

*Adventures on the American Frontier*

# PIONEER SHOW PEOPLE

Revised Edition



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# The Drake Players Go West

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Long ago, in the days when the whistle of the steamboat was a new sound and the puff and chug of a steam locomotive had not yet been heard in America, two creaky old covered wagons lumbered up a dusty road. They carried a company of actors and actresses to the Kentucky frontier, where they hoped to open the first theaters to bring shows to the pioneers.

“Whoa!” called out the driver of the first wagon as they pulled into a little town. The horses came to a stop in the shade of a tree on the roadside. It was a hot day in July, and they had walked all day on that road in southern New York state, heading westward on the long journey from Albany to the Allegheny River.



“Is this as far as we go today, Mr. Drake?” called the driver of the second wagon. He had pulled his team behind the lead wagon.

Mr. Drake leaned from the driver’s seat to look back. “Yes, Lewis. We’ll post the bills for the show before we put up at the inn. Come on, boys!” he shouted to a group of four young men who were walking up the road. “*Forty Thieves* tonight!”

Mr. Lewis climbed down from the wagon seat and brushed the dust from his hat, his mutton-chop whiskers, the shoulders of his tailcoat, and the knees of his striped trousers. Then he turned back to the wagon. On the seat, a large, plump lady waited quietly.

“Come, my dear,” said Mr. Lewis. “I’ll help you down. You and the young ladies will have time to rest in the shade of the tree.”

The three young ladies of whom he spoke were climbing down from the rear of the lead wagon. They were Martha Drake, her young sister Julia, and another actress named Fanny Denny. They were being helped down by Joe Tracy, who was the only one in the group who was not an actor. Joe kept the wagons in repair, tended the horses, helped put up scenery, shared the driving, and made himself useful in many other ways.

From one of the wagons, Mr. Drake pulled poster boards advertising the play, *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* from the *Arabian Nights*. As the young men reached him, he handed a bugle to one of them. “Here, Noah,” he told the boy. “Give a few toots on the horn so folks will come out to see what the hullabaloo is about.”

To Noah Ludlow, even tooting the horn was exciting, like everything else in show business. The other three young men were sons of “Old Sam” Drake. Young Sam, Aleck, and James had grown up as members of the “Drake Players” and had been acting in plays ever since they were old enough to walk onto a stage. But to Noah, it was all new. He was nineteen years old and had left his home the year before to learn to act in Albany. This was his first time on the road with the Drake Players.

Old Sam hurried ahead to the courthouse that stood in the center of the little business square. He wanted to use the courtroom as a theater that evening, for there was no other room big enough in the town. In larger towns, the local inn sometimes had a ballroom that made a better theater, but there would be no place that large until they finally reached Pittsburgh.



The young men knew what to do. Young Sam and James took a hammer and nails and put up some posters on the trees. Aleck lifted a pair of boards, attached at the top by straps, over his head and settled it onto his shoulders so that one board covered the front of him and the other covered the back. The boards had pictures on them of Ali Baba poking his head out of a great oil jar as the forty thieves, fierce of face but bright in red and yellow clothes, raised daggers over his head.

Old Sam waved from the courthouse door that all was set. Noah tooted loudly to draw a crowd. Aleck marched back and forth.

Old Sam shouted, "Come one, come all to the courthouse tonight, folks! See before your very eyes the wonders of the Arabian Nights of old! See Ali Baba outwit forty thieves! The greatest company of actors ever to come to your city will present the finest show you have ever seen! See the great chests of genuine jewels, the silks and satins of the Orient, all before your very eyes! Tonight, one night only! Don't miss the greatest show of your lifetime, here at seven o'clock tonight! Here in the courthouse, folks!"

The next two hours were busy ones. The men took rolled-up scenery, boxes of items for the play, the curtain, and candle footlights into the courthouse and set everything up. Soon the plain little courtroom was transformed into a bit of far-off Arabia.

Mr. Lewis had found sleeping rooms for the company at the inn. There, Mrs. Lewis and the girls freshened up the costumes as best they could. In those days, it was hard to find brightly-colored cloth that would wash, and the costumes

looked dingy in the daylight. But at night, in the glow of the candle footlights, the dull, tarnished braiding would become shining gold, the glass beads would be bright jewels, and the soiled costumes would become princely garments.

At seven o'clock, Noah peeked out through the closed curtains. The little courthouse was packed. The benches were filled to the last inch, and there was standing room only for the latecomers. He remembered his first night as an actor. It had been in this same play, but he had been given only two words to say. Tonight he played the parts of several of the thieves, popping in and out of sight often, each time with a different-colored cap on his head to make it seem as if there really were forty thieves.

The audience clapped loud and long when the play ended. The little town had been on the edge of the frontier only a few years earlier, for this was the year 1815, and all of the towns west of the Alleghenies were young. To many in the audience, this was the only play they would see all year.

To the colonies along the seacoast, actors came from Europe to bring to the people in America a little amusement besides the games and singing and dancing they had for fun. The cities of the east had a few museums, a small circus now and then, and theaters to go to most of the year. But on the frontier, such things had not yet come.

The next morning, the two wagons were on their way again. "From here on, we'll be in the wilderness almost until we get to Pittsburgh," Old Sam told the group. "There are no more places to perform for a while."

The woods closed in around them, and Noah felt nervous. He had never been much farther west than Philadelphia

before, and he thought that the dark woods along the trail were about as wild as they could be. But soon he learned that there were more people in the woods than he thought. One afternoon, Mrs. Lewis got lost while she walked behind the wagons to get some exercise. The actors had just begun to search for her when two pioneers came and offered to help. Within an hour, there were eight more helping with the search until they found her and brought her safely to the wagons.

At last the travelers reached the wild Allegheny River at the little settlement of Olean. There they planned to trade the wagons and horses for a boat. The fact that none of them had ever been on a flatboat before did not worry them.

“You just let it float down the river,” said Old Sam. “There’s no place to go except between the river banks.”

Noah looked at the boat that was to be their home for the next month or two. There wasn’t much to it. It was about twenty-five feet long and fifteen feet wide, with board sides that rose five or six feet along most of its length. The sides served as the walls of a roofed-over cabin. The roof curved a little so water would run off it.

In the cabin, the actors stowed their stage equipment and costumes and the few other things the company had, but there was room to curtain off only two bedrooms. Mr. and Mrs. Lewis would have one and the young ladies the other. The Drakes, Joe Tracy, and Noah would sleep wherever they could.

“What do they call a boat like this?” Noah asked Old Sam.

“It’s a flatboat,” Old Sam told him, “but the men here tell me that this kind is called an ark.”

Noah laughed. “Noah’s Ark,” he thought.

On the roof of the boat, at the middle of the stern, was a forked piece of wood in which rested the long handle of the steering oar. The oar was just a long pole with a wide board at the end that went into the water. There were a couple of loose poles on the boat, too, and a pair of oars for the little skiff, or rowboat, that was tied to the flatboat.

“Yo, ho, ho! It’s off to sea we go!” sang Young Sam. He and the other young men pushed the ark out into the Allegheny River while Old Sam struggled with the heavy steering oar.

Just then, a young man in the uniform of a soldier of the War of 1812 came running down to the riverbank. “Hey, there!” he yelled. “Could you use a good hand aboard?”

Old Sam was making strange splashings with the steering oar. “Reckon we could,” he said, “if we can stop this dang thing.”

The young men leaned on the poles. They had not gone far enough for the current to take hold of the boat, but even so, they had some trouble getting it close enough to shore for the young man to leap aboard.

“My name is Hull,” he said. “I’m on my way home to Ohio after fighting in the war.”

“Been on a riverboat much?” Old Sam asked him.



“Not on the Allegheny River, but twice up and down the Ohio River, and down the Mississippi River, too,” said Hull. “Before I went into the army, I did some keelboating.”

“Good. We’re actors, not boatmen,” said Old Sam, “as you can see. I’d be obliged to have you take this confounded steering oar.”

Hull took over, and soon the ark was following the channel of the river. The other young men saw Hull take off his jacket and shirt, and they did the same themselves, for the July afternoon sun was hot. Hull was brown to the waist, and his muscles rippled. The other boys looked white and thin beside him.

The sun dropped behind the tree-lined shore, and the river water darkened in shadow. Old Sam said, “Head for

shore, Hull. We'll tie up for the night and do our cooking out in the open this warm evening."

Just ahead, a wooded island divided the river into two streams.

"If you'll take a word of advice, sir," said Hull, "you'll camp on that island instead of on the mainland. That way there's less chance of wild animals creeping up on you."

"Thank you, Hull. We'll do that," said Old Sam.

Soon the boat was tied to a sycamore tree that overhung the bank. After their days of traveling through the woods, the women knew just how to go about preparing a meal in the wilderness. They made stew using some meat they had bought in Olean.

After supper, Martha and Julia Drake and Fanny Denny sang while the men smoked their pipes or just lay back and looked up at the stars. After a half hour, the Lewises said goodnight and went to the boat to sleep.

"Come on, girls," said Martha. "We'd better turn in, too."

Old Sam and Joe Tracy put blankets on the ground.

"I'm not sleepy yet," said Young Sam. "Why don't we take the skiff and go see what's on the mainland? Maybe there's a town just beyond the trees. I thought I saw lights a while ago."

The three Drake boys, Noah, and Hull climbed into the skiff. Noah and James decided that they would rather sit in the boat than go exploring. The others jumped ashore and soon disappeared into the woods. Noah and James stretched

out in the little boat. The frogs croaked, and the katydids argued “Katy did, Katy didn’t.” The sounds made Noah and James sleepy. But they sat up, wide awake, at the sound of crashing tree limbs.

“They’re the noisiest pioneers that ever tracked through a woods!” said Noah.

Young Sam appeared and leaped into the boat. Aleck was right behind him. Hull came last. As he jumped into the skiff, he grabbed the oar and gave the boat a good shove out into the river.

When the skiff was about twenty feet from shore, Young Sam said, “No more exploring in the dark for me! We walked right up to two or three wolves. You should have heard them snarl!”

The wolves were howling noisily at the water’s edge by then. The boys listened until at last the animals moved on.

“Maybe there are wolves on the island, too,” said Aleck.

“Likely there are,” admitted Hull. “But if we keep the fire burning, they’ll stay back.”

So they built up the fire. Soon everyone was asleep except Noah. He found himself thinking about the fire burning low each time he was about to drop off to sleep. By the time he put more wood on it, he was wide awake once more. At last he had an idea of how he could get some sleep.

He poked Aleck. “Aleck, Aleck, wake up!”

“Huh?” said Aleck.

“Didn’t you hear that howl? It was close!” said Noah.