Westward Ho the Reids

By

Larry E. Reid
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Dedication

I am dedicating this book to "The Pioneering Spirit". If anyone deserves thanks and credit for settling the North American Continent it has to be our forefathers who, with their blood, toil, sweat, and tears, explored, settled, built homes and farms, factories, mills, and cities that is today The United States of America.

Settling the west was no easy task. Mother Nature was always a threat to strike down progress on a non-discriminating basis. There were floods, earthquakes, severe storms, harsh winters and scorching summers to name but a few of the natural phenomena our forefathers had to confront, endure and overcome. In addition to Mother Nature there were man made threats aplenty. Marauders attacked and plundered unsuspecting settlers on the trail. Con Artist and unscrupulous merchants cheated and took advantage of newcomers to this country as well as fellow countrymen.

There were hostile Indians to oppose them every step of the way west. These hostiles were especially effective in delaying the westward movement of the Europeans in the beginning, but the onrush of land hungry settlers was like a river torrent sweeping everyone and everything downstream. It was so rapid and in such large numbers the newcomers simply overwhelmed the Native Americans who were quickly reduced to a fraction of their former number. By the late 19th Century, the Native American population was pretty much confined to special "Reservations" which they could call their own until Tribal ownership of land was abolished by the Dawes and Curtis Acts in 1887 and 1898 respectively.

Acknowledgements

This book would not be possible without the tireless efforts of newspaper writers and photographers, family historians and many, many individuals who have responded without hesitation to my requests for help and information when I
asked for their help. High among this list are the dedicated newspaper men and women of the Steele Enterprise who gathered information, interviewed people and published several editions about life in early Pemiscot County history. I drew heavily upon their "Special Section "75-40" Birthday Issue" published Thursday, November 20, 1997, Volume 76", both sections of the "Special History Edition" published Thursday December 9, 1976, and the Thursday, December 6, 2001, Volume 80 issue.

Another great reservoir of early Pemiscot County is the Pemiscot County Historical Society who publishes a quarterly journal containing biographies of many first settlers in Pemiscot County. As a member since 1999 I have been privy to these Quarterlies as well as the wealth of information the Society has in its archives. They have clipped, saved and reproduced obituaries and birth notices, short stories, articles, and many other interesting facts about Pemiscot County for me. They are a group of tireless and dedicated Missourians.

Chief among my many correspondents in Pemiscot County is Francis Funderburk who, apparently goes every day to the Steele Enterprise to clip and save Obituaries, birth notices, and newspaper articles about Pemiscot families for the Historical Society and others like myself. An author in her own right, she has penned several articles and pieces to the delight of others interested in Pemiscot County history. She also gives lectures and talks throughout her native Steele and surrounding communities.

I could not have accurately portrayed the life and character of Sam McDonald Reid and his family without the help of two of his great, great granddaughters and my cousins J. Lynn Sitar and Tina Reed (this spelling of this family name is an interesting story in its own right).
ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

The author was born December 19, 1941 in Butler County, Missouri and raised in a small farming community in Southeast Missouri, (Pemiscot County) commonly known as ‘The Bootheel”. He graduated from Cooter High School in 1959 and Campbell University, Buies Creek, North Carolina in 1963. He earned a Masters Degree in History from the University of Texas, Arlington, Texas in 2005 and is currently enrolled in their Doctoral program.

His varied business career includes a four-year stint as a schoolteacher, ten years as an Aviation Underwriter for a leading Aviation Insurance company and twenty years as a Marine Insurance Consultant. He retired in 2001 from his own consulting firm.

He is a member of the Sons of the American Revolution, and The General Society, Sons of the Revolution. He has qualified seven (7) ancestors as soldiers in the American Revolution as certified by these two hereditary societies.
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INTRODUCTION

This 4th book in my family history series, is about four (4) of our ancestors as they journey west to new lands and to a new life in Missouri, Arkansas, and Oklahoma. The story begins when three bachelor brothers Thad, Will, and Mack Reid plus their widowed brother-in-law, James (Squire Jim) Fisher as they decide to leave their ancestral homes in Transylvania County, North Carolina, pack their meager belongings and head west to find work building and repairing levees on the Mississippi River. The year is 1884. The foursome range in age from 15 to 35 years. In reverse order they are James Fisher, the eldest at 35; Thaddeus Reid is 26 followed by his brothers Will Reid at 24 and Sam MacDonald (Mack) Reid who has just turned 15 April 8, 1884. They planned to travel light as they had few worldly possessions and they intended to travel swiftly.

Their immediate goal is New Madrid, Missouri and the Mississippi River levee projects going on there. New Madrid was named by Spanish explorers in honor of Madrid, the capital of Spain. In Spanish it is pronounced Nuevo Madrid but today Missourians pronounce it New Mad-rid. Others from Transylvania County had preceded them and the letters and reports they sent to their loved ones in Transylvania County were filled with good news about good paying jobs, lots of cheap land, and the abundance of opportunities everywhere.

The Mississippi River, the life line of the Midwest and gateway to the prairie lands, like all major river systems, had a nasty habit of frequently overflowing its banks. It averaged massive flooding every three years. For thousands of years, Native Americans living on or near the river simply adjusted to this natural phenomenon. The first known Europeans to see the Mississippi River were Spanish and French explorers. The Spanish were mostly interested in finding and looting gold and silver from the Native Americans living there. They looked on the river simply as an obstacle to overcome and as a means of travel and ignored its overflows. Later the French arrived
with vastly different interests. They wanted to convert the Indians to Christianity and to trade European goods with them for pelts and furs. The French established settlements at strategic points along the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to accomplish these objectives. They made the first feeble attempts at controlling the river and its flooding by erecting levees between their settlements and the river.

The Spanish and French were soon followed by English settlers either directly from England or relocating from their homes and settlements on the eastern seaboard of the continent. They relentlessly pushed farther westward, especially after 1803 when the western lands between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains was purchased by President Thomas Jefferson from the French in what is commonly know as “The Louisiana Purchase”. These English settlers were bent on occupying the land and making it their own. They established homes, villages, towns, and eventually cities in their occupation of the land. Farming and land ownership were their passion. To them, these frequent overflows of the Mississippi were a huge problem; a problem that threatened their farms, permanent settlements, and even their very existence.

As time went by, a patchwork of levees grew up along both sides of the Mississippi River as local communities tried to control the mighty river one community at a time. It was soon recognized that this patchwork of local levees was a very inefficient method of controlling the overflows. For example the first levees built in Pemiscot County, Missouri on land obtained via the "Swamp Land Act of 1850"1 as a gift from the United States Government to the state of Missouri and subsequently to the various counties, were built too close to the river and they were soon in a state of disrepair and eventually disappeared altogether.

The Mississippi River Commission was created by the United States Congress in 1879 to develop a national system of levees to foster navigation on the river by supplanting the local levee system. In this way they would harness and control the mighty
river as it coursed from it’s headwater in Itasca, Minnesota all the way south to New Orleans, Louisiana and the Gulf of Mexico.

The Commission quickly adopted the “Levee Only” findings of The United States Corp of Engineers as laid out by West Point graduates Captain Andrew Humphreys and Lieutenant Henry Abbott. In doing so they completely ignored the recommendations of a civilian hydraulic engineer, Charles Ellet, Jr. for a system of containment reservoirs. It was not recognized at the time, but this decision set the Commission and the country off in the wrong direction lasting for decades².

The actual work of the commission started in 1882 by encouraging, accepting, and approving contracts for specific levees. Building a levee in the 19th Century was a very labor intensive business. Laborers of every race, creed, color, ethnicity, religion, size, and shape poured into the area with the real prospect of landing a back-breaking, sun up to sun down job. The pay scale was more than adequate for the time and these eager labors saw an opportunity to work hard, save their money, and eventually bring their families to the area. This was the situation the Reid families found in 1884 when they came to tame and lay claim to their own piece of land and make it their home.

Let's join our four adventurers as they begin their journey and share their adventures along the way. Just remember, the story line of the first two chapters is fictional and some of the people are imaginary but the four main characters are my true ancestors. The dialogue between the characters is based upon what may have been said by them and contains the phrases and idioms used by most Americans at that time.
Chapter I

The Reids "Go West"

As soon as James, aka “Squire Jim” Loftus entered the room and took a seat at the table an argument broke out among the four young men now sitting at the dimly lit table. It started when Thad announced that as the oldest Reid present it was his duty to break the news to their parents. It would be a delicate thing to announce that three of their children would soon be leaving for Missouri to get jobs building the Mississippi levees. He truly believed that he, and only he, could successfully gain their permission, if not their blessings. He knew he had several good arguments and he would skillfully break down any objections from their parents. His strongest argument would be that many of their neighbors had already gone, gotten good jobs, and were doing quite well there. Jobs were few and difficult to come by in and around their Transylvania County home which limited any opportunity for them to gain independence, marry, or prosper in many other ways.

"Not so fast", interjected Squire Jim. "As an ex son-in-law and the eldest of the four, it will be easier for me to break the news."

As the two youngest, William Massie and Sam MacDonald listened to the two older men, they grew uneasy at the prospects of their parents flatly refusing to readily give their consent for their leaving. Sam in particular was only 15 years of age and feared that this would present a severe obstacle to his leaving.

The dispute was soon resolved and Thad mustered up his resolve and sought out his father, Samuel Wilkins Reid, to inform him of their plans to leave at the earliest possible date for Missouri to seek their destiny in the “West”. He found the grizzled Civil War veteran at his favorite spot during the late afternoons when the day was almost over and nightfall not far
away. He sat in his rocking chair with his corncob pipe. He struggled, as do all pipe smokers, to keep it lit. At his feet slept his faithful hunting dog, Blue. Blue wasn’t the retriever he was years ago when he was a young pup but he had become an alert watchdog, barking at any unexpected movement. S. W., as his friends called him, was almost 60 years old but wore his age well and was very active for a man of his age.

Smoke from his pipe curled upwards as Thad approached. “Dad, I want to talk with you about something serious, if you are not too busy”, Thad said. “Sure son, drag up a seat and relax here with me and old Blue”, he responded.

“Dad, as you know I am almost 26 and in October William turns 24. Our prospects here in Transylvania are limited at best and we want to get on with our lives. We want to go where work is plentiful and the pay is good. As you know, the Gillespie boys packed up and went to New Madrid, Missouri where they immediately got jobs working on the Mississippi Levee Projects. Several of the Breedloves, Mc Calls, and Owens have gone too. All working, saving their money and now have prospects for a future. Will and I have been talking
to “Squire Jim” and he wants to go too. Every since Mary Malinda died he has been at loose ends and has volunteered to lead the group". He had purposely left out Sam MacDonald because of his young age and he figured that would just be another objection for his father to make against their going.

“Well son, it’s like this. When I was your age I had some of those same feelings. I felt like there was nothing I couldn't do and I wanted to do everything. Instead, I got married and haven't regretted it a day. Of course, the war came and I had all the adventure I could ever want and then some. While I understand your situation perfectly well, I can see you and Will going off on your own, and of course James is certainly old enough and not blood anyway. But, Mack is a very young fifteen and that's another question all together. Tell you what! Talk to your mother, tell her I said it was alright with me if she is also agreeable."

Thad immediately agreed and went inside to use his best manners and persuasive skills to convince his mother, Jane Butler Reid, of their decision.
He found his mother in her usual domain, the kitchen where she ruled supreme and was in total control. He studied her for a couple of minutes as he collected his thoughts before approaching her on such an important matter. He realized that she was a woman of vast experience and intellect. As a woman of the world she understood men better than he understood the fairer sex. She came close to loosing her husband during the War as well her brother, Uncle Aaron Butler. Two of her sons and several of her cousins, nephews, and friends did not return and lay interred in far off places like Antietam, Chancellorsville, Shiloh, and Gettysburg. For these reasons, and a host of others, she was very protective of her surviving children and especially Sam MacDonald "Mack", her youngest son. Thad soon realized that this might be harder than he first thought. "Mom", he said as he approached her. "We need to talk".

"I know we do", she responded. "I am not blind and can see how the four of you are always off somewhere planning and scheming up some cockamamie adventure or another. Beside, I overheard you and you father on the porch just now and you trying to convince him it would be a good thing for you boys to go looking for some kind of a job in some lawless place out west. I've heard way too many of those stories about wild adventures and loose living."

"Well, out with it! What do you want to say to persuade me to let you go? I know it's all up to me. I heard your father say so."

Thad collected his thoughts and began slowly. "We need to improve our chances of getting a good paying job. Not just a job, but one with real opportunity to get ahead and go somewhere. There's nothing here but farming and logging. That's pretty slim pickings. Plenty of people here-bouts are willing to do those jobs at dirt cheap wages. As a matter of fact, so many men are applying for those jobs it drives down the wages the boss-man will pay. Anyway, everyone who has gone west has reported plenty of good paying jobs there just
waiting for the taking. They send home part of their wages and that's the only thing keeping this county afloat as far as I can see. They are getting rich and we just sit here wishing."

After a short pause, she replied. "If you and Will want to desert your family and go off on some ill planned adventure, you have my permission. James is certainly old enough and experienced enough to make up his own mind. As for Mack, he is too young to make up his own mind. Besides, I need one son here to help around the farm. Your father, even though he enjoys good health, is not a young man any longer and gets older by the day."

Thad had his answer. They would be going west and soon. He didn't want to give her time to change her mind so the very next day, Wednesday, the 24th day of April, 1884 the three adventurers said their good byes and headed west. They were surprised that young Sam MacDonald was not among the family and friends who came to wish them good luck, good fortune, and fame in the "West". Perhaps he just couldn't bear the disappointment of not going and didn't want to make the pain of staying behind any worse.

The three of them mounted their horses and rode along the trail that led to Brevard. In their haste to depart the homestead, they were able to gather only the bare essentials for travel, fully expecting to purchase what few things they would need in Brevard. According to an old map Squire Jim had purchased in Brevard years ago, their best route of travel would be to stay on the same road that took them to Brevard. Following this route would lead them directly to Waynesville, North Carolina. Beyond Waynesville their map pointed them towards Newport, Tennessee and some very mountainous terrain. Good weather would be essential here for a quick and comfortable passage. Douglas Lake lay just beyond Newport and would have to be circumnavigated before they could make a junction with the Knoxville Road. Upon reaching Knoxville, they would refresh and perhaps stay in a hotel or boarding
house and make time for a hot, home cooked meal before going on.

From Knoxville they would continue southwestward down the Great Valley Road leading to Nashville, Tennessee. On the way to Nashville they would pass through Crossville, Tennessee which they figured would be approximately halfway to New Madrid. Their map did not go very far beyond this point but they reasoned they would buy another map in Crossville when they arrived there or perhaps in Nashville, which lay just beyond the scope of their old map. From Nashville it would be a simply hop, skip and jump to a river crossing ending at their destination. In other words, they figured the entire journey was just over 550 miles and probably 18 to 20 daystravel (See map below).

Proposed Route to Crossville, Tennessee

Brevard in 1884 was a typical mountain town. It was the county seat of Transylvania County and therefore was the location of the county court house. Court was in session and the town was abuzz with the proceedings going on there. Being short on cash, especially after buying essential supplies, they decided to camp for the night just outside of town. That way they would save what cash they had and get accustomed to outdoor living, which they knew would be the norm until they reached their destination in New Madrid, Missouri.
After treating themselves to a hot meal at the local boarding house, they mounted up and moved to a likely looking spot where they prepared to camp for the night. They fell asleep full of hope and looking forward to many adventures along the way and a promising future.

As the dawn broke, they were astir, built a small fire and began to prepare their breakfast. After eating they were soon tending to the horses, grooming them and preparing to saddle up in preparation for departure. Just as each was adjusting girths and cinch straps there was a definite stirring and rustling in the nearby scrub trees. Not necessarily being frightened, they were more than curious. On the other hand, they armed themselves just in case the noise was more a threat than the blowing of the wind. Suddenly there emerged a familiar face, Sam MacDonald Reid, holding the reins of his horse.

"Howdy" came the greeting from the recognizable voice. "Bet you didn't expect to see me so soon."

"Well, Well" said Thad. "Always knew you were a bad penny. Showing up at the least expected time. How did you get away from Mom without a big fuss?"

"It wasn't easy", Mack replied. "Actually I decided on my own that I was old enough and big enough to make this trip. Besides, what could happen with the three of you to look after me?"

"I assume from that answer you didn't exactly tell anyone you were leaving", Will interjected.

"Not really, I hate long farewells", said Mack.

"I see you are dressed and ready to travel" said Squire Jim. "Where did you spend the night?"
Mack was quick to answer, "Over yonder, just beyond those bushes. I was afraid that one of you would discover me during the night and make me return home".

"Did you leave a note behind explaining to mom and dad where you were going and what your intentions are", piped in Thad. "Or should we write them a letter saying you found us and that you are safe", he continued.

"Well", said Mack, "a letter would probably be best". I left in rather a hurry and probably forgot to do a lot of things I should have."

Thad quickly retrieved a piece of paper and a pencil from his saddlebag and, being the oldest brother, took it upon himself to jot a quick note to his parents. The note read as follows:

"Dear Mom and Dad: We were surprised this morning to find a stowaway among our party. Young Sam MacDonald caught up with us just outside of Brevard. All of our arguments for him to return fell on deaf ears and he eventually persuaded us to let him join our adventure or he would just follow us, staying out of sight until it was too late to force his return. Against my better judgment, I have agreed that letting him go with us would be best under our present circumstances. Do not worry as the three older members of our party are resolved to keep him safe and secure in his person until we are re-united with the family.

Thad, Will, and Squire Jim"

Handing the note to Mack, Thad said in his sternest voice, "Take this note into Brevard and leave it with Mr. Jones at the Post Office. He will see that mom and dad get it when they next pick up their post".

Mack jumped onto his horse and hurried into town. Of course the Post Office was not open so he had to wait until 8:00 am for Mr. Jones to open. Mr. Jones appeared promptly at 8:00 am,