



The Prairie Schooner

William Francis Hooker

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William Francis Hooker (1856 – 1938) was a bullwhacker in the Wyoming Territory starting in 1874. He knew both Buffalo Bill and General Custer. He was to later become a newspaper editor of the "Erie Railroad Magazine." In 1918 Hooker published his book "The Prairie Schooner", in which he relates his exciting life experiences as a bullwhacker. Hooker writes: The railroad had no short line feeders, and there was, in the period of which I write, no need for them sufficient to warrant their construction. There were military posts scattered along the North Platte, and other rivers to the north, and the government had begun, as part of its effort to reconcile the Red Man to the march of civilization started by the Iron Horse, to establish agencies for the distribution of food in payment to the tribes for lands upon which they claimed sovereignty. These oases in the then great desert had to be reached with thousands of tons of flour, bacon, sugar, etc., consequently large private concerns were formed and contracts taken for the hauling by ox-teams of the provisions sent to the soldiers as well as the Indians. The ox was the most available and suitable power for this traffic for the reason that he required the transportation of no subsistence in the way of food, and was thoroughly acclimated. Usually he was a Texan--a long horn--or a Mexican short horn with short stocky legs, although the Texan was most generally used, and was fleet-footed and built almost on the plan of a shad. Oxen were used in teams of five, six and seven yokes and hauled large canvas-covered wagons built for the purpose in Missouri, Wisconsin, Illinois and Indiana. In the larger transportation outfits each team hauled two wagons, a lead and a trailer, and frequently were loaded with from 6,500 to 8,000 pounds of freight. These teams were driven by men who were as tough and sturdy as the oxen. It may seem strange, but it is nevertheless true, that Indians frequently attacked the very wagon trains that were hauling food to them, in Wyoming and Western Nebraska. Go back with me to the days of the prairie schooner before the Wild West was really discovered, and let me try to entertain you with just a glimpse of things that are in such wonderful contrast to those of today. The freight trains with ox-team power have vanished, never to return, and with them most of the men who handled them. The "color" of what follows is real, gathered when the Wild West was wild; and I make no excuse for its lack of what an Enos R. Mills or a Walter Pritchard Eaton would put in it, for they are naturalists while I am merely a survivor of a period in the development and up building of a great section of the golden west.

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