

Drummers Accommodated

A Nineteenth-Century Salesman in Minnesota



TRAVELING SALESMEN who worked central and western Minnesota in the 1890s sometimes put up at spacious hotels offering modern conveniences such as electric bells, steam heat, and bathrooms. But these drummers also put in grueling hours on trains and riding behind horses in sleighs or carriages trying to out-hustle each other in an economy painfully sensitive to the vagaries of weather and market recessions. From 1892 through much of 1896, a transplanted Vermonter named Albert D. Onion followed a drummer's route in an elliptical territory roughly bordered by the Northern Pacific and Great Northern railroads between Minneapolis and

DRUMMERS spent much time on trains between towns, often swapping stories to combat boredom. They were not called "commercial tourists" for nothing.

Moorhead (see map). Bert Onion left a record of some of his experiences in fourteen letters written from various towns through the years to his brother, Carlos L. Onion, back in Rutland, Vermont.¹

Bert Onion's line was candy and crackers, for three years with the American Biscuit and Manufacturing Company and in the last year or so with Lillibridge-Bremner, both out of Minneapolis.

Onion was born in 1854,² presumably in Vermont, although records are lacking. He lost his father in 1868 and traveled to Minnesota in the 1870s to work for an uncle in the grocery business in Minneapolis.³ He was first listed in the *Minneapolis City Directory* for 1878-79 as a clerk. In December, 1878, he wrote his brother Carlos of his faith in the city's future: "There is to be lots of building done in the spring, and Minneapolis is agoing to be the coming city of the North West." From 1880 to

¹These fourteen "on the road" letters are among twenty-one from Albert D. Onion to his brother Carlos of Rutland, Vermont, from 1878 to 1896 (one letter was actually to "Dear Sister Maude" but obviously intended for Carlos to read). The earlier letters were written from Minneapolis. These plus two letters from Albert's widow, Rose, and one from "Aunt Phil" of Minneapolis are available on microfilm at the Vermont and Minnesota Historical societies. The originals, in addition to other Onion family correspondence, 1848-1935, are in the collection of William A. Onion of Castleton, Vermont.

²Although it is certain that the family lived in Vermont in 1854, the exact day or place of Albert Onion's birth is not known to the editor. His name does not appear in the collation of vital statistics from towns on file in the Vermont Vital Records Office in Montpelier. Vermont did not enforce statewide registration of births until much later.

³Eliza A. [Pattee] Onion, Minneapolis, to her son, Carlos L. Onion, June 23, 1879, Onion Papers in the possession of William A. Onion.

This article is based on one written by Margaret Kent Onion. Mrs. Onion is a Smith College graduate, with an M.A. in English from the University of Vermont, who retired in May, 1977, after twenty years of teaching English in Vermont at Fair Haven Union High School and Castleton State College. She is the unofficial editor of the Onion family papers saved by her husband's grandfather (Carlos Lemuel Onion, 1852-1923) and aunt (Maude Anna Onion, 1888-1971).

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1884 he took a fling in his own wholesale grocery business with a partner, Frank C. Berry. The letterhead of the Berry & Onion firm, located at 218 Central Avenue, described it as dealing in "staple and fancy groceries. Choice butter a specialty." That business turned out "disasterously" [*sic*], Bert wrote Carlos in 1887.⁴

Bert tried other jobs. He was a city water works inspector for a time, clerked in George W. Tanner's grocery, sold soap in the city, and was an engineer briefly for H. J. Gude & Co., flour, feed, and grain dealers. Writing Carlos in 1885, Bert indicated that "the trouble is that Minneapolis has got such a reputation for being a smart city that every one comes piling in here, and the result is that there is about a dozen men to one situation." In 1888 Bert told Carlos of another difficulty: "Minneapolis is a costly place to live in. I live over two miles from my work, and three miles and a half from the center of Town. A man that depends on a small salary, has to live out a good ways to get any thing like reasonable Rent, and then horse car fare brings the Expense about up to what it would cost to live in town."⁵

In the 1880s while he was moving from job to job, Onion married a Minneapolis woman named Rose Frear. They had a daughter who died at the age of two and a son who was six and a great delight to the family in 1892 when Bert wrote Carlos: "You did not ever think that I would ever get to be a drummer or as the *Harris* girl in *Rutland* said, a *Commercial Tourist*. I am selling Crack-

ers and Fancy Biscuits and Confectionary for the American Biscuit and Manufacturing Co. I like it first rate if it was not for being away from home most all the time."⁶

AMONG THE PLUSSES of the new job during the next four years were the accommodations he found in at least seven of the eight hotels from which he wrote letters to his brother (and one, obviously to be shared, to his married sister). Regardless of where he stayed, he enjoyed the camaraderie of other commercial tourists. His path sometimes crossed that of his drummer brother-in-law, Frank Frear; and when his fatal illness struck on the road his family was impressed by the loyalty and helpfulness of his traveling colleagues.⁷

Bert was proud of the miles he covered — an average of 1,800 by rail and 200 by team every month — in the process of selling in as many as six towns a day in all kinds of conditions.⁸ He was proud of his sales record when he moved "five tons of candy this past week besides about two hundred boxes of crackers. In the city of St. Cloud I sold over two tons." He felt himself part of the bustling, hustling West with its genius for making money in thriving cities which he always wanted his brother to see.⁹

But there were drawbacks of which he was constantly aware. Absences from home often stretched out for longer than two weeks at a time, although he tried mightily to get back to Minneapolis every Sunday. A wide variation in accommodations meant that he encountered not only pleasant places to stay but also some he describes as "Dutch Hotels" in "Jay Towns" where "the wind blows through the side of the house, and strong enough to blow one out of bed" and where the food is "Sour Kraut and Cows Bag."¹⁰ The crippling effects of cold weather and agricultural slumps on his business and the constant struggle for financial solvency always thwarted his dreams of a visit from his brother or of spending some time again in "the old Green Hills." He could still talk Vermont in Fergus Falls, Minnesota. When there he apparently always made it a point to call on Sheriff John Billings of Otter Tail County and two businessmen — John's brother, Jesse, in the horse trade,

CARLOS L. ONION (left) and, presumably, Albert D. Onion posed in Vermont before Albert left for Minnesota in the 1870s. Albert's identification is not certain.



⁴Albert to Carlos, December 8, 1878, September 19, 1883, October 9, 1883, January 20, 1887, all from Minneapolis, Onion Papers.

⁵*Minneapolis City Directory*, 1885–1889; Albert to Carlos, August 17, 1885, December 30, 1888, both from Minneapolis.

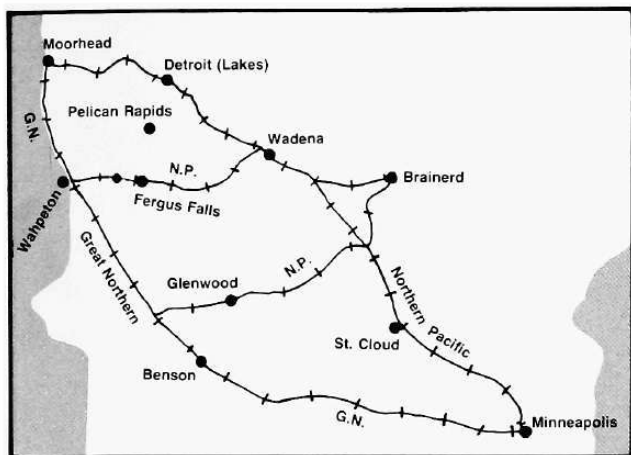
⁶Albert to Carlos, August 17, 1885, from Minneapolis, August 6, 1892, from Fergus Falls.

⁷Priscilla [Pattee] Putnam to Carlos L. Onion, November 17, 1896, Onion Papers.

⁸Albert to Carlos, April 5, 1895, from Wadena.

⁹Albert to Carlos, December 4, 1892, from Fergus Falls.

¹⁰Albert to Carlos, February 1, 1893, from St. Cloud. He was not describing the Grand Central in St. Cloud, which he liked, but hotels in which he dreaded being stuck.



ONION'S ROUTE took him to several Minnesota towns on both the Northern Pacific and Great Northern railroads. Snow, pictured on a St. Cloud street (right), was frequently an obstacle to travel. Albert often stayed at the Grand Central Hotel (left, background), and he received much of his mail there.



and Martin McMahon, in the lumber business. All three were Rutland men who had done well in the West.¹¹

At the age of forty-two, in November, 1896, Bert Onion died of peritonitis after a short illness in the Merchants Hotel in Wadena. He is buried in Lakewood Cemetery, Minneapolis, where a small stone lettered "Bert" marks his grave in the Frear lot. All of the last three letters he wrote to Vermont in 1896 show him acutely conscious of the physical pounding that was inescapable in a drummer's routine. Writing from Glenwood in January, he notes the shock of crawling into cold hotel beds again after a two-week Christmas respite at home. He thanks his sister for her Christmas present of a luggage tag and cites his plan to use it on his ever-present heavy grip.¹² In March he reports from Detroit — now Detroit Lakes, Minnesota — that a forty-five-mile sleigh trip so exhausted him that he actually managed to sleep between thank-you-ma'ams. He also acknowledges that "I have not been as well this winter as usual. My stomach bothers me some, a sort of indigestion." In his last letter, written in September from Wadena, he dreads the coming of another winter, made especially grim by the fact that all the drummers working for his firm have had to take a pay cut of fifteen dollars a month.¹³

Most of the hostilities that catered to the armies of

dogged Minnesota drummers like Onion in the 1890s must have been oases on a punishing trek. The eight that become familiar to the reader of the Onion correspondence emerge through the fogs of time as pretty comfortable landmarks. Sometimes Bert's comments about accommodations are specific, but, more commonly, the ingredients of the hotel's hospitality must be inferred. All of the hotels made quality letterhead stationery available in liberal quantities (and thereby helped precipitate correspondence like Onion's). The letterheads alone speak eloquently of the image the moderately priced hinterland hotel wanted to project in the workaday Midwest of the Gay Nineties.

Most insistent in its self-serving propaganda was the Park Hotel in Fergus Falls, and that is the only one about which Bert makes a disparaging comment in the letters that survive. When he stopped at the Park in August, 1892, the hotel claimed at the top of its letterhead: "Rebuilt and Remodeled 1887. Newly Furnished. All Modern Conveniences. Electric Lights, Electric Bells, Steam Heat. Bath Rooms and Barber Shop. Elegant Bar." Although he uses the flamboyant paper for every page of the long letter, Onion notes between the advertising and the hotel name on his second page, "P.S. The above is a fraud. This is a Bum of a Hotel. Bert."¹⁴ This could have been an early reaction in his career as a drummer before he had encountered worse accommodations.

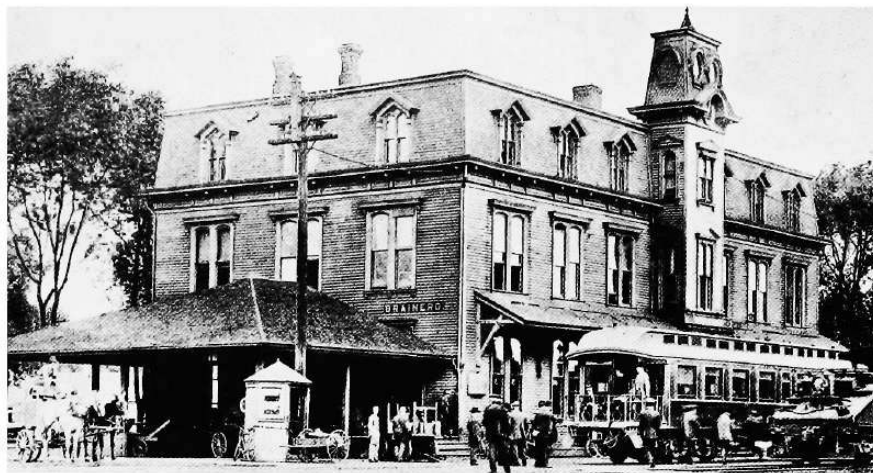
There is no way of telling from the letters how often he made the swing around his territory or how often he returned to the same hotels. A letter written from the

¹¹ Albert to Carlos, September 13, 1896, from Wadena ("Green Hills" quote), August 6, 1892, December 4, 1892, both from Fergus Falls, April 5, 1893, from Benson.

¹² Albert Onion to Maude Onion Marshall, January 5, 1896.

¹³ Albert to Carlos, March 10, 1896, September 13, 1896.

¹⁴ Albert to Carlos, August 6, 1892.



RAILROAD DEPOTS, like hotels, were familiar to Albert Onion and other traveling salesmen. This is the Northern Pacific depot at Brainerd after the turn of the century.

Grand Hotel in the same town as the Park and perhaps under the same management (that of George H. Woodhouse) later in the year suggests some reasons for Onion's being psychologically ready to dislike Fergus Falls, even though he enjoyed seeing the men from Vermont who could talk Rutland. Fergus Falls was at the far end of what he called his "Northern Pacific trip,"¹⁵ and from there he took some of his longest team trips, including a forty-five-mile killer to Pelican Rapids in December, 1892. Moreover, he swung from Fergus Falls out to Wahpeton, North Dakota, "the only kind of Country that I get any ways home sick in." Minnesota with its "Rolling Prairies, Lakes, and Woods" he always found pleasantly like Vermont; but country "flat as a floor, as far as one can see, with hardly a Tree to be seen" depressed him.¹⁶

The Aldrich House in Benson, Minnesota, and the Arlington in Brainerd were also stopping points on his railroad runs. When he wrote from Benson to his brother in Vermont in April, 1893, he had just been in Brainerd. Because of a train washout, he had arrived in Benson at

3:45 A.M. and still had two more towns to make that day and three more the next. He mentions in the same letter that "I weigh more than I ever did in my life[,] 155 lbs." and that "carrying my heavy grips gives me a pretty good muscle." The letterhead lithograph shows the Aldrich House to be a substantial establishment, and it is clear that staff members were on duty twenty-four hours a day to accommodate the poor fellows dragging in at almost any time from delayed train connections.

In the same April, 1893, letter, Bert brags a little to Carlos: "You ought to come out this year and take in the Worlds fair [in Chicago] on your way. The change would

¹⁵Albert to Carlos, April 5, 1893, from Benson.

¹⁶Albert to Carlos, December 4, 1892, August 6, 1892, both from Fergus Falls.

OF TWO HOTELS in Fergus Falls, Onion apparently liked the Grand (below) but not the Park, whose stationery is shown at lower left. On August 6, 1892, Bert labeled the Park's letterhead claims as a "fraud." "This is a Bum of a Hotel," he wrote.

and Remodeled, 1887. Newly Furnished. All Modern Conveniences. Electric Lights, Electric Bells, Steam Heat, Bath Rooms and Barber Shop, Elegant Bar.

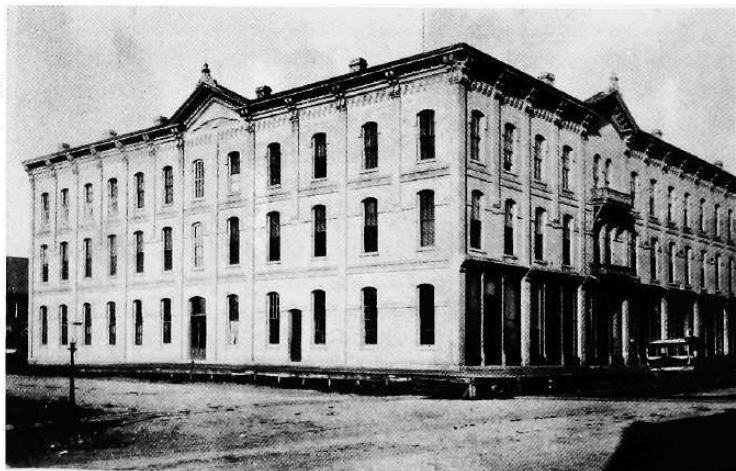
The Park Hotel.

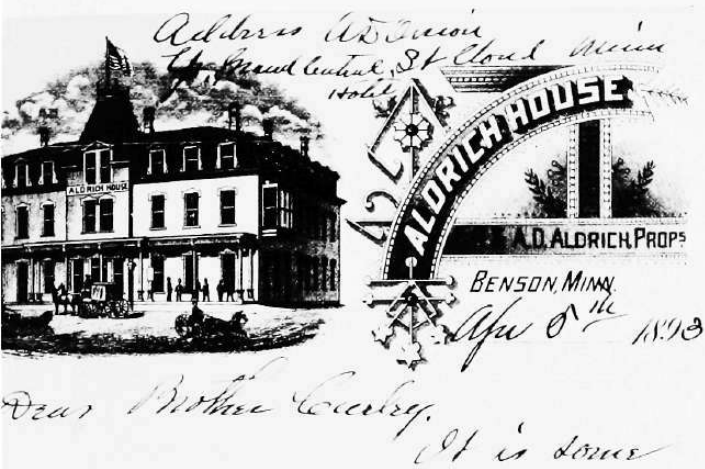
G. H. WOODHOUSE
PROPRIETOR

Fergus Falls, Minn.,

1892.

*spect of good crops. I will
do all I can do if the
rest have out all night*





IN BENSON, Bert Onion stayed at the Aldrich House, whose substantial exterior was pictured on its stationery letterhead. The Aldrich is at far left in this 1882 view of Benson, looking northwest from Twelfth Street.

do you good, and give you a chance to see what kind of a country we have out here. It opens an Eastern mans Eyes when he sees how our Western Cities spring up and grow. Every one is on the hustle out here. Every man trying to get ahead of the other. It gets to be tire-some some times, but when one gets the fever, it is hard to live in any other way.”¹⁷

Letters directed to him in Brainerd sometimes waited for longer than three weeks, but all the hotels along his route were obviously meticulous about handling and holding mail for traveling men. He suggests often that the handiest mail drop is the Grand Central Hotel in St. Cloud. A postscript in 1893 suggests addressing everything there “as I get there oftener than I do home.”¹⁸

The Merchants Hotel in Wadena, whose stationery was the last word in smart decorative art, was obviously a pivot on the Northern Pacific run. Five of the surviving letters were written from there, not always on its fanciest letterhead; the hotel also offered paper with a sober, businesslike design. Onion encountered some of his coldest weather there in January, 1894, when he and two other drummers covered three towns on a sleigh trip of forty-four miles at thirty-six degrees below zero. A month later he reports an apparent result of that trip when he says he “froze” his face.¹⁹

The Merchants Hotel was popular with drummers. From Onion’s point of view it had the advantage of lying in a region of insatiable candy eaters — “more . . . in a week than your old Yanks in Vermont would buy in a month.” More than a year earlier Bert had written that

the St. Cloud country “is largely populated with Germans and Swedes . . . and they are great people for Candies. During Christmas they must just stuff them selves with it.”²⁰ In his April 8, 1894, letter from the Merchants Hotel, Bert describes the scene when a group was stormbound by a blizzard. “There are several Traveling men besides my self here to day, and we have set about swapping lies, and have all tried to see who could spit the nearest to the Spittoon without hitting it.”

ONLY ONCE in the fourteen letters from the road does Onion write a direct testimonial for his lodgings. Even as he reports the frozen face in February, 1894, he remarks that the Hotel Minnesota in Detroit is “on the main line of the Northern Pacific. In the summer time it is quite a resort. There are some Beautifull Lakes here and a great many people come here to spend the hot months.” The hotel’s letterhead shows a truly extensive, four-story building offering “bath rooms, steam heat, electric light and bells,” although a cold-country householder of the 1970s can only wonder how much of the building was kept “open all the year” as advertised and how much fuel it took to maintain the steam heating system.²¹

Only one hotel, on its stationery, advertised itself as a resort. That was the Glenwood Hotel in Glenwood. “Situated on Lake Minnewaska. A Fine Summer Retreat,” reads the legend; and when Onion writes a Christmas thank-you note to his sister from there on January 5, 1896, he reports a temperature of twenty below zero.

The scenery *was* beautiful, and the conviction that one was about to make hustle pay off despite poor crops and bad weather was always there, but the drummer’s

¹⁷Albert to Carlos, April 5, 1893.

¹⁸Albert to Carlos, October 4, 1893, from Wadena.

¹⁹Albert to Carlos, January 12, 1894, from Wadena, February 16, 1894, from Detroit.

²⁰Albert to Carlos, April 8, 1894, from Wadena, December 4, 1892, from Fergus Falls.

²¹Albert to Carlos, February 16, 1894.

THE MERCHANTS HOTEL, a favorite of drummers visiting Wadena, offered this fancy letterhead on its stationery as well as a contrasting businesslike one. Five of Bert's surviving letters were written from this hotel, and he died there.



travels in turn-of-the-century Minnesota were not the stuff of travel brochures. The panic of 1893 affected the national economy much of the time that Onion was a salesman around Minnesota. In August of that year he asks his brother how times are in Rutland and then complains that "they are tough out here. It keeps a fellow guessing where he is all the time. I have managed by hard work to keep my sales up in pretty good shape until now. And what orders I do get now are pretty light. And Collections are worse. Every day or two a Bank suspends. There [are] more men out of work than I ever saw before. The Railroads are lined with Tramps."²²

Writing in the same vein in October, 1893, Onion said "the outlook in the Northwest this fall is *Rocky*. I have managed to sell goods enough so far to a little more than pay Expenses. . . . Already there has been a great many traveling men taken off of the road — and I don't know how long I can keep my End up. I tell you I do some mighty hard hustling now days. And if the merchant is good for any thing, I talk an arm off of him to get him to buy."²³

Onion frequently points out how poor crops, especially of wheat, made it hard for drummers. In January, 1894, when No. 2 grade wheat brought an average of forty-one cents a bushel, Bert writes that "wheat was never known to be so low before, so you can see that the Farmer is in the hole and he leaves the Country Merchant in the hole, and the Country Merchant leaves the Jobber in the same fix."²⁴ The up-and-down business was also dangerous to health. "Indigestion . . .," he wrote from Detroit on March 10, 1896, "is quite common with traveling men. Irregular meals and different kinds of cooking, some of it not fit for a Dog to eat. The

²² Albert to Carlos, August 8, 1893, from Brainerd.

²³ Albert to Carlos, October 4, 1893, from Wadena.

²⁴ Albert to Carlos, January 12, 1894, from Wadena.

THE HOTEL MINNESOTA in what is now Detroit Lakes was an ample, four-story establishment that advertised "open all the year" on its letterhead. The view below was made in about 1885. Being in a resort area, it catered to vacationists as well as commercial tourists like Onion.



Hotel Minnesota.

J. S. ADAIR, Proprietor.

OPEN ALL THE YEAR.

ROOMS. STEAM HEAT. ELECTRIC LIGHTS AND BELLS.

Detroit, Minn., _____ 189
us of Improvement do not
how up. Very fast. I



next day Grub fit for a King. One night a Cold Bed. The next a warm one. . . . [A] man needs a Constitution like a horse to stand it."

A man must have felt frighteningly isolated, too, before telephones. Over and over again, Onion writes that everyone was well when he left home, but there is always the suggestion of fear that the situation may have changed and the man on the road will be unaware of it for some time.

In the end for the Onions, it was the family in Minneapolis that got the sad news from Wadena. Bert took sick suddenly of peritonitis — probably as a result of ruptured appendix — on Tuesday, November 10, 1896, in the Merchants Hotel in Wadena. In spite of the attentions of Dr. John J. McKinnon and Mr. and Mrs. M. A. Rawson of the hotel, Onion's condition got steadily worse. Attesting to his popularity was the fact that more than 100 brother Masons and salesmen visited him at the hotel throughout the week. He was conscious to the end, and among his last words were an expression of gratitude "to the kind friends around him who had so heroically done their best to ward off the inevitable." When he died on Saturday, November 14, his wife's brother, Frank Frear, was at his bedside. Mrs. Onion arrived by train two hours after her husband died. Frear and J. M. Wisner, a fellow traveling man, took the body to Minneapolis, and the funeral service was held at the family home, 108 East Twenty-Fifth Street, on Monday, November 16, too soon for Carlos Onion to attend from

²⁵*Wadena County Pioneer*, November 20, 1896, p. 1 (quote); *Wadena County Journal*, November 20, 1896, p. 8; *Minneapolis Tribune*, November 16, 1896, p. 5, November 17, 1896, p. 2; Priscilla [Pattee] Putnam to Carlos L. Onion, November 17, 1896; Rose Onion to Mary Onion, Carlos' wife, December 11, 1896, Onion Papers.



IN LAKEWOOD CEMETERY, Minneapolis, Albert D. Onion's grave is marked by this small stone with the simple legend, "Bert 1854-1896."

Vermont. The graveside service in Lakewood Cemetery was in charge of the Masons.²⁵

No relative now alive in Vermont ever knew him, but members of the family of the brother who saved the letters have recently circulated copies among themselves; and they have been moved by a poignant sense of what it must have been like to slog around a drummer's route in Minnesota eighty-five years ago.

THE DRAWING on p. 59 by J. J. Gould is from Charles N. Crewdson, *Tales of the Road*, 180 (Chicago, 1905). Mrs. Onion furnished the photo on p. 60, and those on p. 61, 62, 63, and 64 are from MHS audio-visual library. Alan Ominsky drew the map, Bruce M. White made letterhead copies from the micro-filmed letters, and Kenneth Carley took the photo on p. 65.



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