

## The Journey from Santa Fe to Denver

*Written by Sister Joanna Walsh, one of the three sisters who founded the school in 1864.*

... The mail-coach with its three span of large mules, Spanish they are called, I believe, was drawn up at the Convent gate. It was the only medium of transportation to our new mission. The farewells being spoken, in tears we boarded the coach. Quite unexpectedly, instead of one, two pair of eyes met us at once; for there sat our Reverend guardian, Good Father Raverdy and Captain Lambert of the Civil War, actually in progress. The former naturally expected to see a few dew-drops; the latter looked concerned for us, and though preoccupied most likely with military tactics for the preservation of the Union, seemed as if he would gladly redress our grievances also. The dilemma, however, was speedily cleared away by Father Raverdy who in an undertone told him we had just bid Mother and Sisters good-bye. The coach was instantly in motion, soon reached St. Michael's Church and from that eminence, we took a last look at our dear Convent home and the City of Holy Faith. On we went for miles, nothing but unattractive scenery to be seen, till we reached Glorietta battle-field, whence the cannon's roar a few weeks earlier reached our ears in our quiet convent home. We would gladly have lingered a while, but had to be satisfied with a passing glance, as the coach was going at such a rate that one might suppose the driver felt no more affected than if it were a meadow field. We had, of course, to yield submission to his will for the time being.

A word on our vehicle. On the outside, it was rusty, dusty looking affair; within sitting room for four passengers. Father Raverdy and the Captain occupied one seat, we three Sisters had to accommodate ourselves the best we could to the space afforded us by the other. Well, thought we, this is our first cross, for naturally we may expect many more weighty. At first we did not mind the roughness of the ride route [sic], but such jolting we had never experienced – no road of course in those days, and the fear of being dashed against our companion passengers on the other seat annoyed us not a little. Then, too, consider this ordeal was to endure for five days and five nights, but the intervals of cessation when the driver stopped for meals or to get a relay of horses, etc. He sometimes stopped for hours. We know not why; but certainly he needed a rest, for he had to keep awake, whereas those within were at liberty to sleep if they could. Some really did take quite long naps. ...

At our first stopping place, the accommodations were all that one might desire, but as we advanced beyond the lines of civilization they changed. Arrived at the next station, we were covered with dust and expected to shake off some and refresh ourselves with an ablution of soap and water. We were ushered into an apartment corresponding to our own condition, a coat of dust on everything, not excepting the washbasin and pitcher. We exchanged looks of disappointment, yet did not abandon the object of our sanguine wishes. One of us discovered a creek not far distant and hither we directed our steps with alacrity, desiring to be back for the evening meal. The place, so far as we had seen, had no appetizing effect on us; we were, therefore, rather reluctant to enter the dining room. But, what a contrast! There cleanliness and order prevailed. It was a pleasure to see the hostess, all neatness, politeness, hospitality; and her savory dishes and snow-white table linen invited us to partake with delight of preparations. What a contrast, thought we, between mother and daughter, the occupant of the dusty room.

Supper over, we said the prescribed prayers, but could make the visit to the Blessed Sacrament only in spirit. We realized what privileged mortals religious are, who can visit our Gracious Lord so frequently and converse with Him so intimately. Having to tarry here a while, we intently gazed on the June sun in its vespertime gorgeousness, nearing the horizon. It seemed peculiarly interesting, being the only object we could behold in common with the Sisters left behind. But the mail being ready our musings came to an end, and we hastily resumed our place in the coach for a whole night's travel. We stopped once for a relay of mules, but did not alight. Dawn brought us to the next station, a lone little house, inmates fast asleep but the knocking and calling of the driver soon awoke them. A man was the first to appear. He immediately set about preparing breakfast, and, if gook humor could supply the deficit of groceries and meat market, we should have a tempting meal; for he hummed and whistled the whole time. His success with pots or kettles now notified him that it was time to set the table; so we were politely asked to withdraw to an adjoining room. Here the ladies of the establishment were dressing. They ventured to accost us; tho' they seemed as if they had never before seen beings like us. After a short time, breakfast was announced, and readily obeying the summons, we assembled round the festal board; but with the exception of the driver, we scarcely knew how to begin, so novel was the fare. The bread was not baked that day; but the rice had just come hot from the cheerful, good-humored man's kitchen, and the sheep and the cow supplied variety in the beverage. As we did not expect another meal until the wish of the driver should proclaim a halt Father Raverdy advised to add something from our lunch box. How little one-half of the world knows how the other half lives! And yet a contentment, cheerfulness, gaiety reigned, as if they had a sumptuous table. But you will say: "These are not plants nurtured by a sumptuous table," and how true!

We stopped here for hours; and miles and miles of prairie afforded ample space for pedestrian exercise, which we needed very much; nevertheless we remained within sight of the house. We were at perfect liberty; for, soon after the morning repast, not a soul was to be seen, not even our good Father Raverdy. Our conjecture placed them in dreamland; but, where they found that land was a mystery. Most probably all got into the coach. We did not, however care to investigate, as they were all of age to take care of themselves. We prayed, walked, talked, and laughed over our adventure, till an individual appeared near the coach and the process of hitching warned us to approach and be in readiness to start in a few minutes. A crack of the whip and on we sped, endless plains on either side. Arriving at the next station, you may be tempted to say; If nothing more than to avoid monotony or tautology, why not give the name: But those places had no name in pioneer days and we alit at a distance from the shanty. Our prudent guardian wished to reconnoiter before conducting us hither. Highly pleased with his decision, we sat down on nature's verdant carpet and enjoyed our lunch beneath the azure vault of heaven.

Night of our fourth day out brought us to a little house, too small it would seem for a family to live in. For all I know it might have the dignified name of hotel; for being about 10 o'clock P.M. it was time to take refreshments so we were soon seated round the table. There were ladies in the background but a man acting as host appeared most conspicuous in the foreground. From all appearances the proprietors of this domicile were both temperate and abstemious, as the fare consisted of cold milk and cold apple-pie, nearly raw. Having no superfluous variety of courses to detain us, we were speedily on route once more. By this time we had a judge and a banker as passengers. One or other of the gentlemen had to ride with the driver. The Captain had got off long since.

The night was dark, no light except the coach-lamps until the moon favored us with her borrowed rays. On we went, comparatively smoothly, when in plunged the poor animals into a slough or mudhole. All had to alight. Animating horse-talk and flourishing of the whip were vigorously employed, but to no effect. This failure, and our unpleasant, uncomfortable situation called forth the thought. If Archimedes needed but "standing place and a fulcrum to move the earth" it is a pity they do not resort to a simple lever of the first class which would easily extricate the vehicle from the quagmire. Thoughts in the distance were unavailing; they were extravagant too; for a stick, much less a lever, was not to be found there. The men's thoughts, whoever, were different from ours; as appeared from their unhitching one of the poor mules, and retracing two or three miles back to the little station for assistance. We stood some distance from the scene of the action, so our good Father Raverdy ever solicitous for our comfort, brought us presages of speedy relief. In the meantime, we prayed, meditated or spoke a little; but our standing position precluded the possibility of a nap. We were quite exhausted by this time, but our compassionate guardian encouraged us saying that we should soon reach our destination. At last we espied the mule with his rider, followed by men from the station and a yoke of oxen; and by means of strength and skill our difficulty was surmounted. Resuming once more our places in the coach, we traveled on till broad day light, and made our next pause at Fort \_\_\_\_\_. I forget the name. The ladies were politeness and kindness personified and I can justly say the same of a Protestant minister, who greeted us most cordially and wished us the greatest success and Heaven's choicest blessings. He was an acquaintance of Father Raverdy's.

The better to refresh us, the ladies, oh, so kindly, offered to remove our bonnets (our veils) but we thankfully declined. Amid a volley of good wishes from those hospitable, kind people, we sallied forth from our temporary resting place, and soon lost sight of the fort, so speedily were we borne along by our three span of fresh mules. After a long ride, the driver quite unaccountably slackened pace, not through reverence, but he had the good taste to let passengers enjoy a transient view of the wonderful Garden of the Gods. One could not help being impressed. The ground was literally carpeted with flowers of various hue. There they had been for ages, spread out in panoramic beauty and "born to blush unseen", till the speculators of the 19<sup>th</sup> century invaded their precincts. But still more affecting was the sight of its monuments, never touched by sculptor's chisel, yet there they stand in their various forms of fantastic grandeur the gigantic labor of tertiary seas, hewn out of sedimentary rock. Leagues of the rocks still remain, But, where are those seas? Where! They have accomplished the work appointed by the Omnipotent Creator, and at His bidding fled from their bed, nor dare detach another grain of sand from their sculptured figures. Briefly reflecting that even the great deep is subject to change, one instinctively turns in admiration, praise, and adoration to consider the greatness and immutability of God. Well, mail time being limited, our reverie came to an end, and with accelerated speed we drove; no stop nor stay till we arrived at the site of our new home. Here we are. The coach halts at the Church, the Vicar General's residence close by. And what an unpretentious one it is! But (it speaks volumes of his missionary spirit of self-sacrifice and that of his faithful companion, our good and holy Father Raverdy).

We received a hearty welcome, but so fatigued were we that we were unable to enjoy it. Lunch was quickly prepared, so our first repast was partaken of in the humble dining-

room of our future Bishop. We were then escorted to our field of labor, where we could look down on the mere nucleus of the magnificent city you behold today. <sup>3</sup> The ladies had been busy arranging beds, etc., and our need of rest being unmistakable, they proposed a nap. One of them led us to our dormitory and then left us to enjoy the first sleep since leaving Santa Fe. I must except Sister J\_\_\_\_\_ who slept soundly on the way. I suppose we could have slept full twenty-four hours, but near six o'clock one of the ladies returned, prepared tea, and came to awaken us. The first salute on opening our unsatisfied eyes was, Oh shall we be ready in time for Mass? She was, as you may suppose, greatly amused at the error of our imagination, and gently replied, "You have been asleep only so many hours, so it is only six o'clock of this same day." After seeing to our comfort, she bade us good-bye and left us to ourselves, a pleasure we had not enjoyed for almost a week. We said supper prayers where we were, but by time for night prayers, after parading through the apartments, we selected a little room for our oratory. There we knelt before a frame-less picture of the Crucifixion standing on our trunk—we had but one—and supported against the wall. We tried to pray most fervently; and for the first time from those prairie wilds, *Hail to the Queen* was wafted to the ears of our Immaculate Mother by her three lone pioneer children. How we missed the presence of Our Blessed Lord in the Sacrament of His love! And for some time we had to suffer that privation; for we were poor, and the house unfurnished till the immediate opening of school.

Well, school opened with quite a number of pupils, large and small, (twenty) and though we were so few, we were obliged to receive as many boarders as space could accommodate. Father Vicar General having promised their parents this advantage. We had to do everything ourselves. No help to be had just then. So with boarders and day scholars, classes of different grades in the school, music lessons and all the accessories of day and boarding school confronting us, we had besides to apportion all the house work and cooking, and reserve time for our spiritual exercises. Now, all this seemed enough to puzzle the head of an engineer. But no engineer being at hand, we made use of our own heads, and indeed, not only our heads, but our hearts and souls, to solve the problem. The expectation of shortly recruiting our number animated our courage, though it had reason to flag many times before that help came, still we went on quietly, as best as we could. (Three sisters joined them in November.)

Help did come to the Sisters in November when Mother Magdalen finally decided to let Sister Ann Joseph Mattingly and Sister Agatha Wall leave Santa Fe. Mother expressed her reluctance in a letter to her sister, "When making arrangements to send Sisters to Denver, Vicar Machebeuf wanted to have Sister Ann Joseph for Superior. I did not want to let her go because she was so useful in every way to this house... The Superiors at Loretto always left it to me, to send her or not. I wanted to keep her here by all means, but the Vicar himself came in November and I could not help allowing her to go with him. Well, she and Sister Agatha left her the 15<sup>th</sup> of last November. The Rocky Mountain News, October 20, 1864, reported that the Very Reverend Machebeuf had gone to meet two Sisters enroute for Denver, "to assist in the flourishing academy for young ladies, now in operation here. We are informed that one of these two Sisters is the one who has been selected as Superioress of the institution, and that she is an American lady of vast experience and high accomplishments."

Although the Sisters at St. Mary's were engrossed with their tasks of establishing their school, they were not oblivious of the momentous happenings of the day. The Civil War was still waging and Sister Joanna states that...we could not complain of monotony, as

from time to time we used to hear of war events, battles lost, battles gained, urgent proclamation for thousands of new recruits ---guerrillas---mail coaches robbed and burned – thus cutting off communication with any of our houses – finally, “Richmond is taken” came flashing on the wires, news joyful to some of our boarders, sorrowful to others. Soon after this we received a package of mail that had been detained.

But I must not pass over unnoticed another species of warfare. Fearful Indian depredations were committed in various places not far distant, and fears entertained that the Indians in full force would fall upon Denver any day or night; though families from the vicinity were flocking in for safety. They did not, however, attack the city; but, turn your eyes toward 15<sup>th</sup> St. and behold a company of those fierce warriors, mounted on elegant horses, riding, I think four abreast, and one in front waiving triumphantly a human scalp placed on the end of a long pole, and you will have an idea of their work. This, you will say, makes a terrific variety; but do not blame those poor savages. In their eyes it is just retaliation; for, as usual, they have been defrauded of their rights.

Denver’s new citizens were pleased to have a school where their daughters could be educated to become the cultural leaders of the community. Although a fire in April of 1869 had partially destroyed the “White House”, the Sisters were not daunted and built a larger establishment. By 1886, there were 85 boarders and 120 day pupils. The music class numbered 95. Subjects taught included Roman and Grecian History, Astronomy and Physical Geography, Literature, Zoology and Geology, Geometry, Mental and Moral Philosophy, Logic and Physics. In addition, the students learned painting and handiwork, which included needlework, crocheting, worsted-work and embroidering.

Indeed, the three Sisters who had “Rushed to the Rockies” in 1864 were the founders of a mine richer than those at the “Gregory Diggings.”