

Masthead Logo

The Palimpsest

Volume 18 | Number 9

Article 5

9-1-1937

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Recommended Citation

Witter, D R. "Two Lost Boys." *The Palimpsest* 18 (1937), 312-316.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol18/iss9/5>

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Two Lost Boys

The wagon conveying my father and family from Indiana across the prairies of Illinois came to a final halt in the summer of 1849 at Colesburg in Delaware County. Father entered 360 acres of government land in Elk Township, built a log house near a fine spring, and made other pioneer improvements. In June, 1850, after a brief sickness, he died, leaving my mother with a family of six children in the wilds of a new country. By 1853, when my eldest brother was ten years of age, we began in earnest to develop our farm. We hired a man to break some of the virgin soil and, by exchanging work with neighbors, who were few and far between, we placed a few more acres in cultivation.

We owned 160 acres of fine timber, had a good team of horses, and as soon as possible, we began hauling logs to the sawmill on Elk Creek to furnish us lumber and slabs to build a new house. This was rather slow work for young boys, but "Keep a going" was the forceful slogan and in two or three years we had about accomplished the task. The new house was going up at last. This was late in the fall of 1857. The time came when

we needed a load of lath. For this material we had to go some fifteen miles north to Clayton County, into what was called the "Turkey Timbers", because they did not then saw lath at our mill.

And so one day brother Noah and I hitched up our ever faithful team, Charley and Fan, and set out. We passed through the woods, over the hills, down the stumpy, rocky road, and into the deep valley of the lower Elk Creek. We were delayed in loading our lath, which had just come from the saws and was not yet tied up in bundles. Having decided not to wait, we took the loose sticks and bound them on the best we could. As soon as our horses were fed and we had warmed some coffee by our little camp fire and eaten our "home made" lunch, we hitched up and started home by what we thought was a shorter route.

We were not averse to traveling after night, especially when our pocketbook was empty and we had no place to lay our tousled heads. The moon was shining through the broken clouds that swept across the hilltops as we set out over the "unknown trail". We had fairly entered the wilderness of timber when the thunder began to rumble and echo along the hills. Soon the rain began to fall. The moon had disappeared when we began our climb to reach the plateau road.

Our first trial was to keep that load of lath, piled high between stakes, from slipping back and off the wagon. The darkness had become inky black, but an occasional flash of lightning and our perforated tin lantern and candle illuminated our surroundings so that we could adjust our load. Just as we were making a steep ascent on the hill, a tug on old Charley's harness broke. Hurriedly we blocked the hind wheel of the wagon and mended the harness with a halter strap.

Presently we reached level ground. There we let the horses rest for a few minutes. We had not proceeded far until we came to a fork in the road. Which way should we turn? We decided to follow the road that looked plainest and best. If our horses had been over the route, even once, we could have relied on them to follow the right road. After going what seemed to us a "long ways", the road again "branched off" and again we took the best-looking route. It soon dwindled into a dim track. We were sure then that we were on a "loggers trail". There was nothing to do but go back or cut across and try to find the main road. The timber here had been cut out so that the ground was more open. We decided to cut across.

The rain had ceased and the clouds were breaking up, so it was lighter. Probably our near presence aroused a gray or timber wolf. He began to

howl. It was a doleful sound and all we needed then was a screech owl in a hollow tree to make a fitting climax for our alarming situation. Well, we worked our way among the stumps and trees, adjusting our load of lath as occasion required, until about midnight. By that time we accepted the opinion of all present that we were the "lost babes in the woods", so we made camp and resolved not to "go home until morning", if then. With matches from our metal, waterproof box and some splinters and chips, we soon had a huge bonfire. We fed our tired horses the remainder of the ear corn left in the bag, warmed up some coffee in the old smoked coffee can, stood by the fire, and watched the steam arise from our drying clothes. About that time the moon came out again.

Feeling encouraged and rested, we decided to reconnoiter. With the hatchet to blaze a tree or top a bush here and there to guide our return, we set out. Less than half a mile from the wagon we found a road. Judging by the position of the moon it ran south toward home. We were quite sure this road would lead us out of the woods, and so, retracing our steps, we hitched up and started again. The road grew plainer and better as we proceeded. The "first sweet dawn of day" was heralded by an old rooster somewhere ahead of us. We emerged from the wooded region, and

lo! the lost was found! We recognized the pioneer farm house and knew we were only about five miles from home. We were so tickled that we felt like jumping up and crowing with the old rooster or rolling in the sand of the road, as boys of our age might do.

In due time we reached home where our mother, who had been waiting and watching most of the night, had our breakfast ready. As we ate heartily, we related our adventure in the "Turkey Timbers".

D. R. WITTER