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Dramatic Publishing

ACROSS THE PLAINS

The Journey of the Palace Wagon Family

by

SANDRA FENICHEL ASHER



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • London, England • Melbourne, Australia

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(ACROSS THE PLAINS
The Journey of the Palace Wagon Family)

Cover design by Susan Carle

ISBN 0-87129-747-7

This play is dedicated to Amie Brockway,
Producing Artistic Director of the Open Eye Theater
—pioneer, mentor, and friend

ACROSS THE PLAINS: The Journey of the Palace Wagon Family was commissioned by The Coterie Theatre, Kansas City, Missouri. The Coterie's world premiere production, directed by Amie Brockway, opened on January 23, 1996, with the following cast and staff:

The Company

First Man (Snyder/Clyman/Reasin Tucker) . Jimmy Augustine
First Woman (Cousin/Mary Graves) Rayme Lyn Cornell
Virginia Reed Milly Hands
Margaret Reed Kelly McMahan
Second Man (Keyes/Keseberg/Patrick Breen) Miles McMahan
James Reed Michael O'Connell
Second Woman (Sarah Keyes/Peggy Breen) Linda Stein

Artistic and Production Company

Set Design Brad Shaw
Costume Design Lynda K. Myers
Lighting Design Art Kent
Sound Design Robert Beck
Stage Managers Melanie Huntington, Kyle Mowry
Technical Director Shaun Hyland
Properties Amy Rowell
Technical Assistant Jim Nimmo
Assistant Stage Manager Amy Rowell
Interpreters Phil Fiorini, Wendy Barsotti
House Managers Matt Miller, Roger Mangels

Coterie Administrative Staff and Support Staff

Executive Director Joette Pelster
Producing Artistic Director Jeff Church
Box Office/Business Manager Cheryl Bengé
Technical Director Shaun Hyland
Administrative/Marketing Assistant Amy Tonyes
Box Office Assistants Brenda Mason, Matt Miller

ACROSS THE PLAINS

The Journey of the Palace Wagon Family

(The following roles are arranged for a cast of five—2 m., 3 w.—but may be played by as many as thirteen actors, with extras, if desired.)

CHARACTERS

VIRGINIA REED about 12 years old
MARGARET REED her mother, 32
JAMES REED . . . her stepfather, 46 (also OFFSTAGE VOICE)

WOMAN, plays:

SARAH 75
COUSIN about VIRGINIA's age
MARY GRAVES 20
PEGGY BREEN . . . Irish immigrant, mother of seven, 40

MAN, plays:

GERSHAM KEYES Margaret's brother
JOHN SNYDER 25
LEWIS KESEBERG . . well-educated German immigrant, 32
JIM CLYMAN mountaineer
PATRICK BREEN . . . Irish immigrant, Peggy's husband, 40

OTHERS, if desired, as the Reed children, citizens of Springfield and Independence, and members of the wagon train.

TIME: Spring of 1846 through spring of 1847.

SETTING: Various locations on the overland trail from Springfield, Ill., to Napa Valley, Calif. Sets are minimal.

Playwrights Notes And Acknowledgments

Although I have taken “dramatic license” on minor points in developing this script, the characters, events, and dialogue are based, as fully as possible, on letters, diaries, and articles written by members of the Reed/Donner Party, especially Virginia Reed, James Reed, Tamsen Donner, Eliza Donner Houghton, and Patrick Breen.

ACROSS THE PLAINS was selected for the Kennedy Center's 1995 NewVisions/NewVoices program and the American Alliance for Theatre and Education's 1996 Play-reading Project National Award. The playwright would like to thank both organizations, along with Amie Brockway, Jeff Church and everyone connected with the premiere and with The Open Eye reading and production at the Roxbury Arts Group's Art and Community Center in Roxbury, NY, for their kind personal support and countless contributions to the development of the current script. Many thanks, also, to the tireless and patient staff of the Olin library at Drury College.

Sound effects from the Coterie production are available on cassette. For more information, contact: Robert Beck, 6508 Charlotte Street, Kansas City, MO 64131, 816-361-3129.

Music: Harmonica, guitar, and/or “fiddle” play folk music throughout. At times, they may be joined by a banjo, flute, or makeshift instruments appropriate to the situation.

ACROSS THE PLAINS

The Journey of the Palace Wagon Family

BEFORE RISE: *Harmonica plays "Hush, Little Baby" softly.*

AT RISE: *VIRGINIA, DL. OTHERS do not relate to VIRGINIA until she enters their scenes.*

VIRGINIA *(to audience)*. My name is Virginia Elizabeth Backenstoe Reed. My family and I will soon be leaving Illinois to follow the overland trail to California. I'm twelve. My sister Patty is eight, and my brothers Jimmy and Tom are five and three. My stepfather, James Reed, owns several businesses here in Springfield—all quite successful. Still, as Ma says, he's got "California fever."

(MARGARET enters, followed by JAMES, who is reading to her with great enthusiasm. MUSIC fades.)

JAMES. "...a soil so fertile and productive...a climate of such mildness...a country eminently calculated, by nature herself, to promote unbounded happiness and prosperity. Paradise, Margaret, that's what he's describing. Heaven on earth. Think of the opportunities!

MARGARET. We've plenty of opportunities here, James.

JAMES. Springfield has been good to us, but there's a new country waiting. The land is ours for the taking and wide open to farming and commerce of all kinds. And the weather is ideal—no more of these miserably cold Illinois

winters. (*Taps book.*) "Eternal spring," Hastings calls it, and he offers an easier and faster route. Won't you at least read what he has to say?

MARGARET (*turns away from him, rubbing her right temple, but speaking with humor*). I believe you've already read me everything he has to say. Several times over.

JAMES (*smiles, admitting his excesses, then, gently*). I suppose I have. But a milder climate, Margaret—it could mean the end of the terrible headaches you suffer.

MARGARET (*weakening*). Our families are here, James. And all of our friends. Think of the children—

JAMES. I am thinking of the children.

(*GERSHAM enters L, with SARAH leaning heavily on his arm and a cane.*)

SARAH. Will you stop fussing at me, Gersham! I will not be parted from my only daughter. Whither Margaret goest, I go, too.

GERSHAM. You're a stubborn woman, Mother, and it'll be the death of you, yet.

SARAH. I crossed half this country long before you were born, and what I know about pioneering may be useful crossing the other half.

GERSHAM. What you know about pioneering is what you've warned us about all our lives: illness, outlaws, Indians, dangers of every description—

SARAH. I'm not the first old woman to make this sort of journey, and make it I will. (*She waves MARGARET over to intercede with GERSHAM.*)

GERSHAM. Talk to her, Margaret!

MARGARET. I cannot keep her from her dream, Gersham, any more than I can keep James from his.

GERSHAM. If you'd once stand up to them with any conviction—

MARGARET. Brother, please! I do the best I can. *(She takes SARAH's arm and they exit.)*

JAMES *(amused)*. They are a stubborn lot, the Keyes women.

GERSHAM *(testily)*. I can't say I blame my mother for wanting to be with Margaret, seventy-five years old and frail as she is. A daughter's care is a great comfort. But the risks are enormous—

JAMES. Others have made the journey without incident, Gersham. And I intend to do everything I can to make sure Margaret and your mother are safe and well cared for. I've spared no expense—

GERSHAM. No, James, I'm sure you haven't. We are all well aware of your ability to spare no expense. *(He exits L, huffily. JAMES pulls himself tall and exits R.)*

(COUSIN enters and runs to VIRGINIA.)

COUSIN. Oh, Virginia, I can't bear it that you're leaving forever. You're my favorite cousin. What will I do without you?

VIRGINIA. I'll write as often as I can, and tell you all about California.

COUSIN. And I'll enjoy your letters very much, I'm sure. Still, it's a great deal more pleasant to be the one going away than the one left behind.

VIRGINIA. Oh, cousin! Maybe you won't be left behind very long. Maybe we'll make such a brilliant success of it in California that your father will want to come out and join us.

COUSIN. My father? Oh, I don't think so. He doesn't even want you taking Grandma Keyes along. Oh, how I'll miss

Grandma's Indian stories, long nights by the fire. Women and children captured as slaves, their husbands and brothers slaughtered and scalped. You do think Grandma will be all right, don't you?

VIRGINIA. Pa says she'll be fine. (*She arranges "wagon" seats DR and she and COUSIN "step in" and sit facing each other.*) We have three wagons, all made to order just for us at Pa's factory: two for supplies and one for the family. Grandma Keyes will travel like a queen in our own pioneer palace car! Pa says there's never been another like it: Two stories tall and drawn by four yoke of oxen!

COUSIN. Two stories tall!

VIRGINIA. With a side entrance, like a stagecoach, and nice spring seats with high backs—here and there. Underneath, we have storage space for useful things, like Grandma's medicines and Ma's workbasket. And up above the seats, there's a whole separate room for our beds.

COUSIN (*seeing it all in her imagination*). Oh, my!

VIRGINIA. Our hired man, Milt Elliot, will drive the oxen. And Eliza will cook, of course. Ma will sit here and sew and read, and Grandma will sit there and tell her stories to Patty and Jimmy and little Tom.

COUSIN. Where will you be?

VIRGINIA. That's the best part of all. Billy's coming with us—

COUSIN. Your pony?

VIRGINIA. Yes! And I'm to ride him all across the prairie, alongside Pa on his beautiful gray mare.

COUSIN. Virginia Reed, you are the luckiest girl in the world.

VIRGINIA. Yes. I am. (*HARMONICA plays "Froggie Went a'Courtin'" as ALL crisscross the stage, chanting, and carrying on supplies briskly.*)

JAMES. Too hundred pounds of flour are recommended—for each individual.

MARGARET. Don't forget cornmeal. And rice.

JAMES. Hmmm. And lard—

COUSIN. Salt and pepper.

VIRGINIA. Hundreds of pounds of beans!

JAMES. Several hundred pounds of bacon.

MARGARET. Dried fruit—

GERSHAM. Coffee—

JAMES. Cows to provide milk on the way—

MARGARET. Cooking utensils—

JAMES. Guns and ammunition—

VIRGINIA. Clothing—

COUSIN. Featherbeds and pillows—

VIRGINIA. Books—

JAMES. Seeds and tools—

VIRGINIA. The dogs—

JAMES. And the horses—

VIRGINIA. Billy!

COUSIN (*hurries on, with small mirror, as MUSIC fades*).

For you and Aunt Margaret, Virginia. Ma says to hang this mirror in the wagon, so you'll remember to keep your good looks along the way.

VIRGINIA. How lovely! Thank you.

COUSIN. I believe the whole town has turned out to see you off, including Mrs. Lincoln. They say Mr. Lincoln would've been here, too, but he's off at circuit court today.

MARGARET (*approaching COUSIN with JAMES*). Goodbye, child. Remember us in your prayers, will you?

COUSIN. Of course, Aunt Margaret! (*They hug. MARGARET exits, in tears. To VIRGINIA. BOTH are near tears.*) I wish

I knew when we were going to see each other again.

VIRGINIA. Look for my letters.

COUSIN. I will. *(They hug. COUSIN hurries off, weeping. VIRGINIA looks after her, forlornly, then turns to audience.)*
VIRGINIA. April 16, 1846—we are on our way!

(There is the SOUND of hoofbeats, wagons creaking, whips cracking, dogs barking, voices crying "Gee!" and "Haw!" etc. HARMONICA plays "Elanoy" as OTHERS enter. JAMES helps MARGARET and SARAH into "wagon." JAMES and VIRGINIA "ride horses" alongside. A silhouetted WHEEL is projected over the stage, turning and turning.)

(SONG: "ELANOY")

ALL *(singing)*.

**WAY DOWN UPON THE WABASH
SUCH LAND WAS NEVER KNOWN;
IF ADAM HAD PASSED OVER IT,
THE SOIL HE'D SURELY OWN.**

**HE'D THINK IT WAS THE GARDEN
HE'D PLAYED IN AS A BOY,
AND STRAIGHT PRONOUNCE IT EDEN
IN THE STATE OF ELANOY.**

**THEN MOVE YOUR FAMILY WESTWARD,
GOOD HEALTH YOU WILL ENJOY,
AND RISE TO WEALTH AND HONOR
IN THE STATE OF ELANOY.**

WOMEN.

**SHE'S BOUNDED BY THE WABASH,
THE OHIO AND THE LAKES,**

MEN.

**SHE'S CRAWFISH IN THE SWAMPY LANDS,
THE MILK-SICK AND THE SHAKES—**

WOMEN.

**BUT THESE ARE SLIGHT DIVERSIONS
AND TAKE NOT FROM THE JOY—**

ALL.

**OF LIVING IN THIS GARDEN LAND,
THE STATE OF ELANOY.**

**THEN MOVE YOUR WAGONS WESTWARD,
BRING ALL YOUR FAMILY,
AND CROSS THE MISSISSIPPI
TO THE STATE OF MISSOURI.**

VIRGINIA (*to audience*). Independence, Missouri, the 11th of May.

(MUSIC fades. SOUNDS of a blacksmith hammer is heard, then HARMONICA plays a lively "Old Dan Tucker" under the following. JAMES helps MARGARET out of "wagon," and ALL weave in and out shaking hands as if agreeing to join forces, admiring goods for sale. This should be more organized confusion than a formal dance, with ad libbed street vendor calls, MUSIC, hammering, barking.)

JAMES. Wagons from as far off as Kentucky and New York are forming new trains here to leave for Oregon, Santa Fe—and California!

VIRGINIA. Teams of oxen fill the highways—

MARGARET. Men, women, and children scurry about—

SARAH. And everything's priced double and triple its worth.

VIRGINIA. It seems everyone is traveling west—

JAMES. Lawyers—

VIRGINIA. Journalists—

SARAH. Teachers—

MARGARET. Farmers—

JAMES. Laborers—

SARAH. Ministers—

VIRGINIA (*gleefully*). And fortune hunters, very shady characters of every description—

JAMES (*pointedly guiding VIRGINIA away from whatever has inspired her last observation*). Virginia! Our business is taken care of. Gather the little ones. We'll be in the Kansas Territory soon. When we cross the Missouri border, we leave the United States behind!

VIRGINIA. Patty—did you hear that!

(She dashes offstage, crossing PATRICK BREEN, who enters and approaches JAMES. MUSIC fades.)

PATRICK. Mr. Reed?

JAMES. Yes?

PATRICK. My name is Patrick Breen, and I wonder if my family and I might join your party for the journey ahead? We've come from Iowa, but dare not go any farther alone.

JAMES. A greater number suits our needs as well, Mr. Breen. We'd welcome your company. (*He offers his hand, which PATRICK shakes.*)

PATRICK. I thank you, sir. My wife will be much relieved by this news. (*He exits; JAMES crosses to SARAH and MARGARET, in wagon.*)

JAMES. Are you comfortable, Mother Keyes?

SARAH. Very comfortable, James.

MARGARET. Mother's health actually seems to be improving as we travel.

SARAH. Adventure has always suited me.

JAMES. That's the spirit! (*He exits.*)

MARGARET (*fondly*). Sometimes I think you, James, and Virginia are all of one bloodline and I'm the outsider, instead of the one who binds the three of you together.

SARAH. Virginia could not have asked for a better stepfather.

MARGARET. No, she adores him. And so do I.

SARAH. You're a fine match, you and your Mr. Reed.

(LIGHTS fade on wagon. MARGARET and SARAH exit. VIRGINIA enters, speaks to audience.)

VIRGINIA. A census has been taken, and our party is found to number 98 men, 50 women, 46 wagons, and 350 cattle. The men have elected a leader, Captain Russell, and we have met our first Indians. They are nothing at all like the Indians of Grandma's stories. They are called the Kaw, and they helped us cross a river by that name.

(Thunder, lightning. SOUND of rain falling. Cries of "Gee!" and "Haw!" The cracking of whips. SNYDER runs on, U of VIRGINIA, followed by JAMES.)

JAMES. Hold up there! Snyder! Lend us a hand! Some of the wagons are mired in the mud. Hurry!

SNYDER. Will this cursed rain never end? (*MEN exit.*)

VIRGINIA (*to audience*). We reach the Big Blue River and it is so swollen, we cannot cross. We must lie by for a while. Ma, Patty, and I take turns sitting with Grandma. She is feeling poorly and never gets out of her bed.

(Background SOUNDS fade, as MARGARET enters.)

VIRGINIA. Is Grandma any better this morning?

MARGARET. I don't think she is.

VIRGINIA. I just don't understand it. She was doing so well

MARGARET. Until we stopped traveling. It seems as if our difficulties with this river have discouraged her.

(HARMONICA plays "Hush, Little Baby." JAMES enters and hands MARGARET flowers as LIGHTS indicate a change in time. VIRGINIA speaks to audience.)

VIRGINIA. The 29th of May, 1846. Grandma died today. *(JAMES and MARGARET move toward gravesite. MARGARET kneels and places flowers on her mother's grave. VIRGINIA speaks to JAMES.)* It's hard to bury Grandma in the wilderness, and travel on without her.

JAMES. It is hard, child. But your mother's chosen a beautiful resting place for her.

VIRGINIA. Maybe Uncle Gersham was right. Maybe Grandma shouldn't have come with us.

JAMES *(as MARGARET reacts to VIRGINIA's well-founded doubt)*. She wanted to be with us, Virginia. She wanted to be a pioneer again. And so she was, for as long as she was able.

(MARGARET stands and hurries away, her hand pressed to her temple. MUSIC fades; the SOUND of wood being chopped is heard. SNYDER enters and mimes chopping down of trees.)

JAMES. See to your mother, Virginia.

MARGARET. Where will you be, James?