

[Mr. Botsford on Travel--Kansas]

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Francis Donovan, Thomaston, Conn.

December 27, 1938 MR. BOTSFORD ON TRAVEL - KANSAS

Mr. Botsford shows me a number of Christmas cards he has received since I saw him last, one from a town in California. “That one is from my cousin's boy. My cousin down in Kansas,” he says.

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"I made a trip down there more than fifty years ago. Left here on a Wednesday, got down there the following Monday mornin'. Think how quick you could make that trip now --It's about 1600 miles, if you was a mind to. You could take the train to New York and hop out to the airport and be there in no time.

"But in those days, 'twas quite a trip. I went out in June and came home the followin' September. I told 'em I was goin', at the shop, and they said 'twould be all right, my job would be there any time I come back. But when I come back it was hard times and they wouldn't hire me again. So I went down to Waterbury and got a job in the clock shop down there. Worked there until January, and Seth Thomas began to get busy and they called me back.

"My cousin lived in a little town of eight hundred people out in the western part of the state. It was called Lakeport. Just a minute, I'll show you a picture of it."

Mr. Botsford goes into the parlor, returns with a framed photograph which he has removed from its hook on the wall. It shows Lakeport in its entirety, not a difficult accomplishment inasmuch as the town consists of two small rows of one story 2 buildings with false fronts facing each other across a wide and muddy thoroughfare.

"See that mud?" asks Mr. Botsford. "That's the stickiest kind of mud in the world. I've seen that mud stuck on wagon wheels so thick you couldn't see the spokes. They call it gumbo. You walk out in that road and every time you lift up your feet, it feels as though you was anchored.

"I had good luck on the train goin' out. Never had no misfortune until I hit a town called Salina, in Kansas, where I had to change. I got there at one o'clock in the afternoon on Sunday, dog tired. And they told me I'd have to wait until 12.30 o'clock that night for the next train to Lakeport. So I didn't get there until Monday mornin' and my cousin was waitin' for me at the depot.

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“But I forgot to tell you about Kansas City. I never see nothin' like that railroad station in my life. Boy, it was a sight in them days. It was the gateway to the west, and there was more life and action there than there is in a dozen Grand Centrals. Trains was leavin' for everywhere, and the station was crowded with immigrants and their baggage, leavin' for new homes and new lives. There was somethin' about it that was mighty thrillin'. It was a sight that won't be seen again in this country, and I never forgot it. Just hearin' the train caller hollerin' 'All points West!' was a thrill for a greenhorn traveler like me.

“Kansas is a flat, rollin' country. You can see for miles 3 and miles. I wasn't there but a little while when I went to help a feller shingle a roof. It was about eight o'clock in the mornin', and I was sittin' there on the roof just lookin' out at those miles and miles of prairies, and way off in the distance I see somethin' about the size of a cigar standin' up on the horizon. It didn't seem to get no bigger and after I watched it a while I says to the feller, 'Look at that thing out there, don't it look funny.' He looked where I was pointin' and he says 'Know what that is? That's the freight train comin' in.' Well, we worked all mornin' and we went in and was eatin' dinner when we heard that train pull into the depot.

“It's a hundred and fifty miles from Lakeport to the western foot hills. That railroad I come in on, only went 17 miles past Lakeport, but they was extendin' it then, out to Pueblo, Colorado.

“I stayed out in Kansas three months, and I had a fine time. People out there are fine, hospitable people. My cousins friends treated me just as though they'd known me all my life. There was a little bit of a crick flowed through there, wasn't much wider than this room, and so muddy you couldn't see into it at all. That crick was full of cotton mouth moccasins, big thick fellers, longer'n your arm. I crawled out on a small tree hangin' over the crick one day and plunked one right through the head with a revolver bullet.

“Poisonous? They say they ain't, but I think they air. They're an awful ugly lookin' snake.

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“People out there is mostly farmers, of course. Remember I'm 4 speakin' about fifty years ago. I don't know nothin' about how it is now. They raised wheat. Used to go 'round and help each other harvest. And harvest times was times of great jollification. After they got through workin' they'd get out their guitars and accordeens and sing and dance for a while at night.

“Tell you a funny thing. Few years ago I picked up Ripley's cartoon in the paper, and there was a picture of the oldest jockey in the world. A feller named J. Burlingame, of Lakeport, Kansas. He was eighty-three years old then, and still ridin' horses. Well sir, that feller used to have a poolroom in Lakeport where I've shot pool many a time. I sat down and wrote him a letter. Told him I saw him in 'Believe It or Not' and I reminded him that I used to play pool in his poolroom. I told him I hadn't heard from my cousin in quite a while and asked him to go round and see what was the matter. When he got that letter he was so tickled he went right around and showed it to my cousin. So my cousin wrote to me right away.

“I stayed with my cousin there a while and then I went down to a little town in the southeastern part of the state, where I had another cousin. That was a minin' town. They mined zinc and lead there. Out behind the buildin's on Main street, the ground was all full of old holes. I went down in them mines, and see the men workin'. As fast as they dug the mine, other miners would timber. You know what I mean? They'd reinforce it with planks so's it wouldn't cave in. It was terrible damp and cold down there.

“My cousin kept a store. One day I see an Arkansas traveler.

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Ever hear of them? They used to have their little farms down in Arkansas, and they'd raise stuff and make stuff like brooms, this feller had brooms, and then kill off their stock and pile everything they could sell into a wagon and start out to peddle.

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“This feller had a big long wagon with six wheels on it and a covered top, just like a prairie schooner. Had his wife and kids in it, and all this stuff he was peddlin’.

“My cousin bought some brooms from him, and some bacon. They have them little old razor back hogs, they’re kind of skinny and mean lookin’, but believe me, that was the sweetest bacon I ever tasted. Not much fat in it. You know what makes it so sweet? Them hogs have a great weakness for nuts. They’re always chewin’ on wild pecans and beechnuts, and the woods down that way are full of them.

“Well sir, I stayed there until September, and then I wanted to come home. I thought I’d stop off in St. Louis and see the exposition. Well I run into the damndest trunk jam in St. Louis they ever was, I guess. They had the exposition there, and they was expectin’ a visit from President Cleveland, and they also had a convention of the Grand Army. And believe me boy, in those days the Grand Army was somethin’. They had tents there from all over the United States. And people come in there from all over hell to see the exposition and to see the president.

“I got permission to go look for my trunk, and I tried to find it, but it didn’t do no good. It had my initials on it half a foot high, but still I couldn’t find it. They was piled on top of each other from here to Heaven. They didn’t know how to handle it and they didn’t try. I didn’t get my trunk until 11 days after I got home.

“That was the longest trip I ever took. I’ve been to New York quite a few times, and been up to Boston to see the sights. Want to see how they used to dress for a trip to New York?”

Mr. Botsford goes into his bedroom, brings out a “plug hat,” in excellent condition, well brushed and glossy. Inside is the label, “Welton, hatmaker to the Queen.”

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"All the sports in town wore these," says Mr. Botsford. "Wore 'em when they went on trips and wore 'em to church of a Sunday. Had to wear a Prince Albert or a cutaway coat with 'em. I think I got one up in the attic yet.

"And here's what I used to brush the hat with, "He produces a case which apparently once contained jewelry, and which, like the hat is smooth from constant brushing, "Fine to brush with," says Mr. Botsford.

"Well, you don't care anything about that.

"Say, you know what I heard on the radio last night? Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. And 'twas just as natural as if it was the movie.

"That was one movie I enjoyed. I'd go to see it again if it come back here. You goin' now? Well, come up again, come up again."

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