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BULLWHACKING: A PROSAIC PROFESSION PECULIAR TO THE GREAT PLAINS

By WALKER D. WYMAN

TRANSPORTATION and communication have been basic problems of every society. Each geographic province evolves a distinct type of travel to overcome its isolation. This is particularly true of frontier societies which are so dependent upon the old civilization from which they have emerged. As this new dependent society becomes more complex and "civilized," the organs of transportation are consequently affected; communicative tools are better fitted to the environment; and, in some cases, the type of animal used for motive power responds to the demands of climate, soil, and needs of the isolated society.

Thus the French fur trader borrowed the idea of the canoe from the Indian, improved upon it, and as the task of moving furs to the seaport became a business, he developed, or himself became a *voyageur*. The necessity of communication between the Trans-Allegheny region and the older society brought into existence a national road system; the Conestoga wagon encouraged the breeding of heavy horses and made famous the professional wagoner with his long whip and "stogy" cigar. These same environments produced other implements of transportation to meet the demands of the changing society—the stage coach, the river steamer, the canal barge, and the railroad.

The Great Plains, that arid and treeless region lying between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains, long

served as a natural limit to the orderly advancement of population. But beginning in the 1840's, and continuing for three decades, spurts of immigration began to jump the gap, and to deposit itself far from the social groupings from which it had emerged. These pools of Anglo-American culture, settled amid an Indian or Spanish civilization, were reliant upon the old society for much of its food and all of its comforts of life. The wagon train served as the artery making the connection. The trail, formerly the path of least resistance between two points used by Indians and buffalo, became the thoroughfare over which ran the new or improved implements of transportation.

The connection between the Spanish Southwest and Anglo-America was established early in the century for the benefit of casual traders. It was in the 1850's and 1860's that the necessities of supplying that area with the products of Anglo-America in exchange for products indigenous to the region, that the great business of freighting, affected the type of travel. The old Pittsburgh or Conestoga wagon came out in the newer and bigger edition. The wagoner of the Old National Road became a member of a trained personnel used to take a wagon train across the plains—but the latter was a descendant of the former just the same, a professionalized man in a democratic west, the product of his environment.

The Santa Fé Trail, that line of travel which bridged the gap between the Missouri River towns and the Southwest, was the longest and greatest freighting route west of the Missouri. Hence on its broad bed, freighting life and influence were typical of those of the great plains.¹ On it the transforming effects of that peculiar environment may best be seen.

The prairie schooner, or "ox telegraph," of the Santa Fé Trail grew in size since its humble beginnings back in

1. Louis Pelzer has briefly discussed ox-team freighting of the Great Plains in his paper "Trails of the Trans-Mississippi Cattle Frontier," published in *The Trans-Mississippi West* (edited by James F. Willard and Colin B. Goodykoontz, Boulder, Colorado, 1930), pp. 139-142.

Pennsylvania several decades before.² It now weighed 4,000 pounds and had a tongue thirteen feet long. The hind wheel alone tipped the scales at 300 pounds, being sixty-four inches in diameter. The tire was four inches through and the hub was eighteen inches deep and twelve inches through. The spokes were once compared, back before the age of fold-away sleeping quarters, to a middle-sized bed post. A great number of the wagons had wooden axles (with an extra along to use in case of an emergency in the timberless area, and the wheels were held in place by a linch pin. Rosin and tallow served to lessen the friction on the axles, but the creaking of a heavily-loaded caravan, sounding to high heaven, gave ample testimony of the need of Standard Oil products.

The wagon box of the schooner was three feet wide, twelve feet long at the bottom and sixteen feet at the top. This made the bed resemble a boat, long since made famous to symbolize the westward movement of the immigrant, but in reality limited to the freighter. The colors often seen on the Cumberland Road carried over, and were used on this Plains wagon: blue bed, and covered by white Osna-burg canvas. An ordinary man could stand on the bed without bending. When loaded to capacity, and they usually were, for freighting was done by the pound, three tons of merchandise could be tucked away under the canvas.

The government wagons differed slightly from the regular freighter's wagon. The blue body was paneled, and often iron axles made them safer in crossing streams. The ends of the bed were straight instead of flaring. However, neither of the two types of wagon had brake or lock. The animals nearest the wheels functioned as a slow moving and patient hindrance as the wagons rolled down hill or grade.

2. For descriptions of the Conestoga wagon see Seymour Dunbar, *History of American Travel* (Indianapolis, Indiana, 1915), Vol. I, pp. 201-203, and Vol. II, p. 227; Bryan Hamilton, "The Conestoga Wagon," *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society*, Vol. XIV, pp. 405-411; and John Omwake, *The Conestoga Six-Horse Bell Teams of Eastern Pennsylvania* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1930), *passim*. References to this wagon are quite numerous.

A chain was kept on the side of the box to use in locking the wheels completely.

The business of manufacturing heavy freighting wagons was slow in coming to the frontier. Long before individual blacksmiths of the Missouri River towns had produced a wagon other than for the immigrants, the Studebaker firm of South Bend, Indiana, companies in far-away Pittsburgh, and Murphy and Espenshied, as well as others, in St. Louis, supplied the demands for the great wagon at about \$200 a piece.³

The ox yoke, bows and rings, chains, and water kegs (but not always for water) were ordinarily supplied at an additional cost of some \$25. These demands soon brought a bevy of blacksmiths and wagon doctors to the terminals or along the way, resembling service stations and garages of a more mobile machine age. Six, eight, or ten oxen—more in difficult places—furnished the horsepower for the private freighter. The government, however, usually used the animal that had made one of our states famous. Horses were seldom, if ever, used. The oxen were believed to have greater stamina than mules, being able to recover more quickly after the long trip across the Plains, and they could feed with relish on all kinds of weeds or grass. Wet weather and sand did great injury to their hooves; but shoes without calks, and pads for the broken spots, often made of hat brim, enabled them to keep going.⁴ Extra animals usually followed the train, serving as a supply of fresh oxen but also as a bait for thieving Indians.

The driver of an ox team was the bullwhacker. He was in charge of one wagon, walking on the left side of the animals—a one-wagon conductor who seldom if ever rode. These men were recruited from the areas at both ends of the trail. They were offered a life of adventure and freedom from the restraints of an old society. Young men

3. *State Record* (Topeka, Kansas), October 13, 1860, quoting the *Missouri Republican*.

4. E. Blair, *History of Johnson County, Kansas* (Lawrence, 1915), p. 67, quoting William Johnson, a bullwhacker.

considered their education incomplete unless they had spent a season on the Plains. One old freighter believed that habits learned while bullwhacking produced the frontier bully and border ruffian.⁵ This character usually wore a "ragged flannel shirt, pair of buckskin 'jeans', or store pants, with pockets made or breaking out almost anywhere, pair of brogans, and old hat and whip."⁶ This outfit was almost as standardized as the uniform of the soldier.

The bullwhacker's whip was an institution in itself. It weighed five and one-half pounds. The stock of tough ash or pecan sapling had a lash of undressed rawhide nearly two inches in diameter and about ten feet long, ending in a thong of buckskin. "To wield this required all of the strength of a man's groins." But it was seldom used to flay an ox, but was cracked with "a flourish and a smart jerk. You could hear a sound like a pistol shot, and see a mist of blood and hair start where the cruel thong had cut like a bullet" into the hide of some recalcitrant ox.⁷ The driver was proud of his whip and of his ability to use it. It was a sign of membership in the bullwhacker's fraternity, and it gave the democratic prairie man an opportunity to be aristocratic and excel those of lesser training and ability in his own group.

Mexican traders, and also some Americans, employed native Mexicans as teamsters. These drivers covered their swarthy skins with the distinctive dirty buckskin and flannel, and perhaps, to people of the Missouri ports, resembled the deck hands on the many steamers which landed goods at the levee.

During the Mexican War the government used volunteers, who arrived too late to be mustered into the Army of the West, as teamsters. Regular soldiers were employed in

5. *Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society*, Vol. XI, pp. 456-463, "The Santa Fé Trail in Johnson County, Kansas." This is a speech given at the Santa Fé Trail marker at Lone Elm, November 9, 1906.

6. *Freeman's Champion* (Prairie City, Kansas), June 24, 1858.

7. J. Evans Green, *The Santa Fe Trade, Its Route and Character* (Worcester, Massachusetts, 1893), pp. 15, 16.

that capacity in cases of emergency (of which there were many). In 1850 the secretary of war complained that such a system of employing teamsters gave rise to intolerable conditions, for besides "not being subject to the restraints of military discipline [he said] they are sometimes very turbulent and ungovernable."⁸ One year later the secretary said that the teamsters were employed at "enormous wages." It would be better, he said, if the government would increase the number of privates in a company to one hundred, increase the salaries, and detail them as teamsters when needed.⁹ The quartermaster kindly advised that soldiers employed as teamsters be allowed thirty cents extra per day instead of the fifteen cents and "commutation for whiskey ration" as before.¹⁰ As late as 1860, the secretary of war made the charge against the teamsters of exacting exorbitant wages when possible. But the powers of government seem never to have heard his call.¹¹

In 1860 bullwhackers on American freighters were paid from \$25 to \$30 per month. This included board. Their Mexican colleagues valued their services at \$15 for the same period of time. Wagon masters, the conductors of the train over the trail, had the salary of a capitalist in comparison to that of the lowly bullwhacker, for they often drew as much as \$100 per month.¹²

Food was a matter of prime importance on a wagon train long before the miracle of refrigeration was dreamed of. Each train carried a supply to last during the trip across the Plains. This was supplemented by occasional hunting forays. Each man was allowed 50 pounds of bacon, 10 pounds of coffee, 50 pounds of flour, 20 pounds of sugar, and some salt for the 800 mile drive of one month or more. Long strings of jerked buffalo meat usually graced the

8. *Senate Documents*, 31st Congress, 2nd Session, Vol. I, Part 2, No. 1, p. 8, Serial no. 587.

9. *Ibid.*, 32nd Congress, 1st Session, Vol. I, No. 1, p. 112, Serial no. 611.

10. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, No. 1, p. 73, Serial no. 659.

11. *Ibid.*, 36th Congress, 1st Session, Vol. II, Part 2, No. 2, p. 6, Serial no. 1024.

12. *State Record*, October 13, 1860.

sides of the wagons while carcasses of buffalo along the Old Trail gave evidence that some bullwhacker had had fresh tongue for supper. In the later days of freighting cows were sometimes driven along for the fresh meat and the milk.¹³ Trading posts which sprang up along the way kept a goodly supply of liquor to replenish the keg.

The Mexicans subsisted on unbolted flour and dried buffalo meat. When a herd of buffaloes crossed their path often camp was made and the larder filled. The meat was cut in strips and suspended on ropes from the corral of wagons. The sun did the magic. However, one freighter upon reflecting some years later, believed the meat to be sour and disagreeable to anyone not used to it.¹⁴ But the Mexicans stewed it, flavored it with generous helpings of red pepper, and ate it "without fear and trembling." Their trains always had hunters who perhaps would have been welcome in an American train, for according to some old bullwhackers "sow belly" three times a day for a month became questionable as an article of food.

All Mexican and many American freighters pastured their oxen in New Mexico during the winter. Early in the spring the owners who had wintered there preceded the teams in light wagons or carriages and went east, that is, to St. Louis, Philadelphia, or elsewhere, to buy goods. While awaiting the arrival of the steamer with the goods, the trains camped on the outskirts of Westport, Kansas City, or some other town on the river. "Solid squares of wagons, covering whole acres, are found," observed a newspaper man in Kansas City in 1860. "Thousands of draft animals are scattered over a 'thousand hills' . . . The streets resound with barbarous vociferations and loud cracks of heavy whips . . . The rumbling noise made by the clumsy, lumbering 'prairie schooners', while propelled along by patient oxen is heard incessantly."¹⁵ Bullwhackers fre-

13. *New York Voice*, September 19, 1895, given in *Kansas Biography Scrapbook* (Kansas State Historical Library, Topeka), Vol. IV.

14. W. B. Napton, *On the Santa Fé Trail in 1857* (Kansas City, 1905).

15. *State Record*, October 13, 1860.

quented grog shops and loafed in the streets, leisurely spending the wages which had been paid upon arrival at the Missouri.

One by one the wagons pulled from the warehouse down by the river, each loaded with sacks, barrels, or boxes weighing about 6,000 pounds. The wagons assembled at the camping ground until all had arrived. "At last, the 'order of march' is given. A scene then ensues that baffles description. Carriages, men, horses, mules, and oxen appear in chaotic confusion. Human cursing, distressing mulish out-cries and bovine lowing, form an all but harmonious concert, above the dissonances of which the commanding tone of the wagon master's voice only is heard. The teamsters make a merciless use of their whips, fists and feet; the horses rear; the mules kick; the oxen balk. But gradually, order is made to prevail and each of the conflicting elements to assume its proper place. The commander finally gives the sign of readiness by mounting his mule, and soon the caravan is pursuing its slow way along the road."¹⁶

There was no regular schedule followed during the trip across the Plains. Usually two or three stops were made during the day. Sundays were disregarded, as a rule, but half-days of rest came often for the benefit of the oxen. The wagon-master selected the camping places. When the afternoon was old he stopped his mule at some desirable spot, preferably near some stream which afforded water and wood. As the wagons drew up to him the head wagon circled to the right, the following team to the left, following the lines of an arc until they met. The next two wagons did likewise, bringing their left fore wheels close to the right hind wheels of the wagon ahead. As the balance of the train piled up this way, a circular corral was made. At the rear a space of twenty feet was left open. A wagon on the inside, or a chain, served as a gate. The oxen were then turned loose. A mounted herder, called a "cavvie" in the

16. *Ibid.*

day time if he drove the loose cattle or "cavayard" along with the train, cared for them during the night. Riding slowly around and around them, always guarding against a stampede, singing to them if they were restless, this "original" cowboy spent a lonesome night until the oxen lay down and began to chew on their cuds.

The drivers divided into messes of six or more. Two started for wood or buffalo chips with sacks on their shoulders. Another went for water. Another dug a fire trench. Soon bread, bacon, and steaming black coffee were served to each man who had his tin plate, quart cup, knife, fork, and spoon. After the mess, preparation was made for breakfast. Then came the "fun and frivolity" of camp life. A deck of thumb-marked euchre cards afforded amusement to some. As the stars began to appear in the western sky, stories of "hair breadth Indian encounters or 'unheard of buffalo shooting' was told." A good smoke and a song often ended the hard day as the flickering shadows of the dying campfire played on tired faces. The quavering call of a wolf echoed the raucous voices of the men. Blankets were spread beneath the wagons. The bullwhacker laid his head on an ox yoke, rolled his blankets around him, and probably had an untroubled sleep until the "Roll out, roll out" call of the night herder came much too soon at daybreak.

Breakfast over, the cattle were driven into the corral again. At the cry of "catch up" from the wagon master every driver started among the milling cattle with a yoke on his left shoulder. It was "first come, first served" for the first day only; after that the only exchange that could be made was from the herd of extra animals. A yoke of heavy, well-broken oxen were used as "wheelers"; a second best came next. The two pairs in the "swing" could be made up of partly broken cattle, with a good light weight pair for leaders. Long legged, long horned Texas steers, when broken, made the best leaders. They held their heads high, were quick on the foot, and could run quite as fast as a horse when frightened. With this in mind the bullwhacker

made his way among the swaying cattle which piled up on each other in the corral. When the sturdy "off-wheeler" was found, the yoke was fastened to him with one end left on the ground while the driver went in search of the mate. When yoked together they were hitched to the wagon, and the others were lined out in order. When the long call "pull out" sounded throughout the camp the teamster was in his glory. About twenty-five long whips tipped with buckskin poppers were swung above the heads of the drivers at the same time, the reports "sounding like fire from a picket line of soldiers." But only the "deadhead" was struck as the caravan writhed away for another day of ten weary miles.¹⁷

The bullwhackers had a reputation for being a "reckless, hard working set of men, many of them indulge[d] in great excesses when starting out, or coming in . . ." ¹⁸ A correspondent of a Missouri newspaper said that the "most intolerable nuisance about some of the trains is the atrocious profanity that is kept up like a raging fire by many of the hands."¹⁹ The tender Susan Magoffin, who rounded out a honeymoon on the Santa Fé Trail in 1846, was much shocked at the conduct of the men at "catching up" time. She noted in her diary that the "whooping and hollowing of the men was a novel sight rather. It was disagreeable to hear so much swearing . . . [Of course, 'catching up'] worries the patience of their drivers, but I scarcely believe they need to be so profane."²⁰ The freighting firm of Russell, Majors, and Waddell prohibited the use of profanity and liquor, forbade travelling on the Sabbath, and demanded that the animals be treated kindly. A code of behavior was

17. R. Rolfe, *Trails Clippings* (of the Kansas State Historical Society), vol. I, p. 391; Tucker and Vernon, *Along the Old Trail*, pp. 31-33; J. A. Little, *What I Saw on the Old Santa Fé Trail* (Plainfield, Indiana, 1904), p. 25; *Harper's Magazine* (clipping found in Kansas State Historical Society); *Dodge City Globe*, May 22, 1915, in *Trails Clippings*, Vol. II, p. 48.

18. *Missouri Republican*, August 11, 1858.

19. *Ibid.*, September 13, 1851.

20. Stella Drumm (ed.), *Down the Santa Fé Trail* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1926), pp. 2-3.

posted in the back of each wagon to serve those who easily forgot. When applying to Alexander Majors for a bullwhacking job, it may have been his connections with the Methodist church as pastor that caused him to ask the applicant if he could drive across the Plains and back without swearing. One old freighter tells that an Irishman, who had ambitions to be a teamster, replied to that question: "Yis, I can drive to hell and back without swearing."²¹ He was not employed. However, there is little reason to believe that Majors' elevating influence was felt far beyond the employment office. To his teamsters on the Oregon Trail he once preached a sermon. One listener said that he talked to them "like a Dutch Uncle." William Johnson, an old bullwhacker, testified that a wagon master seldom knew when Sunday came after being out awhile.²² An English traveller summarized his impression of the wagoner's conduct by saying that he "scarcely ever saw a sober driver; as far as profanity [is concerned], the western equivalent for hard swearing—they would make the blush of shame crimson the cheek of old Isis Barge."²³

Swearing was not unheard of on government trains, even if mules instead of oxen were used. The teamster rode one of the mules near the wagon, just as his brethren on the National Road had ridden the heavy horse near the Conestoga a generation before. From that position he made brave attempts to keep the four leaders moving. He held a line in his hand which extended to one of the lead mules. A jockey stick "not unlike a rake handle" separated the "pilot" from his mate. When the driver gave a heavy strap one pull the old veteran in the lead turned, pulling his mate to the left. Two jerks caused him to turn to the right, pulling his companion. And, to quote Mrs. E. Custer, "in this simple manner the ponderous vehicle and all the six animals are guided . . ." The most spirited mules were se-

21. J. A. Little, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

22. E. Blair, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

23. Sir Richard Francis Burton, *The City of Saints, and Across the Rocky Mountains to California* (New York, 1862), p. 14.

lected as leaders. Being out of reach of the whip their pace was determined by the persuasive effect of the driver's vocabulary or the tone of his voice. Mrs. Custer testified that she saw the driver of the teams which she accompanied to Ft. Riley from Leavenworth, desiring not to be profane in her presence, "shake his head and move his jaws in an ominous manner, when the provoking leaders took a skittish leap on one side of the trail, or turned around and faced him with a protest against further progress . . . It was in vain that he called out, 'You bet, there!' 'What are you about, Sal?'" She heard further remarks which caused her to believe that some of the mules were christened after the sweetheart of the "apparently prosaic teamster." This driver perhaps lavished as much affection on his mule as he did on his sweetheart. "Fox or small coyote tails were fastened to bridles and the vagaries in the clipping of the poor beast's tails, would set the fashion to a Paris hairdresser. . . . The coats of the beasts . . . shine like the fur of a fine horse."²⁴ Thus Mrs. Custer observed from the front seat of a government wagon while going across the Plains on a road often used by government wagons enroute to Santa Fé.

The dull monotony of the day or the stillness of the night was upon many occasions interrupted by the war whoops of mounted Indians armed with spears, guns, or bows and arrows. When sighted, if while the caravan was moving, the corral was hastily formed, the oxen placed within the circle, while the teamsters took a position of vantage behind the wagons. One old freighter tells a story of such an attack on the Old Trail (and there are many such stories) when a government escort was along. Upon this occasion, First Lieutenant Ulysses Simpson Grant and sixty troops had accompanied the train from Ft. Larned. When the Indians were sighted and the corral made, the soldiers took a position at one end, while the bullwhackers stood at

24. Mrs. E. Custer, *Tenting on the Plains or With General Custer in Kansas and Texas* (New York, 1893), pp. 222-229.

the other. Shots were exchanged with the red-skins as they rode around the encampment. When eight Indians lay dead on the ground, they flew the flag of truce, picked up their dead and went away. Lieutenant Grant, who had calmly strolled about during the fight with a black corn-cob pipe in his mouth, treated the men with a drink of whiskey from one of the wagons, and gave a receipt to the wagon master showing delivery to the army.²⁵

Stampedes were full of excitement while they lasted. Occasionally the spare cattle in the rear would become frightened. As they ran past the wagons the signal was given for a change of pace of the wagon train. The yoked oxen would begin to bawl, and to quote one teamster, set off at an astounding speed for miles, frequently overturning wagons. When their strength was exhausted they would settle down again. In 1862 Robert Wright was driving the loose cattle behind one of the Russell, Majors, and Waddell wagons. In the hot afternoon he took off his heavy linsey-woolsey coat, the body of which was lined with yellow and the sleeves with red. In taking off the coat it was turned inside out. Then he tossed it over the long horns of "Old Dan," a gentle ox that was lagging behind. "Old Dan" had fallen behind some distance during this process so the herder prodded him along. "No sooner did Old Dan make his appearance among the cattle than a young steer bawled out in steer language, as plain as English," says Wright, "Great Scott, what monstrosity is this coming to destroy us?" Then "with one long, loud beseeching bawl, [he] put all possible distance between himself and the terror behind him." Immediately all the cattle but "Old Dan" stampeded. When the wagon master inquired of the cause of this commotion which had wrecked some eighteen wagons, broken the legs of three steers and one man, and scattered loose cattle for about fifteen miles, Wright (meekly perhaps) said he thought it was a wolf.²⁶

25. *Kansas City Star*, quoted in *Trails Clippings*, Vol. I, p. 396.

26. This account is given by R. M. Wright in his *Dodge City, the Cowboy Capital* (Wichita, Kansas, 1918), pp. 28-29.

The wind, if in the right direction, heralded the approach of the caravan to Santa Fé. The creak of the wagons, the "gee-ho" and the "ho-haw" of the drivers, and the crack of the whip announced the arrival in a manner not to be mistaken. "From the shining white of the covers and the hull like appearance of the bodies of the wagons, truly [they] look like a fleet sailing with canvas all spread, over a seeming sea." Perhaps the cattle resembled so many insects crawling along on the surface of the desert, sometimes hidden from the eye by a shifting cloud of dust. The wagon master was the first to arrive in town. The few "guntoters," used for guards by some trains, accompanied him down the crooked streets of Santa Fé to bask in the sunshine of popularity. Looking back they could have seen the caravan moving from the horizon as if it were a part of nature. Finally dust covered vehicles, escorted by a swarm of flies which were attracted by the dried meat on the sides of the wagons, and pulled by sweaty, dirty oxen, crawled to the end of the journey.²⁷ The soft voices of dark-eyed señoritas mingled with the clatter of roulette wheels and the ring of Mexican dollars carried the tired bullwhacker far away from the life of bawling cattle. Perhaps excesses were indulged in "without stint or remorse"—but what of it, they must have reasoned, within a few days or weeks or months the business of making a living would call them back to the Old Trail again, seven hundred seventy-five "Gol durned" miles. If with empty wagons, it meant twenty miles each blessed day instead of ten. Then what lay at the end of the Trail—pay day, liquor, and women. Bullwhacking was indeed a prosaic profession to the plainsman on the trails of the Great West.

27. In *Santa Fé Trail and Other Pamphlets* (a collection of the Kansas State Historical Society), Vol. 1, Jonathan Millikan says that swarms of flies *always* followed the wagons.