David Hodgson, 1863

A COVERED WAGON PIONEER, AND A FOUNDATION BUILDER.

In the spring of 1863, along the uneven prairie roads that stretched from Arena, Wisconsin, to the Platte River Valley of Weld county, rolled a typical wagon train—four horse-drawn and three ox-drawn covered wagons, followed by a drove of sixty cattle.

As was the custom of that early day several families were traveling together, the better to protect themselves from possible Indian raids or other happenings on the way. On the driver's seat of one of the wagons sat David Hodgson and his wife, Christine, while tumbling about on the feather bed behind them and peering out through the round canvas opening at the back of the wagon upon a strange new moving world were three small children, daughter Eva, baby son Frank and two year old George, destined to be a future Weld county commissioner.

The pioneers had allowed time for anticipated Indian attacks and other misfortunes, but none occurring they made the journey in less than the time allotted, arriving at the valley of the Platte on July 12, 1863. Here they stopped and took possession, and near here a dozen years later, the town of Platteville was built. Every family built a cabin home and at once a pioneer settlement sprang into existence that preceded colonization by almost a decade. The home of David and Christine Hodgson was in a picturesque spot, which, with a more commodious house replacing the cabin, still is known as the Hodgson Ranch.

Among these early settlers of the Platte valley were men and women who figured prominently as foundation builders for the coming commonwealth, and whose names are still well remembered. There were the Smiths, two families of them, James and John. Henry Smith, whose reminiscenses form a "Vivid Picture" among the Pioneer Stories of this book was one of the children of James. There were the two McKernan brothers who later

built that part of the Denver Pacific Raiload connecting Evans with Denver; and Roger O'Connor who drove the water wagon that supplied the builders. There was James Lee and his family, and Jay and Martha Thomas, all of whom became substantial farmers on the Platte. And there was Marshall Cook, an educated Cherokee Indian, and his white wife, Susan, a practicing physician. They raised a remarkable family. Marshall Cook was an expert on mining, and the first Prosecuting Attorney elected in Arapahoe county; this was March 28, 1859, before the organization of Jefferson Territory and while Arapahoe was still a part of Kansas Territory. This election was reported in Vol. 1, No. 1 of the Rocky Mountain News, April 23, 1859, the first newspaper published in this part of the West, the property of William N. Byers. And the F. W. Hammett family have been prominently connected with Weld county all along the line.

THE FIRST DISCOURAGING YEAR:

The Dryest Summer, The Coldest Winter, The Worst Flood. And The Biggest Grasshoppers.

It was almost as though some unseen Power, call it "Fate", had looked upon these new settlers and concluded as yet they had had no test of endurance, but must have. Their long journey had been without mishap and their arrival auspicious; but would they hold up under misfortune? were they of a strong fiber, the stuff that pioneers are made of? Could they stand the tests of drouth and storm, and flood, and grasshoppers? Fate must be sure of her builders, and so each test was applied, all within the first year of their arrival.

THE DRYEST SUMMER

David Hodgson, who fifty years later wrote a reminiscent story of that day, stated that the summer of 1863 witnessed a drouth the like of which had never before been seen. The river itself actually disappeared in places, and the only way the settlers could get water for themselves or their animals was by digging holes in the sands of the river bed and waiting for the

water to slowly trickle in. Water was treasured as life itself, not a cupfull being wasted; it would have been a crime to drink from a cup and throw the rest away. Those, even among the children, who have lived to this summer of 1938 look upon the streams of water from irrigating hose and ditches wasting down the streets and roads—and remember.

Along with the drouth—and because of it—came the threat of starvation. Nothing was produced in the valley and prices soared. Flour reached $23 a sack and salt for the bread, 60 cents a pound; and grain to feed horses, 18 cents a pound. Resources ran low and then it was that thirsty men drove thirsty horses over onto the banks of Lost Creek and put up hay. That was a life-saver; the hay when hauled to market brought all the way from $40 to $110 a ton. And thus the first test and threat of Fate was met by the settlers. Then came the second.

THE COLDEST WINTER.

The winter closed in early and with its deep snows almost isolated the little settlement from the outside world. The snows were deep and constantly increasing, one never going off before another had covered it. David Hodgson told of a custom that prevailed among travelers caught far out upon the plains during that bitter time, a custom that was cruel, but less so than its alternative. He said that trains made up as theirs had been, of both horse and ox drawn wagons were halted by their drivers when the storms grew fiercest, the loads transferred from the oxen to the horses, the oxen then unyoked and turned loose to take their chances while the swifter footed horses with the added loads passed on. He said that by the slow pace of the oxen all must have perished, but by their sacrifice, men and horses could be saved. He said, too, that when the rigors of winter had passed many oxen were found, "leaning up against trees, frozen."

THE WORST FLOOD.

But because the settlers of the Platte valley had literally "made hay while the sun shone" through the drouth stricken summer, neither animals nor human beings suffered for food

through the ice locked winter, and so passed through Fate's second test unharmed. Then came the third, the great historic flood of 1864. The spring came early and the soft, warm days and copious rains made the hearts of the settlers to grow warm with thanksgiving, for here was assurance that the drouth of the previous summer was not to be repeated. But it did not stop with that. This blessed promise soon grew into a threat of dangers more appalling, if possible, than any that had gone before. The rains kept falling and the deep snows melting until it was nothing short of a flood that roared down the Platte from Denver to far beyond the little settlement; and on and on it swept, carrying houses, animals and everything before it that could not be hurried out of its pathway. The settlers climbed to the high grounds with their children and what stock they could save and watched their cabins float by. And thus the third test of endurance was met by the settlers. From that time on David Hodgson kept a boat at the river crossing until it was finally replaced by a strong bridge built by Contractor McElroy for the county in 1874.

THE BIGGEST GRASSHOPPERS

David Hodgson outstripped all other story tellers of that early day in his description of the grasshopper plague that fell upon the valley in the summer of 1864. He declared that in the *cloud* that descended many were found *as big as mice*. And he did not qualify that assertion by the statement that it was the infants of the species he had in mind, but left it to stand as the full grown rodent.

It is a good story, and quite correct when properly understood. And now comes George, son of David, with the explanation.

There has always been a type of grasshopper much larger than the ordinary type, that hops but does not fly; that requires much less food and subsists almost entirely on grass, which fact entitles him to the distinction of being the boni-fide, original *grass hopper*. Being without the power of flight he is not much of a traveler, seldom moving more than forty or fifty feet from his starting place during the whole summer of his existence. In

point of appetite he does not compare with his voracious little brother, but nibbles the grass and sings away his short life in contentment. He is unobtrusive and quiet, but George, the son, says he has always been in the valley. In the summer of 1937, as if to prove the father's statement, the son gathered a handful of specimens fully measuring up to the description of the father and put them on display in a down town window where they attracted much attention.

So the explanation is that the giant type was in their native valley when the hungry hoard arrived in '64 but had not been noticed until after the "cloud" had passed by and then, being found on the scene of the crime were unjustly accused of being the criminals. It was a clear case of mistaken identity.

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When the settlers had made the grade on all four of these tests Fate seemed satisfied; and, after a few minor tests, put on a smile that in three quarters of a century has not worn off. These last tests were especially for the women and consisted of Indian visitations at times when the men were out in their fields and the women alone. But the situations, calling for nothing more serious than good common sense and presence of mind, were successfully met.

In 1863-4 a band of Indians were encamped on the river near the mouth of Big Dry Creek, southwest of Fort Lupton. They were peaceable and friendly but always hungry. They developed a great fondness for the white squaw's biscuits and the white man's meat. But that was about the time when the white men were having a pretty hard scrabble to keep their flour barrels filled and the rafters of their cabins properly decorated with pork hams and bacon. The women found that it took a lot of biscuits to fill up even one full grown Indian, and they generally came in groups.

It was a serious problem with the women how far this dividing up process should go, and two of them at least decided to put a stop to it. Mrs. F. W. Hammett adopted a method that was both heroic and effective but, in the judgment of her husband, might have precipitated a crisis had it been successful. As

usual she gave the Indian the biscuits, but when he wanted the ham that hung from the ceiling she told him he could not have it; then as he reached for it she reached for her husband's gun, leveled it on the Indian and pulled the trigger. Fortunately the gun only snapped, but the astonished Indian left hurriedly without the meat. When told of the incident, Mr. Hammet said they could not be thankful enough that the gun did not go off, for had an Indian actually been shot in the cabin of a settler the whole settlement might have been annihilated.

Christine Hodgson was the other one who met the situation. The two cases were exactly parallel up to the point where the remedy was adopted. Instead of a gun Christine used a poker. She had slipped the iron poker into the stove and let it heat on the red coals while she served the biscuits; when the Indian wanted meat she told him he could have the antelope quarter hanging beside the ham, but he said he did not want that, for that was Indian meat, and he wanted white man's meat. Then as he reached for it the red hot poker made a swift journey across the room toward the upraised arm and the Indian beat a hasty retreat, leaving the ham behind. Then the group outside who had been watching the play, instead of entering enmasse with war whoops, tommahawks and scalping knives according to generally accepted ideas of Indian ways, clapped their hands in hearty white man fashion and shouted: "Heap Brave White Squaw."

One day David himself was at home when the Indians called. They were unusually friendly that day, and after they had eaten their full share of biscuits and white man's meat they bantered David for a "wrastle." David admitted afterwards that he was actually afraid to accept the challenge, but equally afraid to not do so, but, he said, when a big Arapahoe caught him up and began to playfully toss him about, fear lent courage to his heart and strength to his muscles and he gave the Indian the best there was in him. The tussle must have been highly entertaining to the audience for when the two struck the floor and the white man struggled to the top, the Indians jumped and

yelled in good Indian manner, shouting their appreciation of a good fight with—"Heap big strong white man."

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Throughout the development of the valley David Hodgson was active in both its business and political development. In 1865 he brought the first mowing machine into the valley. It was a Buckeye Junior and cost $350. In '68 he opened a coal bank near where Platteville now stands and shipped the first coal out of the settlement. He voted in Precinct No. 6 which was first on St. Vrain Creek but later moved to David's own house. He helped to elect John McKissick sheriff in '64, Van B. Kelsey in '66 and Hugh Munson in '70. The first political convention of Weld county was held under a big cottonwood tree on his place. He hoped his sons would follow in his footsteps. George did. He served as Mayor of Platteville in 1909-10; county commissioner from 1912 to '17, during which time the new court house was built, and was deputy under Sheriff Corder in 1925. But long before any of these dates he was in public service. In 1880-1 he had a part in the government survey under Major Hill and Lieutenant Egbert Johnson that surveyed twenty-three townships in the region of Las Animus county, now Baca county; six in North Park now Jackson, and two in Middle park now Grand county. And all this traceable to a journey he made with the Wisconsin covered wagon train in 1863.