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Preface

My introduction to Reuben Smith occurred in 1978 when I was working as a graduate assistant in Wichita State University’s library. In the midst of organizing the manuscript collection of Kansas poet May Williams Ward, I found an excerpt from her grandfather’s diary describing his voyage from England to America in 1854. He wrote about life on board the ship in captivating detail, everything from work songs sung by the sailors to the somber ceremony of a burial at sea. It was a fascinating story, beautifully written, and once I started reading it, I couldn’t stop.

A short time later, a cousin of Ward told me that her Grandfather Smith had written extensive diaries during his adult life, even though most family members had seen only a few excerpts such as the one belonging to Ward. The original diaries were believed to be in the possession of a descendant living in Texas. Fortunately, Scott Smith recognized the historical significance of his great-grandfather’s diaries and donated them to the Kansas Historical Society in 2009. A year later, while visiting the state archives, I asked to see the collection of diaries, and soon discovered that the stories contained in them affected me the same way they had thirty years earlier—I couldn’t stop reading.

Spanning fifty years, the diaries showcase Reuben Smith’s skill as a storyteller. He paints vivid pictures of life along the frontier of Kansas Territory, and he also illustrates the evolution of a volunteer soldier from the beginning of the Civil War to its end, from an inexperienced private to a seasoned officer who is willing to risk court-martial and death to stand up for his principles. After the war, he provides an insider’s view of early-day Kansas politics and the growing pains endured by a young state in the process of establishing its own policies and institutions. During Smith’s later years, newspapermen Arthur Capper and William Allen White wanted to publish his diaries, but he refused, giving the reason that their contents were “too malicious and too true.”

Not all of Smith’s diary entries are included in the book, just those that personalize or enhance noteworthy historical times, people, and
places. But whenever significant passages have been omitted, they are summarized as part of the explanatory editorial material provided in those chapters. Smith leaves us wishing for more details during certain years when he offered just one or two entries, or none at all. Although today’s readers regret this, it is understandable that he would have had little leisure to record daily or even monthly happenings at certain times, such as when he was a young husband and father trying to establish a farm on the prairie or while he was splitting his time between Topeka and home as a newly elected representative in the Kansas Legislature.

Smith rarely mentioned family members in his diaries, concentrating instead on recording the military and social history unfolding around him. But he was the patriarch of a very large family—sixteen children—with his youngest child arriving thirty-three years after his oldest! And by all indications, he was a devoted husband and father, albeit a busy one. One of his favorite activities was cooking flapjacks for his family on an open fire, army style. Reportedly, he could flip one ten feet in the air and catch it neatly in the pan. He also maintained an extensive library of books that he readily loaned not only to relatives but to anyone in town. Smith’s eldest grandchild recalled that he defended her right to read whatever she desired, regardless of what her grandmother considered appropriate for a young girl’s eyes.

Background is provided at the beginning of chapters and at various points in the book to aid the reader’s understanding of current events at the times Smith recorded his experiences. However, these contributions to the book are meant to furnish facts and settings only, not to debate viewpoints or to project any theories. Smith’s words stand as his own personal observations. And while some small details could be incorrect, I found his accounts to be very accurate historically.

Dates in the diaries appear sporadically, as Smith tended to write continuous narratives, resulting in entries that covered weeks and months but were entered under the date marking the beginning of the sequence. Although this could appear confusing to some, I believe it serves to transform Smith’s experiences into smooth-flowing stories. And even when dates are missing, I have taken great care to present those entries in chronological order.

Where dates do appear as headings for diary entries, the specific format used is of my own choosing in order to lend uniformity to the
appearance of the text. I have added some locations beneath the dates as well, especially during the Civil War years, to aid the reader’s ability to track Smith’s movements. On a couple of occasions, the diaries contained two separate entries for one day, and in those instances, I combined the two.

For the sake of clarity and consistency, misspellings and punctuation have been edited. Most of the existing diary pages were typed later in Smith’s life, evidently using the first typewriter model sold by Remington, which produced only capital letters. It is presumed that Smith was the typist because his granddaughter recalled seeing him working on his diaries during the summers in an army tent set up outside in his yard. Even though typing errors were numerous, it is evident that Smith reviewed each page for content because he frequently added handwritten notes and corrections. And in those instances where I felt that my editing might interfere with Smith’s intended wordage or distinct manner of speaking, I left the text as it originally appeared. For example, Smith tended to use the word “give” in place of “gave.”

The following pages feature the life experiences of an extraordinary man, offering eyewitness accounts of history as it occurred. Smith lived during pivotal times in the early development of the state of Kansas and recognized the value of documenting them. Through his diaries, early Kansas history comes alive.

*Lana Wirt Myers*
INTRODUCTION

On the Quiet Waters of the Marais des Cygnes

AUGUST 1897

A few nights ago, I was alone upon the river. I lay in my little boat moored under the shade of a large tree. As I watched the twinkling of the stars and heard the croak of the frog and the song of the whip-poorwill, I felt as lonely as though I were a thousand miles from a human habitation. Without knowing it, I began to reflect upon the past and to think about the future. My whole life came up in review before me. I wondered what I had done to leave the world better than I found it. I looked back to my boyhood days when I ran away from home to become a common sailor before the mast. . . . Then I would think of the old sea songs we would sing while hoisting more sail to speed us along to the western world. . . . But I saw nothing in this boyish freak to be proud of; it was undertaken solely to gratify a spirit of adventure, and the world was no better because I was once a common sailor.

Then I saw myself with ox gad in hand following a plow and breaking up the virgin soil of Kansas, living upon the coarsest of food and arrayed in garments not much more costly than those worn by Adam. But I saw nothing to be proud of in this matter; I was only doing my duty to my family.

Then I saw myself allured by political ambition from the corn-field and the plow to the caucus and the convention, and then to the halls of legislation, and whilst I saw nothing in my political life to be ashamed of, yet I saw nothing that I had done as a legislator that would leave the world better than I found it.

Then as I lighted a cigar, and lying upon my back in my little boat, memory took me back to the time when I was a state officer and in fifteen years disbursed more than a million of dollars of the people’s
money truly and faithfully. But I could not give myself much credit for that; I was only doing that which I had taken an oath to do.

It looked to me, as I lay upon the quiet waters of the Marais des Cygnes River, that my life had not been a great success.

Then I thought of my life as a soldier in the late War of the Rebellion. Here I found something to be proud of. I saw myself a young man attempting to make a home for my wife and two little ones. The hardships of a life on the frontier of civilization had about passed when the War of the Rebellion came on. Barely a citizen of the United States, yet I thought it my duty to tender my services and my life in the effort to maintain our republican form of government. Leaving wife and children and the comforts of home, I spent four of the best years of my life in one capacity or another in the service of the government, in protecting it from those who would destroy it. The hardships of camp life and of the march, and the dangers of the battlefield were passed through without a murmur, and I returned home a poorer man than when I first enlisted, besides finding my home and improvements destroyed.

As I lay upon the quiet waters of the Marais des Cygnes River and this event of my soldier life passed before me in review, I looked upon it as the most unselfish and the proudest period of my life. I had not lived solely for myself but for others. I had risked my life that future generations might live under a government without a serf, a servant, or a slave. I am not, comrades, endowed with a large share of this world’s goods, and the greatest and richest heritage that I can leave to my children is that their father was a soldier of the War of the Rebellion and that he offered his life that his country might live.

—Reuben Smith, age 65
Captain Reuben Smith, March 5, 1863. Courtesy of Paola Free Library, Paola, Kansas.
“Reuben! Come down!” Hannah shouted to the young man who was standing above her, balanced on a ladder, his arm stretched high to paint the weathered trim around the upper windows of his family’s house.

Startled by the interruption, Reuben Smith steadied himself before peering down over his shoulder to see his cousin’s wife and son Charley standing beneath him at the foot of the ladder. Dropping the brush in the bucket of paint, he climbed down the rungs, not yet seeing the anxious expression on Hannah’s face.

“I thought you’d be on the ship by now,” Reuben said with a wink at little Charley as he wiped his paint-spattered hands on a rag. Two days earlier, he had bid farewell to Hannah and her husband at the train station, watching them depart from their homeland of Stockport, England, to begin a long journey to the United States. Lured by the possibility of land ownership and economic opportunities, Sam Smith and his brother-in-law Robert Williamson were taking their wives and young sons to what they hoped would be a more promising future in America.

“Will you take my place on the ship?”

“What?” Reuben asked, his smile fading.

“I thought I could manage.” Hannah hesitated, tears filling her eyes. “But I don’t feel well enough to endure the voyage.” She paused again before continuing. “Sam says you can pay him directly for your passage and then we won’t lose the money already paid for mine. Charley and I can come later, when I feel stronger.”

Reuben’s mind began to race. He had planned all along to join the two young families once they were settled in America. In fact, he had already saved enough money to fund his trip.

“Let me talk to my people,” he told her as he took down the lad-
der, feeling a rush of excitement at the prospect of sailing sooner rather than later. At the age of twenty-two, Reuben yearned for new adventures and experiences. He believed he could better himself in America, a place he thought to be the freest and best country on earth.

But saying goodbye to extended family and friends on such short notice proved more difficult than Reuben expected. He had lived with his grandparents in Great Moor, Stockport, since he was a young boy, moving there with his father and siblings after his mother died. Uncles, aunts, and cousins lived nearby as well. Now intent upon reaching the ship before it sailed, Reuben only had time for rushed goodbyes. And the next morning, he left on an early train that took him to the docks of Liverpool, where he joined his cousin Sam and the young Williamson family aboard the Rappahannock. It was a sailing ship designed for efficiency rather than speed, so the Stockport travelers faced a long, arduous journey across the ocean before reaching New York six weeks later.

SEPTEMBER 11, 1854
Liverpool, England

We left our dock, being towed out into the river a few miles when the tug left us and we cast anchor for the night. Before daylight, I was awakened by the noise and the tramping of feet and the shouting of the sailors on deck over my head. Hurrying on deck, I found the sailors at work, some at the capstan hauling in the anchor and others aloft unfurling the sails.

“Here, my hearty,” cried a young man whom I afterwards found was the second mate, “lend a hand at the capstan and make yourself lively and useful.” The old ship Rappahannock was moving and passing the New Brighton Lighthouse near where we had anchored, and we were soon in the Irish Channel. The voyage was badly begun as we were just two weeks before we lost sight of the coast of Ireland and were fairly at sea.

I had been on deck most of the time assisting the sailors in their work and sometimes ventured aloft. I had watched my fellow passengers of the second cabin one by one as that great dread of lands-
men, seasickness, overtook them. I watched their misery and their silent sufferings as they unwillingly gave up their food to the sea.

But my time came, and as I leaned over the bulwarks of the ship, I felt the strangest sensation in my inwards of my life. But after a few days of suffering, I regained my sea legs and was again at work with the seamen. We have encountered head winds all the voyage so far, and today, for the first time, we have a wind from the north and we have up every sail. The ship careers over on one side and we are going at the speed of twelve miles an hour. The ship is built for the carrying trade. She loads with cotton at New Orleans and then with freight and passengers to New York after she has discharged her cargo at Liverpool. Reaching New York, she loads with anything in the shape of freight that she can get to New Orleans. She is therefore a slow vessel.

We meet a number of vessels and several pass us that are built for the passenger trade. These are clipper-built, long and narrow, and some of them make the trip between Liverpool and New York in sixteen days. We met one of them today—the John Bright—that our captain says will make the trip in that time. Today we are becalmed; there is not a waft of wind. But the vessel rocks like a cradle as we lie helpless almost in mid-ocean. Now we see the smoke of a steamer, and soon we see the smokestack. Now she is in sight, and in an hour or so, she passes us and the captain speaks [to] her with his long trumpet, or speaking tube. The deck is thronged with passengers, and as we are passed, they wave handkerchiefs and cheer. Captain Cushing informs us that she has been a week at sea and that she will reach New York in six more days. There are four steamers only that cross the Atlantic.

As she passes from our sight, we all wish that we had a little steam, as we lie helpless upon the sea like a child. Two children in the steerage died last night, and they were dropped into the sea and sank out of sight. We pass our time on deck reading and singing and playing cards and other games, but the time passes slowly along.

We furnish most of our food but we draw a certain amount from the ship’s stores, consisting of crackers made from a very poor quality of flour, and they are as hard as a brickbat. Then we get rice, bacon, tea, and potatoes, and a certain amount of fresh water per day.
The steerage passengers live upon this, and I do not see how they do it. They do their own cooking. The second-cabin passengers have hired their cooking done by the ship’s cook, and as we have plenty of preserved fruits and jams that we have brought with us, we swap with the captain’s cook for the best and choicest food he has. The captain is partial to black currant preserves, of which we brought plenty from home.

Our stores are piled up in front of our berths, and a number of boxes have been broken open in the night and the contents stolen. We have hired one of the steerage passengers as watchman, but the second night, myself and the second mate found him stretched upon the boxes fast asleep. After daubing soot upon his face, the mate gave him a rope’s end and sent him down in the steerage flying.

OCTOBER 11, 1854
Middle of the Atlantic Ocean

Mrs. Allen, the wife of Fred Allen, who occupies the next berth to ours, died about daylight this morning. The cause of her death was a premature birth of her child caused by fright during the late storm.

At nine o’clock this morning, she was buried.

I cannot imagine a more oppressively solemn ceremony than a burial at sea. It surpasses the ceremony on land in point of solemnity as much as the awful grandeur of mid-ocean surpasses the mild, soft beauty of a tranquil lake. The great desolate stretch of water, with its billows and its howling gales, seems to invest the presence of death with a more realizing terror than is felt on land. A general feeling of oppression was felt all over the ship. Seamen and passengers, alike, had a solemn look upon their faces. My thoughts ran back to the churchyard grave where my mother and my little sister lie buried. I see the open grave, and around it, the tombstones that are erected to those who have gone before them. I see the trees that dot the cemetery waving in the wind, and I hear the birds singing in them. I see the mail coach with its four horses speeding along the London road, carts laden with coal, the sound of the men on foot are passing by, and around the grave, all is hurry and life and bustle.

Here in mid-ocean, everything is still as death. The corpse is
brought from the 2nd cabin sewed up in a piece of sailcloth and strapped to a bare board. The face is up. At its feet is attached a heavy weight, and four seamen lift the board upon the bulwarks of the ship and move or shove it out seaward until it balances. Then the first mate tips the board and the corpse goes into the sea feet first and is lost to sight in a moment, to become feed for and to be gnawed at by the greedy monsters of the sea. This burial at sea will never be effaced from my memory.

*Insatiably curious by nature, Smith was determined to experience all he possibly could while aboard the Rappahannock. He jumped at every opportunity to participate in the tasks of running the ship and to gain an insider’s view of a sailor’s life in 1854.*

I sometimes go down below decks and assist the sailors in “pumping the ship.” I like to hear their wild, and to me, strange, songs. As we pump, we all sing:

I wish I was in New York City, yo ho ye rolling rivers,  
Where the yellow girls are so pretty, on the wild Missouri.

Another song is:

O, Sally Brown is a bright mulatto,  
Blow, boys, blow,  
Oh, she drinks rum and chews tobacco,  
Blow, my bully boys, blow.

I also assist the sailors at the capstan and the windlass and in hauling at the ropes to change the sails. The following is the song mostly used:

Haul the bowline, Kitty is my darling,  
Haul the bowline, the bowline haul.  
Haul the bowline,  
The clipper ships a-rollin’,  
Haul the bowline,  
The bowline haul.
Another foolish song is as follows, and all the sailors sing it:

I wish I was old Stormy’s son,
I’d buy me a bark of a thousand ton,
I’d fill her up with New England rum,
And all my old shipmates, they’d have some,
Now, if ever again I get ashore,
I’ll wed the gal that I adore,
And if ever childer we should have,
I’ll bring him up as a sailor lad.

We have had a number of heavy storms, but today has been the worst one that we have encountered. Early in the morning, the hatchways were closed and fastened so that passengers could not go on deck, myself being the only one allowed above and that being on account of my assisting the seamen. One of the seamen, a Mexican, was washed overboard and drowned. For a few days it was pleasant, and the sun shone brightly and warm. At sunset each night, we would all sit on deck and watch it set. I never saw a more beautiful sight. It is something that is not seen in England. I never saw the sky so clear and bright, nor never saw the sun so high at meridian, it being nearly over our heads.

We are now off the banks of Newfoundland and it is again foggy. We have buried at sea two more children and a seaman.

We are now nearing New York. We see three pilot boats all making for us, as the captain has run out a signal that we have no pilot on board. They have a lively race for us, and the nearest of them is soon alongside of us and climbs up the ship’s side by means of a rope ladder, and his boat, with two other pilots on board, puts out seaward.

Early next morning [October 23, 1854] the captain motions me to go aloft, and climbing the ladder about twenty feet, he points out New York to me.

In the afternoon we reach the quarantine, and the passengers pass
before the medical officers one by one. Our detention was short, and a steam tug took us in tow until we reached our dock. Here the custom officers went through our luggage, and we were allowed to set foot once more upon dry land.