

# VERDE HERITAGE: 1875 Wagon Train from Missouri to the Verde Valley

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Covered wagon at the end of the journey. (Glenda Farley)

Preston Burford, a resident of Cedar County, Missouri, read a letter written by Charley Buster describing the country and “giving a glowing account of” the Salt River Valley in Arizona Territory. Preston “had so much confidence in what Charley said, he decided that if he could get there he would be in heaven on earth. Pres. Burford was a man that when he made up his mind to do anything it would be hard to turn him away from doing it. He had a strong passion to get rich. As he was well acquainted with Charley Buster, the letter set him on fire to go.”

Mr. Burford shared the information and his enthusiasm with his friends and neighbors. “Parson” Bristow wrote: This was in the fall of 1874 and the first time I ever heard that there was any Arizona. I was not very anxious to go, but the hand of Providence was pushing me out. I did not have much time after we decided to go to prepare for the trip. As 2 of the children had married we had 5 children to care for.”

The families who decided to move to Arizona Territory lived in different settlements and had planned to meet at a designated camping location near Humansville, Missouri. Some families left their homes on April 26, 1875. Preston and Elizabeth (Hornbeck) Burford [7] the Lett family [4] “Parson” James C. and Luranda (Smith) Bristow [7] were joined by their daughter Mary and her husband, James Human [2] and they were in 4 of the 9 wagons from Humansville. The family of Nicodemus and Elizabeth Hutchinson [7] and Morris Smith joined them at the camp. The wagon train was organized and Preston W. Burford was chosen to lead them on their journey to the Verde Valley. Henry F. “Tack” Gaddis, who was with his 3 brothers and their

parents, Michael and Dorcas Gaddis, remembered: "We started from Missouri in the first days of May with the Parkers, Stackhouses [6], Pankeys, Wagners [4], Letts, Dickinsons (Samuel and Nancy) [9], Davidsons (James and Elizabeth) [8], Burfords, and others I can't remember." (Pioneer Stories; p. 127.)

Plans to go to Arizona were made before homestead land was available in the Verde Valley. The Camp Verde Indian Reservation was annulled by a presidential order and over 800 square miles of land along the Verde River was opened for settlement on April 23, 1875. The General Land Office released this information on May 20, 1875, but it was not published in the Prescott newspaper until June. (Az Weekly Miner; June 4, 1875.)

"Parson" Bristow wrote: "We all pulled out on the 10th day of May and met the next day. We were a novel looking sight. When the buzzards would fly over they would eye us and shy away. We were such a novel looking set that if the Indians came upon us, the only thing they would have thought of would be to get away as quick as possible. ... Before we got 60 miles, Tom Smith (brother of his wife) [5] and 'Pleas' came up. I did not know they were coming."

The large wagon train crowded campgrounds and some wagons traveling faster moved ahead. These were the 2 wagons of James Oliver Bristow (the older first cousin of "Parson" Bristow) and his wife Sarah [9], 1 wagon of the John Engles family, 2 wagons of the William Underhill family, 1 wagon shared by William T. Moore and John Roberts, 2 wagons of the Joseph and Sarah Roberts family [9] and probably Andrew Jackson "Jacky" Thompson. (Pioneer Stories; p. 55, 56) Joseph and John Roberts were brothers of Elizabeth, wife of James Davidson, and "Jacky" was their uncle. (Pioneer Stories; p. 51.) Along the way they were joined by Lizzie Copeland. Their journey from home to the Verde Valley lasted 3 months and 20 days.

"Parson" Bristow continued: "Soon after we passed Fort Scott we came upon [the family of William and Harriet] Hawkins [12]. They had been across the plains in an early day to California. He had something near 100 cows and some horses. I had the next largest number of cows."

"Parson" Bristow owned 2 yoke of oxen and had traded his ranch for about 20 cows and 3 fillies. They passed in sight of Wichita and finally lost sight of all timber and then "entered the plains in earnest. All hills disappeared. No birds or animals could be seen, not so much as a rabbit and no insects, not even a grasshopper. In any direction one would look it had the same appearance and the eyes would become weary. Day in and day out, week in and week out, not a cloud to be seen and the sun pouring merciless rays down on us. I cannot command language that can describe this scene." Finally, Pike's Peak appeared in the distance, and we traveled into New Mexico.

The wagon train came to a fork in the road, and they were "advised to take the left [south] road. Mr. Hawkins would not do it. He seemed to have some knowledge of the country. He had a brother who drove cattle from Texas to Prescott, and I suppose he got some knowledge from him." So, they parted, leaving the "Parson" Bristow family, James Humans, the Hawkins family, cattle and horses on the "right" [north] road used by the riders carrying mail between Albuquerque, Wingate, and Prescott.

Dispatches from Camp Verde in July mention large numbers of wagons and people who were following the 6th Cavalry from Kansas going to Prescott and the Salt River. On August 4, there

were 15 wagons passing through the Verde Valley. The wagon train from Humansville, Missouri, including more than 100 people with oxen, horses, and over 100 cattle, began arriving about the middle of August.

As the Hawkins and Bristow families neared their destination, they spent a night at Rattlesnake Tank. Before they started down the mountain, they “cut cedar trees and chained them to the back of their wagons in order to come down easy.” They camped on Dry Beaver Creek, then spent the next night, August 16, at the Wales Arnold place and heard his stories about the “old days.” and the Verde. Continuing onward, they camped for the night on the river a mile above Camp Verde then crossed the river in the morning and traveled up the river to camp August 18, 1875, at what would become the Central Verde settlement.

Because of the length of their journey, food was scarce on the main wagon train. Pres. Burford and Charlie Dickinson went to Camp Verde to buy food. Martha Burford wrote: “They were gone 4 days. It was close picking before they got back. ... We arrived on Beaver Creek at the Wales Arnold ranch on August 23.” (Pioneer Stories; p. 22.)

The Michael Gaddis and Lett families had stopped to rest a few days at a river crossing. They joined a wagon train from Arkansas, arriving on Dry Beaver Creek (now, McGuireville) on August 28, 1875. (Pioneer Stories; p. 127.)

The Burford family stayed on Dry Beaver Creek (now, McGuireville) and built a cabin under the walnut trees. Later, they moved to the Central Verde settlement. Pres. Burford used his wagon and oxen to haul freight between Camp Verde and Prescott. Messers. Wallenberg and Levy hired him to haul merchandise from Prescott to their adobe store near the northern border of the military reservation operated by George Hull. (Wkly Az Miner; Aug. 10, 1877.)

Preston Burford received a land patent on December 5, 1884. The sale of that property, etc. made it possible for the family to move to “heaven on earth” in the Salt River Valley. “Parson” Bristow wrote: “But as it is so hot there, he had come nearer” to the other place. “He turned and went to Oregon.” (Numbers in brackets refer to the [number of people] in the family. See: “Sketch of the History of My Traveling from Southwest Missouri to Arizona,” handwritten manuscript by James C. Bristow; Oct. 5, 1909; edited and typed; and “Pioneer Stories of Arizona’s Verde Valley,” 1933, 1954; Verde Valley Pioneers Association, first edition.)