



















“All we hear about in the East is the opportunity in the West,” Mr. Pound said.

“Mr. Horace Greeley, the editor of the *New York Tribune*, has been hammering us with editorial after editorial. Surely you’ve heard his famous words, even out here on the prairie . . .” Mr. Wheeler put a serious look on his face, puffed out his chest and said, “Go west, young man. Go west.”

“Yes, and we’ve not only read his words, we’ve seen wagon load after wagon load heeding the call.” Pa stood up to stretch his legs. “Where will you go?”

“We are going to take the Oregon Trail,” Mr. Pound said. “At least that’s the plan. We will head for Council Bluffs. That’s where we’ll rendezvous, purchase all our supplies, and join up with a wagon train.”

Ma and the ladies stood up and shook out their skirts. They picked up the last of the dishes and went into the house to begin planning dinner. Since there were no children her age, Olive stayed close to the table so she could hear the talk of the West. The men talked about word of a gold rush in California and land to be had for the taking. They discussed the different routes and the best time of the year to start.

Olive watched her father as he listened to his friends. They pored over Mr. Wheeler’s copy of *The Emigrant’s Guide to California*. They walked over to the wagons, and she could see Pa running appreciative hands along the canvas stretched over the ribs and squatting down to look at the strength of the axles. By the time the women had dinner prepared in the

early afternoon, Olive saw a yearning in her father's face.

During dinner, the men continued to talk about the journey west. The children ate and cleared away the dishes, and still the adults talked.

"Do you fear going?" Ma asked later, as the women and the girls worked to bake enough loaves of bread to hold them until they reached Council Bluffs.

"Sometimes," admitted Mrs. Wheeler. "But look at them." She pointed to the men. "Once they make up their minds to see the elephant, there is no stopping them."

"See the elephant?" Ma asked.

"It's a figure of speech. Remember when we were children and the circus came to town? We couldn't think about anything else until we had been able to see the elephant." Mrs. Wheeler sighed as she looked out the door at the three men earnestly examining the wagon wheels.

"You asked about fear, Mary Ann." Mrs. Pound lowered her voice and lapsed back into girlhood names. "The term 'to see the elephant' actually comes from a story of a farmer who came to town with his whole crop of vegetables in his wagon. He arrived just in time to see the circus parade being led by the elephant." She gave the bread dough a hearty thump on the floured board. "He was thrilled to see the parade, but his horses startled and bolted, overturning his wagon and spilling his entire load of vegetables into the ditch." She continued to knead as she talked. "When the townspeople expressed their regrets for his loss, he just slapped his thigh and

said, ‘I don’t give a hang, for I have seen the elephant.’”

“Isn’t that the truth,” said Mrs. Wheeler. “Once a man’s got a hankering to see the elephant, the cost doesn’t seem to matter.”

That night, they ate a supper of wild strawberries, crusty baked bread with newly churned butter, and glasses of cool milk. The grownups talked long into the night. The children continued to run and play in the dark, trying to trap fireflies and listening to the far-off sounds of wolves. Nobody stirred to put the children to bed—they sort of drifted off and fell asleep on one bed or another, hoping someone would eventually tuck them into the proper bed.

Early in the morning, before the sun had barely risen, the Pounds and the Wheelers packed the last of their things into the wagons and headed out of the Oatman yard. Children walked alongside the wagons, careful to stay to the side since the horses tied onto the back kicked up a lot of dust. The Oatmans walked alongside for a ways, calling out good-byes as they walked.

When Ma could no longer keep up, she called out, “God be with you, dear friends.” When Ma said it, she meant it. She believed God walked with them every step of the way.

As the wagons pulled away, the Oatmans continued waving until all they could see was a cloud of dust on the horizon. Olive heard her mother sigh deeply and understood the reason—her father stood there staring after the wagons with a look of stark longing. At that moment, Olive knew the truth—Pa would not be satisfied until he saw the elephant for himself.