

Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier **By Joanna L. Stratton (1981)**

(We have no traveler's specific account of stopping at Mahaffie, but this woman almost certainly did, given the date, the route, and the coach line – Sanderson.)

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In 1867, Carrie Stearns Smith traveled by stagecoach from Kansas City, Missouri, to her new home south of Fort Scott. It was a tiring journey, but also one of adventure and spectacle. "The stage station," she wrote, "was at a hotel I seem to recall as The Pacific. . . . The stage swung around a corner with a great circling sweep of eight white horses, accoutered in all of harness and ornaments that could catch the sun and the eye. I have often been quizzed as to this statement of eight horses, but I cannot be mistaken; eight seems a superfluity but there were eight. It might have been an extra span was being driven to some station below to anticipate a future need of relays. The stage was a Vermont Sanderson, said to be the pioneer stage from coast to coast.

"At last we were all listed and crowded in-wedged would better express the arrangement. The driver cracked his whip and away dashed the beautiful horses. I had been placed by the station agent in the care of a passenger they accosted as Governor Crawford, * a slight invalid-appearing man, wearing a shawl, a fashion not then quite out of vogue. It occurred to me it would have been more appropriate to place the delicate traveler in my care, for he surely appeared the more likely of us two to succumb to the effects of rapid stage travel.

"Our route led south over Westport Road to our first mail station at Westport House, where with a great flourish and clatter of hoofs, we drew up alongside and an exchange of mail bags occurred. Then ho for Shawnee Mission, where at one of the huge original buildings, like formalities were observed. The dashing up and the dashing away I from these stations was worthy of a king's retinue, an event that drew small crowds from the immediate vicinity.

"Our route was by no means the shortest distance between more important settlements. We diverged to the southeast and southwest here and there for the delivery of mail or the more practicable fording of streams. Whenever we halted for relays of horses, the traces were , " loosened, and the released spans marched unled to their long low shed barns, and those to be driven marched each to his accustomed place in front of the stage-not an animal led or driven. Two or three minutes only were consumed in the exchange. . . .

"We reached Paola just at dusk. The hotel was a rude rambling one-story affair, and soon after supper, when fairly abed and about to fall asleep, the sounds of fiddles in the dining-room told that a country dance was beginning. All the sleeping rooms seemed to open out of the dining-room. I occupied one with a lady on her way east to Pleasant Hill. Though very tired, the fiddles, the stamping of stoutly shod feet on the rough floor, and perhaps

the excitement attendant on new experiences, kept me awake until 3 A.M., and it seemed I had only caught the merest wink of sleep after dancing ceased, when loud knocking at our door and 'stage leaving!' aroused me.

"I had always been able to dress with real speed, but when I reached the stage at the door, the agent gasped, 'Why, every seat is taken! And no one of the several men inside offered a solution of the, problem. So as I lifted mine eyes to the driver's seat, I managed to beg 'Could I sit with the driver?' The agent put the petition to the one aloft. 'Why, sure,' and I was pulled and hoisted to the seat. I secretly rejoiced. The previous day the presence of a sick child in the stage, poorly cared for by evidently very poor mountain people from Tennessee, had made the journey perform most disagreeable because of the odor and flies.

"Away we dashed, I fairly holding my breath and the railing at the end of my seat. But the sensation of swift motion and aloftness, the keen air of the October morning's dawn, the unusualness and the unexpectedness of that phase of my journey-it was intoxicating!

"At one point we had forded a stream with a border of brush, and rounding a hill across the ford he [the driver] pointed to a small new grave. Such a sadness possessed me, as I pictured to myself the delay in camp, the suffering of the little one, the absence of medical skill, the death, the burial, and the grief of leaving that freshly heaped mound. But hundreds of such mounds have marked the advance of pioneers. And what stories of grief do they suggest to those travelers who have passed that way."

Later that day, when the Sanderson stagecoach arrived at Fort Scott, Carrie Stearns Smith climbed down from her scenic seat in order to change to another, southbound coach. There was a disappointing delay of a day and a half before an "oilcloth-covered Democrat stage" pulled in for her at four o'clock in the morning.

"I was helped inside and in the darkness we rattled out of the 'Fort,' my only company a roll of freshly tanned leather, the size of a big person's body, placed diagonally across the seats.

"On we clattered, finally crossing several miles of timber on Drywood Creek and at its farthest edge we drew up in the dawn to a log hotel. Here was breakfast. I was chilled by the early ride and asked the Dutch proprietress if I might go into the kitchen to warm. As I drew near the kitchen stove, the swarms of flies on the low ceiling flew down and back with bzz-zz-zz-zz! The housefrau came out with knives and forks from the table where an earlier stage's passengers had eaten, swung around the tea kettle lid and thrust the articles of tableware into the boiling water, hastily drying them on a cloth. 'Heavens!' was my mental ejaculation. 'And I bet on a penny she makes the coffee from that identical kettle.' She did; and I vowed to refrain from coffee, but I was so frozen I verily believe I should have broken that vow if three times that unwashed cutlery had been immersed in that kettle.

"The driver and I breakfasted alone and exchanged brief sentences. Excellent bread, no butter; but lifting the last slice revealed a big grown specimen of cimex lectolarius- familiarly known as bedbug!

"By now the sun was well up. I had made slight acquaintance with the driver, a man of 35 to 40, and I ventured: 'I find the leather unbearable. Cannot I sit in front?' He was quite agreeable. Now I found a different type of prairie, and passing and leaving the few settlers' shacks near Arcadia, we followed the old military road over a barren, treeless stretch of thirty or more miles. There were roving herds of cattle, here and there a bloated carcass. I inquired; 'Flies,' said Mr. Laconic, and further perseverance on my part drew out the details of how an animal, ill-conditioned, often became the victim of concentrated hordes of flies that should have more impartially divided their assiduous attentions among the herd, until the poor beast succumbed, and finally became the most conspicuous object in the landscape. It did not enthuse me at all, even though assured this was bound to become a great stock country.

"Much of the uninteresting stretch passed over that day was later opened up as a great mining region. At this time, however, coal had been found cropping out along creeks or draws in very small quantities, such spots being much favored by campers as furnishing fuel for the campfire where no wood was found.

"My driver, after a prolonged interval of silence, mused aloud: 'I suppose I will be hauling you back in about three weeks.' Heavens! 'hauling.' I had never heard the word except as to hauling logs to a mill by chains. Again I queried, delicately. 'Oh, I hauled two young women down to Baxter Springs last summer. They claimed they were going to stay-settlers. But I notice I hauled them back again, over this very road.' My vocabulary was beginning to add new words unto itself. "

* That Kansans referred to George A. Crawford (1827-91) as "Governor" was more an expression of frontier courtesy than a statement of fact. In the special election of November 186[], Crawford was elected governor of Kansas, but the state Supreme Court subsequently declared the election illegal. (See A. T. Andreas, History of the State of Kansas, pp. 21 1 - 1 2.) In 1864, George Crawford again received the Democratic gubernatorial nomination, but was defeated by the Republican candidate, Samuel J. Crawford. In 1868, Crawford ran for governor a third time, but was once again defeated.

- 1.) What challenges were faced by stagecoach travelers in the late 1860s?
- 2.) How were the needs of travelers met along the way as they traveled?