

FIELDS AND FORBES, PEDDLERS

Many business partnerships dissolve because the partners eventually find themselves at odds on too many fronts. Others thrive because the partners naturally complement each other. Wilber Fields and Caleb Forbes constituted the latter. The skills each partner brought were unique, indeed. Fields and Forbes, Peddlers planned to travel west and sell to whoever would give them the time of day—farmers, miners, town folks, and even outlaws.

On the fourth day of April, the boys began stocking their two covered wagons with goods purchased in St. Louis, Mo.

“Did you get those blankets we wanted, Wilbur?” asked Caleb.

“You bet,” answered Wilbur. “I had to do some hard bargaining to get the best price. They wanted two dollars apiece, but I worked them down to a volume price of ten for thirty dollars.”

“Good thinking, Wilbur. That’s pretty much all we can get on without overloading the wagon and stressing the mules.”

Their first day on the trail, they broke a wheel on Wilbur's wagon. Fortunately, they broke down just outside a farm owned by the local wheelwright and with some serious bartering, they got off pretty cheap. Despite that first day, the first month of their journey west proved quite profitable for the partners. With their early sales success, they had to change their route plans. Caleb figured they could go another week or so before running out of inventory. They planned to return to St. Louis via Topeka, Kansas, where they would pick up some items to sell on the return trip.

After finishing up in John's Corner, they headed to Coopersville at the western edge of a valley. The narrow path that led to Elmerton's Trail, which would take them to Coopersville, was dry, dusty, and overgrown with brown buffalo grass. A gap in the rocks, barely wide enough for their wagons, opened up to Elmerton's Trail. Though considerably wider and open, the trail continued to be a source of throat choking dust. The boys were glad they had taken on extra water in John's Corner.

The looming horizon of Coopersville stood as a welcome sight to the weary travelers. A bath to wash off the dust and a hot meal would hit the spot. When they arrived in town, they saw some

commotion going on at the bank. They had to bring the wagons to a stop to avoid hitting three men running out of the bank. Quickly mounting their horses, the three men left town in a cloud of dust. A fourth man then came out of the bank and saw his horse had gotten loose and was galloping away with the others. Frantically looking for a way to escape, the fourth man jumped up on Caleb's wagon, put a gun in Caleb's side, and grabbed the reins. Caleb's fleeing wagon left Wilbur in front of the bank.

“Wait,” hollered Wilbur. “Where are you going?” Snapping the reins, he continued to yell as he urged his mules to chase after Caleb's wagon, “Wait for me.”

Following close behind the two fleeing wagons, the sheriff and his deputies fired a volley of warning shots, but that didn't stop Caleb, Wilbur, and the apparent bank robber. Eventually, the faster horses of the lawmen enabled them to overtake the wagons and the mules, and they arrested Caleb, Wilbur, and the hijacker.

Looking through the bars of their jail cell, Caleb and Wilbur pleaded with the sheriff. “We didn't do nothing wrong, Sheriff,” said Caleb. “We were just sitting there, and this guy jumped up on

my wagon with a gun and grabbed the reins. We don't know anything about a bank robbery."

"You boys are lucky," said the sheriff. "The Circuit Judge happens to be in town, so you'll get a speedy trial."

"Trial?" asked Wilbur.

"Yeah, old Judge Hawkins ... Hanging Hawkins they call him, will have you outta here in no time."

"Well, that's a relief," said Wilbur.

"Yeah, outta here and up on the gallows," said the sheriff.

"Gallows?" asked Wilbur.

"Yeah, we haven't had a hanging in nearly a month. It'll be over real quick."

"Real quick?" questioned Caleb. "But we didn't do anything. We were just sitting there and ..."

"Tell it to the judge, boys," replied the sheriff.

Two days later, when the judge called Caleb and Wilbur up to the table, he said, "Peddlers,

hmph. I hate peddlers. My wife ran off with a peddler.”

“I’m just as sorry as I can be, Judge,” said Caleb. “But we didn’t do anything. We were just sitting there and ...”

“Bank robbery, huh?” murmured the judge. “How do you plead?”

“We’re innocent, Judge,” pleaded Caleb. “We were just sitting there, when ...”

“Good, the Court accepts your plea of guilty. Hanging will take place tomorrow morning ... did we get that box of new rope in yet, Bob?”

“No, sir. Not yet.”

“Well, we can’t have a hanging without any rope,” said Judge Hawkins. “You boys got any rope on those wagons of yours?”

“Yes,” said Wilbur. “I think we ... what did you kick me for, Caleb?”

“No, sir,” answered Caleb. “We sold the last of it back in John’s Corner.”

“Hmm ... well, here’s what I’m going to do, boys. You got thirty days probation to get some

rope and then I want you to bring it back here so we can hang you.”

“Thank you, your Honor,” said Caleb. “Thank you. Come on, Wilbur, let’s go.”

“And don’t be late,” added Judge Hawkins, as the boys scurried out the door.

“Do you think they’ll be back, Judge?” asked the sheriff.

“If they do come back, then they deserve to be hung,” said Judge Hanging Hawkins.

When they got back to their wagons, Wilbur asked, “Which kind of rope do you think we should order, Caleb?”

“We’re not ordering any rope, Wilbur. We’re getting away from here as fast as we can and heading back to St. Louis.”

“St. Louis? ... oh, right, St. Louis,” repeated Wilbur.

Two days into their journey back to St. Louis, they entered a dry, brown valley with only a few scattered cottonwood trees. After a couple of hours, Caleb brought his wagon to a stop. Wilbur got off his wagon and went up to Caleb.

“Why are we stopping, Caleb?”

“Look out yonder and tell me what you see, Wilbur.”

“A bunch of dry bones ... a bunch of dry bones that, uh, uh ... that are putting on flesh and rising up from the ground. Uh, uh ... it’s probably just a mirage.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Caleb. “I’m not sticking around to see if the mirage does anything else. Let’s get out of here.”

The next day the boys ran into a wagon train headed west. Seeing as how the wagon train was bedding down for the night, Caleb and Wilbur got permission to spend the night with them for security. They did a little selling to the travelers with the few supplies they had left and then joined a group who were sitting around a crackling campfire. Meaningful words couldn’t compete with the relaxing flame until one man, a traveling preacher, stood up and began reading from the Bible.

“Ezekiel, Chapter 37, Verses 7 to 10,” said the preacher. “So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And as I looked, there were

sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them, but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.’ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great host.”

“That’s it, Caleb, that’s it,” said Wilbur, excitedly. “That’s what we saw.”

“Quiet, Wilbur. Do you want people to think we’re crazy?”

“But that’s what we saw, Caleb,” whispered Wilbur. “Don’t you want to tell that preacher that’s what we saw?”

“No. Let’s keep it to ourselves and just get back to St. Louis. I don’t want to hear any more about it.”

The peddlers eventually made it back to St. Louis to restock their wagons.

Standing outside their main supplier, Caleb suddenly said, “You know, Wilbur, I’ve been doing some thinking. There’s this little store building

for rent back in that last small town we passed through. I'm kinda thinking we should settle down and get away from those dry, dusty trails."

"You scared of that valley of dry bones, Caleb?"

"Me? No, I'm not scared, Wilbur."

"Yeah ... I'm scared, too."

"Whatta you say we rent that place and open a general store?"

"Okay by me, Caleb," replied Wilbur.

"I was also kinda thinking we should start going to church. There's a little one the next block over from that store building."

"Okay by me, Caleb."

The first Sunday that the boys went to that small church, the preacher stood up and read from the Bible.

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Wilbur looked at Caleb and said, “It was probably just a mirage.”

“Yeah, just a mirage,” replied Caleb.

The new storekeepers did pretty well for the first four months. Then one day, a man in dusty clothes got off a wagon in front of their store and came inside.

“Howdy, stranger,” said Caleb. “How can I help you?”

“I ... I don’t know,” answered the stranger. “I’m still a little confused. I feel kind of strange ... like I just woke up from a long nap. I’m not sure where I came from. I remember walking down this dry, dusty trail that had all kinds of dry bones lining the path. This man with a wagon was kind enough to give me a ride into town. I guess I’m going to

need some provisions and clothes. The only thing I have are these clothes on my back.”

Caleb began studying the stranger very carefully and then he bagged up all kinds of food, clothing, gear, and medical supplies.

“Here, my friend,” said Caleb. “Everything is on the house.”

“That’s very generous of you, sir. I will repay you as soon as I am able.”

“No need, my friend. You have a good day.”

“Caleb, you gave that guy all that stuff for free. What were you thinking?”

“You can’t be too careful,” answered Caleb.

“What do you mean?” asked Wilbur.

“You heard that guy talking about where he was and all, didn’t you?”

“Yeah ... oh ... you ... you don’t think he was one of those, do you?” asked Wilbur.

“If God wanted to put flesh on those bones and bring them back to life, then He must have something planned for them to do. And I don’t think we should be on that guy’s bad side.”

“That’d kinda be like being on the bad side of God, right, Caleb?”

“You said it, Wilbur.”

“You can’t never be too careful, huh, Caleb?”

“You can’t never be too careful, Wilbur.”