

HONEYMOON ACROSS THE PLAINS

The Ellen Bell Tootle Diary

by

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The name Tootle is well-known in St. Joseph, Missouri, not because Tootles abound there, but because the Tootle family has played such an important role in the development and progress of the city. The original St. Joseph Tootles came to Missouri from Marion, Iowa, in the 1840s. Three brothers, Thomas, Milton, and Joseph, began the Tootle Dry Goods Company in 1849 and soon expanded their business interests to include mining, cattle ranching, and banking not only in Missouri but also in Iowa, Nebraska, and Colorado. In St. Joseph, the Tootle Opera House and the Tootle-Lacy Bank are among the legacies of these industrious, enterprising brothers.

Not so well known another legacy of the Tootle family comes to us not from one of the Tootle men, but from the bride of the oldest brother, Thomas.

Ellen Bell grew up in Hagerstown, Maryland, where her father owned the Hagerstown newspaper. She had lived the cultured, leisured life common to young ladies of eastern ante-bellum society. She was well educated, and loved to travel. When her older sister married a man from St. Joseph and moved to that new settlement on the Missouri River, Ellen, then in her early twenties, decided to visit her sister. She travelled from Maryland to Missouri, and during the course of her visit met Thomas Tootle, a man twenty years older than she, and in April of 1862, Ellen and Thomas were married.

Mr. Tootle would not have qualified as a dewy-eyed romantic. He was a forty-two year old businessman who needed to check on some of his out of state investments. Late spring and early summer are good times for travelling, so on May 27, 1862, the newly-wed Tootles set off on a journey from St. Joseph to Colorado. Accompanied by one servant, Warren, who was probably a Negro house slave, Thomas and Ellen sailed by steamboat up the Missouri River to Plattsmouth, Nebraska, and went from there to Denver by covered wagon. During this journey, the new Mrs. Tootle recorded her impressions of weather, scenery, food, clothing, emigrants, settlers, Indians, and her husband in a diary which is as proud a legacy to her family and city as her husband's and brothers'-in-law business contributions.

In her diary, the attractive but rather formal looking young woman and her bewhiskered husband seen in portraits, come to life as do the people they encountered and the country they travelled through in the late spring and summer of 1862.

The Tootles boarded the steamboat, West Wind, on May 27, 1862, and sailed to Plattsmouth, Nebraska, which Ellen Tootle describes in her diary:

It is situated on the bluffs. Like all new towns the houses are of board with one or two exceptions which are brick. The location of the place and the country around are beautiful. It is one of the principal points from which the emmigration [sic] and freighting for Colorado, California and those countries start from.

On May 31, she and her husband went to Sidney, Iowa, where, she writes,

Mr. Tootle drove his mules for the first time and though they are very fine ones, he had to be whipping and hollering at them all the time like all mules. Sidney is a small town . . . It is situated on high prairie and the houses not so scattered. The houses are nearly all white, gives it a neat appearance. We staid [sic] with Mr. Tootle's uncle. He is living in a large house and large rooms. A luxury [sic] one appreciates in this new country. Everything had such a home like appearance and the cooking so like home and everyone so kind, I would liked to have remained longer.

However, they did not stay longer. They had to return to Plattsmouth, load their wagon, and begin their trek west. Of the wagon, Mrs. Tootle says:

. . . things were just put in every way. The inside of the wagon is filled nearly to the top with boxes, trunks, comfortables, blankets, guns, a mattress, [sic] and all the etc. of camp life.

June 5th was a Thursday, and of that day Mrs. Tootle writes:

Seven weeks from the time we were married. At the very hour, we were seated on the prairie eating breakfast . . . Mr. Tootle says I cannot do anything but talk, so would not trust me to make coffee. Boasted very much of his experience. He decided to make it himself, but came to ask me how much coffee to take, for information, I know, but he insisted, only out of respect . . . He . . . filled the coffee pot with water then set it near, but not on the fire. I noticed it did not boil, but said nothing. When he drank it, he looked rather solemn and only took one or two sips. I thought it was time to have an opinion on it. As Mr. Tootle would not volunteer one, I inquired how the coffee tasted. He acknowledged it was flat and weak, but insisted I did not give him proper directions. He consented to let me try it at

supper time Had ham, dried beef, crackers, pickle and syrup for dinner with brandy today. [sic] The brandy and whiskey we brought for medicinal purposes, but indulged in a little as we had just started on our journey. The first day, the cork came out of the whiskey bottle and spilled more than half, to Mr. Tootle's great disappointment. [sic] Indeed I don't believe he has recovered from it yet.

The next day, June 6, the honeymooners camped, according to Ellen,

at 6½ o'clock. Washed our persons for the first time Felt so comfortable afterwards. We undress at night though it is not customary on such trips. Took sheets with us and spread our bed at night as we do in the mornings at home When we camp, Mr. Tootle and Warren first un-harness the mules and pony then picket them. After that build a fire and put the water on to boil. Then either Mr. Tootle or myself make the coffee and get supper together. While they feed and picket pony and the mules for the night, I prepare the bed and wash the dishes. For breakfast we go through the same routine . . .

The diary entry for June 7 describes the couple's clothes.

Mr. Tootle put on his traveling suit for the first time. It consists of a flannel shirt, one is blue with a blue and white plaid bosom, cuffs, and collar. Pants pepper and salt cloth. Cold days or mornings and evenings he wears a coat.

My traveling suit is a cotton material brown plaid minus hoops, [sic] dark stockings, brown cambric skirt, brown hat trimmed with brown ribbon and blue veil covering head and face leaving a hole through which I could see and breath. [sic] For a change I have a blue calico bonnet with a beaux at least ¼ yd. long.

On June 9, the travellers did not make camp until ten o'clock. Their supper consisted of boiled potatoes and fried flicht which is a side of bacon or ham. Mrs. Tootle writes:

By the way I lost a bet on the last. Mr. Tootle bet me a new dress I would eat fat meat before I was half way to Denver. I entirely forgot it, and ate 3 pieces of fried flicht, when he very triumphantly reminded me of it. As we had not been able to wash for two days, both got on pony, (I rode behind Mr. Tootle) and went to the Platte to bathe. The river was so muddy, we were afraid to go in it for fear of holes or quick sand, so we had to content ourselves with a sponge bath. It was a lovely evening, the scenery so fine, nothing could surpass it. The sky was a bright rose color, the Platte flowing

beneath it reflecting its rosiat tints and stud-
ded with islands of all sizes . . . Behind us
the prairie was stretched out for miles bounded
by the bluffs.

The Tootles and Warren were not the only people travel-
ling that summer. They passed several wagon traius most of
which were pulled by oxen, although they did encounter mule
and horse trains. Not everyone was on the move, of course.
Some people had settled on the prairie, and Ellen Tootle
describes the ranches they saw:

There are ranches every 5, 10, 12, 15, and
sometimes 20 miles. Every ranch is a sort of
house of entertainment, has a bar room and little
store attached to it. There are with but few
exceptions, wells at them and the only places good
water can be obtained, so the trains always camp
near them.

Fellow travellers were not the only people the Tootles
encountered on their journey. On June 12, Ellen and her
husband met their first Indians who obviously didn't impress
Mrs. Tootle:

While we were at breakfast, a filthy, dirty
squaw and a papoose came up. Fortunately, we
were done. The Papoose had a little dirty yel-
low flannel (something between a saque and
shirt) on, nothing else and it hardly came to
its waist. It ran about where it pleased. The
squaw had drawers and skirt with a buffalo robe
wrapped around her. Skirt drawers and robe were
all the color of dirt. We had sardines for
breakfast. Mr. Tootle remarked 'Indians will eat
all the grease they can get.' Gave her the box
with the oil and some pieces of sardines. Then
offered her the fat from the fried flicht. She
held out her hand for it. He motioned her to
hold the box and poured it in. She then began
dipping the crackers we had given her in it and
drinking it with great gusto. It made me sick
. . . . They look picturesque in pictures, but
to see them dispells the romance. The Indians are
all filthy looking creatures . . . They are
uncivilized.

As they continued westward, the travelling became more
difficult, and the land desert-like. Mrs. Tootle writes:

Yesterday evening the cactus commenced
for miles and miles. Almost all the way to
Denver the prairie is covered with the
Prickly-Pear Cactus There a few
other cactuses all grow low. The flowers of
them are pink and very pretty Mr.
Tootle found two beautiful pink cactus. He
planted them at a station so we could get them
when we returned.

They saw antelope, prairie dogs, and dead and dying oxen. Then, on June 19, they

. . . came in sight of Rocky mountains today about 12 o'clock. Mr. Tootle saw them two hours before he pointed them out to me. 115 miles from the mountains and 100 from Denver. They present the appearance of white painted clouds, excepting they are more decided than clouds and their outlines more distinct.

Two days later, the Tootles arrived in Denver which at that time was only five years old. "It is a real luxury [sic] to live in a room and sleep in a bed again."

This luxury, however, was short lived, for six days later, on June 25, they left Denver for the mountains. They had hoped to reach Central City that first day, but their mules were so tired that they had to stop, and spent the first night out of Denver at a log cabin which apparently accommodated travellers. Mrs. Tootle describes this nineteenth century "motel:"

The log cabin we stopped at had two rooms and the garret loft was divided by a partition into two rooms . . . to my joy and surprise we had a room to ourselves. We could only stand up-right in the middle. There is so much competition on this road that they are obliged to have good fare. For supper we had worked biscuit, boiled ham, fried potatoes, a large dish of green peas . . . and eggs. Peaches and elegant rich cream. Tea and milk. For breakfast, we had the same . . . They gave us a feather bed to sleep upon, but it contained so few feathers we could feel every slat in the bed. But everything was so much better than the appearance outside led us to expect that we were delighted.

The Tootles reached Central City the next day, June 26, and stayed at the Metropolitan Hotel which, she says, had "very rude and indifferent accommodations." [sic]

Monday, June 30, found Thomas and Ellen leaving Central City for Pikes Peak via Colorado City which was then the capital of the territory.

Pikes Peak is $1\frac{1}{2}$ or 2 miles from Colorado City and is 12,000 to 12,500 ft. high above the level of the sea. The ascent is both difficult and dangerous and the air so rare and cold that some persons who have ascended have had their health permanently injured. One man died immediately or within a few days after having ascended it. In the valley it is very healthy. A citizen who has resided there 2 or 3 yrs. said she knew of no sickness or not one death from disease during that time.

The good health of the valley residents was attributed to the hot springs there. Mrs. Tootle found the hot springs a "very interesting curiosity."

On the third of July, the Tootles left Colorado City for Denver, but went back the same way they had come rather than by the mountain route. Thomas felt that one of their mules was too tired to travel the mountain road, and they were further discouraged by reports of flies on the mountain trail:

They were so large and had annoyed the mules so very much causing them to bleed a great deal. A Mexican that came down . . . the road we had intended taking, said they were much worse up there and had nearly killed his pony, the blood was dripping from all over it.

That night the newly-weds stopped at the house of an acquaintance of Thomas.

In the morning, his daughter went with us to the top of the highest mountain in that neighborhood. We could look down upon the others and over the prairie as far as the eye could see Over the whole side of the hill, around all the trees for yards were laying these beautiful stones, crystals as clear as glass, pure white, yellow, red, green, brown, black, all colors and all sizes. They looked more like french candies than anything I could compare them to. I gathered first my dress skirt full, then my under skirts, so heavy I was loaded under the weight . . . Mr. Tootle . . . knew we could not carry all the stones on the mountains home, so we selected the most singular looking and threw the others away. It almost made the tears come to have to leave them behind So passed the 4th of July. More real pleasure than any 4th ever brought to me before.

The evening of July 5, Thomas and Ellen returned to Denver where Ellen

Learned a new and appropriate name for Yankeys. A servant of all departments . . . a wild, harum-scarum, kind-hearted girl, they called Texas because she came from there though born in Mississippi, said, 'I would die for a Southerner, but would not give you a cent for a Pinch back Yankey.'

This is the only reference in the diary to the Civil War which had been raging for more than a year in the eastern part of the country.

The little group of travellers left Denver on July 14 and began their homeward trek. By this time, the summer insects were flourishing, and Ellen complained of gnats and mosquitos. On July 24, they camped near a ranch and experienced their first violent rain storm:

Went back to the wagon before 9 o'clock and it was still raining and dark as Egypt. I had just that evening spread clean sheets on the bed. When I stepped over the seat my foot went into a puddle of water. I put the other foot down. It went into another puddle. Every place I put my hand was either wet or in water. The matches were damp, they would not light The fleas were devouring me, so all I could do was to stand or sit in a puddle of water and catch and murder fleas Mr. Tootle . . . lighted the lamp, we found everything wet, excepting his blanket and shawl We turned the wet side of the mattress [sic] down, spread some soiled clothes for a sheet.

As they continued eastward across the prairie, they were plagued with more storms, insects, and heat. On July 28, Mrs. Tootle writes:

It is intensely hot today The mosquitos swarm around us at night and the fleas almost devour me. Last night, Mr. Tootle made a fire in the frying pan and smoked the mosquitos out of the wagon and me too. I did not know which was more disagreeable.

On July 30, the Tootle arrived at Salt Creek which had been the first campsite of their journey. Ellen writes:

Last Sunday, Mr. Tootle resolved not to chew any more. He has been breaking off gradually for the last 3 or 4 months. For a few days he felt nervous and badly, but now feels better.

He may have felt better, but that didn't keep him from indulging in another kind of tobacco:

July 31st. Mr. Tootle smoked one pipe yesterday, another today, the first since we have been married.

The day Thomas smoked his second pipe, he and his bride arrived in Plattsmouth, Nebraska, and stayed there for three days before crossing the Missouri River in a row boat, an adventure which Mrs. Tootle says made her feel a little nervous. They stayed a few more days in Sidney, Iowa, and returned to St. Joseph from their Colorado trip on Monday, August 11, 1862.

The original diary of Ellen Bell Tootle is in the possession of Mrs. Tootle's granddaughter, Miss Ellen Lacy of St. Joseph, Missouri. In 1961, the diary was presented to the St. Joseph Museum for transcription. Ellen Tootle's account of the people she encountered, the country she travelled through, and the experiences she had give us a vivid impression of life in the new territories in the mid 1800s. It also introduces us to a delightful, perceptive young woman whose writing is a legacy to be cherished.