

Trailblazers Off to Oregon

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CHAPTER 4

The Crossing

It was hot. The sun blazed down. Ben walked in back of the wagon with his dog. His feet hurt. His new boots were almost worn out. He pushed the cows along with a stick. They were tired and thirsty. There had been no rain in a long time. They *had* to reach the Platte River soon. It was all people talked about. Pa worried about the oxen. What if they couldn't go on? There had been no rest days. Frank kept pushing the wagons hard.

Then Ben heard "Platte's ahead! The Platte!"

People passed the word. There were lots of cheers on the trail. Here was water! To cross the Platte was a big step on the trip to Oregon. They would follow it for almost 300 miles.

All of a sudden a wagon broke out of line! The oxen ran for the river. They were crazed for water. The driver could not hold the team. Then Ben saw it was Tom's pa! His wagon was going too fast. It would tip over. Where was Tom?

"Go help Ma hold our team!" Pa yelled. He raced his horse up the trail.

Ben jumped up on the wagon. Ma held tight to the reins. But the oxen pulled hard. They wanted to run. Ann clung to Ma and cried. Ben put his hands over Ma's and helped her pull. His

hands burned. More teams went wild. Wagons tipped over. The sound of screams and oxen bawling was awful. Did Pa catch Tom's wagon?

Then they saw the river. It was so wide! There were islands all across it. Wagons sat stuck in the water. Loose cows and oxen stood in the mud. They bawled in fear. Ben and Ma were losing their team.

Some men raced up to the front of the team. They grabbed hold and slowed the wagon down. The team stopped. Ben ran for water for the oxen.

There was trouble at the river! Tom was screaming for help. He was out in the river on his horse. The water was deep. Ben knew Tom could not swim. All of a sudden there was Pa,

swimming to Tom! He grabbed Tom off the horse. The horse sank from sight. Pa swam to shore. Tom hung on to his back.

Ben ran to get blankets. He wrapped them around Pa and Tom. People said, “It was quicksand! The horse ran off with Tom and got stuck in it.” Ben felt a chill go down his spine. What if Pa had stepped into quicksand instead of swimming?

They still had the wide Platte to cross. Frank called a meeting. He said the river had deep holes and quicksand. And the current could be strong. He would show them the best place to cross.

The Wood’s wagon had lost a wheel. Ben and Pa helped them fix it. They chained their two

wagons to each other. Pa and Mr. Wood rode beside the wagons while their sons drove.

“Take it slow, now,” Pa told Ben. “Let the oxen feel their way. We don’t want them to step in a hole.”

Ben was scared as they rolled into the river. He had heard of wagons that tipped over. People said the Platte was “a mile wide and an inch deep.” But he knew that was not true. He had seen Tom’s horse go down.

Ma and Ann sat with him in the driver’s seat. Pa made sure the milk cows came on behind. The long line of wagons stretched out across the Platte. Once or twice a wheel would get stuck. Then the wagon would drop out of line. It was a



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Then it got higher.*

slow crossing. Ben kept his eyes on the Wood's wagon in front. The water just hit the middle of the wheels. Then it got higher. Ben felt his heart pound. Why did Frank lead them this way? Would they be swept away? The water rose near the top of the wheels!

“I'm scared, Ma!” cried Ann. She looked down at the muddy brown water.

And then the water went down. The wagon rode high again. A cheer went up! Ben smiled at Ann. “See – we're just fine,” he told her. “We're almost across now.”

Frank called for a short rest and food on the shore ahead. Then they would join the trail again. They had miles to go before night came.