

## **NARCISSA JUNE 1836**

*by Crystal Calhoun*



## PLATTE RIVER, JUST ABOVE THE FORKS, JUNE 3RD, 1836.

Dear Sister Harriet and Brother Edward:

✘ Friday eve, six o'clock. We have just encamped for the night near the bluffs over against the river. The bottoms are a soft, wet plain, and we were obliged to leave the river yesterday for the bluffs. The face of the country yesterday afternoon and today has been rolling sand bluffs, mostly barren, quite unlike what our eyes have been satiated with for weeks past. No timber nearer than the Platte, and the water tonight is very bad - got from a small ravine. We have usually had good water precious to this.

Our fuel for cooking since we left timber (no timber except on rivers) has been dried buffalo dung; we now find plenty of it and it answers a very good purpose, similar to the kind of coal used in Pennsylvania (I suppose now Harriet will make up a face at this, but if she was here she would be glad to have her supper cooked at any rate in this scarce timber country). The present time in our journey is a very important one. The hunter brought us buffalo meat yesterday for the first time. ✘ Buffalo were seen today but none have been taken. We have some for supper tonight. Husband is cooking it - no one of the company professes the art but himself. I expect it will be very good. Stop - I have so much to say to the children that I do not know in what part of my story to begin. I have very little time to write. I will first tell you what our company consists of. We are ten in number; five missionaries, three Indian boys and two young men employed to assist in packing animals.

**Saturday, 4th.** Good morning, H. and E. I wrote last night till supper; after that it was dark I could not see. I told you how many bipeds there was in our company last night; now for the quadrupeds: Fourteen horses, six mules and fifteen head of cattle. We milk four cows. We started with seventeen, but we have killed one calf, and the Fur Company, being out of provision, have taken one of our cows for beef. It is usually pinching times with the Company before they reach the buffalo. We have had plenty because we made ample provision at Liberty. We purchased a barrel of flour and baked enough to last us, with killing a calf or two, until we reached the buffalo.

The Fur Company is large this year; we are really a moving village - nearly 400 animals, with ours, mostly mules, and 70 men. The Fur Company have seven wagons drawn by six mules each, heavily loaded, and one cart drawn by two mules, which carries a lame man, one of the proprietors of the Company. We have two wagons in our company. Mr. and Mrs. S., husband and myself ride in one, Mr. Gray and the baggage in the other. Our Indian boys drive the cows and Dulin the horses. Young Miles leads our forward horses, four in each team. Now E., if you want to see the camp in motion, look away ahead and see first the pilot and the captain, Fitzpatrick, just before him, next the pack animals, all mules, loaded with great packs; soon after you will see the wagons, and in the rear, our company. We all cover quite a space. The pack mules always string one after the other just like Indians.

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There are several gentlemen in the company who are going over the mountains for pleasure. Capt. Steward (Mr. Lee speaks of him in his journal - he went over when he did and returned) he is an Englishman and Mr. Celam. We had a few of them to tea with us last Monday evening, Capt. Fitzpatrick, Stewart, Major Harris and Celam.

I wish I could describe to you how we live so that you can realize it. Our manner of living is far preferable to any in the States. I never was so contented and happy before neither have I enjoyed such health for years. In the morning as soon as the day breaks the first that we hear is the words, "Arise! Arise!" - then the mules set up such a noise as you never heard, which puts the whole camp in motion. We encamp in a large ring, baggage and men, tents and wagons on the outside, and all the animals except the cows, which are fastened to pickets, within the circle. This arrangement is to accommodate the guard, who stand regularly every night and day, also when we are in motion, to protect our animals from the approach of Indians, who would steal them. As I said, the mules' noise brings every man on his feet to loose them and turn them out to feed.

Now, H. and E., you must think it very hard to have to get up so early after sleeping on the soft ground, when you find it hard work to open your eyes at seven o'clock. Just think of me - every morning at the word, "Arise!" we all spring. While the horses are feeding we get breakfast in a hurry and eat it. By this time the words, "Catch up! Catch up," ring through the camp for moving. We are ready to start usually at six, travel till eleven, encamp, rest and feed, and start again about two; travel until six, or before, if we come to a good tavern, then encamp for the night.

✘ Since we have been in the prairie we have done all our cooking. When we left Liberty we expected to take bread to last us part of the way, but could not get enough to carry us any distance. We found it awkward work to bake out of doors at first, but we have become so accustomed to it now we do it very easily.

Tell mother I am a very good housekeeper on the prairie. I wish she could just take a peep at us while we are sitting at our meals. Our table is the ground, our table-cloth is an India-rubber cloth used when it rains as a cloak; our dishes are made of tin-basins for teacups, iron spoons and plates, each of us, and several pans for milk and to put our meat in when we wish to set it on the table. Each one carries his own knife in his scabbard, and it is always ready to use. When the table things are spread, after making our own forks or sticks and helping ourselves to chairs, we gather around the table. Husband always provides my seat, and in a way that you would laugh to see. It is the fashion of all this country to imitate the Turks. Messrs. Dunbar and Allis have supped with us, and they do the same. We take a blanket and lay down by the table, and those whose joints will let them follow the fashion; others take out some of the baggage (I suppose you know that there is no stones in this country' not a stone have I seen of any size on the prairie). For my part I fix myself as gracefully as I can, sometimes on a blanket, sometimes on a box, just as it is convenient. Let me assure you of this, we relish our food none the less for sitting on the ground while eating. We have tea and a plenty of milk, which is a luxury in this country. our milk has assisted us very much in making our bread since

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we have been journeying. While the Fur Company has felt the want of food, our milk has been of great service to us; but it was considerable work for us to supply ten persons with bread three times a day. We are done using it now. What little flour we have left we shall preserve for thickening our broth, which is excellent. I never saw any thing like buffalo meat to satisfy hunger. We do not want any thing else with it. I have eaten three meals of it and it relishes well. Supper and breakfast we eat in our tent. We do not pitch it at noon. Have worship immediately after supper and breakfast.

**Noon.** - The face of the country today has been like that of yesterday. We are now about 30 miles above the forks, and leaving the bluffs for the river. We have seen wonders this forenoon. Herds of buffalo hove in sight; one, a bull, crossed our trail and ran upon the bluffs near the rear of the camp. We took the trouble to chase him so as to have a near view. Sister Spalding and myself got out of the wagon and ran upon the bluff to see him. This band was quite willing to gratify our curiosity, seeing it was the first. Several have been killed this forenoon. The Company keep a man out all the time to hunt for the camp.

Edward, if I write much more in this way I do not know as you can read it without great difficulty. I could tell you much more, but as we are all ready to move again, so farewell for the present. I wish you were all here with us going to the dear Indians. I have become very much attached to Richard Sak-ah-too-ah. 'T is the one you saw at our wedding; he calls me mother; I love to teach him - to take care of him, and hear them talk. There are five Nez Perces in the company, and when they are together they chatter finely. Samuel Temoni, the oldest one, has just come into the camp with the skin and some of the meat of a buffalo which he has killed himself. He started this forenoon of his own accord. It is what they like dearly, to hunt buffalo. So long as we have him with us we shall be supplied with meat.

I am now writing backwards. Monday morning. - I begun to say something here that I could not finish. Now the man from the mountains has come who will take this to the office. I have commenced one to sister Hull which I should like to send this time if I could finish it. We have just met him and we have stopped our wagons to write a little. Give my love to all. I have not told you half of what I want to. We are all in health this morning and making rapid progress in our journey. By the 4th of July our captain intends to be at the place where Mr. Parker and husband parted last fall. We are a month earlier passing here than they were last spring. Husband has begun a letter to pa and ma, and since he has cut his finger so it troubles him to write to the rest. As this is done in a hurry I don't know if you can read it. Tell mother that if I had looked the world over I could not have found one more careful and better qualified to transport a female such a distance. Husband says, "stop."

Farewell to all.

NARCISSA PRENTISS

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**PLATTE RIVER,SOUTH SIDE,**

## **SIX DAYS ABOVE THE FORT LARAMIE FORK, NEAR THE FOOT OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS,**

**June 27, 1836.**

Dear Brother and Sister Whitman:

We were in perplexity when we left Liberty, but it has been overruled for good. I wrote Mother Loomis from the Otoe Agency. We were in still greater perplexity there, while crossing our baggage. Husband became so completely exhausted with swimming the river on Thursday, May 9th, that it was with difficulty he made the shore the last time. Mr. Spalding was sick, our two hired men were good for nothing; we could not obtain much assistance from the Otoes, for they were away from the village; we had but one canoe, made of skins, and that partly eaten by the dogs the night before. We got everything over by Friday night. We did not get ready to start until Saturday afternoon. By this time the company had four and a half days the advance of us. It seemed scarcely possible for us to overtake them, we having two more difficult streams to pass, before they would pass the Pawnee villages. Behind there we dare not venture more than one day. We were at a stand; but with the advice of brethren Merrill and Dunbar-missionaries among the Pawnees-after a concert of prayer on the subject, we decided to start and go as far as it would be prudent for us. Brother Dunbar kindly consented to become our pilot, until we could get another. He started with us and came as far as the Elkhorn river, then the man Major Dougherty sent for, for us, came up, and Mr. Dunbar returned. We had passed the river on Monday morning and taken down the rope, when our pilot and his Indian came up. It was with difficulty we crossed him and returned Mr. Dunbar. While on the opposite shore, just ready to leave us, he called to us to receive his parting advice, with a word of caution which will never be forgotten. Our visit with him and Brother Merrill's family was indeed refreshing to our thirsty spirits-kindred spirits rejoicing in the self denials and labors of missionary life.

The next day, in the morning, we met a large party of Pawnees going to the fort to receive their annuities. They seemed to be very much surprised and pleased to see white females; many of them had never seen any before. They are a noble Indian - large, athletic forms, dignified countenances, bespeaking an immortal existence within. When we had said what we wished to them, we hurried on, and arrived at the Elkhorn in time to cross all our effects.

Here I must tell you how much good Richard, John and Samuel - Pacific coast Indian boys whom Dr. Whitman had taken to New York with him the year before - did us. They do the most of driving the cattle and loose horses. Occasionally husband and myself would ride with them as company and encouragement. They came up to the river before us, and seeing a skin canoe on the opposite side, they stripped themselves, wound their shirts around their heads, and swam over and back again with the canoe by the time we came up. We stretched a rope across the river and pulled the goods over in the canoe without much difficulty.

Monday and Tuesday we made hard drives - Tuesday especially. We attempted to reach the Loup Fork that night, and a part of us succeeded. Those in the wagons drove there by 11 o'clock, but it was

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too much for the cattle. There was not water or feed short of this. We rode with Richard and John until 9 o'clock, and were all very much fatigued. Richard proposed to us to go on and he and John would stay on the prairie with the cattle, and drive them in in the morning. We did not like to leave them, and so we concluded to stay. Husband had a cup tied to his saddle, in which he milked what we wanted to drink; this was our supper. Our saddle blankets, with our India rubber cloaks, were our beds. Having offered up our thanksgiving for the blessings of the day and seeking protection for the night, we committed ourselves to rest. We awoke in the morning much refreshed and rode into camp before breakfast - five miles. The Fur Company was on the opposite side of the river, which we forded, and, without unloading our wagon much, were ready to move again about noon. We wished to be with the company when they passed the Pawnee village. This obliged us to make a day's drive to the camp in half a day, which was too bad for our horses. We did not reach them until 1 o'clock at night.

The next day we passed all their villages. We, especially, were visited by them both at noon and at night; we ladies were such a curiosity to them. They would come and stand around our tent, peep in, and grin in their astonishment to see such looking objects.

Since we came up with the camp, I rode in the wagons most of the way to the Black Hills. It is astonishing how well we get along with our wagons where there are no roads. I think I may say it is easier traveling here than on any turnpike in the States.

On the way to the buffalo country we had to bake bread for ten persons. It was difficult at first, as we did not understand working out-doors; but we became accustomed to it, so that it became quite easy. June found us ready to receive our first taste of buffalo. Since that time I have had but little to do with cooking. Not one in our number relishes buffalo meat as well as my husband and I. He has a different way for cooking every piece of meat. I believe Mother Loomis would give up to him if she were here. We have had no bread since. We have meat and tea in the morn, and tea and meat at noon. All our variety consists of the different ways of cooking. I relish it well and it agrees with me. My health is excellent. So long as I have buffalo meat I do not wish anything else. Sister Spaulding is affected by it considerably - has been quite sick.

We feel that the Lord has blessed us beyond our most sanguine expectations. We wish our friends at home to unite with us in thanksgiving and praise for His great mercies to us. We are a month earlier this year than husband was last, and the company wish to be at Rendezvous by the 4th of July. We have just crossed the river and shall leave here tomorrow morning.

Now, Sister Julia, between you and me, I just want to tell you how much trouble I have had with Marcus, two or three weeks past. He was under the impression that we had too much baggage, and could not think of anything so easy to be dispensed with as his own wearing apparel - those shirts the ladies made him just before he left home, his black suit and overcoat - these were the condemned articles. Sell them he must, as soon as he gets to the fort. But first I would not believe

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him in earnest. All the reasons I could bring were of no avail - he still said he must get rid of them. I told him to sell all of mine, too; I could do without them better than he could. Indeed, I did not wish to dress unless he could. I finally said that I would write and get Sister Julia to plead for me, for I knew you would not like to have him sell them, better than I should. This was enough; he knew it would not do to act contrary to her wishes, and said no more about it.