

Adventures on the American Frontier

Following the Frontier West

Revised Edition



Edith McCall

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This book has been substantially edited, revised, and updated to retain the spirit of the original work but with a modern understanding of historical events and a more sensitive awareness of human equity.

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We'll Be There with Bells On!



All day long, the covered wagons slipped and slid down the mountainside. Rumbling and creaking, they bumped over rock ledges and eased around sharp curves on the narrow road. Now the sun dropped behind the next mountain ridge to the west, and the day's travel was nearly over.

The road stretched ahead, clear and open to the inn in the valley where the wagoners would spend the night. The sound of the horses' hooves was like a beating of drums in time to the music of the bells that the horses wore hanging from arches over their shoulders. Six horses pulled each of the ten big wagons. Each driver rode on the back of one

of the two horses hitched closest to the wagon, called the “wheel” team.

The man who held the long reins of the head wagon spoke to his horse. “We’ll ride up to the inn in style, Prince,” he said. “Clear road ahead!” With his left hand he gave a little flick to the reins that reached to the bridles of the first pair of horses in his team. At the same moment, he raised his whip with his right hand and snapped the end of it above the ears of the second pair of horses, the “swing” team.

The gentle jangling of the bells sharpened and then was lost in the hard beat of hooves against the stony road and the rumble of the wagon wheels. Duke, the bulldog that trotted along under the wagon all day tied to the rear axle, yelped his excitement and set his short legs to running.

No one watching the six dapple-gray horses stepping out so briskly would have guessed that they had been pulling a load of almost four tons all day as they traveled the road from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh on the Pennsylvania frontier.

The United States was a brand new country then, in 1785, and Pittsburgh, the little town that was growing around Fort Pitt, seemed far in the West.

Each team of the ten-wagon train stepped out in its best style, following closely the wagon ahead. The innkeeper heard them coming and went to his doorway to see the sight.

“Get the table laid, Betsy!” he called to his wife. “There’ll soon be ten hungry men to feed.”

He went out into the shed in the big inn yard to empty sacks of grain into the grain bins. Those sixty big horses would be hungry, too.

“Whoa!” called the driver of the lead wagon, and “Whoa!” echoed all down the line. The six dapple grays of the lead wagon slowed to a walk and turned into the inn yard. With the ease that came from doing it many times, the driver backed the wagon into the place where it would stand for the night.

Soon the inn yard was full of wagons, horses, men, and dogs. Each wagoner set about the work of caring for his animals.

John, the wagoner who led the train, went to his lead team. The horse on the left was his pride. She set the pace that the others followed and helped John hold his place at the head of the wagon train. John gave her nose a gentle rub as he reached up to take off her arch of bells.

“You’re a good old girl, Queenie,” he said. The five bells he took from Queenie’s back were shiny brass. The arch from which they hung was made of metal, but the wagoner had carefully wound it and all his bell arches with black and red ribbons. Bits of the red ribbon hung from the center, matching the red plume that all of the dapple grays wore proudly on the tops of their bridles.

The bells meant almost as much to John as his horses did. He had won them from another wagoner fairly and squarely.

One day, when John was new as a wagoner and had not yet earned his place at the head of the train, his wagon train had met another one. He and the others in the train were forced to move over to the edge of the road. But it had been raining, and one heavily loaded wagon near the head of the train slid off into the wet clay of the ditch at the road's edge.

The wagoner worked long and hard with his team to pull the wagon back onto the road. All of the other wagoners sat quietly, waiting and watching. No one offered to help, for everyone knew the unwritten rule that no one was to help until the wagoner in trouble gave up.



At last the wagoner unhooked his team and led it from the wagon. Not a word was spoken until the team that had failed walked clear of the wagon. The team's bells tinkled sadly.

"I'll pull it out!" a man called then. "I need that fine set of bells!" The other half of that unwritten rule was that if a

man had to have help, he had to give his bells to the wagoner whose team could pull him out of trouble.

The wagoner who thought he could do it unhitched his team and led it to the wagon that was stuck. He backed the team into place and hooked the harness to the wagon.

As he cracked his whip, the six horses leaned into their work. The wagon wheels made part of a turn. Then one of the horses slipped, and the wheels rolled back. Twice more the wagoner urged his team to pull, but he had to give up. The other wagoners laughed as he led his team away.

John got down from his saddle and walked up to Queenie. Queenie was young then, and John was new in the business of wagoning. He had used all of his money to buy the matched dapple grays, one at a time as he found them. As yet, no bell arches hung over their shoulders.

“Think we can do it, Queenie?” John asked, and Queenie tossed her head as though she could do anything. John called out, “I’ll give it a try!”

Soon he had his team in place. The wagon was tipping badly as its right rear wheel sank deeper into the mud. But John was sure his team could pull it out, for each horse knew how to work well with the others.

“Forward ho!” he cried, and he cracked his whip. Each horse leaned hard, and the wagon wheels began to make that first important turn. It was as though one giant machine worked to pull the wagon from the mud. Little by little,

the wheels turned. One turn, another one, and the wagon moved forward out of the mud and onto level ground.

“Whoa!” cried John, and the men broke into a cheer.

John unhitched his team. Without looking, he knew that the other wagoner was taking off his sets of bells. John whistled softly as he hooked the harness back onto his own wagon. In a moment, the wagoner was beside him.

“They’re yours, John,” he said. John knew that the other man felt bad. His team had worn those bells proudly for many years. They had been won long ago, just as John’s younger, stronger team had won them on this day.

John hung the arches over his team for the first time. The two sets of five higher-toned, smaller bells went over the lead team. The swing team wore two sets of middle-sized bells, which sounded deeper to blend with the smaller bells. There were four of them on each arch. The wheel horse that pulled beside John’s saddle horse wore a set of three large bells that had an even deeper tone. John grinned as he snapped this last arch into place. Then he jumped into the saddle and picked up the reins as the other wagoners gave another cheer.

The lead wagoner started forward again, and John heard the pleasant ringing of his own bells for the first time. His team sensed his pride and stepped out smartly. From that day on, John could call out with the other proud owners of bell teams as they started on a journey, “We’ll be there with bells on!”

John had never lost his set of bells, for his team never failed him, no matter how rough the going.

When the six horses were watered, John took the feed trough from its place at the rear of the wagon, filled it with grain, and placed it on the wagon tongue. He led his horses, now wearing only halters, to the trough and tied three to each side of the wagon tongue—the center beam that ran from the wagon down between the horses.

As the horses ate, John took a pine tar bucket from its hook near the back of the wagon. The cover had a hole in the middle through which the handle of a paddle stuck. A paddleful of the sticky stuff went into the hub of each wheel to grease it. A little more went on the rubbing plate, up where the front axle turned. John checked the three-inch-wide iron tires on the wheels and found a loose nail to drive into place again.



At last the wagon stood ready for the next day's travel. The canvas cover was stretched tight over the six wooden arches that held it in place. Ropes reached down over red sideboards set above a blue wagon body. The wagon box was curved, rising a little at each end to keep the load of goods from sliding too easily to one end or the other when the wagon was on a steep hill. The wagons were made for the mountain-road trade. They were called Conestoga wagons, named for the river that ran through Lancaster County in southeastern Pennsylvania where they were made.

The night's work was nearly finished, but John had one more job to do. He took his ax from the iron hanger on the side of the wagon. He would need a good, sharp ax the next day to cut young trees for braking poles. These would go into the wheels when they started down the last mountainside on the road to Pittsburgh. There was a grindstone in the yard, and John soon made sparks fly as he held the ax to the turning wheel.

Then he was ready to join the other wagoners around the plank table in the large room of the inn. A big meal, rough talk, and good storytelling went on until it was time for each man to go out to his wagon to take the meat scraps and bones to the dogs and to bring in his bedroll. The dogs would keep watch over the horses during the night while the men slept on the inn floor near the big fireplace. Dawn would come soon enough, and the men would be back in the saddle again, ready to urge their teams over the mountains ahead.

At Pittsburgh, flatboats waited to take some of the wagonloads of goods down the Ohio River to the pioneers who were building their settlements in the land beyond the mountains.

“We’ll be there with bells on!” the wagoners called out, and they set out with their white-topped wagons. Westward over the mountains those wagons would go until, many years later, some of them at last would reach the end of the mountains and the Pacific Ocean.



Captain Becknell and the Santa Fe Trail



Westward moved the frontier. Over the eastern mountains and down the Ohio Valley it went, and up and down the Mississippi River. From there it started up the Missouri River, into the great wilderness of the north and west.

Past the place where Kansas City is today, the plains began, and there the government resettled many of the Native Americans who had lived in the East. No pioneer could settle there, nor in all the land from Texas to California, for the whole Southwest belonged to Spain.

By 1816, the town farthest to the west was Franklin, Missouri. Daniel Boone's sons had gone up the Missouri

River for about a hundred miles from the fur-trading towns of St. Louis and St. Charles, Missouri. They had found trails of buffalo and deer that led to a “salt lick” not far from where Franklin was to grow. There, salt water bubbled from the earth as a spring and left salt that the wild animals licked from the rocks.

“We can get enough salt here to supply all the people around St. Charles, and maybe some to sell in St. Louis, too,” Nathan and Daniel Morgan Boone decided. So they widened a trail all the way from St. Charles to the salt springs. It was called “Boone’s Lick Road,” and soon pioneers were following it west to Franklin.

One of the people who came to Franklin to live was Captain William Becknell. He had been an officer in the War of 1812, but after the war, he needed a new way to make a living.

One day, Captain Becknell rode out to the cabin of Ezekiel Williams. Captain Becknell liked to talk with old Zeke, for Zeke had been all over the West as a fur trapper. Zeke’s talk of how the Comanches in the Southwest captured wild horses and mules to sell to white traders gave the captain an idea.

“Zeke, how much did you say a man could buy mules for out in Comanche country?” he asked.

“Two, maybe three dollars’ worth of trading goods,” answered Zeke. “But bring those mules back here, and they’ll bring seventy-five dollars each.”