

1863, Young, John R. (Captain)

A Thrilling Experience on the Plains-The Stampede, 1863

by John R. Young

In 1863 I was living in southern Utah. It was believed the Mormon immigration would be unusually heavy that year; hence great exertions were put forth by the people to bring the season's gathering to a successful termination. Cooperation was the power which, under the wise guidance of Brigham Young, made it possible to build up a prosperous commonwealth in that isolated desert

Teams were raised in all parts of the territory, organized into companies of fifty wagons each, four yoke of cattle to each wagon, and placed under the care of experienced men. These were sent to the Missouri River, fourteen hundred miles, to haul hack the luggage of the immigrants. The people were required to walk.

Rules of government were established in each camp and firmly carried out. No swearing was allowed; all assembled for prayers at the call of the chaplain, morning and night; usually at nine o'clock all retired for rest; and at five all arose. These camps were practical training schools of great value.

It fell to my lot to drive a team in Captain John R. Murdock's train. Upon arriving at Omaha, I was selected to take charge of an independent company; people who had means to immigrate themselves to Utah. On the 8th of August I commenced the task (mission, we called it, for we all served without pay) of leading these people, who were Scandinavians, from Omaha to Salt Lake City. When it is remembered that these people spoke a language that I did not understand; that they were not accustomed to driving teams; that I had to teach them even how to yoke their cattle, and hitch on to their wagons, it will be easy to imagine the magnitude of the task I had undertaken.

For the first week we made only from five to ten miles a day; but at the end of two weeks, we could make twenty-five. At Wood River center, the western line of civilization, and the last telegraph station, I received a dispatch from our immigration agent, Feramorz Little, telling me that the Sioux were on the warpath, and that we must be watchful or they would run off our cattle. As a word of encouragement he added that Captain Preston would overtake me in a few days, and would give me four mounted Utah men to aid me as scouts and night guard for my cattle.

Thus cheered I pushed boldly out into the hunting grounds of the Sioux. But day after day passed, and Captain Preston did not come.

At last I reached Ash Hollow, where there was a stockade and five Utah men guarding supplies left by the down-going trains. Leaving early the next morning, we made a drive of twenty-five miles, across the big bend of the Platte. In the evening a squad of U. S. troops camped on the opposite side of the river, and helloed across to us to look out, for 'the devil was let loose' - meaning that 'Sitting Bull' was on the warpath.

In the morning they were gone, and when we brought up our cattle one of our best oxen was missing. It belonged to a Swede who had only a light wagon and one yoke of oxen. Selecting a large cow from the herd, I yoked her in and started the train in charge of the interpreter. I then circled the night herd-ground; and being a good trailer, I soon found the track of the ox going hack and caught him at Ash Hollow, twenty-five miles from camp.

Giving my horse a feed of grain, and taking lunch with the men, I started with the ox to overtake my train. The long, weary day went by, the sun was near setting, and I had just passed the night camp ground I had left in the morning, when a small cloud of dust coming from the foothills attracted my attention. Just as I was entering a gorge, I drove the ox into the wash, then turned

back up the hill until I could see the dust again.

With the aid of my telescope I made out four Indians rapidly driving a herd of horses toward a patch of timber on the river. A careful inspection convinced me that the loose animals were American horses, and I soon recognized them as Captain Preston's. It now flashed through my mind why he had not overtaken us; the Indians had stolen his horses and crippled his movements.

Well, there I was, twenty miles from camp, alone, with no weapon but my revolver, and almost face to face with the robbers who had stolen my friend's horses. I stood and watched until they reached the timber. Selecting a large tree for a camping place, they threw down their traps and three of them bunched the horses, while the fourth caught and hobbled them. Then they cut poles and started down the river, evidently to catch fish for their supper.

I saw that the arroya that I was in emptied into the river near their camp; and knowing that the moon would not rise until a few minutes after dark, I instantly formed a plan and went to work to put it into execution. I was adverse to shedding blood, having always been taught to avoid it except in self defense. I resolved, however, to recapture the horses, and then, if followed, I would fight.

Leaving the ox, I moved cautiously down the ravine and reached the mouth of it just as the gloom of night settled over the plain. The Indians had returned and built a large fire. One of them walked out and bunched the horses, and their movements attracted the attention of my mare. She threw up her head and started to neigh, but I gave the bit a jerk in time to check her. The movement, slight as it was, showed me how dangerous was the enterprise I had undertaken.

The Indian soon returned to camp and threw some more wood on the fire, which in the still night flamed high in the air, rendering objects visible for some distance round, and greatly assisted my movements. I felt that now was my time to act. Approaching carefully the outer circle of horses, and dropping my bridle reins, I moved quietly from horse to horse, cutting their hobbles, then regaining my own horse, moved the band slowly until they found they were unfettered, when I leaped into my saddle and started them on a run.

The wild yell that rang out on the night air curdled my blood and made my hair stand on end. For a moment I was quite unnerved, but soon recovered and lashed the horses at a wild rate across the plain. By the time I reached the oxen the moon had risen and it seemed as light as day. I drove the horses and the oxen across the gully, and then wheeled back and stood in the darkness at the bottom of it, waiting for my pursuers.

Soon the pattering of feet reached my ears; and holding my breath until two dark forms came into view, I opened fire. The quick somersault, and rapid retreat convinced me that Mr. Indian had been twice surprised by the white man. Emptying my revolver to give the idea that there were several of us, I sent the stock hurrying toward my camp. The road was tolerably straight and free from hill and hollow, so I was not much afraid of being ambushed. Yet I was keenly alert, and the fluttering of a bird or starting of a hare would rouse me.

As several hours passed, however, without interruption, I concluded that my shots had taken effect, at least so far as to discourage the Indians from following me. But I was suddenly aroused from this feeling of security by another danger I had not counted on. It was the low distant howl of a wolf. Soon an answer came, then another, and another. I smiled, for I had a contempt for the whole wolf tribe, believing them to be cunning and cruel, but cowardly. I turned the cylinder of my pistol to see if it was properly reloaded, and finding it all right, calmly awaited the gathering of the howling pack.

With lolling tongues and fiery eyes they came galloping up, falling into small groups, snapping, snarling, and fighting. I hesitated to shoot for fear the smell of blood would whet their ferocious appetites. My hesitation ceased, however, as a large grey wolf trotted up to my side and

crouched to spring at me. Instinctively I put a bullet through his shoulder and he fell backward with a yell. In an instant a score of hungry brutes sprang on to him and tore him to pieces. At the same moment, a fresh pack came sweeping across the road in front, enclosing us in a circle. The frightened horses recoiled back upon me, and I began shooting right and left. One of the excited ponies suddenly bolted from the herd and ran wildly across the plain. Instantly every wolf joined in pursuit. For a moment there was a rushing sound which gradually died out in the distance, then I was left alone with my trembling ponies and my heart wildly beating.

At four a.m. I reached the camp in safety. The Danes had put the children to bed; but the men and women were sitting around a fire in the center of a corral formed by wagons. When I rode up they greeted me with four hurrahs, and strong hands lifted me from my saddle and bore me triumphantly to the watch fire.

When the joy had somewhat subsided, I said: 'Brethren, that ox has traveled one hundred miles and I have ridden seventy-five. These horses are Captain Preston's. I took them from the Indians who had stolen them. Now, double the guards around the camp and cattle, put out your fire; and let me sleep until sunrise.' (The horses were not Captain Preston's; they belonged to a small company of men who were returning from Oregon.)

It is strange how susceptible of impression the mind of man is. As a first glint of sunshine rested upon my face, I awoke. The camp was bustling with activity. The Danes, though naturally a slow, stolid people, yet when aroused to enthusiasm are like a deep stream almost irresistible in force. And present conditions were such that the deepest feelings of their hearts were enlisted. Their faith, begotten of new convictions, was leading them to gather to Utah. It was their Mecca, their Zion upon earth; and every possible effort was cheerfully put forth to bring them to that haven of rest. Hence, camp rules and regulations were willingly adopted. Even the children seemed to vie with one another in carrying them out.

And needful it was that such faith should exist, for the journey before them was beset with trials and dangers; and no one could tell how or when trouble would come. The first day after my adventure passed pleasantly. We made a good drive and camped on a small clear stream and the usual horse-shoe corral was formed. At dusk the horses were placed on the inside, and guards placed at the ends of the corral. In the morning it was reported that the horses had been restless. I circled the camp and near the mouth of the creek I found where two Indians had jumped across. I knew that mischief was intended. That night I was cautious in selecting a camp ground, and careful in forming the corral, being sure that no gaps were left.

Before our company left Omaha, two American families joined us. They were rough Nebraskan farmers; and one of the men, whom I will call Jerry, was of great service to me. He was good-natured, strong and fearless. A younger brother of mine was also with me. He, too, was quiet and reliable. At prayer time I told the people that I feared the Indians were following us, and that they would try to stampede our stock, which I dreaded above all things.

I had seen the effects of stampedes in my first trip across the plains. A tornado is but little more to be dreaded than the rush of a large herd of crazy, frightened cattle. I have seen wagons smashed to stove-wood and strong men trampled to death. I therefore requested Jerry and my brother to spread their blankets near me and I kept my best horse saddled ready for any emergency.

And the emergency came about three o'clock in the morning. A wild yell like an Indian war-whoop rang out on the air, followed by a rush of cattle. In an instant, all was confusion; women and children tumbled pell-mell out of the wagons in their night clothes, screaming and fainting. The men, guns in hand, formed bands and, rushing in front of the cattle, fought desperately to keep them from bolting; and caused the crazy beasts to run in a circle. Every round brought them nearer the wagons and I knew if they struck them that we were ruined.

Grasping my two trusted men, I urged them to mount their horses and throw themselves between

the cattle and the wagons, and force the cattle, if possible, to bolt from us. I seconded their efforts by mounting my horse and, getting my interpreter, hurried to the men who were fighting the cattle and led them to where I could hear Jerry and my brother's voices vainly trying at each returning surge of the dark mass to force the cattle farther from the wagons. Massing my men at the most exposed angle of the corral, I ordered them, on the return of the cattle, to fire a volley into the air. The sheet of flame from the guns seemed for a moment to paralyze the stock, and then with a rush that shook the ground beneath our feet away they thundered toward the foothills on the north.

I lay flat on my horse, and, crowding him into the jam, was swept along with the herd for about three miles until I was satisfied no Indians were following; then I straightened up and commenced talking to them. This had the effect of quieting them. They slowed up, began lowing, as if calling to each other, and finally stopped. I was soon joined by my brother; but Jerry's horse, being slow, was soon distanced and lost, and he did not find us. Nor did he reach camp until the next day.

As soon as it was light, we moved the cattle back to camp; but they were nervous, and great care had to be taken in yoking them up. About nine o'clock we broke camp. I put my brother's team in the lead, and told him to drive briskly as I wanted to keep the wagons some distance apart. I strung out the teams and instructed the drivers to not close up. I proposed to drive fast until we should reach Goose Creek, fifteen miles away, and then camp.

All went as I desired until we reached the summit of the last ridge. From there we had a mile of down-hill grade to the creek. I glanced back and could see the line of white covered wagons following each other like birds of passage moving in orderly columns to a warmer clime. A feeling of joy filled my bosom, for I felt that the labors of the day would end in peace. I spurred my horse and galloped rapidly to the front to select the best spot on which to form my camp.

Crossing the creek and ascending the bench a few rods to the west, I turned and looked back just in time to see two Indians ride from the head of a hollow on our left. As they rushed past the rear of the train they gave their wild, blood-curdling war-whoop. As quick as lightning an alarm seemed to flash from one end of the train to the other and every team rushed wildly down the hill.

My pen is too weak to describe the heart-rending scene that followed the fearful rushing of the wild, stampeded cattle. Wagons were jolted against wagons with such force that inmates were thrown out, to be run over and trampled under foot by other teams following in their rear. On they came, tearing blindly in any direction that their crazy fear led them. Wagons were embedded in the mire of the creek, and the tongues jerked out. At last they began to scatter and then stopped.

Children ran instinctively to their parents for protection. In groups they wandered from their teams, avoiding them as though they had become beasts of terror to them. I rode to my brother and directed him to the selected camping place. He unhitched his team, and, driving the oxen some distance away, unyoked the right ox and turned its head toward the off one's tail, then yoked it again. In this shape, as long as yoke and bows held, there was no danger of stampeding.

The movement was like a revelation to the people, and they took new hope. I rode from wagon to wagon directing their movements, and checking noise and confusion. By sundown, the camp was formed, the cattle secured, the guards placed, and fires lighted. Then I turned my attention to the wounded ones. I had but little knowledge of surgery but all eyes were turned to me. With a prayer for God's blessing to attend my efforts, I sewed up gaping flesh wounds. Providentially, no bones were broken but there were two lovely women and one man who needed no help of mine. Loving hands smoothed the tangled hair and closed the eyes of the dead, and loving lips kissed the pale brows. Then white sheets were spread over them and they were left to rest. On the morrow, on the near hillside, we dug their graves, and of the dear old family chests, coffins were made. Then a venerable man, in workman's garb, spoke sweet words of comfort:

"Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord."

And whether they rest on prairie wild, or sleep in the city's polished sepulchers, it matters not, so God's will is done. In the resurrection morn, they shall come forth clothed with life and immortality.