

Extract from "The Time Pioneer"

(On a visit to the vet's, James suddenly becomes unconscious. When he comes to, he finds himself in the Wild West, where he is adopted by a childless couple who take him with them on the Oregon Trail. As he doesn't know how he is going to get back to his own time, he tags along. He gives himself the name Jim Black and even starts to wonder whether he would like to become a fur trapper like the leader of the wagon train, Grizzly Bob).

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In the middle of the night, Jim was woken by a loud rumbling noise. At about the same time, Ann and Jake were also roused from their sleep with a start and they scrambled immediately to get underneath the covered wagon. Within a few seconds, the inside of the corral was full of scared people and Grizzly Bob had to shout to try and calm them all down.

»Stay calm everyone. It's just a thunderstorm. They come and go very quickly but they can be pretty severe. This won't be the last one that hits us during the journey. Make sure that all the important stuff is stowed safely in the wagons and fetch all the ropes you've got. We've got to tie the wagons down to make sure they don't get blown over in the wind.«

While Grizzly Bob was still telling them what to do, the first drops of rain started to fall and the ominous rumbling got closer. »Quick. Get a move on!«, he shouted again and set about helping the settlers as they tried to secure the

wagons. The livestock was spooked by the approaching storm and the people had to make sure they didn't get trampled underfoot by the oxen or horses. The rain got heavier and the night sky was lit up by the glare of the lightning. Before they had got all the wagons tied down, the wind started to howl and blew with a ferocity that took Jim's breath away. A storm and they were out in the open. That was dangerous. But there was nowhere for him to hide. He just hoped they wouldn't get struck by lightning.

Together with Ann, he hid underneath the wagon and looked cautiously out as the animals ran backwards and forwards, bellowing in panic. Most of the noise from the animals was drowned out by the thunder and could be just heard briefly when the thunder and lightning paused for a few seconds, as if drawing breath for the next onslaught. Jim was afraid that time was running out for him. Ann, his new mother hugged him close and prayed loudly. She cried.

Jim felt sorry for her. She had lost her first son and because Jim was so much like him, she and Jake had adopted him as if he were their own. Now Ann was afraid that something was going to happen to him as well. Jim didn't know what he could do to comfort her. Anyway, it was too loud to do much. He just took hold of her hand and squeezed it tightly. This also gave him some comfort and so he just held on while Ann continued to pray and stared out at the dreadful storm.

Jake finished checking the ropes one more time and then he too crouched down underneath the wagon. He sat next to Ann and put his arm round her. All the families sat

underneath their wagons, waiting for the storm to pass. Every time a flash of lightning briefly illuminated them, they could see the look of fear in each others' faces. None of them had ever experienced a thunderstorm like this before and they hoped with all their hearts that they would survive it.

Just as quickly as it had started, the storm stopped again. Two hours later, as the grey of the dawn came up over the horizon, the storm moved on and the rain stopped like someone had turned off a tap. By this time however, the people were all soaked to the skin and there wasn't a dry place to be found inside or outside the corral.

»Let's check the damage!« shouted Grizzly Bob and encouraged the people to come out from underneath the wagons. One wagon had tipped over and the covers of two others had been torn to shreds. Fortunately, they had thought about bringing replacements with them. If you are going on a journey of almost 2,500 miles, you have to expect that some things are going to get broken. And what you don't take with you, you have to do without. So packing repair things and enough food was critical on this journey. Grizzly Bob had impressed this on them all, before they set off.

There was no way they could continue their journey that day. The oxen were still too nervous to be hitched up and the people had to dry themselves out first to make sure they didn't go down with pneumonia. Major repairs had to be carried out to Peggy and Tom Johnson's wagon, the one that had tipped over, as two of the wheels were broken. Fascinated, the many children who were there looked on as the wooden wheels and spokes were replaced with new ones

and Jim thought to himself that changing a tyre on a car was certainly a lot more effort.

»If the wood in the wheels gets too dry and brittle or if it gets too soft, it can break,« explained Grizzly Bob to Jim as he watched the men at work. »It will be hot to start with on the journey. Then we shall have to cross rivers several times and travel over hills and mountains. This makes the wood shrink and then expand again.

No wheel can make it all the way to Oregon. Unfortunately, they didn't all listen to me when I was telling them to bring enough spare parts with them. If they are lucky, they'll be able to get what they need at one of the trading posts. You can buy animal skins, wheat, material and food there. You can trade things with the Indians and there is a blacksmith who can help with any repairs that need to be done.«

»We are going to meet Indians?«, asked Jim uneasily. Grizzly Bob looked down at him with a quizzical look on his face. »You're not scared are you?«

»Well...«, hesitated Jim, trying desperately to think of an excuse. From everything that he had heard about Indians, they were very dangerous indeed and he really didn't want to have anything to do with them.

»Most Indians are just there to do business. They are peaceful. They swap bison skins and meat for tobacco or material - and also for alcohol and glass beads. They'll make moccasins for the people whose shoes have started to fall apart under the strain of the trip. They are friendly and helpful. We'll come across some when we cross the Kansas

River. If you give them some money, they'll help to get the wagons and the livestock across by swimming with them or by using a raft. Anyone who is not prepared to give them a bit of money has to build their own raft. But most of them wouldn't know where to start.« Grizzly Bob grinned.

»Why do we have to cross rivers several times?«, asked Jim. Unfortunately, by asking this, he let slip the fact that he had no idea about the geography of where he was. But even if he had studied America before his journey, who would have been able to tell him whether 150 years ago, all the rivers were in exactly the same place or even whether they had the same name. And Grizzly Bob didn't seem to take the question the wrong way.

»Well we can't just walk along the river until it drains away into the ground, you know. And the river doesn't just flow straight from Independence to Oregon. It divides up. It twists and turns. It joins up with other rivers. At some places, you just can't get across. You either have to go upstream or downstream for a while and then carry on until you get back to the point where you actually wanted to cross in the first place. If you are really unlucky, you have to cross over several times where there is a split in the river, before you're back on the right route.«

Grizzly Bob paused for a moment and looked hard at Jim, to see whether he had understood what he was telling him. Then he carried on. »Anyway, we shall have to cross the Kansas River, the Big Blue River, the Little Blue River, the Platte River and the Sweatwater River for sure. Either we'll get swept away by the raging torrents or we'll get stuck in

the sand of the river bed. Each river is a new challenge and if the banks are steep, it's even worse. It's also a problem if it's rained a lot before we get there. Then the rivers get bigger of course and sometimes, we have to camp up for a while before it is safe enough again for us to cross.«

Jim swallowed hard. So there seemed to be every chance that they were going to drown. Great! »And where are the mountains we've got to get over?«, he asked. »Is it easier to cross mountains than to cross rivers?« There was just a spark of hope in his question. At least you can't drown on a mountain. It would probably be easier.

But Grizzly Bob let out a booming laugh and Jim's shoulders slumped. This was not looking good. »I like you kid«, rumbled Grizzly Bob. »Just take a look around at the wagons.«

»I don't understand. What's that got to do with the mountains?«, asked Jim. »Just take a look at the wagons.« Jim did what he was told, but he didn't notice anything particular. »Can't you see how full these wagons are? Jam-packed full with old porcelain and lots of fine clothes. With chests, furniture and toys. With stoves, cutlery and even organs. And then take a look at the oxen. Those animals will never be able to haul weights like that over the mountains. The journey's long and where there's scarcely any grass in the prairies, the animals' strength will just disappear. If they want to get over the mountains, these folks are going to have to leave some of their bric-a-brac behind.

You'll see for yourself. Before we get to the mountains, there's row upon row of things that have been off-loaded,

standing like soldiers along the side of the road. Valuable things that their owners couldn't bear to part with - that is until they were faced with the possibility of having to pull the heavy wagons up and down the steep mountains on their own, without the oxen. Then everything they didn't need was finally thrown overboard. But even then, it is dangerous travelling on the narrow, steep paths over the South Pass, Windlass Hill and the Blue Mountains. Particularly in winter, when everything is snowed in and the oxen are standing up to their bellies in snow. That's why we've got to get a move on, before we starve to death on the mountains in the winter.«

Now Jim really was starting to panic. Drowning in a river, falling down a mountain or getting stuck in the snow and starving to death. He didn't fancy any of those options. Why hadn't he stayed behind in Independence and looked for a job there? Although the chances of a twelve-year-old getting a good job were not exactly good. But whatever. He could have given it a shot. Perhaps he could still go back?

When Grizzly Bob saw that Jim had gone white with fear, he slapped him on the shoulder. »It'll be OK kid. Something always happens on every trip to Oregon. But it has never been my experience that all the things that could go wrong, actually do. You survived the thunderstorm didn't you? One of the wagons could have been struck by lightning. But it wasn't. Don't let your fear get the better of you.

Look at me! I fought with a grizzly - and I survived. Just imagine what would have happened if I had given in and fallen on my knees in front of the bear, whimpering like a

baby. He'd have killed me without giving it a second thought.
But that didn't happen. I faced up to the danger and I beat it.
And you'll do the same as well. Promise me.«

Translated from the original German by Nicholas Freakes
(nickfreakes@t-online.de) 05/2011