



An Early Nebraska Sawmill

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

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Article Summary: In 1849 Meredith Moore decided to transport a sawmill overland to California, where he anticipated a large profit, knowing that lumber would be needed for construction. His brother persuaded him to sell it at cost when they reached Fort Kearny instead.

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AN EARLY NEBRASKA SAWMILL

BY E. P. H. GEMPEL

A unique venture in overland freighting during the California Gold Rush, involving an unsuccessful attempt to freight a sawmill overland in 1849, is told by Meredith T. Moore, an enterprising Missourian who, though not interested in hunting gold himself, joined the gold-seekers in the belief that the thousands of men rushing west to the New El Dorado would provide unexcelled opportunities for developing a lucrative business.

In 1849 Meredith Tarleton Moore was living on the north side of the Missouri River, in Calloway County, just above Jefferson City, Missouri.¹ He was a veteran of the Mexican War, having served in a volunteer regiment of Missouri frontiersmen who marched with Colonel Alexander W. Doniphan's famed expedition from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, through Santa Fe, to rout the Mexicans at Brazito before entering El Paso and to outfight them near Chihuahua and Saltillo.²

He had a brother, John Hendley Moore, two years older, just finishing law school, who had caught the gold fever. John urged Meredith to join him in the gold rush, but Meredith was not stampeded by wild enthusiasm. He also realized that his older brother had always been a stay-at-home, had no business experience, and had no conception of the hardships in crossing the plains, desert and mountains.

Meredith Moore did not fear hardships or dangers. The obstacles and hazards encountered in his 3,600 mile march over the Santa Fe Trail and through Mexico, culminating in a sea voyage of 2,500 miles from Matamoras back home to Missouri had steeled Meredith and had given him the con-

¹ Meredith T. Moore, Ms. letter and signed statement to William E. Connelly, January 9, 1908 (Snyder Collection, Kansas City University Library).

² William E. Connelly, *Doniphan's Expedition* (Topeka, Kansas, 1907), pp. 506, 639-640.

fidence needed to make the overland journey to California. However, when he read newspaper reports that thousands of men were waiting at eastern seaboard cities for ships to weigh anchor for the Gold Coast, and that fully as many men were at the frontier outfitting villages awaiting spring, Meredith thought his chances of finding a bonanza were very slim. He did not want to hunt gold. Yet the restless urge which drove him forth with Doniphan was still pushing him to further adventures. He was not ready to settle down.

One day he went across the Missouri River to visit his crony, William Reggin, who had fought by his side when the Americans, outnumbered five to one, had captured the fortified position on the Sacramento river before entering the city of Chihuahua. Reggin was operating a sawmill on the bluff just about opposite the Moore home. Here it occurred to Moore that with so many people rushing to California, there would be a shortage of buildings for homes and business. In order to get lumber for construction, sawmills would be required. Moore then determined to buy a sawmill, transport it overland to Sacramento Valley, California, and sell it at a large profit.

He went to St. Louis, and there bought a sawmill like Reggin's and had it shipped to Jefferson City. To reduce weight, the wooden parts that could be reproduced in California would not be taken. Only the iron and steel parts were purchased. He bought extra saws and made up a spare parts kit and repair chest. A fine mechanic by the name of McGhee, who lived three miles north of Moore, was hired to draw plans for the missing wooden parts. At the Missouri State Prison, Moore had a wagon constructed, large and strong enough to haul the sawmill. In three other wagons he loaded provisions to last eighteen months—tents, log chains, medicine chest, needles, thread, cloth, shoes, iron bellows, blacksmith tools, and a heavy rope. This rope was long enough to be used in ferrying operations over wide streams, and also for use in getting wagons over steep mountains where it might be necessary to use a windlass or capstan. He bought eighteen yoke of oxen, two Devon-

shire milk cows, and several mules and horses for riding.

The early spring of 1849 saw hundreds of teams arriving daily at Jefferson City, Missouri. There, about eighty men, lusting for gold, formed a company to travel together. Meredith Moore and his brother joined the company. So did William and Benjamin Reggin, McGhee, Peter Mason, James R. Hart, Fenwick Fosher, John H. Moon, William Ferguson, Napoleon Ramsey, and a Mr. Majorly. They took passage on the steamboat *Amelia*, of which Captain Thomas Miller was the pilot and principal owner, bound up the Missouri for old Fort Kearny—later to become Nebraska City—where they would begin the overland journey.

In April, 1849, Moore's sawmill, four wagons, together with the ox yokes and chains were loaded on the side-wheeler, and his older brother, John, placed in charge of the supplies on board for the journey up the river. Meredith and two men drove his cattle from Jefferson City to Lexington, where they crossed the Big Muddy on the ferry. They continued up north on the east side of the river to a point opposite the site on which Nebraska City now stands. They arrived two weeks ahead of the *Amelia*.

Only two or three shanties and a small store were there, but waiting to cross the Missouri were a wagon train from Howard County, Missouri, one from Virginia, two or more from Illinois, one from Michigan, and one from Buffalo, New York. The bottle-neck was a small, flat-bottom scow with no side railing—only one wagon could cross at a time, and with no railing the boat could not be used for ferrying cattle and horses. For a few days while waiting to cross, Moore boarded with James Thompson at his log cabin on the east bank of the river. Moore relates his exciting crossing of the Missouri River as follows:

"I determined to swim my cattle (thirty-eight head) and horses across. The cattle were unwilling to go. The water was cold. We would drive them into the water and they would 'mill', that is—turn around and come back. After two or three efforts to make them cross, I almost got out of patience. I knew if I could make their leader cross the rest would follow. I had on a large overcoat, cloth leggings and spurs, and had sixty dollars in silver in my pockets. I pushed my horse after the leader, trying to make him go across, and

before I realized it he was in deep water, swimming heavily, and seeing the bull would cross, I concluded to go back, but the river was full of cattle following the leader, and there was no way for me to pass between them. I undertook to get out of their way, but for some reason my horse began to sink, and soon went down. I reached out and seized hold on an ox's horn, let my horse go, and by the ox was kept from sinking. The men on the bank began to hollo to me, some telling me to do one thing, and others something else, their confused directions being of little help, if any. It dawned on me that I must cross the river with that ox or go down, for it was cold, the water very cold and the river wide and full, but just then my horse came up in front of me, his head towards the Missouri shore, and by glancing back I could see a way had been made among the cattle for him. I reached out, grasped his mane, and was in that way carried to land by him. One ox about the middle of the river, turned down stream and swam six miles to an island. I sent two men in a canoe for him. He was gentle and they tied a rope to his horns, and led him to the west shore and brought him into camp. So I lost no cattle in crossing and got everything over in safety.³

Nebraska City, at that time, consisted of a blockhouse and a few log cabins that belonged to the old fort. It was then "old Fort Kearny," established in 1846 by Captain Clifton Wharton and company of the First Dragoons that had come up from Fort Leavenworth. The fort was named in honor of General Stephen Watts Kearny, who had selected the site the previous year and who commanded the Army of the West in the Mexican War. During the Mexican War the fort was garrisoned by mounted Missouri Volunteers. After the War, the bulk of westward immigration was starting from Westport, Leavenworth and St. Joseph. The War Department realized that the old fort was too far north and at that time not on the traveled trail. The fort was, therefore, moved in the spring of 1848 to where the Oregon and California trail touched the southernmost point of the Platte River.⁴

In time the steamboat *Amelia* landed at the mouth of Table Creek, Nebraska, and then Moore's troubles began. The large wagon was easily unloaded and the sawmill put onto it, but the river bank was very steep and muddy from

³ Moore, Ms. cited.

⁴ J. H. Sweet, "Old Fort Kearny," *Nebraska History*, XXVII (October-December, 1946), 233-243.

recent heavy rains, There was only room to hitch one yoke of oxen to the wagon. If more were used, the wagon tongue was pulled into the ground. All of the men of Moore's company were called to help. They came reluctantly and with much grumbling. To be delayed by this white elephant was not in tempo with their stampede to the Pacific.

After a long time of prizing and pulling, the men got the wagon up the bank, and then with eighteen yoke of oxen attached to it there was no difficulty in hauling it up the steep bluffs. But the bickering had begun, and it would not cease so long as the big wagon with the sawmill was a part of the wagon train.

The company camped the first night on the bluffs near the old fort. That night around the campfires they elected John C. Gordon, former warden of the Missouri State Prison, "Captain," and Meredith T. Moore "First Lieutenant." It was Moore's duty to ride ahead and select the place to camp.

The next morning the outfits followed the trail west. Moore believed his wagon train was the first over this route. Wagons might have passed earlier, but if they had, they had left slight indications. Moore states he followed the high ground and arrived at Salt Creek about where Saltillo, Nebraska, is now located. There, he says, a road from Leavenworth and St. Joseph intersected the trail.

The trail from Leavenworth was known as the Fort Leavenworth-Fort Laramie Military Road and joined the St. Joseph-California trail about two miles south of the present town of Summerfield in Marshall County, Kansas, near the Kansas-Nebraska border. From here also a trail branched north to join the Nebraska City trail.⁵ The trail selected by Moore from Nebraska City developed into a well-known trail later on but the crossing over Salt Creek was made farther north near its mouth where Ashland, St. Nebraska now stands.⁶ The Nebraska City-Fort Kearny

⁵ Map of Marshall County, Kansas, Surveyor General's Office, Nebraska City, November 25, 1858.

⁶ J. Sterling Morton, "From Nebraska City to Salt Lake Creek in 1855," *Transactions and Reports, Nebraska State Historical Society*, IV (1892), 11-18.

road was extensively used during the Utah expedition of 1857-58, and later.

The freighting firm of Russell, Majors and Waddell hauled large quantities of supplies over this route for the Army in Utah. Mr. Majors wrote: "From Nebraska City to Fort Kearny, which is a fixed point for the junction of all roads passing up the Platte, we have but one stream of any moment to cross. That one is Salt creek, a stream which is now paved at the shallow ford with solid rock."⁷

In the latter part of May, 1849, when Moore's party reached the east bluffs of Salt Creek (known to the Indians as the Valley of Weeping Water) the Pomeroy brothers from Lexington, Missouri, also veterans of Doniphan's expedition, were there encamped. They had come over the St. Joseph road and had failed to effect a crossing with their wagons. The bottom land of Salt Creek, which was about a mile wide from the east bluff to the west bluff, was deep and covered with water. There were forty or fifty wagons mired here and there, on both sides of the road for a mile up and down the valley. Some wagon trains had been there for over a week. It had been raining for sometime, but now for the last few days it had been clear.

Moore's statement relates in detail his unusual experiences in crossing Salt Creek:

I went to talk with Mr. Pomeroy and ask him why he had not crossed. He said he couldn't, and advised me—I distinctly remember—not to cross until conditions got better. His teams were mostly mules. Mine were cattle. As I rode on back to the road or trail that led down the bluff, I determined to make a test and put a stop to the grumbling about my big wagon. I had ridden ahead of the train and looked over the situation, and when the train came up I went to Mr. James A. Hart, who was a man along in years, and had a very fine yoke of oxen, well-trained and excellent leaders, and Mr. Hart was a fine driver of cattle. He was a man of grit, and I could rely upon him.

I said to him: "Mr. Hart, I am going to take my big wagon across the bottom, and I want the use of your leaders, and you to drive them. I am going to tie log chains to the axle-tree, and close to the hubs, and run them to the end of the tongue and then run log chains from there on, doubling them when necessary and put my bulls next to the wagon, and

⁷ Randolph B. Marcy, *The Prairie Traveler* (New York, 1859), p. 326.

then my sixteen yoke of oxen, and yours in front, making 18 yoke in all. You can drive five or six yoke in front and then Peter Mason will drive next to you and I will drive the bulls." (wheelers)

Hart said: "All right, by God, I'll drive it across or pull the tongue out."

I said: "All right, if the tongue is pulled out, let her go!" Then I got Mason who was a very fine man with a whip. We began to hitch cattle, and as we did so the other men laughed at us.

But I was determined to try—if for no other reason than to put a stop to this silly grumbling. I did not myself know whether I would get across or not, and it was a risky undertaking, but I determined to try. We went into the valley and half way to the Creek. I suggested to Hart to stop and let the cattle rest. The wheels all along had been down in the mud over the hubs, the water coming up to the wagon bed. The cattle had not stopped and could have gone on. Hart said if we stopped he feared we could never start again. I told him—"Yes we can," and so we stopped. After resting the cattle a little, I told Hart to pull his leaders away around to one side, and then to gee them back around to the direction again, and that if he would do that the cattle when they came around to line again would think they were moving the wagon, and by the time they got into line they would be pulling heavy, as would my bulls and Mason's section. He did that, and when his cattle came around into line every ox was doing his best, and the wagon moved on. The next move we reached the creek and stopped in it. It was a little creek. The water was about knee-deep. It had a hard gravel bottom, but was broad.

We were all on our horses—the drivers. The men from all the trains were standing on the bluffs watching us, but they seemed to say little when we reached the creek.

We got to the bank without much difficulty, but we had a much harder time in the west bottom than in the east although it was narrower.

The mud close to the bank seemed harder or stiffer, or at least stronger. The wagon went down over the hubs and the mud began to pile up in front of the wagon bed, like you have seen water do in front of a boat or earth in front of a drag. Piled up in such quantities that it rolled up over the back of my bulls and I began to fear it would break their backs. They were marvelously strong fellows, could alone pull a great load, but that was too much. I stopped then; we got shovels from the wagon, got down and cleared away the mud from in front of the wagon and from off the bulls, then Hart veered the leaders around to the left again; then brought them around into line with taut chains. We went through that experience twice. Then we reached the bank and mounted the [west] bluff. Then the men on the opposite bank raised a great shout and cheered us gleefully.

After we reached the bluff, we went back, and doubled and thirbled [trebled] the teams and crossed all our wagons before night.⁸

⁸ Moore, Ms. cited.

Moore's brother had gone on ahead to Fort Kearny, and was not present at the crossing. He also did not believe the sawmill wagon could make it over Salt Creek, much less over the mountains to California.

The only buildings at Fort Kearny were log cabins and barracks of sod walls and brush roofs. The troops had been there only a short time. Brevet Major Robert H. Chilton was in command, and the company commanders were: First Lieutenants Rensselaer W. Foote, Charles H. Ogle and Second Lieutenant T. O. Davis. The Engineer was Lieutenant Daniel Phineas Woodbury, and he had appointed James Cowan, a veteran of Doniphan's Expedition and evidently now a civilian employee, to superintend the building of two-story houses for the officers and one-story buildings for the enlisted men.⁹ Wagons had been sent to Fort Leavenworth for lumber.

Mr. Moore now relates how even his own brother prevailed on him to leave the sawmill behind.

Before we reached Fort Kearny my brother came out to meet me and told me the government would buy our sawmill and urged me to sell. I did not want to sell. I believed I could sell it for a much larger price in California but he was urgent and called up the grumbling and complaints of the other men. I yielded to his judgment and wishes, and sold the sawmill and wagon to Captain Woodbury, for the government for the original cost and transportation. They paid me well for the transportation, but that was about all my profit.¹⁰

Mr. Moore believed the sawmill to be the first in Nebraska, and aside from that located at Fort Atkinson, more than two decades earlier, it may have been.¹¹ Cowan at that time was a carpenter at Fort Kearny, and it was he who made the woodwork from the plans drawn by McGhee. Cowan and

⁹ Post Returns, Fort Kearny, May, 1849 (WD AGO Records, National Archives). Moore, in letter cited, wrote: "I got some of these names from Capt. Keowan: the commander of the troops at Fort Kearney was Brevet Major Chilton; the company commanders were; first lieutenants, Foote, Oglesby and Lee; the engineer, was Capt. Woodbury, and he was the man who gave the appointment to Keowan to superintend the building of the fort."

¹⁰ Moore, Ms. cited.

¹¹ Cf. Edgar B. Wesley, "Life at Fort Atkinson," *Nebraska History*, XXX (December, 1949), 348-358.

Moore had been friends for many years, and members of the same Masonic lodge back in Missouri.

After the sawmill was set up, the enlisted men at the fort sawed their own lumber, hauling the logs from Grand Island to build Fort Kearny.

Moore continued on to California with his cattle. At Sacramento, then a town without houses, some ten thousand people were living in tents. Here Moore met James Houston, a Missourian and friend of long standing, and they went into the cattle trade together, selling cattle to the miners. A small cow sold for \$112.00 and a steer for \$200.00.

In California Moore regretted more than ever that he sold the saw mill to the officers at Fort Kearny, for there on the wharf in Sacramento was a similar sawmill which had just been sold for Fifty Thousand Dollars.