

# Cowboys on Parade

By Jessica Holden

The sun had just begun to show its rays over the horizon, giving off only enough light to see your feet flatten the grass with each step. This was always the Mississippi rancher's favourite part of the day - when everything was still and nothing had managed to go wrong yet. Already the men were outside preparing for what the day might bring, and the women were awake waiting for the kids to wake up, prepping breakfast and baking bread. The three generation ranch was always busy, with three young kids running around the ranch and two new borns still sleeping in the nursery, there never seemed to be a moment of rest; Grandmother and Grandfather still working hard, with only one of their children's families still remaining at the ranch. Bale and his wife, Georgia, were guilty for all of the young children running around, but old Grandmother and Grandfather were still grateful they had decided to stay and help run the ranch. Being the only son, Bale was going to inherit the ranch, while all of his sisters had left home to marry other ranchmen — starting families of their own.

The rest of the kids would normally wake at once, but young James had always been the first one up, dressed and ready for the day before any of the other small eyes had even opened yet. His Grandfather had always joked that James was the 'truest cowboy he'd ever met' as there was no child as excited as him to learn how to ranch. Even though he wasn't quite old enough yet to work outside with his Pa and Grandfather, he was always awake with them in the dark mornings. James was inseparable to them, pulling his boots on with the same grunt his Grandfather did, combing his hair slick to his head just like his Pa, and as they stepped outside, would copy them both with their first deep breathe of fresh morning air.

"It's how the wild men stay strong" Pa once told him, and James believed it through every bone in his body.

James's passion had made it easy to make the tough decisions when the time had come. In 1843, when James was just 15 years young his Grandfather had made the decision to move the cattle along the Oregon Trail to the West Coast.

"I'm sorry Bale," Grandfather had said, "but it's a great opportunity you see. And James! Oh, James will make the journey almost less than impossible. You've seen him out there, son! He's got to come."

With not nearly enough money saved to get the whole family across the country only Grandfather, Bale, James, and James's younger brother, only 13, attempted the Oregon Trail. Grandmother was to sell the farm land in the Mississippi Basin. Bale's wife, Georgia, was to say her husband had died, to become a widow and remarry before she grew too old. Bale's oldest daughter was sent to marry a nearby ranch boy, who would give her a home, and the youngest two children were to stay with Georgia. The boys' journey began with heavy hearts and teary eyes, but the reminder of what they left behind was their motivation to make it to Oregon.

They rode off as the month of April turned to May, when the grasses had grown for the cows to eat, and to ensure they would make it through the Oregon Mountains before snow. The expedition began with an introductory trek from Mississippi to Missouri, where the Trail began. They managed the four of them, but it was clear when they reached Missouri that driving 2000 cattle across country would require help, even with James bringing up the rear. Lucky for them, the head of the Oregon trial was busy with prospectors looking to make their way to the California gold fields, and many of them were eager to make the journey alongside them for a small pay.

James was in his glory. His smile remained bright even when the journey was rough, but the mile long line of cows would be a dream to his younger self.

Traveling through Nebraska was complicated with three major river crossings to get through. They lost a few head to the rapids, but onward they went. They had heard word of the Indians native to Wyoming, in which some told ravage stories of being attacked by the local inhabitants, however no conflicts arose. They traded a few cattle for supplies and knowledge, but nothing near what the rumours had let them to believe. The 2,000 mile journey did not shorten quickly, as each day was a push to get through, moving at most 15 miles a day. Most days however averaged about 12 miles.

When they reached the desert in Idaho, they lost almost 100 head of cattle. Water was scarce, and the dust slowed travel — making them spend more time than needed crossing through the state. They traveled with cloth tied around their mouths and noses to keep the dust out of their lungs. The lost time cost them almost half a month, as it was harder to get the cows in motion. With their pace slowing, worry began to set in. Not out of fear for the desert, but the snow they would most certainly meet in the mountains.

James was astonished by the Blue Mountains, being the prairie boy he was. Upon arrival they found their worry was justified. The crew had to trek through snow, which the cows didn't have much experience in - with coming from Mississippi – which again slowed the operation. However it wasn't until the summit of the Blue Mountains that James's little brother became ill. It had been rough for all of them, but the youngest of the crew felt it the hardest. The poor boy fell too ill with hypothermia to continue the journey. He was already changing to the blue shade of death, Bale noticing it only when it was too late. Spending the night atop the mountain would have put everyone at risk, so they packed up their supplies. James said his goodbyes to both his brother and his father, who stayed behind to keep the scared boy company, understanding there was no way to protest.

After five and a half months of travel, they made it to the end of the trail, where they said goodbye to the prospectors who had helped them push the cattle. James paid them what little money they had left for their services. Now in Oregon, he and his grandfather managed to trade a couple hundred heads of cattle for a small ranch, where they settled down for the time to come. Despite what they both had to leave behind in Mississippi, which felt like a different life to them, they managed to find a way to keep up with life.

They did well for themselves, until soon more cattle ranchers (who had the same idea as them) began to arrive on the West Coast. Over 15 years later, they found themselves surrounded by competition, where too many cattle ranchers had set up new homes in Oregon. James, being 31 now, had a wife and two children of his own, and it was getting hard to make enough money to support the family. There was rumour spreading that British Columbia was the new California, with bigger nuggets than you could imagine. With more prospectors moving camp north, a new market for cattle was established. James had been thinking about it for a while, but it wasn't until one night after dinner when Grandfather pulled him aside to tell him he needed to go. Of course, Grandfather was much too old now to make another journey, but he assured James that he would be fine. James had to once again face a difficult journey.

Learning from the life he had left back in Mississippi, this time he packed up his wife and children. He had already prepared everything they would need to get to Kamloops, a new settlement in British Columbia where they would all now call home. The morning before he and his family headed out, he stood on the rickety porch of their farmhouse and watched the sun rise. He watched as the sun ray's just peaked over the horizon. He could just make out the grass flatten beneath his heavy step. He inhaled, bringing as much of the cool morning air into his lungs as he could.

“Dad?” A small delicate voice chirped, “How come you always take a deep breathe in the morning?” Without skipping a beat, James knelt down and replied, “Well, my sweet Georgia, it's how the wild men stay strong.”