A Trip To the End of the Union Pacific in 1868

I. Introduction

In early August, 1868, Maj. Thomas J. Anderson, Topeka ticket agent of the Union Pacific railroad, Eastern division, organized a three-day expedition to the western end of the road.

On August 5, 1868, the following item appeared in the Topeka Daily Kansas State Record:

The Topeka Excursionists will leave the Depot on Thursday morning the 6th inst., at 6 o'clock Sharp, and run to the end of the track. Everybody is expected to take along their own eatables, and occupy as small a space for the same as possible, as the baggage car will not accommodate large boxes or trunks. Mr. Pape will furnish the refreshments, consisting of Ice Cream, Lemonade, Sherry Cobbler, Mint Julips, Wines, etc. A general good time is expected. All are expected to provide their own mode of conveyance to the Depot.


One of the excursionists, however, wrote a long letter describing the journey. He was John H. Putnam1 and his letter follows:

II. The Letter

Topeka, Aug. 22nd 1868.

Dear K—

Your last has been awaiting an answer a long time, and in doing my duty towards you I can think of nothing better than to give you a hasty account of an Excursion Trip of recent date “all of which I saw and part of which I was,” in the language of an ancient Somebody.

Mr. Charles Shewry, some time of Columbus, whom I would most heartily commend to your . . . attention if you should ever meet him, has long been a partner of my bed and board, and formed one of our crowd on this Excursion.

1. John H. Putnam was born and reared in Gambier, Ohio. He attended Kenyon College. At the beginning of the Civil War he entered government service as a clerk in the quartermaster’s department. In 1864 he came to Topeka and read law in John Martin’s office. He practiced law in Topeka after his admission to the bar in 1868. He was a justice of the peace and twice held the office of police judge. At one time he was in partnership with A. H. Case, and at his death he was a partner of A. L. Williams. He died March 18, 1879, at the age of 35, of consumption.—The Commonwealth, Topeka, March 19, 29, 1879.
Along the Line of the Union Pacific in 1868
Photos by Alexander Gardner

KANSAS AVENUE, TOPEKA

[Looking north.] Three-story building on left is the Tefft House, northwest corner of 7th and Kansas.

[This and succeeding pictures were selected from 150 Gardner photographs in the collection of the Historical Society. For an account of Gardner’s visit to the state and a catalogue of his Kansas pictures see Robert Taft’s “A Photographic History of Early Kansas,” in The Kansas Historical Quarterly, v. III, p. 3-14.]

ST. MARY’S MISSION
Early upon the morning of August 6th there came a vigorous knocking at the door of my office, house and castle and a gruff voice proclaimed the death of sleep and summoned us to action. I pulled my eyes and mought open by one herculean effort and “Prophet, said I, thing of evil” come in and get a drink. (I did not say, but of course meant, water.) But he com’d not. Then came a hasty, dreamy[?] toilet; a rush to the hotel, a strangling over hot coffee, a rally on the stable, and in the dim haze of the morning we were soon urging two lazy steeds out into the suburbs where high up above Kaw river, . . . in a vine clad cottage, where the morning air is loaded with perfume, and the song of the birds makes music all the day, were the ladies whose smiles were to make the journey pleasant for us, already waiting for us. Think of this, . . . girls of the 19th Century ready and waiting “at 5 o’clock in the morning.” Among the languid beauties which the effete society of the East produces were such a thing possible? No sir! But in this land of pure air, and glowing health, the fair damsels rise, fresh as Venus from the Sea, “at 5 o’clock in the morning.” Before 6 o’c. we were at the Depot. Then I made a most beautiful charge on the town and my office for our forgotten tickets, and returned in time to save from desertion and loss a large box sitting on the platform, marked “John Putnam, His Box.” A box like the Pickwickian Hampers suggestive of what Mr. “Samivel Veller” called “weak fiz” and cold punch. As we steamed up the Valley in the cool morning the complacency of having got through the trouble well, of having three days rations, and no enemy to make afraid, settled down upon the undersigned “like a sweet dream of youth” as “Trine” used to say. We thought of L. Browne far away among the fire eaters of Alabama when we passed Wamego, and mused upon the future glory of this land as in rail road fashion we called out the localities as we passed, for the benefit of the ladies—Silver Lake—Cross Creek—Big Aleck’s—St. Mary’s Mission—Lost Creek—the Vermillion—Wamego—St. George—The Blue River—Manhattan—Ogden—Fort Riley—The Republican River—Junction City—Abilene—a—Solomon City—Salina. You can see them on the maps. So far the scenery has not changed. Here the Kaw river, already dwindled by the loss of several large streams, divides into the Saline and the Smoky Hill Forks. Our route is through the country of the Smoky. The road however here cuts across a great bend and after

2. Among the newspaper items sent by one of the excursionists was this humorous note concerning Abilene: “Cars stopped to put on more cow catchers on the rear end of the train. Texas cattle crowding around and climbing on the platform. . . .”—Daily Kansas State Record, Topeka, August 7, 1868.
a seventy five miles ride through a rough, uninhabited, and almost uninhabitable country, which shows many signs of volcanic action, we again strike the Smokey at Ellsworth—one hundred and sixty five miles from Topeka—

We are now, . . . in the West. Here is life. The fine spun theories, the moon-eyed inventions, the old time manners, and obsolete customs of the East are unknown. The houses here are alternately Beer Houses, Whiskey Shops, Gambling houses, Dance houses and Restaurants. There is little difference however as the Beer houses sell whiskey, and the whiskey houses retail beer, while the Club rooms and Restaurants all dispense the lightning (here sweetly called "Tarantula juice"). The dance houses combine the worship of Bacchus with terpsichorean amusements of a very high order. They used to "have a man for breakfast here every morning" as they pleasantly spoke when chronicling the nightly murders in the town, but, as they pensively admit, "business is very dull now." From Ellsworth to Hays City is nearly a hundred miles. This is part of the "Plains," what on the old maps is called "The Great American Desert." There are no signs of human life except at the wood and water stations of the rail road, where are generally one or two little sod houses, and a few negro soldiers loafing about. Now we begin to make acquaintance with the denizens of the Plains.

First come the Prairie Dogs. They are gregarious wild animals, . . . living in villages and having well regulated forms of government, but as they seem to have each a separate house it is probable that they are unhappy in their domestic relations. They sit at the doors of their burrows and when alarmed they fling themselves in the air with a gay nimbleness beautiful to see, flip a summer sault, and present to the admiring gaze of the traveller two furry heels and a short furry tail as they make their exit from the stage of action. We see a skulking wolf or two, and a timid antelope or two, and elk in the distance. Then Buffalo— singly—in couples—in groups—in countless herds. They are great awkward creatures with hair hanging over their eyes, with shambling but still rapid gait. There we come on a herd. The cars stop. Now the fun begins. Everybody runs out and commences shooting—Nothing hurt. Though I expect in the reckless firing to see somebody hit, and have as many fears as the melancholy game keeper out with Mr. Winkle, although differing from him in having no wife and children to support. With the same result this performance is repeated again and again—the stopping of the train—the brave charge—the ignominious return.
Along the Line of the Union Pacific in 1868

Photos by Alexander Gardner

LINCOLN AVENUE, WAMEGO

HAYS CITY
We failed to bag a buffalo. I did not shoot having ill defined ideas as to hunting rifles, which end you put the load in and which end you let it out at. (I never hunted any game with guns except men, you know.) But I rushed out with the rest— yelled promiscuously— “Buffalo”— “Stop the train”— “let me out”— “there they are”— “Whoop-pee”— “Give ‘em thunder”— “no go”— “Come back”— “drive on”— So you see I helped a good deal. We got through to Fort Hays and Hays City in the evening lively as crickets, and perfectly capable of enduring the fatigues of a cup of coffee and a sandwich. Here we met some acquaintances— among them “Wild Bill” [Hickok] the great scout, a romantic but not o’er true history of whom you may find in Harper’s Monthly of about a year ago. He said there were some hundreds of Cheyenne warriors camped a few miles out. Soon some of the braves came in. Clad mostly in red paint, feathers and bear-claw necklaces. Pleasant looking gentlemen these, . . . pleasant images for dreams. The girls wondered if they would like some scalps of foreign hair.

Most of the ladies proposed to remain in the cars. Our ladies had an invitation to accept beds at a nice house in town. And against our advice, gently offered, conclude to accept. Behold the scene. Eleven o’clock at night, or after, in the wildest of all wild western frontier towns. A small procession moves up the middle of the street to prevent interruption— Seeking a house no one knows— A nice quiet residence— A specimen of which does not exist within a radius of two hundred miles. We ask “where does Mr. Joyce3 live?” Answer—“Just around the Corner”—

3. Probably Judge Marcellus E. Joyce. Years later Henry Inman wrote of Hays City and Judge Joyce as follows: “When Fort Hays was established in 1867 on Big creek, in what is now Ellis county, Hays City, a wild, ‘wooly,’ mushroom hamlet sprung up almost in a night, like that edible fungus, because of the proximity of the United States military post only a mile distant. This was immediately after the war and there congregated, of course, the renegades from both armies; men, who, steeped in crime, and fugitives from justice, lived under assumed names, but safe in their remoteness from the operations of law. Society there was such as frequently characterizes extreme pioneer civilization when first aggregating in towns. There, too, settled some of the truest people, comparable to the best who have built up our Western empire, the effect of whose presence and efforts is visible in the beautiful, moral and cultured Hays City of to-day.

“During the early period of the struggling town’s existence, it had, for its justice of the peace, a stubby, red-headed little Irishman, with a most pronounced brogue. He was a man of some education and good-hearted, who loved his whisky, which frequently ‘laid him out,’ and who made many friends, but whose construction of the power in his official capacity, delegated by the constitution, was widely at variance with the facts.

“His office was a rickety, tumble-down shell of boards on the main street, furnished with an ordinary pine table and a few rough benches. It had one door, and four windows on each side with bread sills, elevated about three feet above the floor. This stern conservator of the public peace always commenced business with the stereotyped sentence: ‘Hats off, now! this court’s in session!’

“One time an Irishman, was brought before him for some infringement of the municipal regulations. He mulcted the unfortunate delinquent in the enormous sum of forty dollars, but discovered, to his disgust, that his victim was penniless. Here was a dilemma; he did not care to commit the man to jail in Saline county, over one hundred miles away; it was the money he was after, and, finding that a brother of the accused, a recent importation from Ireland, was present, he called him up, asked him if he had any cash, and being answered in the affirmative, said: ‘Well, the fine’s on you, thin.’ And he collected it, too.

“Once, when a verdant young lawyer fresh from the East took exception to some of his
the "Eldorado Club rooms," and "Pat. Murphy's Saloon," opposite the "Prairie Flower Dance House." A nice neighborhood surely. Find it with the help of "Wild Bill"—A little wooden shanty used for a justice's office—Locked—No key. Visible through the dirty window—one tallow candle burning low, two deal chairs much whittled, one bench worse whittled, and the "nice clean beds" promised, three dirty blankets thrown on a floor mapped off like the devil's wild land with tobacco juice. We are informed that the proprietor is on a bit of a spree over our arrival—and that having pledged us in the flowing bowl to his heart's content, and having trod a measure or two in the mazy dance he would doubtless return to welcome us. Having considered the matter at some length the ladies concluded that after all perhaps it would not be best to trouble this pleasant little man who had such pleasant little ways. And our procession filed back again to the train. We made the ladies as comfortable as possible on the train, cautioned them to say their little hymns and left them for the open air. With a prostrate telegraph pole for pillow and "the starry decked heavens" for roof we courted the syren[?] sleep. But in vain. The wind began to blow a perfect gale. You may think them are winds from the lake at Cleveland, my boy, but it is a mistake. Here the gale sweeps over a smooth level surface, hard and stationary, for hundreds of miles, without the least obstacle, and it gets down to the ground like a race horse and gets up a rate of speed "fearful for to feel."

rulings and proposed to appeal the case, the judge grew furious and said: 'I'll have you to know there's no higher court than this! There's no appellate from my court, and I'll fine yess fer contempt ov yess talk ov an appala!' The young man consequently subsided.

"At another time a cowboy was brought before him charged with murder, who, 'as the legend hath it,' had contrived, as a friend, to quietly slip five hundred dollars into the hands of the judge. When the man was called into court and was asked: 'Are you guilty or not guilty?' he replied: 'Guilty!' 'Well, yess are a big fool to plague that way, and I discharge yess for want of evidence,' so discharged he was.

"He had a case before him during the latter days of his reign in which the ownership of a heifer was in controversy, the evidence hinging upon a certain brand supposed to be somewhere on the animal. It was after four o'clock, and both 'coot' and jury were in a condition their frequent 'rounds' to the saloons during the day would naturally leave them in at that late hour.

"As the trial waxed warm, the judge became satisfied that the jury must have occult proof of the existence of marks or brands on the animal in controversy, so he ordered the acting sheriff to 'bring the baste to the door where the jury could see it.'

"The heifer, after some delay, arrived at the front of the building, notice of which was promptly conveyed to 'his honor.' But the majority of the jury, who had become somewhat obstreperous by this time, swore they wouldn't go outside to look at any 'd—d heifer; if the judge wanted them to view her, let the sheriff bring her inside.'

"The order was given, but the unruly animal objected decidedly to the mandate of the court, and refused to enter after several abortive attempts to compel her. At last the sheriff, worked up to a degree of desperation, with the aid of a few idle loungers, friends of his, got the brute's head fairly pointed at the door, and dexterously twisted her tail, cowboy fashion. The now enraged beast, with horns lowered and bawling with pain, incontinent rushed into the presence of the 'coot' regardless of the sanctity of the place.

"It did not take a moment for the spectators at the trial to make good their escape by the door as the infuriated creature made a break for the little redheaded judge, who, the moment he saw the state affairs had assumed, got down prone upon the floor close to the wall, where the table under which he had crept shielded him from the brute's raged rush. The jury, suddenly sobered at the apparition of the maddened beast, took refuge on the broad sills of the windows, where they remained while the heifer tore around and demolished everything loose within her reach, after which she rushed out and down the prairie, which ended the proceedings of that trial for all time.

"—Topeka State Journal, June 20, 1890.
Along the Line of the Union Pacific in 1868
Photos by Alexander Gardner

NORTH SIDE OF MAIN STREET, ELLSWORTH

[For another Gardner view of Ellsworth see Kansas Historical Quarterly, v. III, opposite p. 6.]

SOUTH SIDE OF MAIN STREET, ELLSWORTH
I'd as soon think of sleeping in the crater of Vesuvius or in the vortex of the Maelstrom as in the open air in such a wind. We crawled into one of those great wagons which freighters use on the plains, called a prairie Schooner. The experiences of that night will cling to the under-girded for many a day. Unable to sleep I lay on my back between two friends regardless of the gale, regardless of the shouts of our lively friends in the towns, gazing up at the stars from this out look on the desert, thinking of home and friends and the "days that are dead." Fearful of the effects of the chill blast and night damp upon my feeble organization I had recourse for warmth to the contents of a huge flask, part of the outfit of the Expedition. And it would have amused a cold ghost to have seen me there in the dead of night between two sleeping companions, lying perfectly straight, raising that long black bottle across the face of my friend Shewry, at just sufficient elevation to produce a downward current into my capacious mouth, and as the rich fluid from Bourbon county gurgled gently in my throat Shewry would sigh in his dreams to think it were not he. At length "tired nature's sweet restorer, balmy sleep," came and we all slept.

When Apollo with his burning car was about to climb the Eastern horizon we were up, washed at the pump, ate a bite of breakfast and once more went rushing "out into the West," one hundred miles further to Monument 4 the last station. The principal productions of this place are Negro soldiers and mud shanties. You may get a glass of beer for 50[?] cents, and a poor Cigar for the same money, the whiskey you would not taste unless you wanted to "shuffle off this mortal coil." We now turned our faces toward home and the haunts of civilization and ran clear through without leaving the train. We made the round trip of near seven hundred miles in less than forty-five hours. A little too fast for pleasure in this climate. I wish you could have been with us. The people are worth seeing. There are men from every nation under heaven in their natural state, and then mixed with every style of American—Yankee, Westerner, Southerner, Negro, Mexican, and "Injun," with all imaginable crosses and mongrels of the same, presenting a conglomerate of human nature more curious than beautiful to see.

But the physical conformation of the Country is even more interesting to notice. Starting from Topeka we pass gradually from one extreme of fertility to the other. From rich farming lands rolling in native wealth we come to a region where we lose sight of man and

---

4. In present Monument township, Logan county.
beast and vegetable life; to dreary reaches of level sand where there are no hills, no water! not a tree, nor a bush, nor a blade of grass; not a green herb, not a living thing, not one trace of any one of the multifarious forms of life with which God has filled the Earth appears to break the unending monotony of the dreary Expanse. There is not one barrier to break the force of the dry, hot wind, for the traveller, nothing to protect his head from the broiling heat of the sun. That most beautiful simile of the Bible that God is "the shadow of a Great rock in a weary land" where one may find safety, peace, and comfort, must have been prompted by looking upon such desert scenes. I shall not attempt to picture to you our return. The journey was not particularly interesting. The party had that drooping, withered, squeezed-lemon appearance which the morning after the Fair always brings. There were many interesting pictures in the cars which must have been seen to amuse. There were the usual crumpled dresses, loose hanging and wayward curls, and ringlets, and possibly soiled hands and faces, which reduces the fair sex from that state of perfect immaculateness, and brings us nearer to them by teaching that they are only common clay like ourselves after all, although clay seven times purified in the fire, and polished and embellished (not to say enamelled and painted) in the most beautiful manner. With song and story we chased the gliding hours until our homes received us once again, weary and sleepy, like the pilgrim going home to his death after the toils and turmoils of his Earthly journey—

"Post juvendum juventutem"
"Post molestam senectutum"
"Nos hababit humos."

[After delightful youth]
[After troublesome age]
[The soil will have us.]

I have not seen the young ladies since we left them at their door in the dim morning twilight of our return. The fatigue and exposure of the journey so aggravated my rheumatism that I have been confined to my room closely since returning, and it is much to help destroy the monotony of my imprisonment that I am writing you this longest of letters. I state this in spite of the story you refer to in your last. I've found the whole verse which runs some how

5. "The Excursion train came from Monument to Topeka, 318 miles, in 14½ hours. The last 16 miles was run in 20 minutes. George Abbott was the engineer."—Daily Kansas State Record, Topeka, August 9, 1868.

6. "The Excursionists reached home two and a half o'clock Saturday morning. . . ."
—Ibid.
thusly—after the young man stating to the young lady that he had called just because “he’d nothing else to do” the story runs—

But before the day was over, I’d some how made up my mind,
That I’d pop the question to her, if to me her heart inclined,
So I whispered “Sweet, my darling, will you have me, Yes, or No?”
“Well,” said she, “perhaps I may, dear, when I’ve nothing else to do.”

I had gathered some Cactus, and some other little mementoes of the trip but in the hasty and dreamy disembarkation, they were all forgotten and I have now left to remind me of the trip, beside some pleasant reminiscences, only, two very rheumatic limbs, one very stiff neck, and one very much dilapidated moral character.

In token of all which, and of “the joys when you and I were boys”

I remain

Yours rheumatically

J[ohn] P[utnam].