

A Glimpse of Kansas 90 Years Ago

I. INTRODUCTION

THE hazards of traveling in Kansas, in February, 1860, were graphically recorded in the following letter from William Addison Phillips to his wife (Margaret Carraway Spilman) under date of February 17, 1860. The letter was among other papers recently received by the Kansas State Historical Society from Mrs. H. M. Korn of Salina, a granddaughter.

W. A. Phillips (1824-1893) was born in Scotland, and came to Kansas in 1855, via southern Illinois where he had lived since the late 1830's. He arrived as a special correspondent of the *New York Tribune*, with a background of journalistic and legal training, and stayed to be one of the most outspoken of Free-State writers and politicians. His *The Conquest of Kansas* . . ., published in 1856, was one of the important books of the period.

In 1858 he headed a party which founded Salina. In 1859 he was married. During the Civil War he served with distinction, becoming colonel of the Third Indian (Cherokee) regiment. He was a congressman from Kansas during the years 1873 to 1879. A legal practice, and writing filled most of the other years. Phillips wrote voluminously on many subjects, but taxation was his particular interest. He died at Fort Gibson, I. T., but is buried at Salina.

II. THE LETTER

LAWRENCE, KANSAS, Sunday, Feb. 17 /60

MY OWN SWEET WIFE,

I would have written to you yesterday, but was very busy, but knew that a letter to-day, or perhaps even to-morrow or next day would reach you just as soon.

I did *not* get in on Monday night, as I wrote from Junction City, but late, late on Thursday night, or Friday morning. I was very much fatigued and rather weather beaten, but am getting better—but let me relate my trip to you in detail.

I left Salina on Tuesday morning— stuck at the Saline, and toiled in the snow two hours. Then struggled on to Solomon that night my horses weak and lame. Next day stalled in snow drifts, as I had done the day before, at least a dozen times, had to tie a rope round the hind axle, and pull out back, and then try a new place. I got into Junction after ma[n]y adventures on Friday

morning shod my horses, and tried to get to Manhattan, but failed. night came on me, and in the dark, and a storm of wind and rain I stopped at a Creek 2 miles from Manhattan. It rained all night and in the morning Manhattan was a sea—the houses Islands. The river had not yet broken up, and fearing that it would and keep me on the north side of it for a week I crossed the ferry at Manhattan. The twelve miles to Waubonsa I had to travel through snow sludge and water lakes, the water knee deep for a mile or two at a place. At Wabonsa I found the Creeks, and even small runs getting up to swimming depth and my horses had sore shoulders bloody feet, and were completely exhausted I drove a mile and a half out of town to Enoch Plattes.

Mr. Platte was away but his wife told me I was as welcome as if he had been there. I got my horses put out of the cold rain in a good barn and plenty of Hungarian Grass. Next morning I went to church alone, (it was bad weather) I went home with the preacher, Mr. (I forget his name, a Congregational preacher) to tea. After tea Lines made me go to his house next morning when I got ready to start I found Jim had got the colic with eating too much of the Hungarian Grass. Plattes people kindly urged me to stay. Crossed two creeks that day, and at night (four oclock afternoon) got down in the Pottawattomie reserve to Mill Creek, there a broad river running very high. I had to wait until next day at two o clock for the river to fall enough to cross, and after riding over once or twice on Jim, feeling the bottom with a pole I cross[ed]; having propped up the wagon bed to keep it above the water, and got through safely.

I reached Mission Creek (12 miles) that night, having left the Topeka road, and striking over for Auburn, on the Salina road, so as to head the creeks, and see Mr. Fox about buying the robes. Passed a dreary rainy sleety night. Next day it snowed, drove as rapidly as I could, got to Auburn at noon, the stone bridge was washed away on the Salina road, and in a heavy shower, about one o'clock had to cut out a road through the thicket and cross at an old ford above. Got completely wet. Wind turned to the north then it snowed and froze. When I got to Fox's they looked alarmed as if they were afraid I had come to visit them. His second wife, a neat precise looking wom—(no, lady) looked as if she feared I would dirty her house with my dripping clothes. I learned that he had not now the money that he expected to pay me for the robes, and so I was disappointed in selling them. I drove off and put my

horses in an empty house, curried them dry and fed them, and then went up to the printing office to get my papers and dry myself.

It got colder, and was snowing hard, but knowing I could not reach Lawrence in one day more, the way the roads were, unless I hurried, I hitched up again and drove three miles through the storm that even. Stopped at a deserted house (there are many deserted houses here), got a fire in an old stove, and my horses in a shed, and tried to get dry, and cook a little coffee, and toast some of the bread. The provisions you gave me lasted me all the way, as I bought nothing. On Thursday morning I started, and drove all day, stopping twice to feed. At dark I was still ten miles from Lawrence, and the roads very bad but I pushed on, and reached our old Walnut house about one o'clock of a dark, cold night, or morning. How cheerfully would I have driven that nights drive had you been there, but Lawrence did not look like home— the house did not look like home. I[t] was empty dirty, and desolate.

In the morning, I am sorry to have to relate to you that I found the house had been robbed. Alexis must have left the kitchen door badly fastened. At all events the book box, the barrel, trunks, &c &c and the box of hardware in the kitchen had been thoroughly ransacked and everything of value taken. I learned that some mischievous people or their children had been there, and I made two visits. I recovered only one smoothing Iron, and a few books, but very little of what had been taken. The flax carpet, wall paper and a number of magazines, and the rest of your smoothing irons gone.

On Friday I ate the last of my provisions, as did my horses the last of the hay and corn I had brought with me. For the last four days I had coffee (not good) and toast with a little mollasses. Still I kept very well and vigorous.

Finding provisions high. It was very cold. No fire in the house. My boots were froze and I could not get them on— so I accepted an invitation of Mr. Bacon to use his cellar office to sit read and write in and board with him at \$3 per week. So here I am quite comfortable, *only away from home*.

I have been very busy since noon Friday,—which time it was before I got everything fixed right about the house— and put the robes in it. Since then I have settled a few accounts due here, and *tried* to collect, but have not got a cent. I have hunted up most of my old buyers of furs, but none of them have any money, and I have no wish to sell on credit. On Monday morning a Mr. Hill — my old customer will be here, and I shall try and sell them

to him— There is no money here. Furs are low, and times more wretchedly hard than ever. I shall do the best I can, but it is dreadful up hill work just now. After I see Mr. Hill I have to ride to Tecumseh tomorrow to see a saw mill. It is 21 miles, 42 going and coming. If I get back tomorrow at all it will be very late. I shall probably have to be here all this next week at least. The horses are sore and the roads are impassible for a load. The river here is high and full of ice. A hundred wagons of relief goods wait at the other side unable to cross. I have no time for politics in this, but they are all engrossing. I shall write you when I come back from Tecumseh. Tell Alex Campbell not to give more than 50c for large and 25c for small wolfskins in trade as I fear that is all it will be possible to get for them in St. Louis or anywhere. I fear the country is on the verge of civil war. Adieu my love. Kiss John and "doodl-oodle" for papa.

Your Affectionate Husband

WM. A. PHILLIPS.