

THE CREEK

Seeing Jake's signal George waved his hat and hollered, "*Wagons Ho!*" then nudged his horse to turn north. Amid the dry dusty air, and hot sun of late June, 1867, 38 covered wagons, with assorted livestock, left St. Louis, Missouri behind them. "All here and accounted for, George," Jake said as he caught up to ride alongside the wagon master."

"Good." George replied. "Have the men drawn straws for fishing rights?"

"Yup. Couple of them asked about the creek and where it was."

"The creek starts in Old Franklin and runs along the Santa Fe Trail. We'll travel that trail right into New Mexico. The men can fish the river until we meet up with the creek."

"I've heard some nasty rumors about that creek. Sure hope we don't run into any trouble," Jake said while he removed his hat to wipe his brow with his shirt sleeve, "but I heard the fishing was good."

"Ah, even if we do run into trouble, it can't be any worse than the Army."

Jake just nodded.

Driving the wagons due north along the Missouri River they arrived at Old Franklin, Missouri—not only a settlement at the beginning of the Santa Fe trail—but their turning point to go west. Aside from the usual mishaps the travel had been uneventful and both men breathed a sigh of relief

"There's your creek," George said to Jake. Several travelers looked at the bubbles percolating out of a non-descript patch of ground. Partially obscured by

waist high iron-wheat weeds, with sandburs and thistle weed covering the ground, the gurgles were steady and strong, creating the creek.

“Looks harmless,” Jake said. “How deep does it get do you know, George?”

“I’ve heard the water never really gets deep, maybe waist high. Despite its tainted reputation wagon trains all rely on its’ daily supply of fresh fish to supplement the dry food stuffs they carry. So, it can’t be all bad.”

“Hey, kid. Get away from there,” Jake said to a boy who was pushing rocks over the mouth of the creek. “Go back to your wagon.”

Twelve year old, stocky and unkempt, Eddie Hoff kicked dirt as he returned to his wagon. “Stories?” he muttered. “Sure,” he sarcastically said to himself as he clambered into his wagon. Roughly shoving his sister aside, he leaned out the back of the wagon and spotted a kid he saw around town but didn’t know his name. He yelled, “Hey, Kid. What’s your name?”

“Who wants to know?”

“I do.” Eddy shouted.

The sullen, skinny boy continued to walk ignoring Eddy. He kicked a rock toward the scraggy dog alongside the wagon. “It’s Tony,” he said as his rock hit the dog, causing it to yelp and limp away.

“Hey! That was pretty good,” Eddy said.

“Yeah? Says who?”

“I say so...Eddy,” and he jumped out of the wagon. He scrambled to maintain his balance, lost it, stumbled and wind-milled his arms to find it. Tony laughed. Side-stepping between the wagons, Eddy sauntered up next to Tony. “What?” he snarled.

“You looked like an old lady after her purse is grabbed. That’s what!” Tony sneered.

“Oh yeah? How would you know?”

Nudging him with his shoulder, Tony said, “That’s for me to know and you to find out, Eddeee.”

Walking a few paces ahead, two giggling girls, Virginia and Samantha, turned to glance at the boys. Virginia—known as baldy since her mother had found head lice and shaved her head—said, “Hi Tony.” Delicate and small Samantha, as usual, remained quiet.

Eddy spat. “Girls.”

Tony flipped his hand in their general direction. “Aw, those two are all right. I’ve seen ‘em do things.” He fell silent as a slow, grim smirk spread across his face. “They’re pretty good.”

“Oh yeah? At what?”

“That’s for me to know and you to find out, Eddeee.” Tony nudged Eddy again, almost knocking him off his feet.

Rubbing his shoulder Eddy muttered, what’s with this kid? Does he think I’m his personal nudging bag like that kid did back in St. Louis? A nice fat rock stopped him.

Virginia boasted, “Remember when I broke old man Johnson’s front window and he cried? It was so funny! Remember, Samantha?”

Samantha forced herself to look at Baldy. “Sure. I grabbed the food and ran.”

“Oh, that’s right. I forgot. But *I* broke the window” she bragged.

Turning from Virginia, she timidly asked the boys, “Did you hear a dog growlin’ last night like ol’ lady Barn’s dog when he got sick?”

“I tol’ her she was hearing things. I didn’t hear no dog,” smirked Virginia.

Tony laughed. “Whaddya mean? You dreamin’ or sumin’.”

“Maybe it was the dog Tony hit this mornin’. He could’a been howling’ last night thinkin’ about what was gonna happen to him today,” Eddy snickered.

Samantha scuffed the sandy dirt with her old shoe. “No. It was low and sounded... black. Oh, forget it. Maybe it was a bad dream, but it sure was spooky,” she mumbled.

“Yeah,” said the laughing boys.

As they walked along keeping pace with the wagons, Becky and Addison joined them and before long, even though nobody wanted them, David and Arnold became part of the group. Nobody liked Arnold. He was always hitting and pushing the smaller kids, making them cry, and then sneer when someone else was blamed. David, who spoke little, but laughed at everything, positioned himself next to Addison, so he could pet her pigtails.

Running back and forth, they darted between the oxen pulling the wagons, accompanied by loud, angry voices from the fathers who drove the team. They stopped when David stepped in oxen droppings making all the kids laugh. After that, they spent most of the morning seeing who could kick rocks the farthest.

Just before lunch, Arnold sauntered off. It’s easy to kick the little rocks. I need a bigger one to really make it fly he reasoned. He pushed gnarled and thorny tree branches aside and stepped closer to the creek. There it is. My perfect rock! He bent to pick it up and sensed something close. He glanced up. The waiting rattlesnake saw its chance and sunk its fangs deep into Arnold’s soft arm. And there, in front of him, stood Samantha’s grinning black dog.

“How many times do you kids hafta be told to stay close to your own wagon?” demanded the wagon master. “I knew one of you would get hurt and shur ‘nuff, one of you did.”

Turning their backs to Mr. Dunne’s scolding, Tony, Eddy, Samantha, and Virginia began to walk away.

“Hey! Where are you kids goin’?”

Tony whirled around. “We’re goin’ back to our waaagons like you tol’ us to do, Mr. Dunnnne.”

“See that you stay there. Don’t want to lose anymore of you,” he grumbled. He turned to walk back to the grieving parents.

“Too bad ‘bout Arnold, huh?” Tony said.

Eddy looked puzzled. “I don’ know why Arnold yelled about some dog when it was a snake got hol’ of him. Uwee! He must’ve been crazy!”

Virginia said, “Good riddance to bad rubbish! my Uncle Herbert says. I’m glad he got bit. He got me in trouble when he beat up my sister and I got whupped.” She stamped her foot. “And that stupid David! He stood there and laughed. I’m *glad* Arnold’s gone. I wish David would go too! I’d be happy to see him with a snake danglin’ off his arm, screamin’, runnin’ in circles!”

Samantha stayed quiet while listening to the others. Feeling the shivers run up and down her spine. It has to be the dog I heard that Arnold saw, and she shivered again.

As one hot day rolled into the next the wagon train made slow progress. It was easy for some of the children to get bored. They were not allowed to go near the river or the creek without one of their parents. They were not allowed to play Tag running in and out of the trees. Kick the Rock game was forbidden because at the last game, Virginia kicked a rock and hit Becky. Even running was out. The funeral for Arnold was finished so many of the children felt there was nothing to look forward to.

After a week or so, during lunch, David’s father looked around and said, “I think they have all learned their lesson to stay close. Maybe some of ‘em could come with us tomorrow when we go fishin’. They could gather firewood from close to the creek while we watch ‘em.” The rest of the fishermen agreed. However, Tony, Virginia, Samantha, and Eddy were not allowed out of their parents’ sight.

Early the next morning, the designated fathers took the older, bigger boys and a dozen younger children. Once the fishing spot was agreed upon the children were given specific areas where they could gather firewood. The men took their places along the clear, running creek, dropped their lines and sat down to wait.

As the morning grew hot with its clear sky and blazing sun the wood-gathering children became restless. Becky, Addison, and David had gathered wood all morning, staying within

eyesight of the older boys. When their stacks of wood were high, Becky poked Addison. “Let’s ask if we can take off our shoes and wade close to the edge of the creek ‘cause it’s so hot.”

“I dunno Becky. Remember what happened to Arnold? I don’t want no snake to bite me. Anyway, I’m not so hot.”

“What can happen to us, bein’ watched all the time? Are you chicken? Besides, you stink. I’m gonna ask my pa.” Becky laughed and flounced away.

Grinning from ear to ear and standing close to Addison, David said, “There ain’t no snakes around here. Arnold’s snake was waaay back there,” he pointed. “We didn’t see any all mornin’, did we? I’ll ask my pa to keep a special eye on you if you want. Come on. You’ll be ok. I’ll even stay with you.”

Once Addison was reassured by David’s father there were no snakes and admitting he was thinking of wading himself, Addison slipped off her shoes and socks and entered the creek one timid foot at a time. The rest of the children slipped off their shoes and socks and ran to the creek. They splashed and played close to the edge. Slowly, but with steady progress, they crept toward the middle. Lots of giggling and high laughter erupted from the children. It startled the fathers. They had not heard any children’s laughter since Arnold death.

This is a good thing, David’s father thought as he gathered up his fishing equipment. He watched the three he was most concerned about—Becky, Addison and David—reach the middle of the creek. He was about to call them back when he glanced at the tree line and felt his heart go cold. “Indians!” he yelled pointing to the trees. Startled like a flock of geese, the kids yelled and scrambled out of the water; tripping over one another while pushing and shoving others out of their way. Everyone ran. Fishing poles, dead fish, shoes, and socks were all left behind.

Expecting to see the wagon train on the road, the running parents and children were surprised to see the wagons far behind. As they continued to run, screaming and waving their arms, George Dunne noticed the commotion and rode out to meet them.

The first parent to reach the wagon master panted, “Indians!”

George immediately swung his horse around and raced to the lead wagon. “Stop! Indians ahead! Lead the wagons into a circle, Jake. I’ll pass the word while the rest of the fishing party catches up.”

The wagon train circled. Scared and softly talking amongst themselves they waited in the hot afternoon sun.

Suddenly, into the waiting quiet, Becky’s mom screamed, “Where’s Becky? I can’t find Becky!”

“Is Addison with you?” Addison’s mom yelled from three wagons away. “She was with Becky.”

David’s father ran crouched across the center of the circle to the two women. He needed to tell them David was missing also. Despite the perceived danger, Addison’s mom stood, wringing her apron as she listened to David father.

“Three of the children are missing! Could they still be by the creek?” Becky’s Mom anxiously asked.

Overhearing the conversation, Tony snickered. *Midnights got ‘um. We heard that black mutt last night. We were pourin’ sand into Bennington’s wagon wheels and that girl with no hair was laughin’ so hard I thought somebody would hear us.* He heard the parents organize a search party that would leave shortly. *I’m not telling ‘um searchin’ is a waste of time.*

The settlers were uneasy hearing this latest development. Many began to believe the Indians were only in Bennington’s imagination. Anger grew and spread among the travelers. Crude names could be heard as tempers heated as hot as the day.

Deciding they had waited long enough, the search party left just before twilight. The remaining wagons stayed in a circle and prepared the dinner meal. Tony, Virginia, Samantha, and Eddy were seen carrying things for various people trying to look helpful, but in reality, they were spilling water, breaking handles off of pots, and acting dumb about where things were placed even after they were told where to put them. Finally, the frustrated parents demanded they sit down with their backs to the wagon wheels and just watch.

Hours had gone by when the search party finally returned almost empty handed. By firelight, and to the accompaniment of Becky's mom's screams, Tony recognized Becky's shoes, and maybe Addison's shoes, but he wasn't sure. David's boots were being carried by his father. The mothers became inconsolable. The fathers grew angrier at Bennington for yelling Indians; scaring everybody before all the children were accounted for and brought safely back.

The accusations flew back and forth until a free-for-all started. Fists flew everywhere. Women and girls threw pots and pans. Tony, Samantha, Virginia and Eddy laughed as they pitched whatever they laid their hands on: rocks, cooking knives, lanterns, and rope.

The gun shots startled everyone. When the wagon master, with Jake at his side, had everyone's attention he yelled, "Stop fighting! This is getting us nowhere. It's unfortunate what's happened and we are all upset, but what's done is done. In the morning we can do a better search. Maybe the children just wandered off and they'll see our fire and come back. The Indians are peaceful. They let wagon trains pass through their county for a small price. Our company has paid that price. The Indians are not to blame. Maybe the children wandered away."

"I'm going out to the fishing spot; I'll spend the night out there." David's father said and started to leave. Half a dozen men joined him. The mothers continued to sob.

"Ha!" Tony whispered to Virginia. "They'll *never* find 'em. Midnight's got um."

Virginia started to chuckle as she passed on Tony's comment to Eddy and gloomy Samantha.

Eddy shrugged and whispered back to Virginia, "Do you figure the men will just find bones?" She whispered Eddy's question to Tony.

"That's for me to know and you to find out," Tony said, quickly followed with a shoulder nudge on Virginia, who in turn hit Eddy.

"Why do you call the dog Midnight?" Samantha quietly asked.

"Because he's dark and midnight is dark. Didn't you say that when we first met? He sounded dark. Midnight jus' fits 'um."

By noon the following day, the wagon train had moved up the trail to the fishing spot. Picking up the somber parents they looked hopeless as they walked through the detritus left behind: shoes, socks, fishing gear and lots of dead, rotting, smelly fish. The creek was clear and bubbling peacefully along, but there was no sign of the missing children.

After hours of useless persuasion on the part of the wagon master, several wagons turned back for St. Louis. David's father remained by the fishing spot, hoping the children would return.

As George led the remaining wagons westward, he told Jake, "It's their fault; the four trouble-makers. When they met up with the four that are gone, it caused nothing but bigger trouble and worse things to happen. What a cursed trip! I should've listened to Kowaski back in St. Louis when he told me about that creek, but I thought it was superstitious nonsense! But now, after those three kids disappeared by the creek I just don't know"

Jake nodded but nothing.

Mr. Bitt rode up and interrupted his thoughts. "Hot, ain't it?"

"What?"

"I said, hot, ain't it? I don't remember it ever being so hot. And the mosquitoes! Have you ever seen so many?"

For the first time in days the wagon master and Jake took note of their surroundings. They watched a flock of circling buzzards fly overhead. Thick swarms of ravenous mosquitoes followed the wagons biting people and animals. No sign of wildlife. They had traveled at least 10 days from their fishing spot, but George could still smell the rotted fish. It was hot, dry, and miserable; even the creek was beginning to show signs of dehydration. 'Course no one wants to fish anyway, he mused. Even though food supplies are low no one will go near that creek. "Where are the summer rains?" he asked the heavens and the two riders. "We need the rains."

That night the fates granted his wish. The rain started in the middle of night and continued for two straight days. Many of the wagons slipped out of the old road ruts and slid toward the creek while other wagons were stuck and littered the trail.

“What a mess! What a gosh-darn mess!” Dunne said to the drivers of the stuck wagons as he rode along the wagon train, stating the obvious.

When the rain diminished to a sloppy drizzle, Dunne called the wagon drivers together. “Drive those wagons that are closest to the creek to its middle. If we all work together we can pull the others out of the mud and have them line up behind the first one. We’ll ride the creek until the rain stops. Then, we’ll cross back to the trail.”

“Some of the women won’t go near that creek, George,” Jake said.

Dunne drew in a deep breath and ran his hand over his face. “Aw, tell the ladies not to worry. With everyone pushing the wagons we’ll be in and out of the creek in no time.”

As they started to drive some wagons and push others, the rain stopped and the sun peeked out.

People grunted and groaned with effort, pushing the mud-stuck wagons off the trail to the creek. When they heard the first wagon was successfully traveling in the creek’s bed, they renewed their combined efforts. The minute Tony, Eddy, Samantha, and Virginia entered the water pushing their respective wagons, the sun disappeared and the sky poured sheets of rain. The laughing black dog, Midnight was seen by the four children.

Cursing the rain he wished for, Dunne counted wagons and did his best to line them up. Then he and Jake sat to wait out the rain

Note to Reader

The creek ground anomaly was well known to the Arapahoe and the Ute tribes; both tribes lost children to its unusual behavior. They feared the creek. Both tribes had warned the white traders about the evil of the creek, but not believing the Indians, the traders told no one. David’s father was right when he claimed to have seen Indians. They had come to watch the fishing and to warn the men about the creek. They knew Midnight