

Royal Daniel Ross

Royal Daniel Ross was born in Brandon, Vermont, August 4, 1830. He was the second child, there being a daughter younger than he and one son older. His parents were Joseph Gerry and Lavina Daniels Ross. His father was a practicing physician for fifty-two years.

In early life Mr. Ross was small and weak owing to continued sickness, and this, coupled with the fact that his eyes were not strong, made him backward in his studies. A severe attack of the measles, occurring when he was 16, caused such permanent improvement in his eyesight that he was enabled to take up his academic work at Middlebury, whither his parents had moved in 1839. He graduated from Middlebury college in 1852, and three years later he took his master's degree from the same institution.

In 1852 he and his brother went to Kentucky to teach. There was not a continuous railroad between Buffalo and Cleveland at that time, and Mr. Ross left Buffalo on a lake steamer in the evening, arriving at Cleveland the following forenoon. On the boat he noticed a very distinguished looking couple, and from the passengers he learned that the gentleman was a Captain Grant, a military officer, but not then connected with the U. S. army, and engaged in the tannery business somewhere out west. From Cleveland to Cincinnati Mr. Ross made the trip by rail, and to Maysville, Ky., by river steamboat.

Eighteen fifty-two was the cholera year, and hundreds of people died in the neighborhood where the Ross brothers stayed. Both of them contracted the disease, but as it was but a light form, they soon recovered. During the summer of 1853, Mr. Ross was invited to attend an auction sale on a farm nearby, but on learning that some slaves were to be sold, he declined to witness what to him was a shameful sight. A little later, when a beautiful quadroon girl, employed as a cook by a neighbor, escaped to Canada in company with some other fugitive slaves, he was greatly pleased, though he was prudent enough to keep his own counsel. This first experience with the actual working of slavery filled him with a strong desire to see it abolished, and he hoped that he might live to see this accomplished.

In 1855 he married, and soon after this he decided to go west. His brother, who had married a Kentucky lady, joined him. Mr. Ross had decided to go to Iowa, but he was persuaded to first visit with the relatives of his brother's wife in northwestern Missouri... Both brothers were so much impressed by the fertility of the soil and the mildness of the climate here that they bought a farm and decided to stay. When the Civil war broke out they found themselves on opposite sides of the question in dispute. This region of Missouri was at first strongly secessionist, which made it difficult for Mr. Ross with his well known union sympathies, to remain here and keep out of trouble. Repeatedly both brothers hid themselves and their horses in the woods, the one to avoid conscription in the southern army, the other to escape hanging or shooting, which quite often was the fate of the union man. It naturally fell to the lot of Mr. Ross to most frequently hide himself and the farm horses from the Jayhawkers and other night raiders who infested this border region. Mr. Ross, when he slept at the house, kept ready at hand a heavy corn knife, his only weapon, as he had fully determined to sell his life dearly if attacked.

Royal Daniel Ross

In the fall of 1862 the southern army was driven from this part of Missouri, and the older brother felt compelled to go to Council Bluffs, Iowa, after selling the farm. The following spring both families moved to this city. In 1863 Council Bluffs was one of the great centers of western emigration, as was also Leavenworth, Kansas, and Nebraska City, Nebraska. These cities were the points where parties going west made final arrangements for the dangerous and toilsome trip over the mountains. Mr. Ross was taken with the "Oregon fever" and, finding that his wife was willing to go, they joined a party under the leadership of Mr. Holmes, of Cincinnati. They left Council Bluffs on June 15, 1863, passing through the small town of Omaha and camping the first night a few miles beyond that place. Mr. Holmes was accompanied by his wife and five children, these, with Mr. and Mrs. Ross and one child, Mr. Hines and Mr. Miller, made up the party. In about a week they overtook another party led by Capt. Tuttle, and the parties combined forces thereafter. In another week they had overtaken and joined another wagon train belonging to Edward Creighton, a wealthy man living in Omaha. There were some forty wagons in this train, each heavily loaded with merchandise for Salt Lake City. Later on Holmes and Tuttle, with whom Mr. Ross traveled, became dissatisfied at the slow pace, and pushed on ahead of the Creighton train in hope of overtaking the Fisk expedition, which, under government escort, was on its way for Oregon by the northern route.

Soon after this they joined a Mormon train of five wagons, and from this time they made better time, going with their oxen about 100 miles a week, and arrived at Bannock City September 12, 1863.

The first gold discovery in that region was on a little stream called Grasshopper creek. The camp was given the name of Bannock City from a small tribe of Indians of the region.

It was a lively mining town in 1862. In 1863 a far richer and vastly more extensive deposit of gold had been discovered about seventy miles from Bannock, in what came to be known as Alder Gulch, in which the most important town was given the name of Virginia City. Later, when a new territory was created called Montana, Virginia City was made its capital. In the summer of 1863 there had been such an exodus of people from Bannock to Virginia City that, when the Holmes party arrived at Bannock City in September, there were quite a number of empty cabins, so that Holmes soon had his family under a roof, as did Ross and the other members of the party who had families.

Holmes immediately planned a trip to Salt Lake valley for freight, and in a few days was on the road. Freighting from Utah was very profitable, often as much as one thousand dollars being made on a single trip.

A few days after arriving in Bannock City Mrs. Ross was taken sick with mountain fever, and died October 28, 1863, leaving a little boy of three, motherless in the new and wild country to which they had emigrated.

Mr. Holes made a quick and profitable trip to the northern settlements in Utah and back. Late as the season was when he reached Bannock

Royal Daniel Ross

City with his freight from Utah, he had determined to return to Utah and bring in some more freight as early as possible in the spring.

Ross arranged with a woman in Bannock City to take care of his boy till he should return, and he started with Mr. Holes for Salt Lake on the 25th day of November.

The distance from Bannock City to Salt Lake City was called 400 miles, and for considerably more than 300 miles there was not a house or a human habitation of any kind. To undertake so long a trip so late in the season, through an unsettled country with two mountain ranges to cross with wagons drawn by oxen, may seem to us now hazardous, but at that time it was considered quite ordinary. The party consisted of Mr. Holmes, who had his covered buggy drawn by a span of mules, two ox drivers, of whom Ross was one, a French cook named Miller, and a family named Richardson. The Richardson family had a large Sibley tent, which was pitched as soon as the team stopped for the night. The party cooked and ate in the tent, and most of its members slept in it, but Miller and Ross slept together in a wagon.

After a difficult journey of twenty-nine days they reached the northern settlements of Utah, where they stayed that winter.
(For the remainder of the sketch see p. 231)

State Historical Society of North Dakota - Vol. 2