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1

OVER THE KANSAS PLAINS.

THE LEVEL PARADISE SOUTH OF THE MISSOURI RIVER.

*The Mysterious Footprint—Editorial Mincemeat—
Beware of Monte Players—Information for Overworked New
York Clerks—The Bone Pickers of the Prairie.*

Correspondence of The Sun.

DENVER, Col., May 30.—It takes two nights and two days to reach this city from St. Louis. I stopped a day in Kansas City. As I alighted at the depot I saw a score of citizens in flannel shirts and buckskin trousers measuring a footprint in the mud. There appeared to be considerable excitement about it. The foot track was measured a half dozen times, but it was finally settled that it was thirteen inches in length. There was a rumor that the impression was from the foot of Susan B. Anthony.¹ The citizens believed it to be true, but they were mistaken. The footprint turned out to be the work of the accomplished cattle

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market reporter of the *New York Times*.² This lady has attracted much attention in Kansas and Colorado. While the stock breeders laugh at her personal appearance, they acknowledge that she thoroughly understands stock raising and breeding, and many horsemen say that they are indebted to her for valuable hints. It is said that she has purchased or is about to purchase several thousand acres of land either in Kansas or the Territory,³ and go into business on her own account.

A QUEER NEWSPAPER.

Kansas City contains nearly 40,000 inhabitants. It looks as though it had been pitched into a heap of sandy bluffs, through which great gaps or streets are cut, and on which white residences stand like bird houses on garden poles. It contains a massive brick court house, surmounted by a sham clock, a half dozen second-class hotels, and a theatre. Its journals are usually newsy and bright, the *Kansas City Times*⁴ appearing to take the lead. While walking at the intersection of Seventh and Main streets, I saw the following sign:

OFFICE OF KANSAS CITY MINCE MEAT.

As it was Sunday the office was closed, and I did not see the editor, but I understand that the *Mince Meat* has a fair circulation.⁵

ON THE PLAINS.

The trip by railroad over the plains is monotonous. It is generally understood that passengers have not a thing to do during the journey but to gaze at immense buffalo herds and shoot antelopes. Although it was in the buffalo season, I saw none of the animals. I counted twenty-one antelopes, but they were at a great distance. We passed about fifty prairie dogs, one prairie hen, any quantity of snipe and turtle doves, four black ducks, and a weasel—and that was all. Not an Indian. The plains spread north and south as far as the eye could reach, but a tree was a

rarity. At one time we ran 150 miles without seeing a leaf or a branch. There was neither wood nor water—not a stick as big as a man's thumb. A line of telegraph poles followed the railroad track. Beyond Fort Riley⁶ I counted nine successive poles shattered by lightning in a thunder storm that occurred during the night. The only natural curiosity seen was Table Rock.⁷ It stands alone on a rolling prairie, and weighs several tons. It is balanced so evenly upon a natural stone post that one fancies he could shove it over without much effort.

A REMARKABLE CURIOSITY.

As interesting a curiosity as I saw during the trip was the following placard in the smoking car:

BEWARE
OF
CONFIDENCE MEN
AND
THREE-CARD MONTE PLAYERS.

This car was filled with second-class passengers. Occasionally a Pullman's car traveler dropped in to take a smoke. He was delighted. The hard-fisted emigrants invariably took him for a confidence man. If he wore diamond studs or gold sleeve buttons he was set down for a three-card monte player, and treated to a seat all by himself.⁸

INFORMATION FOR OVERWORKED CLERKS.

Within four hundred miles west of Kansas City the land is nearly level, and very rich. The soil is a black loam, and resembles the soil of the Illinois prairies. Water is said to be plenty, and enormous crops of grain can be produced. Large cattle ranches are found within twenty miles of the railroad, but not one-seventieth of the land is cultivated. It looks as though it had been seeded down for grass. All that a farmer has to do is to

stick a ploughshare into it and turn the sod. It ploughs as easily as an Ohio corn field. The only trouble appears to be that there is no wood for fences, but I saw hundreds of acres under cultivation without a foot of fence. In some cases men had just taken up their land, and were living in wall tents until they could erect houses. Some had dug holes in the ground and boarded them over. Such residences are called "dugouts." Toward the territorial line these houses outnumbered the others two to one. The earth, however, is filled with a soft limestone, which can be sawed into blocks as it is dug from the ground, and which hardens from exposure to the weather. Many of the railroad stations are built of this stone. It is clean and white, but it will not take a polish.

HOW TO PRE-EMPT LAND.⁹

For ten miles on either side of the road the alternate sections are owned by the Kansas Pacific Company. The other sections are open for preemption. The railroad company sells its land for from \$2 to \$6 an acre, with five years credit, one-fifth cash, and no other payment, except interest, within two years. A discount of ten percent for cash within sixty days is allowed. As the company is anxious to fill the country with settlers, they offer extra inducements in the way of tickets. Government land can be pre-empted for \$1.25 per acre. Payment cannot be made, however, until the party has actually resided on the land for six months, and made the necessary improvement and cultivation. This proof can be furnished by one witness.

WOMEN ALLOWED TO PRE-EMPT.

It is not generally known that an unmarried woman over twenty-one years of age, and not the head of a family, can preempt her 160 acres the same as a man. I have not seen or heard of any woman who has done this, though I have seen several women who ought to do it. Officers, soldiers, and sailors who

have served in the army or navy for ninety days, have the privilege of entering 160 acres of land within railroad limits at \$2.50 per acre. Civilians are restricted to 80 acres. These are called "double minimum lands." Many thousand acres have been taken up by colonies. Between Junction City and Ellsworth, ranging from 138 to 223 miles from Kansas City, there are a number of large and prosperous colonies. There is an English colony in Clay County, a Scotch colony near Solomon City, two Swedish colonies in Saline and McPherson counties, and an Ohio colony in Saline County.

ENGLISHMEN TURNING AMERICANS.

A wealthy Englishman named George Grant¹⁰ has purchased about twenty square miles of land near Hays City, 200 miles west of Kansas City. The company has built him a commodious house of soft limestone, and Grant began operations on Saturday last with about a dozen colonists. He intends raising blooded stock. Your correspondent passed through it on Monday.¹¹ The land is well watered. A hot sun was shining on the broad, leafless plain, and a flock of blooded sheep just imported was quietly grazing a quarter of a mile away. Two corrals had been built, and a note had been sent to the railroad agent at Ellis¹² for lumber to make a third one. Grant himself was walking about this purchase, with a sun umbrella over his head. His face was very red, and the passengers laughed a little at his large nose, but he looked like a man who had a well-settled plan, and who was determined to carry it out. The ladies of the party were sent to Ellis, there to remain until the colonists have made arrangements for their accommodation. Mr. Grant calls his settlement Victoria. The whole colony went before Senator Edwards¹³ in Ellis yesterday, and declared their intention to become American citizens. They are daily expecting a consignment of short-horned cattle from England.

YOUNG ELLIOTT, THE TREE-SEED MAN.

Ellis is the finest station on the road between Ellsworth and Denver. It contains a beautiful hotel and three or four houses, and is the breathing place between Kansas City and Denver. State Senator Edwards lives here. He has planted trees about his residence, and he says they are thriving finely. Mr. R. S. Elliot,¹⁴ the Industrial Agent of the railroad company, has been planting tree seeds between Ellis and Wallace, 118 miles further east. He believes that they will prove a success, but the Senator declares that Elliot will be an old man before his trees shade the plains. Elliot is remarkably handsome and has a wonderful intellectual development. He seemed to be about 25 years old, and is regarded as one of the rising young men of Kansas.

THE THREE DRAWBACKS.

So much for the land in Kansas. Any healthy retail clerk with \$500 capital can become independent through its cultivation. The cattle looked fat and tempting. They were grazing on the prairies by thousands. There may be a drawback in the shape of sickness. It seemed to me that fever and ague and prairie fevers would feed upon the settlers, though I heard no complaints. The snow storms of winter must be severe as there are miles upon miles of high racks along the railroad to prevent the snow from drifting into the cuts. These racks are always on the north side, about a hundred feet from the track. They are nearly six feet high and resemble huge sawbucks with slats nailed across the arms of the buck. They prove of great service, even where the road is cut not more than a foot below the surface. Only two weeks ago Sunday the plains were visited by a snow storm so severe that the locomotives were frozen up and the cars stopped running. One man in Ellsworth lost 400 head of cattle. The third drawback is an occasional visit from grasshoppers. At intervals of years these insects spread over the prairies by myriads, destroying every green thing.

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The grass grows less green as we approach the Rocky Mountains. There is less moisture in the soil, and it looks sterile. For more than 200 miles east of Denver the land is valueless without irrigation and this can be obtained only through artesian wells. There are few settlements along the railroad in the Territory. All the houses between Ellsworth and Denver, over 400 miles, could be dropped into Washington square,¹⁵ with room to spare.

THE BUFFALO BONE HUNTERS.

I saw no buffaloes, but plenty of buffalo bones. These bones are gathered up from the prairies, and delivered at the railroad station for \$5 a ton. Every second station between Ellis and Kit Carson¹⁶ had its monument of buffalo bones. Some of them contained many tons, being from forty to fifty feet long, and from ten to twelve feet high. The bones are used in separating ores.¹⁷



CURING BUFFALO HIDES AND BONES. NOTE THE STACKS OF BONES IN THE BACKGROUND. THIS SCENE IS THOUGHT TO BE FROM NEAR WICHITA, KANSAS. (*HARPER'S WEEKLY* 18 (APRIL 4, 1874):307; ORIGINAL ENGRAVING BY PAUL FRENZENY AND JULES TAVERNIER)

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Acres of buffalo hides were spread about various stations, and in certain sections the ground was strewn with animals that had been slaughtered for their skins. The raw hides bring \$1.50 apiece. I saw an old hunter who said he had just come in from the buffalo country, 800 miles to the south. He declared that for hundreds of miles the buffalo paths were like rows of corn, about three feet apart and a foot deep. He was a very gentlemanly hunter, but nobody asked him to drink, and he departed somewhat discouraged. He wore buckskin breeches, with an old barn-door flap ornamented with beautiful Indian bead work.

SOD-WALLED GARDENS.

Toward Denver the shanties were surrounded by walls made out of prairie sods. I noticed the garden, containing half an acre of ground, encircled by a sod fence with a good-sized ditch outside. The sods were piled up about two feet high, which served to keep the cattle out. The race course in Denver is shut in by a high mud wall, similar to the sod walls. Some of the passengers were so innocent as to assert that these walls were thrown up for protection against the Indians. No savages appeared upon the route, but gravestones of white limestone occasionally marked spots where they had massacred parties of whites. I am told that Indians rarely appear upon the line of the road. They seem to have given up the thing for good, and to have withdrawn to the north and the south.

A PLEASING INCIDENT.

Pleasing incidents, however, relieve the monotony of the long ride. While the passengers were eating supper at Ellis a few days ago a trapper and a conductor indulged in a little intellectual conversation. The conductor endeavored to persuade the trapper into an endorsement of his peculiar views by drawing a revolver upon him, whereupon the trapper whipped out a brace of six shooters, and began snapping them promiscuously about

the room. Sixty people, men and women, made a rush for the door. It is averred that a colored palace car porter jumped ten feet high, and landed on his stomach across a windowsill. The conductor whizzed out of the door like a comet, and a gentleman weighing 295 pounds managed to stow himself away under a small dining table. He said that he had dropped his watch key, and was looking for it. After all were safe on the cars it was discovered that the trapper's pistols were not capped, and that fifteen of the railroad men and passengers ran out of the dining room with loaded revolvers in their pockets.

A SECOND PLEASING INCIDENT.

A few days ago two hunters got on a spree in Wallace. One of them was a notorious character known as Mud-Eater. Under the influence of whiskey his bump of self-esteem began to swell, and he had a desire to let the people know who he was. "I'm a coyote! I'm a wolf!" he shouted. One of his comrades said, "Well, I've knowed you a good many years, an' I've heered you howl; but I never knowed you to hurt anybody." Mud-Eater's destructiveness arose. He drew a navy pistol, and shot the speaker dead. After procuring another drink he moosied¹⁸ off over the plains. A party followed him and returned a day after with his clothes, declaring that they had lynched him. As they were nearly all intimate friends of Mud-Eater, their story is doubted.

Another version of the affair is that one of the crowd shouted, "I'm a wolf!" Mud-Eater replied, "I'm a wolf eater!" and put a bullet through him, making a hole big enough for a rabbit to jump through. He then disappeared, but returned within a half an hour. Lifting the dead body, he tore the shirt away from the breast, and pointing to the hole in the heart, chuckled out, "Popped just whar I aimed, by —!" He then mounted his horse and left the settlement unmolested. The man's body laid around Wallace for days before it was buried.

A THIRD PLEASING INCIDENT.

We arrived in Wallace¹⁹ on Monday after dark. The little town, consisting of an eating house and four or five mud shanties, was in a spasm of excitement. There is a military post near by,²⁰ under command of a Capt. Irwin.²¹ The captain is alleged to have grossly insulted the wife of Mr. George Barry,²² a well-known master mechanic. When the latter gentleman heard of it, he shouldered his rifle and began to look for the captain. The officer, however, was too shrewd for him. He ordered out a guard of soldiers, and is determined to have a general fusillade in case Mr. Barry makes his appearance. This is the story told the passengers. Mr. Barry's provocation may be lesser, or even greater than reported, and the captain may be as innocent as a whip-poorwill, but it is certain that both are on the war path, and that Wallace is boiling over with excitement.

INVALIDS ON THE ROAD TO PARADISE.

These delightful incidents are duly appreciated by the passengers. To further entertain them the railroad officials kindly point out the trees along the road where men have been hanged. The trees are so scarce that an invalid is overjoyed to see one, and he absolutely thrills with satisfaction when he is told that half a dozen desperadoes have been strung up to its branches without a judge or jury. It is particularly pleasant to have such a tree pointed out and hear such a story about dark. It produces so refreshing a sleep and such charming dreams that the poor consumptive experiences a sensation of being much nearer heaven than he was on the previous day.

NOTES

1. The famous suffragist was five feet five inches in height, tall for her generation. I believe that here Cummings is tweaking the people of Kansas. In 1867 an amendment to the Kansas constitution that would have allowed women to vote had been defeated. The vote had drawn

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national attention and the *New York Tribune* and its editor, Horace Greeley, rivals of Cummings's own paper, had opposed the amendment. Earlier in 1873, Ms. Anthony had stood trial for illegally voting in New York.

2. The *New York Times* journalist was certainly Middie Morgan, described by contemporaries as "the most respected live-stock reporter in New York" and "the best judge of horned cattle in this country" (Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage*, 403). Ms. Morgan, who also covered footraces and cattle shows, is generally said to be the first woman sports reporter in the United States.

3. He is referring to Colorado, which was still a territory in 1873.

4. In 1990 the venerable *Kansas City Times* merged with the *Kansas City Star*, formerly the evening paper. Today the *Star* is a Knight Ridder paper.

5. Cummings is poking fun both at Kansas City and his newspaper colleagues. There was no *Mince Meat* newspaper. The Sunday Cummings was in Kansas City almost certainly was May 25.

6. Established in 1852 as Camp Center because it was near the geographical center of the United States, the fort was renamed the next year to honor Maj. Gen. Bennett C. Riley (1790–1853), who is credited with commanding the first military escort along the Santa Fe Trail, which led from Franklin, Missouri, to Santa Fe, New Mexico. Fort Riley was intended to help protect people and trade traveling the Santa Fe Trail. In 1867, George Armstrong Custer was stationed there and Wild Bill Hickok was an army scout. Fort Riley continues to be an important U.S. Army facility today.

7. The western (as well as the eastern) United States has a number of table rocks. The one Cummings is referring to was on Table Rock Creek in eastern Lincoln County, Kansas, north of the railroad: Kansas's Table Rock. According to author Frank Blackmar (in *Kansas*, 795), the rock "consisted of two columns of stone surmounted by a cap. Originally the stone was about 5 feet high and overlooked the surrounding country. The late B. F. Mudge of Manhattan brought the curiosity to the attention of the public in an article on the geology of Kansas, which was published in the report of the state board of agriculture for 1877–78, in which a photograph of the rock was reproduced. It is said that the rock was inscribed with the names of the members of one of Fremont's parties which camped here during one of his expeditions.

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The rock was partially, if not wholly, destroyed a few years since by parties who failed to appreciate its value.”

8. Three-card monte was (and is) a classic con game rather than a legitimate card game. The dealer takes three cards, one of which is a queen, mixes them, lays them facedown, and the player bets on which one is the queen. Because the dealer manipulates the cards, players always end up losing.

9. Preemption is the right to buy land.

10. George Grant was actually a native Scotsman who had made a fortune in the cloth business. His colony, Victoria, was southeast of Hays City in Ellis County, Kansas.

11. Probably Monday, May 26, 1873.

12. Ellis was the next small town on the rail line west after Hays City. The railroad had established a water station at that location in 1867; the town received a post office in 1870. In the 2000 federal census the town's population was 1,873.

13. John H. Edwards, from Ellis, was a ticket agent for the railroad before being elected state senator. Edwards County, Kansas, is named for him.

14. Cummings also spells the name “Eliott.” R. S. Elliot would go on to write scientific papers on the industrial resources of Kansas and Colorado, among other things.

15. Washington Square Park is at the foot of Fifth Avenue in New York City's Greenwich Village. It is less than ten acres in size.

16. Kit Carson, in eastern Colorado (today in Cheyenne County), was a flourishing railroad town and a major shipping point for cattle when Cummings visited in 1873.

17. To extract silver and gold from ore, lead was added in the smelting process. The resulting alloy was then transferred to a cupellation furnace that contained bone ash. Heating the alloy in the furnace caused the lead to take up oxygen. The resulting lead oxide was absorbed by the bone ash, leaving behind the valuable metals.

18. Moseyed.

19. Wallace originally was a station on the stagecoach line that once crossed the plains. In mid-1867 it had been raided by Cheyenne Indians.

20. Fort Wallace, originally established as Camp Pond Creek in western Kansas in 1865 and renamed in 1866, was about two miles

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southeast of Wallace. From 1865 to 1878 it is said to have been one of the most active military outposts in terms of encounters with Plains Indians. The fort was abandoned in 1882.

21. Captain Irwin may have been Bernard John Dowling Irwin, an Irishman, who was stationed at Fort Riley, where he served as post surgeon at various times from 1867 to 1873. In that latter year he left to become chief medical officer of the U.S. Military Academy. Irwin was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor in 1894 (the same year as Amos Cummings) for bravery at Apache Pass, Arizona, in 1861. Forts Riley, Harker, and Wallace, among others, were on the east-west trail along which the railroad that carried Amos Cummings west in 1873 had been built only several years earlier.

22. George Barry, master mechanic, may have been James Barry, who in 1870 was at Fort Harker (between Fort Riley and Fort Wallace), where he served as a foreman for the company building the railroad across Kansas. A native of Ireland, he was forty-three years old in 1870 (according to the federal census). His wife, Mary, born in New York, was thirty-six that year. Fort Harker was closed in 1872. James Barry might well have moved west to Fort Wallace from Fort Harker, especially because railroad construction had moved west past Fort Harker (in 1867). All of this, however, is speculation.

