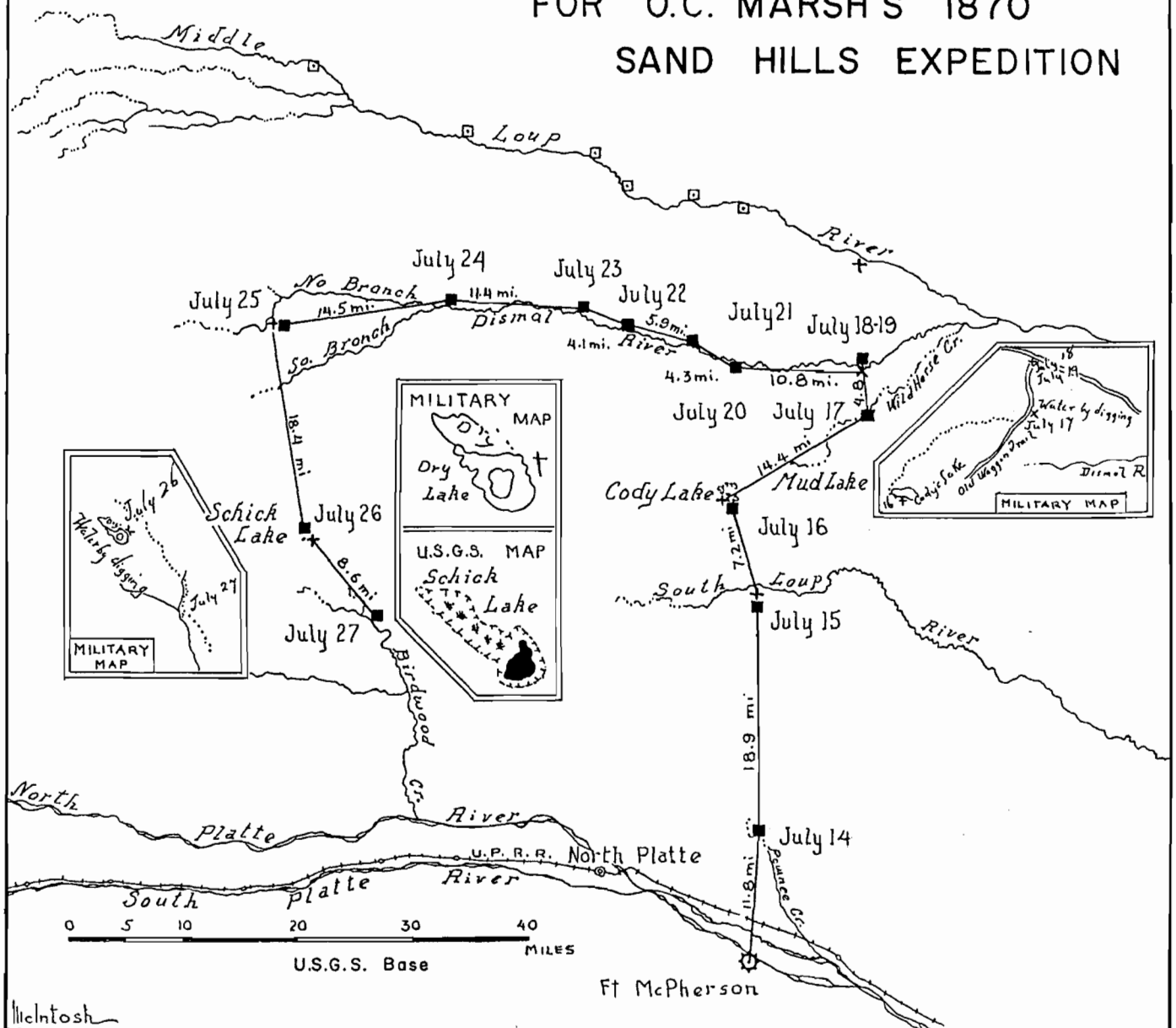
Long before the first blush of dawn appears in the east, the travellers are astir, and after a hasty meal, they start away to repeat the labors of yesterday. And thus for months the journey is continued with scarcely an incident to vary its monotony. The passage through the Indian country, and at long intervals, a buffalo hunt, alone relieve the tediousness of the march.

Such was travel on the plains in the olden time. It has passed away, and what was formerly a journey of months is now measured by days. Towns have sprung up and are flourishing along the lines of the Rail Road and the old emigrant trail is deserted. The progress of the traveller who rides along the road, formerly so well worn, is impeded by the tall weeds that grow in the wagon tracks, and when from time to time he passes one of the adobe ranches that still stand along the path, he finds the soil washed from the roof and the sides guttered by the rain; while the timbers that formerly served to support the former lie scattered on the ground and furnish him with firewood. The old emigrant trail has relapsed into its pristine solitude.

I desire to give you a brief sketch of every day life of a party travellers who leaving the Rail Road with its civilization and all the accompanying luxuries, have started northward over the sand hills of Nebraska. Well are they called sand hills. Brown, bare and desolate, they stretch away to the north for hundreds of miles, clothed only with a sparse covering of grass that grows in stunted tufts, each separated from its neighbor by a foot or more of coarse yellow sand.

Suppose us there to have started. Our own party numbers

PROPOSED CORRECTION OF ROUTE FOR O.C. MARSH'S 1870 SAND HILLS EXPEDITION



The Marsh expedition's destination was the Middle Loup River, and a map drawn by the army escort places them on that stream. However, a recalculation by C. Barron McIntosh using accurate mileage data, physiographic associations and other evidence, shows their actual route to have been along the Dismal River. See C. Barron McIntosh, "The Route of a Sand Hills Bone Hunt: The Yale College Expedition of 1870," *Nebraska History* 69:2 (Spring 1988). Courtesy C. Barron McIntosh

a dozen and the cavalry and with teamsters make the total of our outfit about seventy five men. Two by two we advance in a long line over the undulating swells of the prairie, and behind us follow six government wagons, their huge white tilts sharply outlined against the brown hills. Each is drawn

by six stout mules that tug and strain before their heavy loads, urged on continually by the impatient cries of the teamsters. These each mounted on the near wheeler guide the leaders by a single rein. The wagons advance slowly, at a rate of not more than two miles an hour and we are therefore soon far

ahead of them and concealed from them by the rolling bluffs over which our journey lies.

As we ride along birds of varied plumage spring up before us and fly away, the antelope gazes curiously at us from the distant bluffs; occasionally a jack rabbit starts almost from beneath the feet of the foremost horses, and with his long ears flopping at each jump skurries off while from time to time we hear the angry "skirr" of the dreadful rattlesnake. The novelty of the scene delights us and we converse gaily as we ride along. As the sun passes the zenith, however, his rays becoming more potent moderate our spirits and now whenever we halt for a while to allow the wagons to come up, each rider dismounting throws himself upon the ground and takes advantage of the shadow cast by his horse to shelter himself from the burning rays.

The sun is low in the west when as we round the point of a low bluff, we see in a little hollow, a few hundred yards ahead, a pool of clear water. Its banks are clothed with a thick growth of high grass which promises excellent food for our animals and we immediately resolve to take advantage of so favorable a spot for the camp. As we approach the water an antelope sturs from the high grass near it's edge, and after gazing at us for a moment turns to flee, but a dozen rifles crack and the beautiful creature sinks bleeding to the earth.

In a few minutes the horses are unsaddled and we lead them down to drink. Several of the troopers, however, pass their lariats around the noses of their animals and spring on their backs to ride them down to the water. As they start some sudden movement causes one of the riders to clasp his legs tightly about his horse and the latter feels the spurs which the cavalry-man has forgotten to take off. The improvised bridle gives him no control over the spirited animal which with many a bound and plunge, dashes off toward the bluffs. The shouts of his comrades notify the careless fellow of the cause of his trouble, and when he loosens the grasp of his legs in order to stop the spurring, a final plunge send him high into the air and he falls sprawling upon the plain amid the screams of laughter of the whole company. The affrighted steed gallops off over the bluff but is pursued and soon brought back. The fall is the least serious part of the matter to the unlucky soldier. Besides the severe rebuke from the Lieutenant in command, he will have to bear the jeers of his fellows for many a long day.

The tents are now pitched, the fires kindled, and before long we are summoned to our evening meal. The tender steaks of the antelope are keenly enjoyed and it is pronounced the most delicious of game. Enlivened by song and story the evening passes away and at length we spread our blankets, and pondering on the wonders of the great west, one by one we fall asleep.

The stars were still shining with that brilliant radiance peculiar to the western heavens, when the clear notes of a bugle sounding the stable call rang out upon the still air. At this signal the quiet that had previously reigned is dispelled and sounds of bustling activity commence to be heard—all hands hasten from their tents to the wagons to get corn for their horses

and then make a hurried toilet. The cooks have already built the fires and move about them preparing breakfast. The red light gives color to surrounding objects and a genial warmth is imparted to the chill air of early morning. As we partake of the meal the eastern sky begins to pale, and just before sunrise at the sound of "boots and saddles" we catch up our horses and are soon on our way.

Fresh and invigorated is the breeze of the morning and glorious beyond description the sunrise that we view. The mists that hang over the lower lands as they are warmed by the rising sun, roll up the bluffs to their summits, and after lingering there for a while are finally dispersed and vanish. The grass wet with dew sparkles in the sun and the cheerful notes of birds are heard on every side. The horses, too, seem to feel the beauty of the scene and move along with an active springy gait very different from their lagging steps toward evening. We proceed for some hours and now the difficulties of the route increase. At times the bluffs are so steep as to appear almost impassable, and it is only by doubling up the teams that we are enabled to surmount them. Finally we reach a little valley surrounded by high and steep hills which it seems useless to attempt to pass. A halt is ordered and we collect beneath the shade of the wagons to discuss the possibilities of penetrating farther into this desert. The idea of giving up the expedition and returning is suggested, but it is treated with the contempt it deserves, and presently scouts are sent out to see if a path cannot be found by which we may continue our march. After an absence of an hour they return and report that if we can pass three or four bad places near at hand we shall strike a divide which promises a fair wagon road. We renew our exertions and after several hours of the severest labors reach a more level country.

This we traversed until the approach of night warns us to seek a camping ground. A little pool of stagnant water is found and by it we pitch our tents. Our reservoir is not a large one, only about two feet in diameter and an inch and a half deep, it is thoroughly warmed by the heat of the sun and is teaming with animal and vegetable life, but it contains water and we are very thankful for it. Men are set to work to enlarge it, and a guard is placed to keep the thirsty animals away from it's edge. Then follows the tedious work of watering the latter. We have a few buckets and these are slowly filled by dipping up the precious liquids half a capful at a time as it trickles drop by drop from the sand. They are then passed up to the waiting herd, emptied and sent back. This is kept up until long after dark and when it is over, thoroughly wearied by the day's work, we seek our couches and are soon profoundly sleeping.

Ornis.

George Bird Grinnell [Ornis, pseud.], "Camp Life West of the Missouri: Among the Sand Hills of Nebraska," George Bird Grinnell Papers, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library. Transcribed from the microfilm (Scholarly Resources, 1999), Reel 44, frames 73-42. Grinnell's usage, spelling, and punctuation have been retained.