



Early Trails as a National Heritage

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Early Trails as a National Heritage

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Mr. President, Mr. Green, my friends of Nebraska, fellow citizens:

I see here some faces from other states. It is a privilege to be in this distinguished company. We of the Association ask the privilege of interpreting for you a few of the things we all feel in our hearts.

Twenty-four hours ago I was two thousand miles away, in Reno, Nevada, before a group of distinguished citizens of that state, helping them to get going on a great American cause—an All-American cause. I have been having so many thrilling experiences since I left New York Thursday morning at nine o'clock that my brain is in a whirl. I have been covering the United States at the rate of about two hundred miles per hour. Pioneers in the covered wagons went two miles per hour. I wish I could take you — because it does pertain to the subject at hand — just in a little flash-view with me on that air-ship trip.

We lifted out of the mists of Manhattan, saw that great trading post way down under the clouds, and then we were above the clouds all the way over New Jersey until just before we got to Pennsylvania, when the clouds broke and we saw the Delaware Water Gap, one of the famous passes in the old Indian, Pioneer and Trapper trails. But the clouds closed again and we went over the Alleghanies, following practically the same trails up the Lehigh Valley and other spots until we got to the trail close to Pittsburgh — the trail where Washington led his troops in long-ago days; then over the old Ohio, in the Buckeye State, where my father and grandfather were born; then Illinois, Indiana, looking down

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through the checkered clouds at the pattern-cities, at woodlands tinted with autumn colors, rivers, lakes, and hills, all speaking of the progress of America; and finally dropping for our first landing at Chicago. Then we rose and came over Illinois and Iowa, over the trails where four of my great grandparents lie in unmarked graves; then up the fine old Platte Valley. I drank in with my eyes that river of hope to the pioneers of the west. You don't get the feel of the trails until you get this over-view, then you can see why the pioneers went the way they did.

We slipped into the sunset as we came out of Denver along the old Overland Stage Trail; passed Fort Collins, and up over Laramie; traced that trail all the way across Wyoming in the moonlight; slipped down over Immigration Canyon, where the Donner party went, the Mormon pioneers and Brigham Young; and where those pioneers emerged in the work to make the great desert "blossom as the rose;" where the Overland Express Company ran, where the first telegraph line was run; and there, under our plane twelve thousand feet in the air, we saw the twinkling lights of Salt Lake City spread before us in the heart of the desert. Then we slipped over the Great Salt Lake—the Inland Sea of America; over the Jordan River—named after the Jordan in the Holy Land; and out onto the Great White Desert, where the Donner party tried to cross and got stuck in the mud and had to abandon their wagons.

I met at the Salt Lake airport Dr. William M. Sutton, who a few years ago rigged up a tractor and trailer and followed the trail of the Donners, whose tracks were still in the mud, and on the sides of which were parts of broken wagons and wheels; the trail where they lost so much valuable time, where their oxen stampeded and first left that ill-fated party to go on across that desert; and I saw the desert, bathed in the moonlight.

Finally, after following the trail of the Donners, gold seekers, who left their horses and mules and wagons strung for hundreds of miles across those wastes, we slipped down into the City of Reno to meet the Nevada State Teachers, and tried to interpret to them some of the mighty meaning of America's past—as I am going to try to bring to you, if I can, a little of the spirit as I have caught it from my own forbears and others with whom I have

been privileged to associate. It has been a labor of love to me for ten years since I took up the work of Ezra Meeker and tried to save these old trails from oblivion.

A little pamphlet, designed by my son, portrays a part of the story of ten years of effort with a group of real Americans in these Oregon Trail states who have worked with us without pay (except that they got their reward out of loving service), and who at this time have succeeded in bringing into being, with the help of many organizations, over five hundred monuments on story-spots scattered over half a dozen states. Now, it isn't the monuments that mean so much; they are tangible evidences of things that have happened. It isn't these outward symbols that really count, but it is the spirit of Americans they help to rouse in us and preserve in us in order that we may keep America American.

America isn't so much an outward thing. We have a broad country, stretching "from sea to shining sea;" we have the great evidences of material progress — our banks and our hotels and our railroads and various institutions, our ranches and our farms. Wipe them all out! Leave, for instance, Nebraska as Washington Irving saw it when he rose from the Blue River and overlooked the Valley of the Platte, lying waste, with buffalo bones scattered over it; naked wandering tribes of Indians that he met with his little calvacade. We never would have had America if it hadn't been for the spirit of the men and women who have made America. The challenge comes to me. We are facing critical moments; can this thing for which our fathers and mothers gave their all continue? Can we implant within the hearts of boys and girls in our country that spirit to make them do for America what their forbears have done?

Well, we can! We can save America if we save, in inviting living forms, the story America is making; if we can teach these people, who with foreign minds come from the heritage of the dead. We can save it if we can make those boys and girls who hear nothing but foreign tongues in their homes — if we can make them realize what it is all about.

May I make that concrete? I was giving a talk one night to a high school in the Bronx, New York, to about five hundred such boys and girls whose whole background was foreign. I don't know

what I said about America's greatest trail, but I must have touched upon it somewhere, because one of the boys at the close of the talk came to me and said, "Mr. Driggs, if we could have our history taught to us like that we would feel like saluting the flag. They tell us to salute the flag, they require us to do it. Frankly, we don't know what they are talking about." And I will tell you one reason why they don't know what they are talking about — because too many teachers are feeding the children on the husks of history.

History comes to life when you make it vibrate in the pulsating stories such as I was given as a boy in old Utah around the pitch-pine fireplaces. We didn't have motion pictures in those days, but our parents used to gather us children around the fireplace and tell the stories that they had brought from far-off New England, tell the stories of the life that they had lived; and that touched off in my boyhood heart a love of American History which has never died. I didn't take history in schools, yet when it came to passing history I got one of the highest percentages. The first book I ever bought was with money that I earned helping a neighbor build a house — ten hours' work a day for twenty-five cents, and board myself. That was before the days of depression and relief. And I bought the old Barnes History, which I still have with my autograph of that age. I remember the history because it was told as a vibrant story. The whole book is plentifully sprinkled with thumbmarks, especially around the places where the battles were fought.

I was sitting with one of our fine leaders one day at his home. He is secretary of the historical society of a neighboring state, and his young boy (who evidently had been fed up on history) turned to me and asked, "Why do we have to study history?" I said, "Why do we have to take care of the roots of the apple tree?" "Well," he said, "I guess you wouldn't get much fruit if we didn't take care of the roots." We sometimes forget the apple-tree roots in a soil made rich by sacrifice. Is that right, Governor?

GOVERNOR WEAVER: Yes.

The blossoms that unfolded this year were fed by the blossoms that dropped in the yesteryear; the leaves that expanded are the leaves that expanded in years gone by. There is as much apple-tree below ground as there is above. Isn't there, Governor?

GOVERNOR WEAVER: That is right.

I know when we tried to dig them up we thought there was.

We are here because they were there; we sit here tonight and pause before the sacrifices that have been made by those fine upstanding American men and women who dared to take the hard knocks of life and came through with heads erect.

But what have trails to do with it all?

Well, old trails are the links that bind every corner of our nation into one place. The interesting thing about old trails is that they don't give a rap about state boundary lines; they were here before ever states were formed, and they were not made in the first place by man. We do wrong, generally speaking, to speak of men as trail-blazers. It is the animals that were the trail-blazers; it was the buffaloes migrating across this country that laid out some of your first trails. They laid out the trail down through Immigration Canyon into Salt Lake Valley to get to the salt lakes, and the Indians followed the animals, and the trappers followed the Indians; and the missionaries, carrying the cross of Christ, followed the trappers; and the covered wagon followed the trappers, too.

Settlers in those homes on wheels, bearing mothers and children, went into the conquest of the West. When the covered wagon came you had an opportunity to take the mothers and children, and where mothers and children go, homes spring up, towns are built, churches rise, schools are organized, government is effected and civilization thrives. We men, in our proud way, think that we are the fellows who did it, but it was the mothers and the children who did it; and it was the old trail that went through the great gateway of the Rockies — the famous South Pass where the mountains iron out at the head of the Sweetwater — it was that old trail and that pass that gave the West to America. The British wanted to possess the West, but they couldn't push trappers up the Saskatchewan and over those high mountains.

When the tide of migration came, beginning with the early Forties, a few sporadic groups tried to get out in the West, until in 1843 they pushed the first great cavalcade of about eight thousand people into Oregon. Then followed the Mormon migration: they came up the Platte, bearing a home-loving people driven twice

from their homes by un-American persecution; and they went out in the West in the same spirit that the Pilgrims crossed the water — to get a place where they could worship God as they wanted to. Then started this great experiment in the heart of the desert, trying to sustain colonization in that arid region with irrigation. Well, they succeeded. Today twelve of these states owe their basic prosperity to the fact that they did succeed.

It was along those trails that these people went, not by the thousands but by the hundreds of thousands. If you want evidence of it go up near Guernsey, Wyoming, and stand in the trail as high as your head through the solid rock for a mile or so, cut by the grinding wheels of thousands of wagons, and the gripping hoofs of oxen, the tired feet of mothers and fathers wearing down those stones. These bear evidence of something of that mighty migration. And along these trails are the graves of the dead, most of them unmarked. They didn't have much to mark graves with in these prairie wastes or these plains. The most they did was to throw the ashes of the campfire over them, wet with their tears, or even drive the wagons over them to keep the wolves from digging up the bodies. Probably twenty thousand of those people lie in the breasts of Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, Wyoming, and all the other plains states.

One precious grave was saved in Nebraska when Rebecca Winters died out there near Scottsbluff. William Winters sat up half the night chiseling on a wagon tire the mother's name — "Rebecca Winters, age 50." And they set that wagon tire arching above the grave and went on. It stood there for over three-score years, until the Burlington Railroad went that way and their surveyors saw the rusted tire with its inscription, and they were touched with the love of a husband's heart. They sent back a wire reporting the discovery, and relatives saw the note in the paper and wired to Scottsbluff and found where the mother was. And those boys went back for miles and changed the route of that railroad away from this grave.

A few years ago Dr. Sheldon was with the Daughters of the American Revolution when they went in a special train from Scottsbluff to that grave. The mother who lies there was the daughter of one of the drummer boys who was with Washington when he crossed the Delaware.

In 1938 we took the whole Oregon Trail Memorial Association, assembled in convention at Scottsbluff, to that grave to hold a memorial service in honor of a pioneer mother. In the group were two of the grandchildren of that mother and several great-grandchildren, and one dear little four-year old girl by the name of Rebecca Winters was lifted over the fence and laid a bouquet of flowers on her grandmother's grave.

We haven't many marked graves. There was one down here near Fairbury, Nebraska, where a stone was found marking the grave of one of the Forty-Niners, and they have set up that old stone with a new one. I think they set the old stone inside the new one, to mark that grave.

Now, these are just treasure story-spots along old trails. The moment you tell the story of the trails of America you tell the epic of America. It isn't a Nebraska epic, or an Iowa epic, or Utah or Nevada epic, or Californian; it is an All-American epic. These old trails are western trails geographically, but they are eastern trails historically; they were made or deepened by Easterners who went West. Every one of the Pony Express boys of whom we have record was born east of the Missouri River. In the group of one hundred and forty-three boys every state east of the Mississippi — every one! was represented — forty from New England, twenty-eight from New York, ten from Ohio — and I don't remember the rest of them. All of these precious things bring to us one idea: that old trails are the unifying force that will knit our nation into one if we just understand the story in its bigness and sweetness.

What to do about it? How many of you know in Nebraska, as you whiz along these wonderful highways, *when* you are on the Pony Express Trail? How many of you know when you are on the Oregon Trail, or the Mormon Trail, or the old Nebraska City-Denver short-line freight trail that went very close to where we are sitting tonight? Oh, we have spent millions and millions of dollars to make our highways faster and more comfortable — why don't we devote a few thousand dollars to make them even more interesting? Why don't we do something along these trails to cause passers-by to lower their speed and at least pause, look, and learn on the spot something of the mighty meaning of America?

I was going over Indiana to Ohio recently, and I saw with great delight that the road commissioners have been building what they call roadside rests, where they purchase along the highway a few acres of ground for parks, so that the tourists may pause for a few minutes. To keep them from breaking their necks, I think, was the main idea — just to reduce the speed a little. What I would like is to do the thing a little more broadly and significantly. I would like to bring the beautifying idea that Indiana and Ohio are putting together and add to it what they are doing in my native state of Utah, where they have chosen a hundred of the story-spots — one hundred and thirty-five, I think — and where they are building roadside rests, and in them erecting a board that has burned into it the story of that spot, set in stone pillars. They invite you to stop and learn what happened; and I understand they too are going to make these plaques and memorials in wood and stone.

Well, there is another thing: We started out in this Association with several ideas. One idea that obsessed me in the beginning was that I wanted to serve history, and because I was overcrowded with work they threw my son into the picture, and he said: "Let's put history to work! Let's not go into it for our own pleasure — let's take a forward look." And that is one result of it — the Pony Express marker design. He said, "Let's make people trail-conscious." So, the association accepted his design and provided two thousand of those plaques, and sent them to Kansas and Missouri and Nebraska. Now, we will give you as many plaques as you have miles of the Pony Express trail in your state.

I would like to have two things done: There are probably one hundred and seventy-five stations along that Pony Express trail where they changed horses and riders. The home station they flashed out of was St. Joe; then across the northeast corner of Kansas, through Nebraska with a dip into Colorado; then on to Scottsbluff, Nebraska, into Wyoming and on up into my old home state, and they went on up. I don't know where your stations are exactly. Mr. Jackson has dug them out, and we have most of them pretty well established; and Dr. Sheldon, I think, knows practically all of them in Nebraska; but we have had this thought — that every station in the state should be properly memorialized, with a

substantial monument bearing the national insignia, the bronze plaque.

This last summer we went out on the Utah desert. The Utah Trails Association, cooperating with the C. C. C. boys, had built a monument at every station from ten to fifteen feet high, and in two places where the old station was still partly intact it is now restored. Here (indicating pamphlet) is one that we found the bullets in, telling a little story; that is why they were given to you. Here's one we found overlooking Overland Canyon. The boys had been killed—several of them, down in that canyon, and they finally moved the station. It is still there, with its portal; and now they are restoring it. They are restoring the old Boyd Station in a fair state of preservation, with its portals and its lookout back of the station where they could see the rider coming and going.

Last night, with the road commissioners and other leaders in Nevada, we laid plans there to do the same thing across the whole state of Nevada. That immortalization of the Pony Express Trail will be effective when every station site is either restored or marked, and when the whole trail, so far as you can find it, shall be properly marked with the official plaque.

Now, we learned some things. We have learned by experience that you can't put these Pony Express plaques out in unprotected places. We started that last year, and when we came back this year some heedless boys had made a target of those beautiful plaques.

I talked to a group of people last August, and I simply said, "Now, look here: This was thoughtlessly done, but that plaque, in common with every other monument that is erected to save a historic spot in America, represents something very deep; whoever shoots that shoots at America." We will have to raise the spirit in this country that will make any vandal who dares to desecrate a monument a very unpopular being in his community.

But we have learned, too, that you can protect those plaques by finding near schoolhouses a place where that trail ran. In Kansas they are doing that type of thing, and they are getting a little group of boys and girls under the leadership of the historically minded people who are willing to get into this game, and they have gotten that little group of boys and girls to take that

plaque on the actual trail where it is near their schoolhouse, and they become guardians and protectors of it; but, more than that, they learn the story of what it is about.

Now, you can't put those on every mile. There are stations of this trail from south of Kearney probably on to the old California crossing that would hardly ever be seen. But there are certain spots along that actual trail where you can have these plaques placed, dedicated and protected; and that is what we are trying to do.

Now, our Association has only one central purpose, and that is to be of constructive help to the local groups. We can't do this work for you. We can provide you sometimes with an acceptable insignia, we can give you a national viewpoint, we can say to Nebraska, "Here's your share of the program." We can do everything possible to help you, but the problem is yours. When we mark an old trail like the Pony Express Trail we want it to be direct to the heritage, we want those markers to indicate to the passing person that here was actually the trail. Now, you can't put your markers in the exact tracks of the ponies. Sometimes, as Dr. Hulbert says, the old Oregon Trail is a mile wide; then he remarked that it was easier to travel a trail a mile wide than a mile deep. In some places you know where it will be, you know in general where that trail went; and every county, every community that has a share in that trail ought to treasure it.

Now, here's another thing: You have great possibilities within your state for the preservation of significant sites connected with the history of your state. Already you have one Nebraska monument at Scottsbluff. Every state in this union ought to have at least one national historical monument that becomes a centerpiece for that state; you have, and you have done a very fine thing. Up here at old Fort Kearny you have made a good beginning, but you haven't brought Fort Kearny up to a place where you are going to be proud of it. I would like to see Fort Kearny restored, I would like to see some Indian villages, and I would like to see a few buffaloes and antelope, and, if you can possibly get them, prairie dogs. I would like to see that post brought up to a point where Nebraskans would be just thrilled to go there; and further, where the people of all this country would be happy to pause there.

"Oh," you say, "that costs money!" Well, let me tell you something: I don't know what the recent record in the Scottsbluff Museum is, but you can probably help me, Mr. Green.

MR. GREEN: Over one hundred thousand visitors every year.

Over one hundred thousand visitors each year to that monument! Harry Peterson told me they had a quarter of a million guests at the home that was described by Mark Twain in *Tom Sawyer*; last August nine hundred people had visited that little story-spot that day, and sixty-six thousand had gone to it in a year. Now, you know what that means from a financial standpoint. There isn't a single shrine that has been preserved in America that has not paid its way every year from a mere money standpoint. But we are not pressing that as the objective of this type of work. I have had to hold back requests for ten years from students in the New York University to make historical pilgrimages over these old trails. I said, "I cannot give my consent until the people of the West are ready to receive you." In old trails is a great historical resource, a great undeveloped resource in this country that is our historical heritage, and that is particularly true of the West.

Now, any community that is fortunate enough to possess an historical shrine close to itself and preserved today in all its fine significance, that community doesn't own that shrine, but is a custodian of it.

When I was down in San Antonio a few years ago I went around to the old missions, and happened to talk afterwards to a group down there, and I remember upbraiding them for allowing those old missions to go to rack and ruin. I must have gotten results, because the next time I went there they charged me fifteen cents to get in; but they had cleaned up the mission. Aren't you glad that somebody saved Mount Vernon? Aren't you delighted that they didn't let Independence Hall and Betsey Ross' home, the Old South Church, the Alamo, and all these other sacred shrines go to rack and ruin? Now, these shrines didn't save themselves! Some patriotic group did it, some men and women who had caught the spirit of this thing and put themselves in the work as a labor of love; and today America reaps the benefit of their foresight.

We need to preserve the old trails and story-spots along sacred

landmarks that link and appertain to America's making ; we need to bring them before the boys and girls of this country in books ; we need to paint them in pictures ; we need to dramatize them ; we need to encourage people along these lines, to learn anew the story of what they signify. All this is in the process of the saving of America's precious resources.

In this great state of Nebraska, and all the other states connected so intimately with the story of the pioneers, we need to save that story in all its bright appearance ; we must get it before the people and not let too much of it go. History slips away very rapidly. We undertook, with the help of the Boy Scouts, to honor the Pony Express riders, and we took the express trail to begin with because it was a definite unit. Probably four hundred boys were in the unit with that great enterprise linked with the West in the dangerous days before the Civil War, but with all our searching we haven't been able yet to find more than a hundred of the four hundred graves. We need to honor the builders of America, to pay tribute to their responsibility — not for their sakes, but that we may get a rebaptism in this thing we call America.

Men and women who came in the covered wagons put twenty stars in our flag ; our business is to keep them shining there. (*Applause.*)