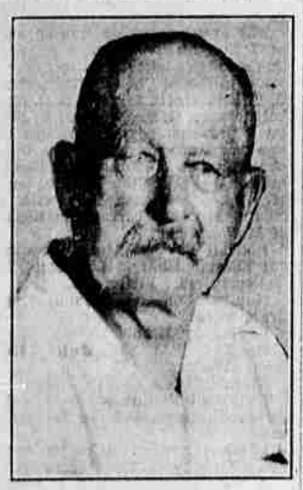
Lem Wilson of Jacksonville

(BY MARY GREINER)

Lem Wilson, 74, of Jacksonville has a way of wrinkling up his nose when he tells a story, that somehow warms his listeners into a whimsical mood of receptivity. It is that mischievous little boy grin of his which makes it easy to laugh and continue laughing thruout his droll accounts of the early days on the plains, and yet one is never laughing at Lem Wilson, but with him.

The Jacksonville man cannot be classed as a pioneer of any one state. He is a veteran rather of the western plains and the days when borderlines were significant principally as indicators of a change in oxen feed and brand of cartridges.

Lem Wilson was born in 1854 on a farm near Lawrence, Kansas, and ran away from home when he was 16, because he couldn't get along with his father, a headstrong, industrious farmer, who



Lem Wilson

believed in all work and no play for the younger generation. As Lem himself explained it, or rather dismissed it:

"My father was bullheaded. I was a chip off the old block. I told him I was tired of the farm and tired of slaving from daylight until dark for nothing more than my board and keep, and that I was leaving. He said I wasn't. I went."

Having never been off the farm before, except to ride occasionally for the mail, the lad made his way to St. Joe, Missouri, and goe aboard the steamer to Omaha.

"First time I'd ever been away from home, and say I was green," he said, his nose picking up another humorous wrinkle as he recounted his first adventure out in the world.

A T-Bone Birthmark

"When I sat down to eat in the dining room of the boat the steward came up and tapped me on the shoulder and said, 'Where's your coat, young man?' I told him it was in the state room, which was a lie. I didn't have what you might call a coat—never had been off the farm long enough to get one. Well, the upshot of it was that he took me to his own room and rigged me up for supper. I never forgot to wear my coat to meals after that."

Lem Wilson stretched his right hand out and pointed out a brown birthmark about an inch long. It resembled a perfect miniature cut of T-bone steak with a white streak thru the center.

"Funny, isn't it? Never could stand beef of any kind, or imagined I couldn't" he said. "Well, what should that steward order for me but a great big T-bone steak. I looked at it, and thought my hour had come. I couldn't imagine out and out refusing to eat what was set before me, so I ate around and around it, and kept getting hungrier and hungrier.

"Finally I told myself, 'Lem, if you eat this steak you'll die. And if you don't eat it, you'll die—of starvation. So you might as well die fighting, and have the good will of the people around you.' About that time, I felt the black eyes of the steward upon me and I lit into that steak fit to kill—the first I'd ever tasted in my life. I'm still alive." The hand with the T-bone birth mark stroked the rising corners of a humorous mouth back into a serious line.

When the lad reached Omaha, he decided to look for work and was wandering about the city when he spied a bull train in the process of being hitched up. Near it stood a tall, gray-haired man of about 65, with a long flowing white beard. His piercing blue eyes were intent upon the crew of workers before him. The Kansas lad walked past him a few times and finally mustered up courage enough to ask him for a job.

The man was Alexander Major, member of the firm of Major, Russell and Waddell, largest freighters in the west at that time. He looked the blue-eyed, bashful looking lad over for a few seconds, tugged at his long beard and finally, without asking any questions, told him there was a place vacant and hired him.

Alexander Major was a very stern, very religious man and requested all his help to carry small pocket Bibles on the trip. He made it clearly understood that there was to be no swearing among his men, which, according to Lem, was "pretty hard lines for a bull whacker on the plains."

The Kansas boy worked for Major six months, during which time he freighted from Omaha to Salt Lake, over 1000 miles, taking in all the points west of the Rockies—all the Missouri river points from St. Jo to Denver. The train traveled from 10 to 15 miles a day, making two drives; one early in the morning while it was cool, until perhaps, 10 or 11 o'clock, or until they ran across water.

When in camp, the men took turns performing duties. One day Lem, for instance, would carry the water, the next day he packed fuel, which generally consisted of buffalo chips, and the next day he assisted with the wagon greasing. There were 100 wagons with eight yoke of oxen apiece—eight yoke for every wagon and its trailer, a train that would, according to the pioneer reach as far as from Jacksonville to Medford, a stretch of five miles.

Rocky Mts. Are Elusive

"When we camped, we unhitched the oxen and made a corral with the wagons" he said. "Sometimes we'd enclose the oxen in this for the night—especially when we thought there was danger of an attack from Indians. But oftener two night herders would stay up and watch the cattle graze. We all slept in the big front wagons." Lem Wilson paused awhile musing on the old days and his first trip away from home, and finally broke into a broad grin as he recalled another incident of his inexperience.

"I'll never forget when I first saw the Rocky mountains" he said. "It was my day to get wood. I started out, set on bringing a good load from the mountains near by. Well, I traveled and traveled, and trudged and sweat and much to my horror, I didn't seem to get any nearer than when I started. I didn't want to turn back, but it was getting late and I knew they'd want to be starting on with the train. So I picked up what fuel I could find on the way and staggered back to the camp disgusted.

"Supper was over when I got there, and they were all hitched up to start on. The crowd all had the laugh on me and guyed me fit to kill. An old man in the crowd fixed me a hasty meal and when I had a few gulps down he said, 'Well Lem, if we go 15 miles a day for five days, we'll be up to those mountains and you can get all the wood you want, so cheer up.' He handed me my lash and we started on." The pioneer explained that the lashes used on the oxen were from 18 to 20 feet long, with short handles.

Buys a "Toy" Pistol

Before starting out on the trip, in Omaha, the Kansas boy decided that he had better be armed, so he went into a store and bought him a pistol. What was his chagrin when he got onto the plains in discovering that all the others in the party carried big guns! So he kept his pistol under cover until the train arrived at North Platte, a town where all the business was done from tents.

Slipping away from his associates, he wandered thru the tentlined streets and discovered a well dressed man standing on a corner, apparently engrossed in deep thought. Lem walked up to him and asked him in as few words as possible if he would like to buy a six-shooter. The man wheeled around, glared at the boy and finally snapped out:

"Yes. There's a son-of-a-gun across the street that I want to kill!" The startled Kansas lad's eyes bulged, he gulped a couple of times, and automatically pulled his little gun from his pocket and handed it to the man. A look of incredulity crep into the eyes of the stranger, as he handled the gun, turning it around several times and finally holding it up between him and the sun. His eyes then wandered back to the gaping boy which he now apparently regarded as a curiosity.

"What did you call this, my son?" he asked.

"That's a pistol" returned Lem; whereupon the man shook his head solemnly and handed back the gun.

"Young man, if you ever shoot me with that thing, and I catch you at it, I'll wear out the ground with you. Never show that thing to a white man again" he said.

The Hard-Boiled West

From here, the Jacksonville man's story centered around Piedmont, reputed to be the hardest place in the west. The Union Pacific railroad was being constructed and the town was full of derelicts of all sorts who followed the work. Dance halls, gambling houses and saloons made up the life of the place and afforded color and recreation to the weary travelers across the plains.

It was at Piedmont where the Alexander Major crew were paid for the first time. The Kansas lad received $75 a month and board on the trip, which was considered an extremely large salary in those days. Several hours before the train arrived Lem heard the men discussing with considerable anticipation the various attractions of the place.

The old man who had fed Lem, after his unsuccessful attempt to walk to the Rocky mountains decided right then to take the boy under his wing and 'put him wise to Piedmont.' After reviewing the various dance halls, he told the boy that the bunch would probably all go to Jimmie Reed's place, Jimmie was an ex-prize fighter and was accommodating about letting the customers settle their disputes as they saw fit. At this point in the story, the pioneer took his wide brimmed straw hat off and mopped his brow as if in anticipation of the ensuing struggle. He crowded some tobacco into his corn cob pipe, lit it, and thus fortified, continued with his story.

"Ras—that was this old man's name who befriended me—Ras Smith. He warned me that if they started shooting in the dance hall to just stand where I was and not move. 'As long as you don't interfere they won't bother you' he said.

Dance Hall Shot Up

"So I followed the others into the dance hall, after we got there. And there I saw all those ladies dressed up in their shiny dresses, dancing with the men. It was the first time I'd ever seen any one dancing. You see I was only 16 and had never been off the farm before. I stood back in a corner looking on. Those ladies in their pretty bright dresses and spangles fascinated me. I thought them the most beautiful creatures I had ever seen. Such rosy complexions!" Here the round blue eyes began to twinkle.

"I began to envy the other boys who could go up and ask them to dance in such an easy way. It was all so new to me, and I was carried away by the music and bright colors and the movement of the crowd around and around. Then all of a sudden I heard a shot and another shot and I came back to my senses.

"I remembered what Ras had told me, and I stood my ground. The lights went out. There were more shots and screams, and I could feel the people all around me pushing and shoving. But I was determined not to budge.

"It got awfully quiet then, and I didn't hear another sound. Still I didn't move. Finally I saw a candle light coming thru the hall and the place was lighted up. I saw four dead men on the floor near me. The manager and his men came in and dragged out the bodies. Then the manager went to the door and called the people back into the hall and the dance went on.

"One of the first in, was old Ras who looked around and spied me. He staggered toward me, doubled over with laughter. He pointed me out to some of the others who followed him in and they all shouted out laughing.

"'For the Lawd sakes, what are you doing here, young 'un,' he asked, coming up to me. 'I'm standing still like you told me to' I said. 'Standing? Hell, don't you even know the difference between standing and sitting?' Ras shouted and doubled over again. And sure enough I was sitting flat on the floor in the corner. I had slid down without realizing, and my back was hugging that wall fit to kill."

Eighteen years later, Lem Wilson was telling this incident to a man in Idaho, at the end of which the man burst out laughing, reached out his hand and said: 'Well Lem, I've often wondered what had become of the boy who sat in the corner.' The man had been one of the bull whackers on the train.

After the six months were up, and the snow began to fall, the oxen in the Alexander Major train were taken down to Green River, and Lem Wilson went to work for "Hat" Shurtleif, a Mormon, south of Salt Lake. The Mormon owned a mule train and Lem approached him for a job at the suggestion of one of the former employes of Alexander Major who had been forced to quit the train when he killed one of the freighters in an argument, and was now himself working for the Morman.

Learns to Skin Mules

"But I've never skinned any mules, and don't know the first thing about them" Lem argued.

"Never mind, tell him you did. If he thinks you haven't had any experience you won't get a job. You can catch onto the work afterwards" argued the man. So Lem mustered up courage and approached the Mormon for a job. He led the boy over to the six mule team and told him to start right in and hook them up, while he stood a few feet away looking on. Lem made a bold attempt at hitching the mules, but realized from the start that he was whipped. He tried several times and continued to get worse and more nervous. Finally Shurtleif came over to him and said:

"Young man, you told me you were a mule skinner."

"Well, I was told that you wouldn't hire me unless I had had experience, so I thought I'd bluff it thru" returned Lem sheepishly, and to his surprise the man laughed good naturedly, and taking him over to the team, he began patiently to give the boy instructions. "I like your nerve, lad" he said.

On this job it was Lem's duty to haul ties for the Union Pacific railroad. After the first day of sliding down the mountain side with the mules, he came to his former friend of the Alexander Major train and told him that he couldn't stand the work and that he was never cut out to be a mule skinner.

"Aw don't be a piker, Lem" said the friend. "The old man's taken a likin' to you and things will keep gettin' easier around here right along." So the boy stuck to the job for eight months, during which time the Mormon showered little personal attentions and privileges upon him, partly because he was several years younger than his other employes.

Shurtleif had nine wives. They all ate at a long table, ranged according to age. The oldest wife and her family sat at the head of the table, then the second oldest and so on. Each wife took care of her own children. The youngest and most favored wife sat at the foot of the table with Shurtleif. The table was 40 feet long, and Lem was privileged upon a few occasions to eat in the dining room with the Mormon and his wives.

In the spring of '69, the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroads were connected at Promontory, where one of the biggest celebrations ever known to the early pioneers was held. The town was crowded with people from all over who wanted to see the golden spike driven and the train run over it for the first time. Lem, and the crew who had sweated over hauling and placing the ties for several months, took a personal interest in the celebration. They felt that they owned part of the railroad.

"After the celebration was over, some of the fellows decided to strike out for Rogue River valley. They wanted me to come along. I debated the question for a long time and decided to wait until later. I wasn't ready for Oregon yet. Had a sneaking suspicion that if I'd ever get there, I'd never want to leave it" he said.

Meets Calamity Jane

Among the more famous early characters on the plains, with which Lem Wilson had come into personal contact was Calamity Jane. Although her name means nothing more to many of the modern generation than a slang phrase, she was as much flesh and blood as Lem Wilson himself, according to the old pioneer.

"The first time I met Calamity Jane was in Pierre, South Dakota, in '79. She was about 35 years old then, and had long black hair like an Indian's tucked under a cowboy hat. Tall and wiry, she was about as hard boiled as you'd find them. She dressed in men's clothes and carried a couple of six-shooters in her belt, which she used to settle any argument which might arise. She drank heavy and could outswear any man in the place. If she wasn't so dissipated, she'd have been rather good looking though" the pioneer added.

Calamity Jane was whacking bulls in the same train with Lem, and according to the Jacksonville man, could yoke up her team faster than most men in the crew. Unlike many of the others, she had her own broco, which she insisted on taking along on the trips, and often in the evenings, without saying a word to anyone, would jump astride and go tearing over the plains shooting into the air like mad.

When the train arrived at Sturges or Deadwood, or any of the towns along the route, she often dressed in women's clothes and came into the dance halls. According to Lem, many of the men used to dance with her thru sheer fright.

It was a few years later, when Lem Wilson was a government scout, that he was bringing some prisoners from Fort Mead to Fort Keogh, and had to stop over night at Sturges. He heard a commotion in the direction of the dance hall, so after locking the prisoners up in the city jail, he wandered down to the place to look on.

In the middle of the hall was Calamity Jane, half drunk. Some girl had danced with the man she wanted, and Calamity went into a violent tantrum. She didn't use her six-shooters this time, but she took a couple of extra drinks and then lit into the whole crowd with her fists.

"She laid out several before they knew what happened to them and the rest ran for their lives. She was reeling and swearing and knocking them right and left. And that was the last I saw of Calamity Jane," said the pioneer, indicating that this was a suitable ending for that day's narrative.

A Cottage Among The Flowers

I often think that the only truly happy people have happy homes. That is why I think Jesus was always happy. He lived in a small cottage surrounded with flowers, and cheerful with the singing of birds. This little cottage was in Nazareth, one of the most beautiful spots in the loveliest section of the country. Jesus must have often and often climbed the hills of Galilee which were close to Nazareth. From the top of one high hill He could see many, many miles in every direction.

When Jesus became a man and preached his great sermon he told the people that a good man was like a city set on a hill, that could not be hid. Close by his high hill was a wonderful spring. There are few spring in this country and so this one seemed all the more beautiful. Jesus loved to play by this spring with friendly boys and girls. It was interesting to him to watch the people filling their pitchers with clear sparkling water which was like molten diamonds. When He went out into life never to come back to Nazareth to live Jesus remembered the wonderful spring and he told the people that if they would come to Him He would make happiness spring up in their hearts like living water. The picture of the Nazareth spring must have come before his memory.

Joseph, Jesus' stepfather, was a carpenter, which shows us that it was a poor family. But Jesus worked with Joseph and learned to build well. The houses in Nazareth were small and for the most part not well nor strongly built. Once Jesus saw a thing he never forgot. A careless man built his house without a foundation on the sand bed of a dry stream. In that country rains come up very suddenly, winds blow hard and the streams rise quickly. And this is just what Jesus saw happen to the house built on the sand. The rain and the wind seemed to suddenly burst out of a terrible black cloud. The lightning flashed, the thunder roared, the rain poured and poured and the bed of the stream became a raging torrent. The man with his wife and children ran up on the hill from it barely in time to save their lives. He had hardly gone when the house fell with a great noise into the raging stream. It could never be rebuilt. The poor man lost everything because he had foolishly built his house upon the sand. Jesus remembered that scene in his boyhood town and told the story of it in the greatest sermon he ever preached. He told this story to show the people how terrible a thing it is to carelessly build the house of life which is one's character.

We can see from Jesus' life that people can be happy even if they are not rich. God has put such a lot of lovely people in the world, and has filled it with such interesting things, Jesus loved all beautiful things and they made him happy. That is one of the ways to be happy, so you see that there are not many boys and girls who have not the chance of happiness. They can make friends with birds, cattle, sheep, and with all kinds of pets. Besides they have the stars to look at in the night, the sunrise and sunset in the day. These made Christ happy, he spoke of them, too, in the sermon he preached when he became a man. He saw and talked of fig trees, grape vines and clusters of grapes. He saw the mustard seed planted, watched it grow larger and larger until the birds came and sang in the branches. He was watching God at work in all that and there is nothing else so wonderful. There were fields of wheat and white, red and yellow lilies glowing in the midst of them. Jesus seemed to like especially well the dove with its brilliant neck. The old mother hen sheltering her chickens from heat and danger was a lovely sight to Him. He did not chase them, nor throw sticks and stones to frighten them, but he made friends with them. It seemed to Him that they were full of love.

Jesus was happy in His home because he helped to make it happy. He loved his mother and did everything He could think of to make her happy. It is the surly boy who says harsh things at home who never finds anything to make him happy.—Christian Evangelist.

NEW YORK, May 19.—(AP) The Holland-American liner Veendam, out-bound for Rotterdam, was in a collision in Gravesend bay this afternoon with the steamship Porto Rico of the New York and Porto Rico Steamship company.

SAN FRANCISCO, May 19.—(AP) Negotiations to provide San Francisco with combined rail and air transportation to New York via Chicago, are under way between Boeing Air Transport, Inc., and the Southern Pacific company.

Life Spans Increases

From time to time questions are raised about this increase in the span of life, and the Biblical ages are frequently brought forward to disprove the point that man's average length of life is greater at the present time. It is certainly questionable whether the term "years" used in Bible had the same significance that we attach to it at present. No doubt there were some individuals, as Moses and Jacob, who lived considerably beyond the average span of life of their times.

The old records found in the Egyptian tombs indicate that the expectancy of life about two thousand years ago was only a little over thirty years. The mortality among children and young adults was decidedly higher than now.

Among the Romans, the expectancy of life was little better.

One of the first tables showing the expectancy of life was prepared by the astronomer Halley, more familiar to us because of the comet bearing his name than as a statistician. Halley showed that the expectancy of life at birth in the city of Breslau in 1691 was approximately thirty-three years.

In the middle of the eighteenth century the expectancy of life at birth in England was thirty-nine years. Following the great sanitary awakening which occurred in practically all civilized countries the span of life has greatly increased, due to the magic wand of preventive medicine.

At the present time the expectancy of life at birth in the United States has risen to fifty-eight years.—Atlantic Monthly.

GRANTS PASS, Ore., May 19.—(AP) Grants Pass yesterday defeated the $400,000 bond issue to provide a municipal water system. The election on this measure was hotly contested before the election. It lost by a two to one vote. The airport measure received better than a two to one vote throughout Josephine county. This provides for construction of a landing field in Grants Pass.

PORTLAND, Ore., May 19.—(AP) Democratic electors: 234 precincts out of state, give: Brackney 2410; Comte 1989; Donaugh 2544; Gleason 2678; Honeyman 1841; Langley 2332; McFadden 1906; Miller 2913.

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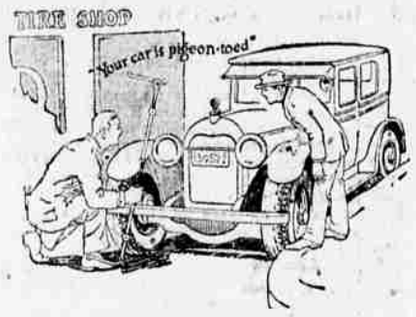

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