



William Bull and Sarah Wells

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In this installment we follow young Sarah's journey into the wilderness of the Wawayanda, the only female in a small company of carpenters and Indian guides. Along the twenty mile route they visit an Indian village, keep a watchful eye for wild beasts and poisonous snakes, make a temporary camp for the night and build a raft to ferry themselves and their supplies across a river before they reach their destination.

The fascinating details of this journey were published in 1846-7 by Samuel Eager in his Outline History of Orange County. He met Sarah Wells, his great grandmother, only once, in 1796 when, he was six years old. The 102 year old matriarch made a deep impression on him, but the details of her life he learned later. Eager refers to some notes by an old and intelligent individual. This is most likely Johannes Miller, a powerful personality in the Montgomery area. Sarah was his grandmother and probably came to live with him while he was a boy. He would have had ample opportunity to hear firsthand her thrilling tales of the old days. What follows is as near as we will ever get to hearing the story from Sarah herself.

Into the Wilderness

As they passed on through the wilderness, the cows leading the way with open bells made a kind of jingling harmony (as Sarah said) for their train to march to. Yet it was a slow, dull march. While the Indians in front could talk to each other in their own language, and the men in the rear could talk as they pleased, Sarah in the middle had only herself to talk to. Nevertheless, the men were friendly and occasionally took turns to walk along side of her horse and endeavour to keep up some cheerful chat. But for all this, in her waking dreams, a melancholy hovered over her senses, almost impossible for her to conceal. To quell these melancholy dreams, she would often stop her horse, cling to his mane, and descend from her pillow saddle to the ground to relieve the Indian leading her horse. He would then pass around their whole train with a critical eye to see if all was right and

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nothing lost, and when he returned to take the horse again, would often present her a nosegay of blossoms snatched from the bushes as he passed along, such as the huckleberry, billberry, and honeysuckle, and showed her that they were harmless by eating some of the blossoms. When she wished to

ride again, the men would lift her into her pillow saddle as if she were a child, for she was small in size, light, and naturally agile. All appeared pleasant, friendly, and kindly attached to her, and yet (as she said herself) had she dared to express her inner feelings, she would have preferred weeping to smiling. At intervals, where good water and grass was

plentiful for the cows and horses, they would stop and unload their horses, and hold them by the halters to graze. Then the train would start again, marching on and on through the day.

In the late afternoon, they passed the Indian village where all was quiet, and the old Indian who had been left at home slipped out with his hatchet and joined his son, the young Indian with the cows. He led the way to the west bank of the Otter Creek, nearly opposite to where Christopher Denn had fixed upon the spot for his residence. Here the sun set and night overtook them. While they unloaded the horses, and Sarah milked the cows, the old Indian struck fire with his hatchet and soon made a comfortable blaze under the boughs of a long spreading beech tree to keep away the night dews. The men piled up their cargo and, finding all safe, they loosened the horses' bells and turned them out to graze with the cows, which made an additional jingling harmony along the silent stream. The workmen then cut forked crotches, drove them in the ground, and laid poles and brush across on which they spread their bedding, for fear of the rattlesnakes which they had seen during the day. When everything was settled, they all gathered around the light of the fire to take their evening meal. Bread, milk, biscuit, cheese, ham and bacon was in readiness for everyone as they chose. Afterwards they lay down on their newly constructed bedstead to rest after the day's fatiguing journey of nearly twenty miles. The old Indian and his son took their blankets and lay by the fire. The other two went home to the village to let their women and children know what was done. They were back by daylight, however, with their hatchets and kindled up the fire, which aroused the whole of the little train from their slumbering.

Then the workmen with their axes and the Indians with their hatchets cut logs of light-wood (as Sarah called them), perhaps dry white wood trees, and made a temporary raft, on which they slid over the stream with their tools and landed near the spring which Christopher Denn had designated as the spot for his residence. The five of them went to work felling timber near the selected spot, leaving the old Indian with his son to assist

Sarah in ferrying over the baggage which she did (as she said) with some propriety. For being born, as she supposed, near or on the Jersey shore, but losing her parents, she became an early orphan, and was reared and brought up, until she came to live with Madam Denn, on Staten Island, a distance of eight or ten miles from New York, where she was occasionally sent to assist in market boats, and learned the use of the oar, the paddle, and the settingpole. This little job of ferrying over the provisions and household goods was the most cheering amusement she met on her voyage and journey, being somewhat like the element of her former employment.

But when all was ferried over and lodged by a large log near the spring, where a fire had been kindled, and the old Indian and his son had gone back to get the horses and cows and ford them over near a ripple in the stream eight or ten chains further up, she sat musing on the log, and cast a mental eye over her fate for at least the next few weeks, or months, or perhaps forever. Her spirits sank again, until the horses and cows with their bells came jingling up to her, which aroused her from her melancholy dream. She slid from the log, took her pail and went to milking.

Meanwhile some of the Indians kindled up the fire, and the carpenters flattened the top of the log with their axes to serve as a table. On this they spread out their remaining provisions of bread, cheese, bacon, and ham for examination. While doing this, there was found in one wallet several rolls of candles and soap, well secured with paper and rolled in cloth, with a few small tin cups, two iron candlesticks and snuffers, and two chain hook trammels. Also in another wallet, from which biscuit had been used on board the boat, there were found a few potatoes which the boatmen had put up for them, to roast at night, and help out their evening meal.

All was satisfactorily arranged on the log table by the time Sarah had finished milking, and she brought the milk over, strained it in another pail, and set it on the log for use. The men observed her serious movements and were fearful she was overtired in ferrying over so much baggage. They asked her to sit down and take some breakfast with them as she must feel fatigued and faint. She shook her head, but said nothing. Nevertheless, on seeing the new tin cups, she took one of them, cleansed it with some warm water she had previously set on the fire in a kettle, then dipping it into the pail of milk, took a few sups with a biscuit and a small bite of cheese, and walked off to where the men had been at work.

They had dug holes in the ground with the spade at the distance of about fifteen by eighteen feet apart, with crotches cut and set in the holes for posts, about six or seven feet high, all leaning inward, with poles around in the crotches and pinned together at each corner with wooden pins. A gutter was dug around the posts, serving to keep out the wet, and to set the lower end of slabs or palisades in. They had begun to set some up, jointing them as close as possible with the ax. There were two crotches outside of all, rising still higher to hold a ridge-pole for the roof.

Having thus taken a glance at the business of the day, Sarah returned to the log where the men were about finishing breakfast, late in the morning. And as they had much to accomplish in order to get all their provisions and household goods under cover by night, they left her to clear up. While she was sorting things on the log, the old Indian with his hatchet cut crotches and drove them in the ground, laid a pole across on them over the

fire, and placed on it the small chain hook trammels. Then he hung the pot and kettle filled with water, kindled up the fire, and went to work with the other men. As the water boiled in the kettle, she took the wooden bowls and trenchers and scalded them, and set them on the log to dry. Then, seating herself on the log as before, she continued her lonely musings.

How long she sat, she did not know, until the old man came and told her the workmen might wish to have something to eat before night, and he would assist her in preparing it. They had bread yet and good bacon; if she was willing they could get a piece and prepare it

for boiling. And there were nettles near the spring that grew in abundance along the Otter Creek, and when cooked with salt meat, they made excellent food. While Sarah was fixing the bacon, the old man gathered two pails full of greens, washed them, and then got a small potato for everyone in the company and scraped them for boiling with the herbs. Soon all was done, though somewhat late, and the steaming bowl of greens and potatoes, with the bread and meat was set out on the log

table. As the workmen left their work and came to dinner, Sarah walked off as before, but to her astonishment, the hut was nearly finished, except along the ridge where the bark was too short. But it appeared small and dirty and the same ominous thoughts she had mused over all day came flooding back as she turned from the door of the hut with disgust, thinking to herself, "What a hole it is to huddle in during the night or in bad weather!"

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Returning, she met the old man with a fire-brand, then saw that every Indian was bringing fire, as if they were going to burn up the hut. But it was merely to build a large fire in the central hearth to warm and dry the green timber walls. While this was going on, the Indians busied themselves peeling more bark and after the fire abated, soon finished the roof, with a hole in the center to let out the smoke and serve also as a skylight window.

The carpenters, meanwhile, bored holes through the palisades in every corner of the wigwam into which they could insert poles on the inside of the hut, the free ends of which were to rest on crotches driven in the ground, to serve as frames for furniture. Two slabs 12 or 15 inches broad and five feet long were squared off and prepared for a kitchen table. They even made a long bench for Sarah out of a slab five feet long, as a seat for her. All of this was prepared on the outside while the large fire was blazing in the wigwam. When the fire died down, they brought in the seat-bench first and placed it at the remote end of the hut from the door. Then the table planks were placed in one corner near Sarah's seat, with the poles and crotches to bear them up; and finally the three corners were fixed with poles and light brush for their bedding, as on the night before.

When this was done, they sent off the young Indian for the horses and cows, as they were grazing to the southward almost out of hearing. The other men went to Sarah at her log table by the spring and told her they were ready to move in, and she must preside in their new house. Picking up the coffee pot, filled with small items as yet unpacked, she led the procession to the hut, with the men

following with the bedding and other household goods. The provision wallets were placed on the table, while Sarah's bed was laid on the smallest bedstead in the corner adjoining her seat bench, and the larger beds were laid on the bedsteads next to the door for the men. A blanket was folded on the long bench, which was still green and damp, and a pillow laid on it for Sarah. They wished her to sit down while they explained the arrangements and asked if she saw anything wrong. She shook her head but said nothing,

so they went out to complete their work. The old Indian brought in his lug-pole with the trammels and crotches, and fixed them over the glowing coals in the center of the room. The pot and kettle were filled with pure water from the spring and hung to boil, as the fire was kindled up. Sarah looked gloomily into the flames and thought to herself, "No, there was nothing wrong but her situation in life - a mere solitary hermit!" Again, dire forebodings came hovering over her senses as the sun began to sink below the horizon. But she was aroused

from her reveries as the cows and horses came jingling up to the door, as they did in the morning, and she rose from her seat, took a pail, and went to milking.

The men were now at leisure, while the old Indian and his son were fixing a kennel for the dogs on the outside of the wigwam near the door. They were all elated with their day's work, and observed that they ought to have something rare as a festival to handsel their new wigwam. Since their bread was nearly gone, and they had flour, they concluded they should have some new bread cake mixed with milk and baked in the pan for the first time, if Sarah was willing and would make some

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coffee to go with it for supper. This they made known to Sarah when she brought in her milk to strain. She nodded a silent assent and took the larger wooden bowl from the knapsack, scalded it in the hot water from over the fire, while they opened the flour bag. Soon the bread was baking in the pan and the coffee grains were roasting over the fire, filling the evening air with a fragrant aroma.

Suddenly she thought she heard a voice. Her heart jumped, but she kept to her work thinking it must be her own thoughts calling, 'Sarah, Sarah.' But the third time, hearing her name more distinctly, she ran to the door and there on horseback riding through the lengthening shadows, were Christopher Denn and his wife. Overwhelmed with joy and relief at this welcome sight, she uttered a cry and fainted at their feet.

Sarah soon recovered her senses and, as the preparations for the evening festivities went forward with a renewed interest, Denn related the events since their separation. He admitted that, as the expedition was being gathered, he had thought no more about Sarah than about the cattle and household goods. But after the boat had left the ferry stairs and he and his wife had returned to their silent home, they suddenly realized in what a perilous position they had placed their young charge and resolved to join her on the patent as soon as possible, regardless of their previous plans. Approaching their patentee friends again on the following day and making known their intention, they were soon furnished with two saddle-horses with provisions for the journey. By evening they were ready and crossed over to the Jersey shore for an early start in the morning. The first day's ride through the Highlands had brought them to the falls of the Ramapo where they put up at a hut for the night. Early the next morning, they started

again, winding through the mountain valleys until they came into Wawayanda near what is now called Sugar Loaf Mountain, where there was an Indian village. Unable to learn anything of the expedition, they rode on to Rumbout's wigwam, but again there was no word. They concluded to ride on to the Indian village nearby, from which the Indian guides had been obtained, and there put up for the night if nothing could be ascertained. But as the sun was not yet set, they rode a little out of their way to see the spot that Denn had chosen and, fording the Otter Creek at the ripple in the stream, they were intercepted by their young Indian friends who came racing to meet them, and were led to the scene of the new wigwam where they found all their fears relieved and their hopes accomplished.

When Denn had concluded this narration, the festive supper was ready and Madam Denn insisted that Sarah should preside. This proposal was quite unexpected by Sarah, but she shyly complied and took her seat on the bench, while the Denns seated themselves on either side of her and distributed the steaming fare of fresh hot bread, savory bacon and greens, with cold ham and cheese washed down by sweet milk and strong coffee. At the conclusion of this hearty meal, Christopher Denn arose and thanked Sarah for what she had done for him and complimented all on their expedition and success in rearing the wigwam. He then presented four blankets, one to each of the Indians for their services to him and their kindness to Sarah, and invited them to spend the night. Then, with happy thoughts and plans for the morrow, the company retired to their beds for their first night of civilized rest in Goshen.

In our next installment we learn about Sarah's pioneer life with the Denne family and her marriage to a young stone mason, William Bull, in the Denne's log cabin .

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Source: Emma McWhorter, Dolly Booth, Philip Seaman, [History and Genealogy of the William Bull and Sarah Wells Family](#) (Printed by The Service Press, Middletown, NY, T. Emmett Henderson, Publisher), pp 44-52.