

Memoirs of Philip Johns

A Pioneer of 1851

contributed by [Laurelen Jabbour](#)

## Memoirs of J Philip Frederick Johns

Written by him between 1890 to 1895 in K C, MO

pages 22 to 44

As transcribed by his granddaughter, Marie Johns. Marie was attempting to join the DAR. She was corresponding with a woman in Ohio by the name of Fern, who was assisting Marie in gathering documentation.

A fellow Deford researcher, J. Schnael, found copies of their letters while she was doing family history research in Ohio a few years ago. She realized that these letters answered a question I had been asking for several decades. What happened to Lavina Deford and Phillip Johns?

These are the only pages I have. If anyone has the rest of his memoirs, or any part of them not included here, I would like to see a copy of them in an attempt to make them whole.

J Philip Frederick Johns came from Germany when he was sixteen years old and at once joined in the Mexican War in 1846. After the war he felt a good U.S. citizen and wanted to see the whole of it — so the best story will be his.

From the Mexican War to the Moving  
Tolk County Iowa, over the Oregon Trail  
by Covered Waggon and Oxen. As told in  
the Memoirs of J Philip Frederick Johns  
from page 22 to 44.

"As soon as possible we were off for Jefferson Barracks, near St Louis, Mo. We were misferred out of service here and paid off in German Gold as America as gold was not in existence, also each one of us got a land warrant for 160 Acres of land.  
After we changed our uniforms for civilian suits, I started at once for Louisville, Kentucky where I left my trunk full of clothes and about fifty dollars in

silver half dollars, in those days it was not often a person saw a silver dollar. I found everything alright. For a while I had a good time. Visited my uncles in Indiana and stayed a while with them. I felt still more independent, having now a land in my pocket for 160 acres, two hundred dollars and could speak a little English. I began to feel that I was one of the boys, who helped gain all that country where you find gold, the Indians and buffalo and also the Rocky Mountains and the great Columbia River. I dreamed of so often when I was a little boy in Germany, I must surely start in that direction. So I left my uncles and went back to Louisville, Kentucky.

One day in a German Bazaar I heard a man say that Iowa had lately been made a state, it had the richest soil for farming in the world, I asked the man in what direction was this town, he told me all about it and the next day I started for Iowa. I found there a place of a few log houses, having reached Kegonok Iowa (having arrived there by steam boat) there were also a few frame houses and one or two bricks, near the banks of the river. I hunted for a stage office to get through the country and found one, not far off. To my questions the driver replied how far and where did I want to go — I told him I did not care how far or where, I wanted to see the country & wild animal. He started the next morning, we were in Ottumwa, nothing but a few log houses, then Oskaloosa, a small village, Fairfield also a little village. Now we reached the Des Moines River, which we crossed on an old style rope ferry boat.

Now we were in the Old Fort Des Moines, in Polk County Iowa. Not a street in town. The best hotel was a double log house and once the officers quarters, — one, one story brick house, not two frame houses and two rows of soldiers log houses, the one on Coon River and the other on Des Moines River and a small brick court house, near a ten acre corn field. Doctor Trummel, a German had the nicest residence sight in town, on a large hill, on the east side of town, and a corn field of eighty acres. The doctor & family were very clever people and I always felt like I was at home there. He had two sons, Frank & George & also one daughter who was married to Judge Cassidy, Frank Allen

had the best general store in Des Moines, in a double log house with a dirt floor. During the war he became a millionaire. He had been together in the Mexican War, on the same line. Also there was a one story log house, standing where a street intended to be by Senator Habbit's family occupied this house.

I was for the first time delighted since residing in America. Campbell Bros., Indian Raiders, driving a herd of fine elks, hitched to a spring wagon, and several hundred Indians came to town and danced their war dances. How more dreamy when I was a little boy, about American Indians and buffalo, began to be a reality, to my greatest delight (but all not complete yet). One day I met my friend Dr Krimmel in a store and he showed me a few small grains of gold which he had, that day, received from a friend. In a letter, he had gone to California that same spring overland in 1849. I looked a while at this gold and started for my dinner. When I got back from dinner I commenced preparations for an outfit, at once, to cross the plains. This coming spring 1850, I sold my 160 acres and two town lots and bought an outfit to cross the Great Plains.

In the meantime I became acquainted in town, with one of the best lawyers in that country, Colonel Backer, who had a nice farm six miles from Des Moines. The Colonel told me he was going also in the spring. He invited me to bring my oxen team to his place, as he had plenty corn, also that his wife was a French, Spanish & German scholar and she would be pleased to exercise her German, mostly. So went and stayed with the Colonel until spring, and we had plenty enjoyment that winter, going hunting and to meetings and speaking, (but of course I left the Colonel make all the speeches) as I only knew a few words of English which I had learned in the Mexican War. However I never forgot to help the Indians often, by applauding the Colonel.

In the spring of 1850 came the sad news that 500 wagons were returning as the cholera had begun. During that year I became acquainted, at Colonel Backers, with the daughter, Anna, of Squire Joseph D. Ford, a veteran of the War of 1812, also a pioneer of Ohio, Illinois and Iowa. I would not go west and married the girl April 16, 1850 with Colonel Backer, the best man and his wife the best woman. The old man

did not want me to go west at all next year and offered me 80 acres of land near the river and and only six miles from Des Moines, Iowa (in Ames a suburb) But No I had not seen the big West - the Rockies - the Indians and the great Columbia River! But this dream of my boyhood was this year 1851, accomplished. But nine months and a little over after we were married a boy baby was born Feb 17, 1851, in consequence (and that baby boy is now the Musical Director La Fayette De Ford (Phineo of Philadelphia Penn) Now my dreams will come true and a reality by crossing those Great Plains.

It was about the 8th day of May, 1851, I think, when we started to cross the great plains for Oregon and California, and a great trial we were. I not twenty years old yet, my wife not eighteen and our first born boy not quite three months old, and such a young happy family to undertake a trip of two thousand miles - and from beginning to end nothing but Indians, buffaloes by the thousands and also antelopes by the thousands! When we started I filled my wagon bed nearly to the top with corn - to keep the cattle in good shape, soon had a long journey before us and I must have treated our animals right as our lives depended on those Open.

We however traveling with our train of about fifty wagons, so unconcerned and happy as if we were going to a camp meeting. After crossing the Missouri River we camped at the old Mormon camping grounds and saw a few Omaha Indians, not of any notice, but after we crossed Elkhorn, and got among the <sup>Pawnee</sup> Indians, our troubles commenced with that old <sup>Pawnee</sup> Chief for traveling through their country - we must pay them for their grass! We did not intend to pay and were about to make them a stand, when by noon we were confronted by several hundred Indians, all painted and on horse back. We called for their chief - his (Pawnee) name was Pow-wow talk. He came and we were surrounded by those high colored Indians. He asked the chief what he wanted for his pay for traveling through his country and his answer was seven head of cattle and wanted us to shoot the cattle. He declined to shoot our cattle, when we had nearly two thousand miles to travel with them. As our Captain had considerable horses & cattle, also a large family, he agreed to give the Indians seven cows, which we had to shoot for the Red Devils. Now after we shot the cows for

for those red devils, they inserted their arrows in every cow. Now the squaws arrived with their baskets or cages to pack all the meat. Then each cow had been ripped open, and all the blood that collected in the carcass had been drunk up by the double handfulls by those red skins — and also the entrails they cut in pieces of about five inches long — they pulled them through their fingers and let them run down their throats like noodles.

The next day we started on our trip again and when we got to our nights camping place where the bridge across a small stream was burned down — built by previous emigrants, those who passed before us, this was the work of the Ponca tribe again — but now we took their chief a prisoner (after we allowed him to enter our forty foot circle of our wagons) where all our ladies were then at work cooking supper, — He treated him kindly, mustering all our men in line with their guns to show the chief what we would be able to do for defense of our wives and children. He ordered all the other Indians to stay within proper distance of our forty foot circle that night. He treated their chief well that night with the promise to allow us next morning to repair the bridge and then to depart without any more trouble on their part — all was done properly. These Ponca Indians were always the most troublesome. Their nature is treacherous, small in stature and always warring with the Sioux. They last Indians and the next tribe, the Shoshonees & Arynes <sup>they are now</sup> are tall and noble looking Indians, more so than any other on the Great Plains of the West. The Crows (the diggers) were both low and dirty Indians, which tribes we had yet to pass through. But we had no more trouble of any consequence hereafter. However there is no fun in facing several hundred savage Indians, and our wives & children at their mercy about fifty years ago with not a house for two thousand miles. — Only Fort Laramie is about 500 miles from Council Bluff with a few company of soldiers and Fort Bridger about 400 miles further on with no soldiers, only a few Hudson Bay traders. Fort Hall then had no soldiers. And 400 miles further one more trading post. And further on Grand Round Valley Trading Agency. To my memory these were all.

One more little incident I must not forget before we get to the Pacific Springs from which point, all waters run in the opposite direction. One fine morning a young lawyer from the law school of Cincinnati was back driving a team for a party in our train and I left our team, after they had started, for a good Buffalo hunt, as it appeared to us that signs were very good for a hunt. He had started from the Prairie in to the hills and up a deep ravine, the wind was in our favor & by following up close we were soon on to them within gun shot. Both of us fired on the same buffalo and he dropped, one ball struck him in the head & the other behind the right foreleg. It was now getting very late in the afternoon and we thought, now we had better get down to the plain again to find our train. Our first impulse was to brain the buffalo with our hatchet & then next to cut a chunk out of the hind quarter and left the balance of the carcass for the wolves. We started down the mountain for the great plain to our surprise saw no train, no sign of a road & getting very late in the evening. We knew we had to go West but a large mountain was in our way — south we could not go but direct north we saw a small gap in the mountains and we knew we were lost, & perhaps a target for some wild Indians or a prey for some wild animals. We began to get very tired, being off the go since early morning and sat down on a big rock for consultation, as we now considered ourselves lost. After a good rest we concluded that our train must have been compelled to go direct north through that narrow gap in the range & then again turning direct south & that would bring them into Camply night, directly on the west side of the Butte right before us. We started up, being not very high, it began to get late & behold to our greatest joy, when we got to the summit we saw our train, at the foot of the west side of the Butte starting fires for supper. It took us not long to get down by breaking dry, heels into the ground at every jump down. Our people were frightened thinking we were surely lost. But we had a mess of fresh buffalo and buffalo brain, if we did have to cook them with buffalo chips. The young lawyer, Pomroy from Oregon City, I were very tired. The next morning we were off for the Pacific Springs. Off for The Pacific Springs - getting ready for the crossing of the 50 Miles Desert.

We left camp early next morning and got to the Pacific Springs about noon, where we stopped until 4 o'clock in the afternoon. We now filled every thing we had in our wagons with water, that would hold any, as we had now before us fifty miles without water, wood, grass or anything else. Our oxen traveled all night like horses and we arrived on Green River about 12 o'clock noon without stopping, except about half way 10 or 15 minutes to give each working head a little taste of water. In going down the mountain to the river we could not hold them back until they all got into the water, which was very unpleasant for us all. But we soon had everything in good shape and camped for the night near Green River. The next day we crossed it and traveled until we found a good camp and plenty grass. We saw many wonderfully formations of nature. The Chimney Rock about 100 feet high in a great plain. The Devil's gate in the Rocky Mountains where only one wagon at a time was able to pass through. Hot water springs, mineral & soda water springs. No more accidents or trouble with Indians until we got to Snake River when one of our men Mr Hattley got shot through the breast, so large a handkerchief the doctor could pull through the wound, but in two weeks he was again riding a horse. No more accidents we had after this of any note, until we started down a long rocky spur of the mountains and to the banks of the Columbia River, which concludes the last of my dream when a boy herefore mentioned and after we got down to the Columbia River I as quickly as possible for novelty's sake, washed my hands in it. Before we got down only half way the Rocky road a halt was called by a strong voice and the whole train stopped among the rocks. For a while when an equal sound called forward "Now inquiry every where revealed that a boy baby was born. When we got to the Umatilla valley it took it to be the first mile land since we left the Missouri river.

Now the Last of our Hardships Cross the Cascade Mountains. We began to feel happy to think that in a few days we will be in a civilized country, where we will hear pigs squalling, agui, roosters crowing & hens gagling, since it has been 4 months passing through a wilderness of two thousand miles. In

the morning we left our camp very early to get as far as possible in to the Cascade Mountain Range and make another camp over night before starting down the very steep three mile decline and the last one down the mountains and very close to the foot of Mount Hood, whose crater discharged smoke at the same time in the fifties when San Francisco had that fearful earthquake. Camping that time in the mountains range we had not much time to lose and in getting up our cattle I could not find one of my oxen and had to leave him behind. Then we got to the steep decline we all had to cufflock our wagons, cut fir trees down and fasten the tips to the hind end of the wagons, and then our oxen were sliding down the mountain ferns, from 8 to 10 feet high, we took a day or two to rest. On the next another buttermilk train came down the mountain, and behold what did we see, my ox pulling a carriage! I had no trouble to claim my animal, but when I asked him, for manners sake, how much he charged me, he answered ten dollars, as I now had but ten cents in the world, I told him I charged him ten dollars for pulling his carriage, which carriage one of his train told me would have had to be left behind if it were not for my ox, we called it even and I took my ox.

After we had recuperated our cattle on the fine green grass, as the rain had set in and which we had not seen for months, we commenced scattering by two and three wagons looking for locations. The old settlers were very kind to us, by bringing butter milk and vegetables to us! My old friend and buffalo hunting companion, who I had mentioned once before, left for Oregon City, where his parents resided for some years migrating from Cincinnati Ohio. His father had two ships trading between Portland & San Francisco Cal. The son being a wild boy, ran away from home with his gun, ammunition and a sack of salt. Falling in with some old Rocky Mountain trappers he luckily managed to reach the Atlantic States and Cincinnati Ohio his old home. His parents considered him dead and one day his father received a letter from him. His father at once wrote back making arrangements for him to go to school in Cincinnati and then to Law School which he did. He played another trick. He

got married and after his father heard that, pulled  
away from him again and not another cent of money  
he received from hard hearted old Tomroy. His son in  
the spring of 1851 left his wife and child & got a chance to drive  
a team for a man in my team, while I got acquainted  
with him. When the lost son got to Oregon under his  
parental roof his father forced him and loaded one of  
his ships with hogs for Edah Francisca to sell them there  
ship part of the money to his father & to keep enough  
to go to Cincinnati Ohio and bring his wife & child to Oregon  
City to his father. Then he got to the mouth of the Colum-  
bia River (a very dangerous place for ships in a storm)  
Tomroy's ship went down and not a soul being saved and  
that was the last of poor young Tomroy.

After my cattle had a good rest I went up the country  
south and took my claim eleven miles south of Salem  
in the Forks of the Santiam and Willamette Rivers.

My land claim now in the Willamette Valley.

Grass everywhere in the valley knee high and as the rain  
season had already set in, and the whole country green  
and horses & cattle so fat as ever I had seen in my life.  
After I crossed Santiam River with my team I struck  
a grove of forest where I made up my mind to camp  
for the night. My provisions were now at bed rock and  
ten cents in my pocket, 2000 miles from home, no friends,  
a wife and baby, but we got along very nicely with what  
we had. Next morning early when we got up it was still  
raining fine mist, as it did all night. After breakfast I  
told my wife, I am going now to look for a 320 acre home  
to which I was entitled. Walking about three miles  
south through the Santiam timber, I came to what was  
called Knob's Butte, and passing it on the east side at  
some elevation, and looking to the south, I noticed  
a forty mile prairie commencing at the Butte, and in-  
termingling with some groves of Oak and Ash timber.  
This country looked to me like a Paradise, and said to  
myself "Kukreka", and by investigating a little further  
at that large Butte, old settlers Knob Christian Miller  
and John Onley these names I learned from a man I met.  
As I fancied the "Miller" a little better, I knocked at his door

The first question he asked, if I had a family, and when I answered yes, a wife and one child, he told me to go and get my family at once, and that at the south end of his place were 320 acres of land and we would immediately go and step it off to go right back and bring my wife and baby to his house, and stay until ~~until~~ I had the cabin built. He were a happy family at once. After stepping off the ground I started back and it did not take me long to go back the three miles. It was called the Albany Prairie, and the heart of Oregon. When I got back it did not take me long to hitch up my Oxen team, and on the way back to my benefactor Miller, and always afterwards the best friend I ever had in my life. Next day I commenced my house, and while I was building it we stayed with his family. In eight days we were living in our own house on our own 320 acres of land in the heart of Oregon. I had 2 miles to the Santean forest and  $2\frac{1}{2}$  miles to the Willamette. I made the first fence rails that winter, levees made and fenced up about ten acres and plowed the same for spring wheat. It was the first plowing I ever did. I had to buy wheat to take to mill at forty miles distance, and my neighbor had no wheat, and it was one dollar per bushel, and no money which put me in a critical position. So I started out one morning & about five miles distance I found an old settler who had plenty to sell at \$1.00 per bushel. I told him I had wanted twenty-five bushels and that I had no money and that he had to wait for it, he told me to come and get it, after I told him where I settled. But he also remarked if I could raise him 500 dollars, which he needed, he would sell me 1000 bushels of wheat and I could leave it in his grainery as long as I wanted to.

When I got home I told my wife I would sell my team to raise 500 dollars to buy a thousand bushels of wheat & she relented as I thought a great many farmers had been to California & therefore no wheat in the country, which she thought foolish to do. I got my 25 bushels then and in two weeks from that time, wheat took a raise from 25cts to 50cts per day, until it went up to 60cts a bushel in six weeks and the millers would come to the graineries, pay that price and haul it away I asked my wife which one of us was foolish.

During the winter and next spring, I did considerable trading and made money. Next summer I raised a little crop but of no consequence, and as I was no farmer, I began to get tired of it, when a man came along and offered me one thousand dollars, I sold out to him and made a trip to Northern California."

From J. Philip Johnson's Memoirs, written by him from 1890 to 1895 in K.C. Mo.